

How to Leverage Technology to Enhance Learning

By Jim Sullivan Copyright 2006

Before you read another word, please chisel this in stone: *If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.*

With corporate training and learning programs changing more rapidly than Elton John at a Las Vegas Liberace Tribute, it's time to assess—and *re-assess*--the role of technology as an enabler of 21st Century foodservice training.

How do you separate hype from high-performance in our *faster-harder-smarter-more* world? A reasonable person begins by considering the evolution of foodservice training by both 1) the three types of learning, and 2) the five formats of screens we use to facilitate that learning. An examination of each area gives smart leaders and trainers a glimpse into both the possibilities and pitfalls that await when new technology intersects with how people *really* learn in the 21st Century.



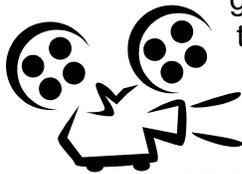
Linear learning. If you've ever read a training manual or business book, sat through an 80-slide Power Point presentation, watched a training video or DVD (whether it's on a 52" monitor or a 3" square iPod), you have experienced classic linear—"one-way"—learning. It's called linear because the outcome has been pre-determined by the "trainer" (author, writer, director, editor or Power Point designer) and the trainee merely follows along. The trainee cannot affect or influence the outcome. Linear learning is not interactive, and marginally experiential.. Linear training platforms *can* teach and inspire, but only with great content, thoughtful design, a dedicated trainer and a self-motivated learner. The biggest problem is that linear training makes it very difficult to track, measure, or gauge proficiencies and progress. Most foodservice training is linear.

Failure learning. Northwestern professor and adult learning guru Roger Schank has long contended that the only way that children or adults truly *learn* new skills is by trial and error, and *learning-by-doing*, as opposed to "teaching-by-telling". Mr. Schank's research creates a persuasive argument that teaching by "telling" alone--whether instructor-led, manual-based or DVD/computer-driven--is costly and often ineffective because there's no opportunity to realistically first "try-and-fail". Long-term retention rises incrementally when the learner is able to first apply the new skills in a safe environment in which they can fail and then *learn from that failure*. This learning practice is especially critical for skills like service,

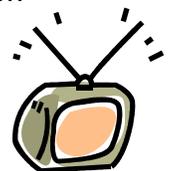
selling, leadership, negotiation, team-building, conflict resolution and safe food-handling. (I think I just described a unit manager!)

Blended learning. This training approach combines visual, written and interactive learning along with guided practice and guided application by a skilled facilitator or coach. Almost everyone agrees that combining audio, visual, and kinesthetic learning with coaching and practice results in team members grasping new skills quicker and most importantly: better *executing* those skills long-term. And while blended learning done well is arguably the best training approach of all, this method still doesn't resolve The Missing Link of training: how does a manager or company effectively inspire, teach and then track, measure, record, guide and gauge an employee's progress from anywhere in the system, whether it's by the trainer in a unit or a Director in the Home Office? This question organically leads us to a brief discussion of where foodservice training and learning begins for 99.9 % of all trainees: one screen or another.

The First Screen. For any American born before 1960 the first visual training program you experienced was most likely a violent cautionary tale in the form of a Driver's Ed course on 16 mm film in a darkened high school classroom on a portable 6' x 4' Bell and Howell screen. The instructor, usually a multi-tasking gym teacher, would turn off the projector, turn on the lights, fold up the screen and in a classic case of understated facilitation, gruffly ask "Any questions?" That was it. The film taught it and hopefully you caught it. Of course the concept of training films is as old as cinema itself. The military produced training films for WW I recruits as early as 1918, and White Castle, Howard Johnson's and others made some classic foodservice training films in the early 1930s and 1940s. If your restaurant didn't have the budget for training films you used the screen for either overhead acetate transparencies ("overheads") or the dreaded "slide-tape" contraption that combined a carousel of 35 mm slides with a synchronous pre-recorded cassette tape. (FYI: overheads ruled for over 30 years and were born in bowling alleys long before they made their way to the classroom. And if you want to see the next generation of training media, visit a bowling alley today and watch how their new electronic scoring system coaches, cheers, teaches and tracks your progress!)



The Second Screen. Television monitors were training's second screen. From 1947 until 1982 the TV was useful in a restaurant only for patrons watching sports. Training was not attached to the tube until the widespread introduction of the VCR in the early 1980s. Once VHS beat Beta, the proliferation of "training tapes" in the foodservice industry was significant. As technology evolved the 2nd screen became home to DVDs as the common method of audio-visual learning for most hourly foodservice workers. Most foodservice operators are stuck on this screen relative to training.



