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THE JOURNAL REPORT: TECHNOLOGY

Business Solutions: Better Training Through Gaming

By **MICHAEL TOTTY**
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
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Note to managers: It's OK to let your employees play games at work.

We're not talking about all those hours fooling around at computer solitaire. Where games have their place -- and significant benefits -- is in livening up boring corporate training sessions.

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reason: Most training sessions are just too dull. (Web-based e-learning classes were supposed to fix that, but in reality they just allow employees to get bored at their own pace.) As a result, employees aren't coming away from the training with the knowledge or skills their employers are paying for.

"Forget learning," says Marcia Sitcoske, director of [Cisco Systems Inc.](#)'s Creative Learning Studio, whose mission is to make the company's online training tools more effective and appealing. "People aren't even completing these things, they're so boring."

Training experts insist it doesn't have to be this way. They argue that companies could make their employee-education programs more compelling, and more effective, if they made them more fun -- specifically, more like computer games. Evidence suggests adults learn more and retain more in courses that incorporate such game elements as competitive scoring, increasingly difficult player levels and fantasy role playing.

But many managers remain skeptical. It's a rare boss who thrills at seeing workers playing games on the job, and adding games to a learning package tacks on extra expense.

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War Games

The U.S. military is a lot further along in adopting game elements in training than are most businesses. In part, that's because learning on a computer is much cheaper and safer than in the field, and recruits come from a generation comfortable in the fast-paced gaming world. The best of the military's training games rival the complexity and richness of some of the best videogames. In fact, a version of Full Spectrum Warrior, a training game developed for the U.S. Army by the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California, has recently been released for the public game market.

Outside of a few custom-designed applications, such games remain a rarity in the corporate training world; don't look for Full Spectrum CEO anytime soon. Instead, a growing number of companies are turning to more modest courses that mix work and play.

In some cases, the lack of good commercial alternatives has prompted companies to take a do-it-yourself approach. Cisco Systems' Creative Learning Studio, formed in 2001, uses technology, high-quality video -- and entertainment -- to enliven its vast library of online training tools. It now has about 4,500 e-learning courses of varying lengths.

One such course, for employees and outsiders seeking certification as authorized Cisco "networking professionals," uses a game to help teach fundamentals of building a high-speed network of shared storage devices. Called SAN Rover (for storage area network), the game requires students to race the clock to gather the pieces -- hard drives, switches and other components -- and correctly put together such a network while dodging crashing asteroids.

The game, which reinforces the skills students learn in classes and from their reading, has been played about 2,000 times since it was introduced last June. "More and more people are learning that gaming can be useful in training in the corporate environment," Cisco's Ms. Sitcoske says.

It's All About Competition

Companies also can turn to simple, off-the-shelf games for reviewing and testing. The games don't even have to be that sophisticated as long as they include an essential element: competition.

Borland Software Corp. wanted to give its sales staff an incentive to master details of its product line before an annual world-wide sales meeting earlier this year, and was looking for

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better results than with its previous PowerPoint-laden e-learning program. So it turned to QB International, a San Rafael, Calif., e-learning company, to develop online study guides that incorporated a series of games for testing students' knowledge of the material.

The simple games, based on such diversions as tic-tac-toe and hangman, featured a series of timed questions. Each member of the sales staff had to get at least 80% of the answers correct on a series of nine tests interspersed with the lessons, and those who received perfect scores were entered into a drawing for five Apple iPods. Everyone also had to take a final comprehensive exam of 100 questions, and the one with the highest score and fastest time received a \$3,000 prize.

Though the games weren't very sophisticated, they were enough to motivate the highly competitive salespeople. Scores in the preliminary exams were posted for all to see.

"All of sudden, people are instant messaging each other, 'You're on top today, but you're going down,'" says Wynn Johnson, director of field readiness for Borland, based in Scott City, Calif. "The competition is a motivator."

ERC Properties Inc., a Fort Smith, Ark., builder and manager of multifamily development, faced a crucial training challenge: teaching 355 property managers how to comply with Revenue Service regulations for affordable housing tax credits. Managers need to determine the eligibility of qualified tenants, and penalties for not following the law are huge.

Candace Armstrong, ERC's corporate training director, chose software from Minn LearningWare Inc. The software, called Game Show Pro, provides a series of games based on popular television shows. Using questions and answers based on her training materials, Armstrong divides each training class into two teams that compete in a tic-tac-toe on "Hollywood Squares."

To test the effectiveness of the games, she compared results from a group of employees who played the game with those of a different group that received the same questions in a basic review. Managers need to score 80% on a subsequent certification exam; Ms. Armstrong found that 88% of the group that played the game passed the test on the first try, compared with 75% of the group that received the basic review.

"Most training is very boring, especially if it's government-required," Ms. Armstrong says. "The difference was pretty obvious. People learn more when they laugh."

Write to Michael Totty at michael.totty@wsj.com

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