USDA

United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Chief Information Officer

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TO: Sub-Cabinet Officials
Agency Heads
Deputy Administrators for Management
Human Resource Directors

FROM: Charles R. Christopherson, Jr.
Chief Information Officer / Chief Financial Officer

SUBJECT: Utilization of Online Training by USDA Employees

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies estimated that they spent approximately $102M[1] in 2004 on training, including tuition and travel expenses. A large amount of USDA's training is conducted using traditional classroom techniques that are often expensive, time consuming and inconsistent from vendor to vendor. Many employees find online training to be more effective[2] than traditional training and more attainable. Increasing the use of online training will provide USDA employees with expanded learning opportunities.

Online training has several advantages.

- Employees can take training "just in time" and apply it on the job while it is fresh in their mind.
- Employees can acquire knowledge when it is needed for their job performance rather than waiting for a class to be available.
- Employees can take "just enough" training. Rather than work through all the lessons of a course, employees can review only the material they need to achieve results, saving time and avoiding loss of productivity.
- Online training is self-paced, allowing advanced learners to speed through or bypass known topics while novices can slow their own progress, reviewing less familiar content until proficient.
- Travel expenses can be eliminated because students do not have to travel to class – it comes to them.

AgLearn, USDA's learning management system (LMS) is the leading LMS in the Federal arena and has over 3,000 previously paid for online courses that are available to all USDA employees. Of the 3,000, there are over 800 general business courses, over 300 Environmental Safety and Health courses and over 800 video-based leadership courses available to senior managers GS-15 and above. A recent survey of

[1] USDA training costs based on an FY2006 estimate agencies provided to OBPA for an OMB 2004 data call.

[2] A recent US Air Force study compared different learning methods for Information Assurance training. Those who used their eLearning courses actually have a higher success rate at passing the exams than the Instructor Led Training participants (81% vs. 74%).

USDA employees, who have taken over 25,000 SkillSoft courses on AgLearn since the beginning of FY 2008, showed very positive results, indicated this training is of a high quality, and are providing a meaningful impact on job performance. Even so, USDA has yet to leverage the full value of this tool.

Comparable private sector average use of online courses is approximately 40% and growing. The Department is issuing a requirement that agencies first review the previously purchased online training in AgLearn, such as SkillSoft, to verify that the course is not available prior to buying equivalent classroom training or other on-line instruction. The objective is to greatly reduce expense and increase knowledge through the use of online training. The online IT training approach is a proven and successful model as evidenced by a similar program in use by the U.S. Army since 2002.

IT Training

Supervisors often comment on the high cost of IT Training. AgLearn now has extensive support of IT training courses for both the IT professional and the non-IT professional. The extensive AgLearn library contains over 1,500 IT professional courses and 300 desktop IT courses. For IT professionals the majority of IT certification and training can now be found in AgLearn. AgLearn also has courses that support MS Word, Excel, Powerpoint, and training for other products used daily by our employees.

While agencies are to use AgLearn as their primary training tool, at times there are gaps between training needs and the available no-charge AgLearn online courses, exceptions to the IT training should be authorized by agency leadership when:

(1) requestor and supervisor have verified that the required IT skills training is not available among the no-charge online courses on AgLearn;
(2) related no-charge AgLearn online courses have been completed, but additional training is needed to meet job requirements;
(3) requestor can demonstrate that the requested course uniquely addresses training requirements not offered in the no-charge course catalog on AgLearn; or
(4) the requested course is a no-charge, non-travel course.

It is estimated that the use of AgLearn will reduce IT training costs by 50% in FY 2008 and by 75% in FY 2009 and beyond. The estimated percentage is capped at 75% to allow for IT training that may not be sufficiently covered by online courses. FY 2008 cost avoidance is projected to be approximately $13.1M ($8.9M for IT and $4.2M for non-IT training). These savings may be repurposed to directly support the mission area goals.

Reports from the AgLearn team will be provided periodically to all agencies to help gauge cost avoidance and assess the effectiveness and satisfaction level of online training. Effectiveness will depend in part on supervisors and employees ensuring that adequate time is available for online training. This initiative will be supported by an awareness campaigns to encourage managers, supervisors and employees to use previously purchased AgLearn online courses.

The AgLearn team has built an impressive library of classes. As agencies work to maximize program dollars, our employees can still receive the training that they need to support the mission responsibilities of the Department of Agriculture.