



# Software Training: Variations on a Theme

BY JOHN SAFIN

## A Scenario for Your Consideration

“Welcome to your first day at work. Here are the keys to this extremely expensive backhoe. I want you to drive it across town to the jobsite and then start working. You’ll get the hang of the thing after a couple hours of trial and error.”

You’re probably laughing at the absurdity of this scenario. No one would authorize any employee to operate an expensive piece of equipment without proper training and certification.

*Why, then, do so many construction companies invest thousands of dollars on expensive software without training their staff on its proper, most effective use?*

## Why, Indeed!

There are a number of reasons why people are more apt to be lax when it comes to “tech” training. Some programs, such as Web browsers and e-mail applications, are very user-friendly and take very little time to master. A person may “self-educate” on such applications over a relatively short period of time simply by using the “trial and error” approach.

But, the more functions and features a software program offers, the more help users need to become proficient with even the basics of the application – and, much more training is usually needed to master the “bells and whistles” of today’s software.

Obviously, it’s in your company’s best interest to have all of its employees be highly productive on its software applications as quickly as possible. Fortunately, there are several software training methods that can bring your staff to a productive knowledge level in a relatively short time.

## The Classroom Model

One instructor surrounded by enthusiastic students in a classroom setting is a proven and effective teaching method. This may be why so many software companies have training centers that provide a comfortable learning environment.

### Off-Site

Two types of room designs are typically found in these centers:

- 1) The “classroom” environment, with all the tables and chairs facing forward and the instructor in front demonstrating the software, using a projector or something similar; and
- 2) The “hands-on” environment, in which each student has his or her own computer workstation to follow along with the teacher, completing assignments or other methods to get a “feel” for the software.

However, travel-related costs are the downside to classroom learning at a provider’s training center. Sending a staff member to another city takes time and financial resources.

### In-House

By bringing a trainer to your company, several staff members can participate in the learning session. The cost of hosting a trainer will be less than sending a number of staff out and, in some instances, the instructor’s travel costs are included in the training fee.

Another advantage: By bringing the software trainer on-site to conduct classes, a significant portion of the training curriculum can be modified to meet the specific needs of your company’s business operations. The instructor will bring materials

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for any classroom-style sessions that are held, and your staff will get hands-on experience at their own workstation using practice copies of your company's data.

By holding hands-on training in-house, your staff will be able to go from "practice" to "practical application" under the watchful eye of the software trainer. And, they'll learn how to use the software's functionality to be more productive in their own specific jobs.

### **Important Points**

Here are four points to keep in mind if your company is thinking of using the classroom method for software training:

- 1) The professional trainers should be experts in the functionality of the computer programs they are teaching and should also understand the day-to-day workings of the construction industry.
- 2) The training curriculum should specifically outline which facets of the software will be learned.
- 3) Employees will absorb the information better when using details specific to their daily routines.
- 4) Employees should be tested for knowledge at appropriate intervals throughout the training.

### **One Teacher/One Student**

A "one-on-one" environment provides the benefits of a live instructor without the distraction of other students. In addition, a private class facilitates a more flexible flow of information. More time can be spent on concepts that take longer to grasp, less on those that are understood quickly.

In addition, instruction style can more readily be adapted to meet the learning style of each individual student. And, the lessons can be tailored to the specific needs of the employee, as well as to the policies and procedures of your company.

From the student's perspective, private training is less threatening than training in a roomful of fellow employees. There is little embarrassment if an answer is wrong, and less apprehension about returning to the classroom after what may be many years. Finally, in the one-on-one setting, the instructor is usually better able to tell if the student has an understanding of the material as it is taught, before a formal exam is administered.

### **Cost Differential**

As with any kind of live instruction, there are charges associated with private sessions. But, in the case of software training, the depth and quality of the instruction may easily justify the additional cost.

And, while the examples in this section are focused on a "one student/one teacher" scenario, adding another staff member to the mix will not create a "crowd." Rather, it could make the expense of a private instructor a more reasonable investment.

### **Online Training: The Web Way**

While vocational distance learning has been around since the 1880s, it took the Internet to facilitate a new, highly interactive means of software training. Using a computer, participants can view the instructor's workstation and follow all the steps he or she performs – without the instructor being physically present.

The Internet tools found in many online software courses identify key fields and screens throughout the training session, allowing participants to keep pace with the instructor and focus on critical information as it is presented. After completing hands-on workshop assignments, tests, and other course requirements, students can receive an almost instantaneous evaluation of their performance.