The Third Screen. PCs became the preferred “third” screen of trainers starting in the 1990s and continuing through today. Power Point accessed from the web was called “Computer-Based Training” and became ubiquitous as the training tool of choice. But is reading a set of bullet points from a screen really “learning” or merely old-fashioned linear training on a different backdrop? Too many foodservice trainers blow into a meeting with a laptop and LCD projector and mechanically click through a deck of Power Point slides (a process I call “show up and throw up”) and you have to wonder if those trainees would not have been better off reading a manual or comic book instead. But the physical size and costs of PCs made them a limited tool for foodservice training. Like the two screens preceding PCs, you had to sit in front of them, they couldn’t come to you. Plus the first wave of e-learning was expensive, heavy on animation that was clever but didn’t teach much and soul-less.

The Fourth screen. The fourth screen of training is small, portable and relatively new: think video iPods, and iRivers. It’s the first and second screens, shrunken, with headphones. There’s a lot of buzz about these new potential training platforms. They’re “cool”, “new”, “it’s how today’s generation likes to learn”, “you’re out of touch if you don’t use it,” etc. (But we’ve heard this before; anyone remember LaserDiscs and CD-i?) At first blush, iPod video training sounds like a great idea. But thoughtful training departments have been asking themselves “is this truly the best bang for my buck technology-wise?” More importantly, is “cool” a tool? The fact is that iPods are still linear (one-way) learning, expensive, and don’t allow true interactivity, guided practice, or realistic simulation. Most *importantly the learner’s progress cannot be measured or tracked* by either the unit manager or the Home Office. Other issues to consider relative to supporting the iPod medium include:

- Device theft,
- Illegal content-sharing (do you want your proprietary training shared freely among users...or competitors?)
- Adapting and editing your current library of video content to a 3”x 3” screen,
- Lack of customization,
- Updating and re-formatting new content on a regular basis to the smaller format,
- Losing the graphics (that reinforce learning) from your current videos since they’re hard to see on a 3” screen,.
- The inability to track and measure learning through interactivity and application.

The Fifth Screen. If you’re *truly* ready to leverage technology to upgrade your learning systems and corporate knowledge, the Fifth Screen—**e-learning**-- is where you and your company need to be. E-learning technology is refined and affordable, and distribution via broadband and wi-fi is ubiquitous and speedy. E-learning is trackable, allows guided practice and simulation, and your current POS terminals can efficiently run e-learning courses, which means minimal hardware resource investment for maximum learning impact.





The hi-def laptop screen, the Treo smartphone, and the multi-tasking POS terminal screen or kiosk) has been quietly transforming the foodservice training arena in the last 18 months with a dynamic new generation of e-learning, driven by a perfect storm of Wi-Fi, DSL and high-speed Internet availability and convergence. Forget those bad e-learning horror stories from the 1990s, today's web-based programs are everything we've ever wanted in learning: non-linear, multi-lingual, fun, interactive, customized, scalable, simulation-driven, measurable and track-able. Pretty much everything that learning is but training wasn't for the last 30 years. It's now affordable and cost-effective too; start-up fees are low and can average about \$100-\$150 per month per unit.



In exchange, you get significantly lower labor and training costs, measurable progress, electronic documentation, improved retention skills, a sharper crew, and a happier customer. "With a Wi-Fi connection and a laptop or Treo today a cook or server or manager can have a customized learning experience anywhere in any language," says Jeff Tenut, a foodservice e-learning pioneer and partner in Nashville-based DiscoverLink, a company whose e-learning customers include Panera Bread, Bob Evans, Golden Corral, Pappas, Ted's Montana Grill, and many others. "They can stop and start when they want, progress only when the skill is mastered, practice to proficiency, fail, retry and have fun learning. All the while, their progress is measured and tracked and enhanced. 21st Century e-learning provides the right training at the right time, so that the employee will no longer have to practice on the customer."

There are dozens of e-learning vendors out there today, but after listening to most of their pitches, here's my suggestion: choose one who knows the business of foodservice well. I hear this often from e-learning vendors: "We do lots of stuff in retail. And foodservice is just like retail." Well, maybe you do. But no it's not. While retail may resemble foodservice relative to transactions and data, it's a much different animal when it comes to service, selling, foods safety, leadership, cross-cultural training, adult learning and filling relevant knowledge gaps. If it's my money, I'm putting it on a company that knows foodservice well, has a proven track record of e-execution, and a backlog of absolutely stellar content relative to adult learning,



*I have seen the future of foodservice learning and it resides on the Fifth Screen of E-learning. **E-learning is no longer a question of "if" for your operation, but a matter of when.** The future is now. Get on board, ladies and gentlemen, because today if you're standing still, you're walking backwards.*

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