



ONLINE HEALTH AND SAFETY TRAINING

In recent years there has been a considerable proliferation of online health and safety training courses, often referred to as e-learning. The number of occupational health and safety (OHS) courses and subjects that are now offered is considerable and leaves those organising training a good deal of choice, as well as difficult decisions to make before investing time and money in a particular type of training. Courses from simple induction programmes all the way through to NEBOSH Diploma and OHS degree programmes are now offered online.

So what are the advantages and disadvantages of online training? Does it meet the legal requirements on the provision of training? Is it worth the investment?

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Training is fundamental to the success of any health and safety management system. When it comes down to it, it is how people behave and the decisions they make that can cause or prevent accidents and incidents. So, effective training is key to that success.

Some professional roles, such those appointed as competent persons under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (MHSWR), rely on their training as part of their competence to be able to advise employers and others in an authoritative manner. Others such as first-aiders and fork lift truck drivers need training to make sure they are able to fulfil their functions.

The provision of training is also a legal requirement. In particular, s.2(2)(c) of the Health and Safety at Work, etc Act 1974 requires employers to: “provide such information, instruction and training and supervision as is necessary to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable the health and safety of all employees”.

Other regulations, such as the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 and the Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992, also require training and lay down to some extent what should be covered in any training provided.

These legal requirements are supported by MHSWR, which require training on recruitment and on being exposed to new risks or increased risks. They also require an employee’s capabilities to be taken into account. In all of these legal requirements there is no stipulation as to the form the training should take, and therefore online training is an option, providing the training is effective. As laid down in common law, competence is not just about qualifications. It is also about attitudes and behaviour. To be a competent employee he/she must have positive attitudes to health and safety at work and behave responsibly, and training can play an important role here. Can online training make a difference in this respect? All these issues need to be considered when making the choice on the type of training to be adopted.

MAKING THE CHOICE

Training should not be provided on a random basis. It must be based on an assessment of requirements and this can often involve a training needs analysis (TNA). TNA is the systematic collection of data to find out where there are gaps in the existing skills, knowledge and competence of personnel. TNA can also be used to analyse where there are deficiencies in attitudes, perceptions and other human factors important to health and safety in the workplace.



A TNA is usually applied from three perspectives:

- At organisational level. Training may encourage change or input in terms of improving or maintaining the organisation's standards of health and safety.
- At job level. All jobs should have a training specification for skills and competence.
- At an individual level. TNAs are very important for individuals and should be linked to personal development.

Following the TNA, a choice must be made about the type of training to be provided. Will the training be provided in-house or will a training provider be used? Where will the training take place? Who will do the training? What is the cost? Can the training be provided online, will this be effective and should this option be taken up?

ONLINE TRAINING: PROS AND CONS

PROS:

- Online training can often be less expensive than attendance at an external training provider's premises or providing in-house training. This not only includes the fees for the training but associated costs such as time and expense in attending the course: travel, subsistence and accommodation, etc.
- Online training is flexible in terms of the availability and location of the learner: training can be undertaken anywhere and anytime, provided there is access to the internet.
- The learner can proceed at her or his own pace and is by default actively involved in the training.
- There is no limit on the number of employees that can be trained providing there are adequate IT facilities.
- Personal progress can be monitored and results tracked during the training.
- The consistency of information and delivery can be maintained and assured.
- There can be the option to join online discussion groups or contact made with tutors and teachers.
- There can be blended learning options where the learner attends training sessions in addition to the e-learning.
- Online packages can be visually attractive and interactive.

CONS:

- Online options require discipline on the part of the learner and self-motivation is important.
- If the training is undertaken in the workplace or in the learner's own time there can be unexpected interruptions.



- There is no or limited interaction with other learners or the tutor. Learners may feel isolated and raising problems and asking questions may not be possible.
- The learner may need confident IT skills and IT support may be required.
- An investment in IT equipment and software may be required.
- Online training can be interrupted by IT problems, such as slow internet connections, etc.
- There may be limited opportunity for practical and hands-on experiences.

THE VERDICT

There is definitely a place for online OHS training but those organising training must consider the drawbacks as well as the advantages. It is also important to consider these from the learner's perspective and not just that of the organisation.

It is likely that online learning lends itself more comfortably to basic or fundamental training, such as induction or display screen equipment training. This is in contrast to higher level, more complex training, where contact with others and the trainer during the training is probably less important. This looks to be the biggest drawback for online training; there is no interaction with other learners or with the trainer at the time of training and it is difficult to quantify what may be lost through this omission. Discussion with and listening to others during training is an important part of the learning process. This may be offset to some extent by blended learning options (a mixture of online and classroom training).

It should not be forgotten that a good trainer can sometimes be inspirational and change a learner's attitudes and behaviour. It is difficult to see how online training could replicate that and achieve the same result.

The provision of training can be an expensive investment and it is important that the training is effective. Those organising training need to carefully consider their options before opting for online training.