Interactive Video - The '90s Training Alternative

It's 1985 and you've been working in construction for three years. One day your boss approaches you and hands you the white hat. Moments ago you had the luxury of a foreman to guide you. Now you are the foreman. What are you going to do?

You're not going to complain about the raise in pay, but do you know how to handle the job? What do you really know about supervising other employees? Feeling a little nervous? A little lost, perhaps? After all, you've had no training. Relax... it's 1994! Times have changed, thanks in part to Merit Contractors Association.

Since it's inception, eight years ago, Merit has been an industry leader in providing training programs for open shop field employees, supervisors and management. In an effort to stay abreast of emerging technology, Merit pulled off a training coup. The organization developed and produced an interactive video instruction (IVI) program aimed specifically at the construction industry. The accomplishment was a North American first. Merit initially purchased an IVI management skills development program designed for General Motors by Wilson Learning Corporation.

"We found that the people in the office responded well to the program, but the people in the field did not respond as well," said Stephen Kushner, Merit's president. "So we asked, 'How can we make this more construction applicable?'" The solution was to adapt the training program to an actual construction site.

In collaboration with Wilson Learning, the process from conception to reality took one year. During that period, great pains were taken to consult with people in the field, including foremen and management, who made practical suggestions about the content. Merit's IVI Construction Management Skills course was ready for students by August, 1992.

"Merit has been a pioneer in introducing IVI into Alberta" said Willard Kirkpatrick, a board member and past chairman of Merit.

"There were a couple of other groups that had made IVI available before Merit started, but I think Merit has the best resources at this point, and has done more to introduce interactive video to the construction industry than anyone else." Mike Knowlton, with Wilson Learning, was involved with Merit from a project management angle, and helped establish the Learning Centres in Edmonton and Calgary.

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"The construction specific segment of the program is a very powerful application tool that helps individuals to recognize the opportunities to demonstrate management skills in a construction environment.

Often times individuals will have a mindset that says I appreciate that these skills are important, but I don't understand how they fit into my role and my job. What Merit has been very successful in doing is bridging that gap to help individuals make the connection relative to the critical skills that managers need to demonstrate. They

can then recognize the opportunities to apply those skills in a construction setting."

Foremen, lead hands, supervisors and project managers can sit down in front of a user- friendly computer workstation in Edmonton or Calgary, and be trained in a style that stimulates one-on-one teaching. If the user is unable to make it to Edmonton or Calgary, Merit can deliver a mobile workstation on site.

The courseware uses video, audio and text to communicate with the user, and allows participants to set their own pace. The actual equipment includes laser disks, computer, monitor, mouse and a workbook.

"It tends to be a private learning process," said Michael Oakes, Membership Services Coordinator for Merit. "Some people could be threatened by other class members. This way they can step back or go forward without influencing classmates. They still receive the feedback and encouragement they would get in a normal classroom setting."

Learning in a seminar-type of format is passive learning. IVI forces active involvement in the learning process, and in doing so, the user retains more information. Scheduling is completely up to the participant, so there are none of the usual problems associated with classroom learning. For users who would otherwise have to travel to far away locations for training seminars, the convenience of on-site learning cannot be equaled. The expensive and time-consuming nature of travel, accommodation and meals in restaurants, is now a thing of the past.

The courseware reflects realistic work situations, so that the user may bring back to the workplace ideas and experience that may be directly applied to the construction site. The programs do not teach technical construction skills; instead, they focus on the people skills needed to function well in any construction environment. Each segment of the course takes from three to four hours to complete, depending on the student. The course is broken-up into 10 skill development areas:

1. Perception
How do you interpret what is going on around you? How do you identify information and what influences your response to it?

2. Organizing and planning
Can you establish goals and procedures, set priorities and schedule your activities to keep your workload flowing smoothly?

3. Decision-making
What factors do you use to reach conclusions? How effectively do you identify problems, generate effective alternatives and choose appropriate strategies?

4. Decisiveness
Do you take the initiative, give opinions effectively, make timely decisions, defend those decisions and take appropriate risks to achieve results?

5. Interpersonal relations
We meet a variety of people in different positions in an active construction work day. Can you interact with them, develop rapport, elicit their ideas and present feedback

effectively?

6. Leadership
As an effective leader, do you initiate action, direct, co-ordinate and motivate others, delegate tasks and establish accountability?

7. Control and follow-up
Delegating is too often painful for both participants. Can you measure work performance, monitor change and implement adjustments?

8. Flexibility
Nothing stays the same and none of us adapt to change at the same pace or in the same way. Can you generate new perspectives and options, re-order priorities, revise your goals and take adaptive action?

9. Oral communication
Can you speak effectively to present a well structured message? Do you use your voice and appropriate non-verbal cues to achieve audience rapport?

10. Written communication
Is your writing effective? Does it win the reader's attention? Does it have a clear focus with the necessary details? ...interactive video disk represents a very efficient and cost-effective way to involve employees in learning.

Roger Krahn, Estimator for IGL Canada, enrolled in the program last winter. "I took it for overall corporate improvement. The general reaction from all the people that took it, was that they liked it a lot and were looking forward to finishing off some of the courses. Basically we were sort of restrained for time. We only had four weeks with the machine, but I think we got in about 30 people to take about four or five courses each. We were running almost 24 hours a day. I think the last course ended at midnight." Krahn said he wouldn't have a problem endorsing the IVI program.

"What was really positive about it was that it gives the person the opportunity to study alone and still have that group feeling while interacting with the screen," he said. Sharon Mayberry, Manager of Inline Pipe Inspections for IGL Canada told Open Mind she gleaned a lot from the experience.

"I took it because it was offered by IGL, and also for personal improvement. It was good as far as pointing out where your downfalls are - where you're lacking. I recommended it around the office to several people who hadn't originally taken it."

IVI provides a welcome opportunity for companies trying to conserve resources. "The big message is that the interactive video disk represents a very efficient and cost-effective way to involve employees in learning. It requires very little computer literacy-ease of use is one of the real advantages of the tool. All of the programs are designed and delivered based on the way adults learn," Knowlton said.

Merit's Management Education Chairman, Frank Babienko said the Board of Directors has made a commitment to upgrade training. "We believe in the concept of continuous learning. We are constantly evolving to meet the demands of an ever-changing industry." Recently the Calgary Chamber of Commerce awarded Merit its

Small Business Training Award for providing training solutions that meet the needs of a small business. Interactive video was a big part of this award.

In keeping with Merit's efforts to help open shop construction stay ahead of the game, the organization is also considering adding more courses to its IVI program. "We can see other projects where interactive video may be used, for example, in negotiations with owners, clients, suppliers and contractors. Technical training is another possibility. Our role is to purchase courses and develop them where needed," said Babienko.

It's 1994 and you've been working in construction for three years. One day your boss approaches you and hands you the white hat. Breathe a little easier. You now have somewhere to turn.