



APO NEWS

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APO e-outreach

“We do not commute but we communicate,” said APO resource speaker Pawan Kumar, Group Head, Energy Management, National Productivity Council, India, when describing the APO e-learning course on Energy Efficiency. His words reaffirm the transformative power of information technology (IT) as a method for exchanging information. The training course utilized the Global Distance Learning Network (GDLN), a videoconference-based network of the World Bank. The GDLN is one of two platforms used in APO e-learning courses, with the other being the e-Learning Portal, which provides Web-based distance-learning and self-learning opportunities.

Recognizing the potential of IT, the APO embarked on a series of e-learning projects in 2005. The e-initiative has flourished, providing the distinct advantage of reaching a large audience in a timely, cost-effective manner. The GDLN-based courses in particular have been enormously successful, attracting an ever-increasing number of participants since the first two in 2006 attended by around 300 participants. More recently, however, according to APO Secretariat Industry Department Program Officer K.D. Bhardwaj: “The total number of participants from three GDLN-based programs held in 2007 and 2008 was around 900 and 930, respectively. The number for 2008 will again increase up to 1,500 once two other ongoing courses are completed.”



Participants in the Philippines celebrating course completion

e-Learning courses also allow the APO to reach more private-sector participants. In 2007, close to 40% of those 900 participants were from the private sector. In the three courses completed so far in 2008, about 60% of those who attended represented the private sector. “Most APO courses focus on delivering practical knowledge and how to apply theory in the real working context of each participant. I believe that this is one of the key success factors of APO e-learning courses and why they appeal to many people, especially from the private sector,” said Program Coordinator Eiko Wataya, World Bank Tokyo Development Learning Center (TDLC). APO e-learning courses are conducted in collaboration with the TDLC, which provides videoconferencing facilities and technical support.

Contrary to the perception that e-learning courses are less popular primarily due to a lack of face-to-face contact with resource persons and others, nearly 90% of participants evaluated these courses as “more than expected” or “as expected.” This is attributed not only to the effectiveness of IT but also to the efforts devoted to making the courses relevant and interesting. “Local program components such as site visits and group tasks are included to promote participants’ involvement, interactions, and information sharing,” Bhardwaj noted, emphasizing the importance of two-way communication in training. He added that, “Various local activities and careful management for sharing and question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions prevent the courses from being one-way information delivery.” In his recent e-learning course on Energy Efficiency, 97% of participants rated the course as “more than expected” or “as expected.” Trainee Graduate Consultant Nilesh Roneel Kumar, Training and Productivity Authority of Fiji, a local coordinator, commented that, “The course covered the subject very effectively. The Q&A session, in particular, was well managed, enhancing participants’ understanding and knowledge of the topics presented by resource speakers.”

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The GDLN-based training course on Exporting Processed Agrifood Products in Major Global Markets was conducted in three phases for 17 countries, organized into groups by time zone. The course featured three resource speakers from important global agriproduct markets: Japan, the USA, and Europe. A Malaysian resource speaker outlined best practices. This course was experimental because resource speakers from nonmember countries such as the USA and Europe made presentations from their own countries. It was confirmed that it is feasible with good program scheduling and time management. US resource speaker David Lennarz, Vice President, Registrar Corp., a private agency assisting companies with FDA regulations and registration, commented that, "This time difference was difficult only in the second phase held in June. My session ended at around 02:00 and thus was rather tiring at the end. However, the other two sessions ended at 23:00 and 12:00, which was manageable."



The screen at the GDLN center in Thailand displaying all course venues simultaneously

The e-learning course on the Toyota Production System (TPS) has been conducted each year since GDLN-based courses started. The key objective is to accelerate understanding of the TPS, also known as lean manufacturing or lean production, and eventually develop local experts to establish and lead TPS communities of practice. Given the technical nature of the subject, the APO designated a national expert from each participating country to conduct an offline session on TPS methodologies. Overseas experts delivered presentations in videoconference sessions. Local coordinator-cum-expert Dr. P.H. Dissabandara, Director, Securities and Exchange Commission, Sri Lanka, shared the encouraging progress made in his country: "We now have a Sri Lankan TPS group. The group members have already visited two companies to observe TPS practices and exchanged learning experiences and views."

The first phases of two ongoing projects, SA8000: Social Accountability Management System and ISO22000:2005 Food Safety Management System, were completed in September. "Time constraints are a problem in Q&A sessions following experts' presentations due to the limited online time available for this purpose," explained Agriculture Department Program Officer Dr. Muhammad Saeed, who has conducted the ISO22000:2005 e-learning course for two consecutive years. "To alleviate this problem, a frequently asked question (FAQ) sheet was prepared based on the queries received last year. The FAQ sheet was provided to participants prior to the commencement of phase 1. It certainly worked well, allowing time for more in-depth online discussion."

In view of the successful experience last year with an e-learning course followed up with a face-to-face project, all e-learning courses this year will have this format, with high-performing e-participants selected for the traditional project follow-up. Bhardwaj, who organized a follow-up workshop on Green Productivity and Integrated Management Systems in January this year, commented that, "I think it is a very effective approach to make a linkage between e-learning and a face-to-face project." The workshop was attended by 23 professionals selected from among 350 e-learning participants from 15 member countries. The following three points were highlighted as success factors in the project: a special bond among participants and resource speaker established through the e-learning course; the high quality of participants who had previously undergone basic training on the topic via e-learning; and properly designed advanced training building on participants' acquired knowledge.

"I think that continuity is important in achieving consistent improvement for both trainers and trainees. The APO organizes projects on subjects in a consistent manner and at the same time explores new topics using the e-learning format. The resulting accumulated experience and skills are one of the key success factors of APO projects," commented TDLC Manager Ryu Fukui. The APO Secretariat formed an e-learning team to develop the most effective course models. These efforts to improve the e-learning courses will continue, with the introduction and adoption of new modalities for delivering the APO's services more effectively to member countries. 