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Rob Vetter: Computer-Based Training – Good Supplement, Bad Substitute

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[Rob Vetter](#) is technical director and managing partner with the [Ives Training Group](#), in Blaine, WA, USA, a leader in North American mobile equipment training systems since 1981.

No other device, tool or machine in history has been integrated into so many facets of human endeavor as quickly and as deeply as the computer. The capabilities of even the most basic of today's computers, coupled with the Internet's ability to virtually connect computers all over the world, has had - and continues to have - a resounding impact on every significant human undertaking: business, science, recreation and, of course, training.

But is the computerised way of doing things better than the way we had, particularly in the arena of forklift operator training? Let's look at some of the pros and cons of computer-based training (CBT) for consideration.

Pros

- **Convenience:** Since a CBT program is usually recorded onto a CD or web-based, it is available whenever the trainee is. No need to co-ordinate the schedules of trainer and trainee. Trainees can also start and stop the program as required to accommodate breaks, work-related matters and other things as necessary.
- **Accessibility:** Trainees at different sites can take the training at their respective locations, further enhancing convenience.
- **Consistency:** The information conveyed to all the trainees is uniform and everyone gets the same lesson as variation between programs and/or trainers is eliminated.
- **Self-pacing:** Trainees move through the program as quickly as their abilities allow.
- **Cost effectiveness:** There are no travel costs and disruptions to work processes are minimised, meaning employers save money. There is no need to engage and pay an outside training provider.

Cons

- **Initial investment required:** You're going to have to spend some money on the program itself and some computer gear to run everything on.
- **Viable quality:** Not all products perform as advertised and this is true of CBT programs as well. The accuracy and flow of graphics and information ranges from good to terrible.
- **Questionable effectiveness:** CBT programs can be excellent at conveying information but they are abysmal at ensuring understanding. Also, based on my personal experience with CBT trainees, retention rates seem to be quite low.
- **Inflexibility:** Most CBT is what it is. There are usually no options to customise and/or alter the content to suit site- and equipment-specific issues or to adjust the delivery method for those trainees having trouble understanding.
- **Unreliable technology:** When the power goes out, computers go off, but people carry on.



Trainees move through the program as quickly as their abilities allow. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

Real, live instructor-led training is, of course, different.

My passion for what I do is borne out of suffering a personal work-related tragedy in which I lost a dear friend. I believe that my trainees feel my passion and respect my experience, neither of which they will ever get from a computer. I also take the time to ensure my trainees actually understand things as we go, not merely memorise what they think I want to hear. I do this not by asking if they can recall some text they read or a graphic they saw but by engaging them with "what if..." scenarios that challenge them to use their knowledge and think about things.

Training is not simply a matter of conveying information and documenting the results. It is an opportunity to motivate trainees toward positive safety behaviour through participation, interaction and a myriad of intangibles that good, human trainers utilise to convey what to do, how to do it, and why it is done.

We tend to overestimate technology's ability to make our lives better and underestimate the indomitable human spirit from which the technology springs. Computers have their place in modern training programs, but they are most effectively utilised as a supplement, like models or other visual aids. Computers are designed to connect to other computers while people connect to people. Without some kind of radical advancement in artificial intelligence in the foreseeable future, nothing will ever change that.

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