

# Referenceware offers instant learning opportunities

BY JOHN AMBROSE

When was the last time you needed an answer to a business or technical question, had the right book, and immediately could find exactly what you needed? For most business and IT professionals, this good fortune doesn't happen very often without a vast collection of the latest books and manuals in your office (or a bookstore in the neighborhood). Even so, you might be working from a client site, traveling or working from home. Then what?

Many people think of e-learning as a standalone event, whether it's a module on the use of Microsoft Project or an in-depth course on object-oriented programming. While formal learning through such structured courses — which also typically include interactive exercises and assessments — is an important part of all professionals' learning, it's not the only way we learn.

The fact is that most learning takes place informally and continuously, from on-the-job training, daily problem solving and even talking with fellow employees at the proverbial water cooler. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 70 percent of workplace learning occurs informally, and 30 percent of employee learning takes place through formal activities such as leader-led classes, seminars or structured courses.

The best cases of e-learning today are those that encompass both formal and informal activities to address both types of employee learning. Increasingly, online reference databases that can be personalized with the content that is most relevant to the user are becoming a part of the mix, because they give workers the ability to learn just in time, with just enough information to solve a problem or answer a question.

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IDC research estimates that 15 to 30 percent of a knowledge worker's time is spent searching for information, while 50 percent of these searches are typically successful. The same research estimates the cost of unproductive and lengthy searches for an organization with 1,000 employees can reach \$6 million.

Referenceware is designed to reduce search time and increase search success. Topic areas covered by these collections span technology, business, finance and desktop applications.

Online reference databases differ from e-books or online libraries, in which hard copies of text are digitized for online reading. A good reference database gives users the ability to search at either at the library, bookshelf or book level, with relevant resources ranked by factors such as information currency and the inclusion of search words in book and chapter titles.

Users should also be able to search for a specific book, using the author's name, title or ISSN, or ISBN. For instance, a search on a database for information on Java web services might result in 39 titles. Those titles containing "Java" and "web services" are ranked highest, followed by those titles in which the terms appear in chapter titles. Works which include the search words within a chapter are ranked toward the end.

An online reference service should also foster collaboration and sharing, and provide usage data that potentially helps organizations identify further training needs and investment value.

Let's say that you find information that's important for others on your team to know. You can bookmark content and share it via e-mail with your colleagues who have similar interests, job functions or who are part of your project team or training class. You can also create a virtual personal bookshelf, where you can keep content pertinent to your job, projects and interests for quick retrieval. These bookshelves can also be shared with colleagues.

For example, a help desk organization could use a personalized reference product to help its help desk employees to address questions faster and more accurately. Customer service improves and so does productivity.

Online reference products offer a way to boost the bottom line by offering information at employees' fingertips. The anywhere and anytime accessibility of referenceware offers value to companies who embrace this form of instant learning.

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