

DANVILLE UTILITIES DEPARTMENT eLearning Case Study

In September 2010, the Utilities Department of the City of Danville, VA, achieved a goal almost unheard of in e-learning circles: 100 percent employee participation in its online training program. How did they do it?



Through its Utilities Department, the City of Danville, VA, provides water, gas, electricity and waste removal for city residents. Danville is the only city in Virginia to own its power-generating facility, including substations. The Utilities Department also fields a customer service center, water filtration system, and wastewater system. It employs 185 people, from customer service representatives in the office to linemen in the field, at six locations.

The Organization

City of Danville Utilities Department

Location: Danville, VA

Services Provided: Water, Gas, Electricity and Waste Removal

Number of Employees: 185

Contact: Leon Jones, Training & Safety Coordinator

Situation

The City of Danville Utilities Department employs 185 workers spread across six locations. Training these employees has always been a challenge. It's difficult to bring them in to a physical classroom, not only because they are spread among so many locations (some of which were remote), but also because employees range from line crews to office workers, all with different needs and schedules.

Switching to an online training program made sense. It would be easier to administer while still meeting the department's needs. In 2004, the Utilities Department chose ClarityNet® online courseware and the Coastal LMS, components of the Coastal eLearning System.

At first, participation was low. Many employees had been entrenched in their job for years, and resisted change, as well as anyone telling them how to do their job, explained Leon Jones, the department's training and safety coordinator. Others were not computer savvy and slow to adjust to using the new software.

Solution

Changing employee attitudes was a process of winning their buy-in of the program as well as impressing upon them the mandatory nature of training. Participation took a huge leap forward when the department's director chose to lead by example. He was the first to complete one of the online training courses provided by the Coastal eLearning System and earn a certificate. He took his certificate to the next safety meeting with the department's supervisors. Holding up the certificate for all to see, he said, "Here's mine. I want yours next." Participation immediately jumped to 80 percent. "The message was heard loud and clear", said Mr. Jones: "Everyone takes it, no exceptions."

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Since the statement by the department director, participation among employees had consistently hovered around 97 percent. This is still well above the 30 to 50 percent typically seen across the industry. Then, the Utilities Department reached an outstanding goal – 100 percent employee participation in its online training program. Not only did the Utilities Department reach the 100 percent milestone, they have kept it for more than six months.

The milestone is attributed to the combination of dedication to informing employees and quality of the training. On the heels of this news, Mr. Jones reported that 2010 was without a reportable accident. “I think the employees are taking a closer look at safety,” he said.

Mr. Jones also makes employees aware of each month’s training schedule. A calendar listing all mandatory, monthly training for the year is posted on area bulletin boards and on the city’s shared, internal network. On the first of each month, emails are sent to all employees explaining what training must be completed for the month. Mr. Jones then sends reminder emails at regular intervals throughout the month. “There’s no excuse for not knowing,” he said.

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Accessibility brings buy-in

Training is made as accessible as possible for employees. Multiple computers are supplied in various locations, often pulling double duty to help make it cost effective. For example, one computer lab doubles as a “hot line station” during storm outages. To further keep costs down, the safety department has teamed with the city’s IT department. When an employee is scheduled to receive a computer upgrade, IT often earmarks the older, slower computer for training. While these slower computers are no longer adequate for other applications, they are functional for training. This saves the department from having to buy all-new computers. The department is also working to get more laptops in trucks to assist line crews out in the field who find it difficult to come in to the office for training.

Results

Once employees were convinced to use the software, they gave the Coastal eLearning System a thumbs up, as evidenced by the department’s participation rate. “Most like the quality of the presentations,” said Mr. Jones. “They enjoy it because they know it’s valuable training. We also have the ability to personalize content with the Coastal LMS. Adding images of our employees hits home. They enjoy seeing familiar faces in their training courses.”

Employee feedback indicates they appreciate the flexibility to complete training at their own pace and at any computer. They also like that the program is well defined — they know what to expect as well as what is expected of them.

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