Cover Story

Learning the Ropes While Against the Ropes

Keeping skills current during difficult economic times

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What if you had been stranded on a deserted island for the past five years? By the time you were rescued, you would have missed the explosion of social media usage, including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, as well as advancements in smart grids and wind and solar energy—it would be more than you could imagine. You may think, "How could the industry have changed so much? I was only lost for a few years." What if you were stranded for just one year? You would have missed the latest tablet computer, the rapid development of smart phone apps and quick response (QR) codes (those odd looking bar codes for smart phone scanning). You even would have missed the latest edition of the National Electrical Code (NEC) and the 2012 edition of NFPA 70E.

Get the idea? Just as the world continues to turn, technology continues to change at a very fast pace—with or without us. If you pause for too long, it will pass you by, and catching up could become quite a challenge. If you're leaning against the ropes, you might as well learn them, so you can rebound faster and better.

Of course, if you want justification, there is an endless list of reasons for keeping your skills and knowledge up-to-date. One reason is that many licensing boards require a contractor to attend a minimum number of hours of training each year, which is often referred to as continuing education. A participant receives credit known as continuing education units (CEUs) or professional development hours (PDHs). However, one of the best reasons is simply to stay current with the latest technology in the electrical industry.

Difficult economic times can make keeping up even more challenging. Training is often one of the first things to be eliminated from a company's budget. Putting off training for a year or two may seem to make good budget sense. Yet, many of the more competitive companies recognize the opposite is true and that, when the economy is down, it's actually the best time to learn and improve skills.

What do these companies know that others do not? They know that keeping up with technology is one of the keys to staying ahead of the competition. When the economy improves, they will already be out in front, but how do you keep skills current on a limited (or nonexistent) budget? Difficult times mean finding creative ways for learning, which may consist of free or inexpensive programs that can even be outside normal working hours, such as lunchtime or evenings.

Conventions and conferences

Trade shows and conferences can provide the ultimate in brain overload. They are the best places to learn where the industry is and where it's going. Every year major organizations—such as the National Fire Protection Association (provider of the NEC) and others—-hold an annual convention. At these events, you can find a tidal wave of information about products, new trends, workshops, codes, standards and much more. In addition, these events are great places to meet many industry leaders.

Video and books

Training videos and books provide the opportunity to learn new material at any speed you like and in the location you choose. You didn't understand something that was said? Review it. A wide variety of DVDs, books, guides and other resources can be used to provide more in-depth knowledge about a specific subject. This approach to learning can be a very low-cost method because, once one person is done with the program, it can be passed along to someone else.

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Seminars
Seminars often come to mind when thinking about continuing education. Generally held in a hotel conference room or at a company's training facility, seminars are available on just about every topic imaginable. The trick is to find the right program. Not every seminar will be the same for a particular subject. Some might be geared toward the technical end of the spectrum while others are more basic. Some seminars may be a veritable avalanche of information from industry experts.

These programs usually last anywhere from half a day to an entire week. Ensure you do your homework to find the program that is right for you. A seminar can provide an excellent format for bringing a person up to speed quickly.

On-site training
One of the best methods is to hold the training program at your company's location because it can be tailored toward specific needs. It is almost as if you have the speaker and their expertise all to yourself. Although this approach can be more expensive, there are ways to minimize the cost. By opening up the training to others, such as clients, business partners and guests, the host company can charge a registration fee, so the cost can be spread out among many different groups.

Free training
One of the biggest attractions to any program is the word "free." It will draw attention to anything, and there are a lot of free resources out there. The following are some examples.
Webinars: Free webinars, and the invitations to them, are everywhere. Although some webinars may be a bit commercial, a growing number are jam-packed with the latest information about products, methods and ideas.

Attending a webinar is as simple as logging in while sitting at your desk (or on a beach) and letting the knowledge flow from your computer to your brain. The only downside of this format is the lack of face-to-face interaction and the ability to mingle with like-minded people. However, this format can be a very efficient way to learn a lot of material over a short period of time—typically one or two hours. Electrical Contractor regularly conducts free webinars on such topics as counterfeit products and the new 2012 edition of NFPA 70E, which can still be viewed, along with other past webinars, at www.ecmag.com/video.

"Lunch and learn" talks: From time to time, equipment manufacturers and consultants will offer a one- or two-hour presentation in a "lunch and learn" format. You usually will have the undivided attention of the instructor, which provides face-to-face interaction, allowing you to ask questions, draw sketches and discuss very specific details.

Such talks can be used to introduce a new technology or product or to present new ideas and concepts. Of course, there may be a small amount of commercialism, but given the right presenter, this format can be an economical and effective way to train a large number of people without taking too much time away from normal work hours.

Vendor seminars: Equipment manufacturers often hold seminars to unveil new products. These types of events are usually free since there may be a bit of commercialism. However, attendees can learn a great deal of new information. Wanting to put on their best show, hosting companies usually bring in some of their top people to share knowledge and expertise.

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Trade magazines: You don't have to go very far to find an assortment of information-packed technical publications. These magazines and periodicals are some of the best resources for keeping up-to-date. They not only pull talent from a large group of experienced writers; they also can offer information about new products, ideas, editorials and commentary. Most have free print subscriptions and also may be available in a digital format (e.g., www.ecmag.com). Spending an occasional lunchtime reading the articles is just one more way to stay current.

Plant tours: In order to demonstrate their capabilities first-hand, equipment manufacturers will sometimes conduct plant tours, which may be part of an open house or in association with an industry event. Taking advantage of a tour can provide a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to look behind the scenes, and see firsthand how a product is manufactured and learn more about it.

Local industry meetings: Many of the larger professional organizations, such as the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), also have smaller local chapters. A local chapter may hold technical meetings where industry experts are invited to speak. These events are often free and open to members and nonmembers. Some of the local chapters also will sponsor day-long tutorials and workshops, which may have only a nominal charge. These events also tend to be outside normal business hours. Attending events held by these types of organizations is only the beginning. Getting involved with their committees can greatly expand your business network.

Online discussion groups and forums: LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites have changed the way we interact and exchange information. Online discussion groups and forums, such as ELECTRICAL CONTRACTOR's group on LinkedIn or my own ArcFlashForum, are homes to a large number of people with similar interests. The primary goal is to help each other by sharing ideas, thoughts and knowledge about various issues. This alternative learning method relies on the experience of a whole community of people, which is yet another no-cost method to expand your knowledge base.

Stay ahead by getting creative!

Slow economic times require being creative with learning opportunities. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the best time to focus on keeping skills current is when business is down. There are many free or inexpensive alternative methods to learning. Begin by picking a good rainy or snowy day, and spend lunch logging into a webinar, reading a book or trade magazine or checking out a discussion group or forum. Sources of knowledge can be free if you look in the right places. For many of these options, the only investment is your time.

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