

# E-Learning for Home Care Employees Respects Principles of Adult Learning

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Agencies providing health care in the home face increasing demands for education and training to improve their employees' proficiencies and to meet regulatory and accreditation requirements. Current training needs reflect increasingly complex medical treatments in the home and progressively more diverse client populations. These training needs must be met as agencies deal with constantly changing government regulations, increasing gas prices, and staff shortages. But as home care agencies try to satisfy these educational demands, they must consider the variety of learning needs, speeds, and styles found in their workforce so the education provided will produce better quality outcomes.

Fundamental principles of how adults learn have been well established over the past 40 years by education researcher Malcolm Knowles and others. These principles need to be understood and utilized by those charged with teaching adults essential information.

First and foremost, adults are autonomous and self-directed. They need to be actively involved in their own learning process, motivated, and persuaded of the value and relevance—to them as individuals—of what you aim to teach them. But how do you motivate adult learners? You need to give them good reasons for learning and you need to clear barriers that stand in their way.

Clearly, adults learn in different ways than teens and children. Educational programs targeting adults need to consider their goals, past life experiences, intrinsic and external rewards from learning, needs for positive reinforcement, and practical concerns about how they

can apply new knowledge in practice. Adults need to understand the purpose or meaning of learning the required information and how that knowledge relates to their own lives.

Adults don't want their time wasted. They demand learning to occur at a time and a place convenient to them, in a format and a pace acceptable to their learning style. They should be engaged with the topic through interactivity and sensory stimulation. People with different learning styles need varied teaching methods. Old-fashioned, stand-up lecture styles, by themselves, are not sufficient for today's adult learners.

## Strategies for Effective Adult Learning

Experts in adult learning have identified a number of strategies which effective educators can use to improve their techniques and make the learning experience more enjoyable for both the learners and the instructor, as well as more profitable for the agency. Consider the following seven strategies in tailoring teaching styles to ensure that adult learners will retain the information presented:

### 1. Learning Is a Continual Process Throughout Life

Western society once believed adults were incapable of learning. Assuming this was true, individuals denied themselves the opportunity to learn. Research and life experience have proven this belief false and have shown that we continue to learn until we die. Those who engage in self-learning are healthier and

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less depressed, retain more cognitive brain function, and live longer than their counterparts who don't. You *can* teach an old dog new tricks!

## **2. People Learn at Different Speeds Using Different Methods**

Because of life experiences, stress, responsibilities, and expectations, adults learn differently. Some grasp and retain facts quickly whereas others need time to study and process information. Provide an environment and tools that allow for these differences so that all adult learners will succeed.

## **3. Learning Results from Stimulation of the Senses**

The five human senses are sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. As educators, we need to present our materials using as many of these five senses as possible to increase the chances of successful learning. Be creative in the use of sound, color, and imagination. Keep in mind that adults learn by reading, watching, listening, practicing, performing, and repetition. Also, remember to *always* bring snacks to in-person presentations.

## **4. Learners Need Reinforcement**

It is human nature to work harder for a “prize” waiting at the finish line. Just as adults learn differently, reinforcements for learning also need to vary. For some, recognition in front of peers (such as a verbal announcement in a staff meeting or posting on a bulletin board or in an agency newsletter) works well. Others respond to certificates and small tokens, for example, movie tickets, car wash coupons, or ice cream sundaes. A promise of a job promotion or pay increase also motivates most adult learners.

## **5. Adult Learners Need Feedback**

Because of all the responsibilities adults shoulder at home and at work, time is a precious resource. Adults need timely, concise feedback to ensure that they have learned the material as expected and have achieved their learning goals. Instructors of adults need to provide very specific feedback, such as, “You missed question No. 3. You answered false and the correct answer is true because . . .” If they are successful in their learning, adults will be motivated to continue devoting their time to future learning.

## **6. Successful Adult Learning Means Information Is Retained**

The amount of information retained is directly related to the style of its presentation. As instructors, we are

challenged to present material in an exciting, interesting, and updated style. Adults need to understand the purpose or meaning for learning the required information, and how that information relates to real-life situations. Adult learning will be more successful if the material presented relates to their job, and if they are given the opportunity to practice what they have learned.

## **7. Learners Must Be Able to Transfer Information into Practice**

Adults are practical, busy people and must be able to transfer head knowledge into information required in real-life settings. For example, to be successful, an adult learner must be able to put out a stove fire in a patient's home, not just list the steps on a written test. Adult learning instructors are challenged to help students translate facts into action and cognitive learning into job performance.

Home care educators also need to acknowledge that different agencies have their own learning styles and requirements, reflecting their size, setting, staffing, and patient populations. Larger home care agencies—if they are serious about compliance with both the letter of regulations and the spirit of providing a quality product—may already employ dedicated education coordinators. Too often, however, these coordinators' time is spent presenting repetitive lessons on required topics in the annual training calendar, such as compliance and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations, safety and infection control topics, and abuse and neglect.

In smaller agencies, the education coordinator may wear several other hats—including that of executive. Start-up agencies need to develop a comprehensive staff education program from scratch. Multi-site organizations need to present a consistent curriculum and content across sites but can't afford to have their dispersed staff driving to a centralized training site. All of these organizations could use the assistance of a learning system tailored to these diverse needs.