### **The "Virtual" Advantages**

Using a "virtual classroom" gives busy professionals the flexibility to meet their educational needs. Many traditional online education providers offer a series of classes that enables students to choose the class that best fits their own schedules. Classes can be taken from any computer, whether at home or at the office. Travel time and costs are the obvious resources saved from online training.

Another benefit of online training is the price of the class itself, which is often less than an in-person session. (One note about pricing: Due to the complexity of the materials, some university-level courses leading to a degree may not have any pricing discounts when compared to their classroom equivalents; in those cases, however, travel time and costs are still being saved.)

And, there is the variety of training available online. In addition to accredited university degrees and software training from well-known developers, there are many online courses available that offer CPE, CE, and other professional education requirements, just like their classroom counterparts.

### **Personal Preferences**

Some people are more at ease working at a computer than talking to or interacting directly with others. Thus, the virtual classroom allows these students to be more comfortable expressing themselves. This comfort level also extends to kinesthetic students, those who learn best by doing. Since the online class requires interaction using the keyboard and

mouse, this is a good training method for those who like a hands-on approach.

### **The Online Challenge**

The most challenging aspect of online education is the fact that it *is* online. Technology, for all its wonderful benefits, can still be a source of frustration; and, any problems accessing the Internet can disrupt a training session.

For example, it is not unusual for a student using a dial-up connection to lag behind the rest of the class. Online courses are extremely content-heavy, especially if students need to run software that resides on the campus network. Cable, T1 lines, and the other high-speed Internet connections can help to make the online educational experience more meaningful.

One thing to keep in mind when considering online training: Campus computer systems are prepared for demands on bandwidth, but some online educators use their own unique communications application. Under such circumstances, the interface program may not sync entirely or properly with a student's home or office computer.

So, students need to install any necessary programs and test both the computer and the connection to the campus before the first class. In most cases, the school's help desk should be able to solve any connectivity or technology-related problems.

### **Prepackaged Training**

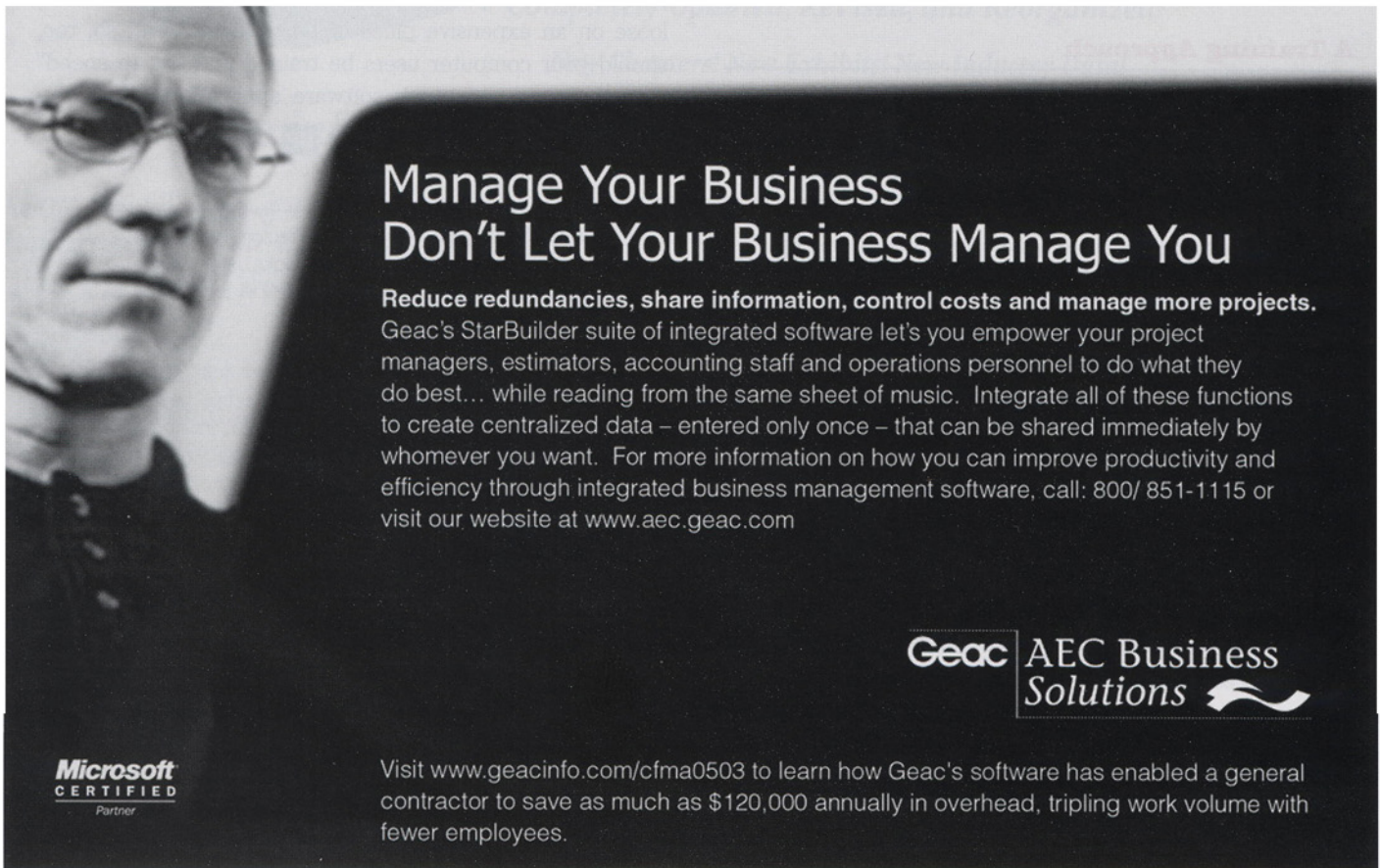
Prepackaged training sessions, which provide preprogrammed stimulus/response acknowledgement of the student's efforts, are designed to allow students to complete training at their own pace.

