



# Earning CEUs Online

**Distance Learning may be the answer to career growth and training for busy professionals and cost-conscious companies alike**

**By Melissa S. Cohn, OTR/L**

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Distance Learning may be the answer to career growth and training for busy professionals and cost-conscious companies alike.

Today, we can quench our thirst for knowledge at the click of a mouse. With such fast, easy access to a universe of information, it's no surprise that the internet is revolutionizing our educational system.

A new era of distance learning via the World Wide Web is connecting students with teachers and enabling them to interact despite being separated physically and in time. That's good news for busy health care managers and clinicians, who are finding Web-based courses are meeting their needs for continuing education.

### **CHANGING THE FACE OF EDUCATION**

The concept of distance learning is nothing new. Organizations offered correspondence courses by mail as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As radio, television and later cable TV arrived, educators took advantage of each communications breakthrough, delivering curriculum in audio and video classrooms. More recently, advances in computer technology gave rise to education and training via multimedia CD-ROM.

Distance learning used to be considered a low-quality substitute for traditional face-to-face education, but new technologies have erased the stigma attached to degrees earned at a distance. And now with the Internet, distance learning is one of the fastest growing trends in higher education.

Schools and universities, companies and professional associations have begun to offer "virtual" courses and degrees. Specialized software and hardware companies are creating a new education industry to support distance learning on the Internet. According to the U.S. Department of Education, distance-education programs have almost doubled in the past three years, and more than half of all higher education institutions plan to offer distance courses by next year. "Every week another college, university or private individual seeks to establish online education," Pam Derringer writes in the *Boston Business Journal*.

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**MAXIMIZING E-LEARNING**

The business community is not far behind. Faced with retraining millions of workers for new, information based economy, corporate America is using distance learning for all aspects of training. A survey by International Data Corporation in Framingham, MASS., Derringer cites, estimated the corporate financial market for electronic-based training at \$550 million in 1998, and projected to grow to \$7.1 billion by 2002. By this time online education is anticipated to represent 52 percent of all corporate training.

Many companies are facilitating e-learning by structuring enterprise-wide e-learning systems. These infrastructures manage training by encompassing every aspect of the education experience, from registration to course delivery, content and curriculum management, through tracking use, scores, proficiency and billing, when required <sup>2</sup>. "The key economic advantage of distance learning over traditional on-site schooling is that it saves students' time ....the principal cost of investment in human capital," Gary S. Becker writes in Business Week.<sup>3</sup> Anything that saves times saves money. So while companies are spending less money on training, online instruction is enabling busy professionals to spend time learning instead of fighting traffic to commute to an after-hours class.

Flexibility is another advantage of distance learning on the internet. Online courses are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, a boon to full-time employees and people with families and unpredictable schedules. Participants can learn course materials at their own place, time and pace. Course-specific, online chat rooms enable students to interact with instructors compare notes with other students, all over the world

**E-LEARNING AND HEALTH CARE**

The health care industry has been adoption use of the Internet rapidly, not only for distance learning, but also for research, telemedicine, clinical data management and equipment purchasing. The internet is also facilitating the increasing trend toward outsourcing. Distance-learning is a way for businesses, institutions and professional associations to outsource teaching to specialized companies, without having to develop the needed training infrastructure and without taking employees away from their work.

Distance learning, which requires students to be self-disciplined and be able to study independently, is well suited for health care professionals who tend to be self-motivated and highly analytical. Research shows that students who are able to self-regulate will be more successful at distance learning, and more likely to enjoy it and sign up for future distance learning classes.<sup>4</sup>

A study at Christopher Newport University (CNU Online) found that learning outcomes in online courses were as good as the outcomes in traditional courses.<sup>5</sup>

Clinical education is also being influenced by distance education. A recent article in the ASHA Leader cited preliminary research showing that "experienced school clinicians seeking a graduate degree enrolled in a distance education program in speech-language-pathology, scored as well or better on the national examination than those pursuing a more traditional path."<sup>6</sup>

### ***COST ISSUES***

For health care professionals to obtain the education they need for state licensure or certification, distance learning over the internet is a cost effective alternative. According to Darringer, Web-based training can save businesses more than 30 percent of the costs of traditional classroom training by eliminating travel expenses and reducing time away from work.

In the rehab industry, the savings afforded by internet learning could rise to as much as 50 to 75 percent of the cost of traditional training. For every dollar spent for an employee to attend a continuing education course, there is another \$2 - \$3 in related costs. The expenses of reflect travel, meals, time away from work and employee replacement costs. In essence, a company pays for two therapists during the time when one is way pursuing continuing education, with no additional revenues accruing during, with no additional revenues accruing during that time.

### ***ENJOYING EDUCATION***

While senior employees may require some time to develop a level of comfort with e-learning, the younger generation of healthcare professionals have come of age with computer technology and fell at home on the internet.

Online learning is dynamic and active in nature, requiring student to use computers, read, write, think critically, and interact with teachers and fellow students. Many students find that they are less shy and speaking up in online chat rooms than in the traditional classroom. As a result, online classmates get to know each other better, discussions are more stimulating, and learning is attractive, effective and enjoyable.

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