## **BLENDED LEARNING INCORPORATES E-LEARNING**

In today's media-saturated environment, it only makes sense that educational offerings for adult learners would require a blended approach, incorporating print, voice, audio, video, and computer-aided methods of teaching. If learning is understood as the act, process,

or experience of giving needed knowledge or skills, then e-learning is an interactive, Internet-based learning tool or medium that uses networked technology to help people learn. E-learning is particularly congruent with the adult learning principles identified above. Although it is a new frontier in home care, it has been widely used in other sectors of our society.

In public education, e-learning is used to manage curriculum development, evaluate and respond to students' weaknesses, and keep parents updated. It has been particularly valuable in home schooling. In higher education, its use has spread widely since 1978, when the University of Phoenix introduced opportunities to earn college degrees online. Today, e-learning is a recognized and legitimate part of the curriculum at most accredited colleges.

In the corporate world, businesses such as General Electric, the Bank of New York, the Garner Group, and Subaru emphasize e-learning for their workforce. Some, like Toyota, have developed internal, networked learning management systems to facilitate access to educational content around the world. For others, Internet-based education helps satisfy their blended learning needs.

Government, with a stake in academics and business, has provided aid in support of distance learning, while embracing e-learning for training government workers. In the consumer market, the motivations of lifelong learners have sparked formal and informal learning opportunities on the Internet. Clothier L.L. Bean offers tips on fly fishing while Dell Computers offers courses in computer programming, each at no cost to the consumer, which offers new opportunities for marketing their products.

In home care and hospice, short, discrete, conveniently packaged, user-friendly training courses such as those offered by the online educational library of The Corridor Home Care & Hospice Learning Exchange (CHEX), offer opportunities for meeting yearly educational objectives specific to this industry. Such e-learning courses can be done online at a time and a pace that works best for individual learners.

Unlike hospital media centers, which are readily accessible to all employees, e-learning for home care staff allows them to plug into their learning assignments whenever they have time, whether that is in the office, working from home, or taking a break at Starbucks. With a computer, and Internet and password access, they can immediately dive into the coursework whenever they have 30 minutes to spare.

## ADVANTAGES OF E-LEARNING

For home care and hospice companies trying to do more training with fewer resources, e-learning offers a number of potential advantages. These include:

- *Consistency.* Standardized content and method of presentation across multiple branches, offices and instructors leads to consistent mastery of required material, including regulatory requirements.
- *Convenience.* E-learning simplifies the required curriculum and streamlines the training process. Learners take courses at times that are convenient for them, logging on from anywhere that has Internet access, working within short time frames and avoiding the need to reschedule patient visits and drive to a centralized training site.
- *Cost-Effectiveness.* Higher productivity results from more efficient use of valuable staff time. Educators can reallocate time to more pressing agency needs when on-line learning provides orientation/yearly education. The Corridor Group has done cost analysis suggesting that an agency with 150 learners and 24 topics to cover could save up to 75 percent on current educational costs when incorporating on-line learning.
- *Easily Updated.* Changes can be made to on-line course materials as often as the content changes, avoiding the need to replace or reprint written, video or CD-Rom course materials.
- *Staff Satisfaction.* Cutting-edge, learner-directed techniques promote staff satisfaction, retention and recruitment advantages, while improving employees' computer skills on the job. Staff is eager to become informed on key topics, better oriented to the job, and willing to take advantage of opportunities to advance professionally.

In addition, web-based education systems provide orientation materials and help desk support to on-site education coordinators. Computer technology can track the results of courses completed, score tests for the agency, and provide test remediation and supply survey ready-written reports. Coursework can be approved to meet professional continuing education uniots (CEUs) and home health aide continuing education requirements, and can be translated into multiple languages. Course content can be quickly updated to meet the demands of ever-changing regulatory and accreditation standards.

Web-based e-learning cannot—and should not—replace all other forms of teaching. There is still an important role for face-to-face education, especially for teaching hands-on techniques in the clinical setting.

But, clearly, e-learning can meet many of the current educational needs of home care and hospice agencies and address the demands of adult learning and adult learners. E-learning can help you tailor your educational content to the desired methods, timing, and pace of your learners. Many users of e-learning have embraced this twenty-first-century medium, using it to stretch their educational resources and maximize cost-effectiveness. Will you join them?

## RESOURCES

The following Internet sites can provide additional opportunities to learn more about e-learning:

- [www.internetttime.com](http://www.internetttime.com)
- [www.trainingmag.com](http://www.trainingmag.com)
- [www.elearningmag.org](http://www.elearningmag.org)

- [www.linezine.com](http://www.linezine.com)
- [www.upsidelearning.com](http://www.upsidelearning.com)

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*Founded in 1989, The Corridor Group, Inc. (TCG) is an industry leader in home health, hospice, and private duty services consulting, executive search, policy and procedure manuals, and educational products and services. TCG has provided business advice to more than 1,200 clients, ranging from freestanding agencies to large health systems, national chains, and investment firms. To learn how TCG uses its resources, industry knowledge and innovation to create successful outcomes for its clients, log on to [www.corridorgroup.com](http://www.corridorgroup.com) or call them at 1-866-263-3795*

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