With this type of training, the course materials may reside on a CD-ROM or may be hosted online. In addition, students may be required to purchase additional hard-copy study guides.

### **Cost-Effective & On-Demand**


Prepackaged training is cost-effective and offers on-demand availability. With a prepackaged course, the materials can be used multiple times, while an online session is a one-time activity. The prepackaged course content can also be used as a tutorial to enhance or reinforce an employee's knowledge, especially using CD-ROM or other electronic storage media.

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In addition, users can electronically search the contents of the course for specific scenarios, providing an even greater depth of learning and delivering more value as a virtual tutor. And, there are some software products that incorporate a “help assistant” into their programming that offer suggestions and aid the user in completing tasks, such as the Office Assistant in Microsoft Office applications.

### **Other Prepackaged Advantages ... & One Drawback**

There are three reasons why prepackaged training is so popular. First, and foremost, students can set their own pace, skipping sections of the training that they understand and repeating sections where the concepts are more difficult to grasp.

Also, the presentation of the content is consistent from session to session. While a live instructor can never give two presentations in exactly the same way, prepackaged curriculum will always have the same content and presentation style. And, a prepackaged training course can easily be used to complement any other training method used by your company.

The downside of using prepackaged training is the lack of interaction with a live instructor.

### **A Training Approach**

Contractors should think of software training as an HR investment. Periodic training sessions offer the best retention of skills, allowing for specific topics to be absorbed more completely.

Choosing a single application or small set of functions for training leads to better understanding because there isn't an overload of information. This enables users to apply what they have learned to their actual work situations, where it really counts.

### **Maximizing Training**

Here are some suggestions for contractors to maximize the impact of their software training dollars:

- Never underestimate the amount of training needed.
- Provide sufficient opportunities for adequate training.
- Remember that hands-on instruction offers the best means to assure proficiency.
- Test students at specific intervals to determine whether the training has been effective.

- Give the courses to managers first. This will allow them to learn which company policies and procedures are affected. Additionally, they will be able to assist (or even instruct) their employees.
- Cross-train your staff. In the event a key employee leaves, productivity will be maintained.
- Seek to create customized training packages for your company.

Finally, ensure that your trainer understands the construction industry. For example, generating purchase orders or invoices in a construction company is subtly different than the same task at a pharmaceutical plant. A proficient instructor will show the “why” along with the “how to,” making the training process much more positive for your staff.

### **Conclusion**

Software that caters specifically to the construction industry represents a significant investment to most contractors. The ROI on that technology investment is enhanced when employees know how to fully use the applications for greatest productivity.

Just as your company would not turn a novice field worker loose on an expensive piece of heavy equipment, so, too, should your computer users be trained and “up to speed” with the your company’s software applications. Both can translate to a better bottom line. **BP**

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