review
Online diversity training that works!
by Matthew Reis

➤ *The Edge Advantage, online, 3 hrs., 2004, Diversity University (513-608-6033, www.diversityuniversity.com), $79.99 per student. Leader guide.*

The Edge Advantage program is a web-based diversity program that actually makes the online training experience useful and engaging. It comprises four modules that take about three hours to complete, start to finish. The program delivery is unusual: it involves a diverse team of eight "employees," and the person taking the training is supposed to be part of the team. An online facilitator named Michelle guides the participant through the program and helps the "virtual team" identify workplace issues and try to resolve them.

The program incorporates a lot of pre- and post-quizzes and polls to determine what perceptions program participants have about their own work team in their organization. The goal is not only to educate participants about diversity issues in general but to make them aware of their own perceptions in the workplace as well. The interactive program, which uses Flash and QuickTime players, is very easy to use and navigate. It also allows participants to bookmark where they stop the program if the need to take it in multiple sessions.

Changing workforce

The first module, *The Knowledge Edge*, focuses on understanding the changing demographics in the U.S., why they are important, factors that create stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, and the primary dimensions of diversity. There are numerous exercises and tests of the participant's understanding along the way that make this both an interactive and interesting program to participate in.

For example, a set of quiz questions tests your knowledge of the differences between cultures, nationalities, and races such as knowing the difference between Chinese and Japanese last names. There is

also a "drag-and-drop" exercise that requires participants to match various people, principles, historic events, and laws correctly. All of these questions may leave the participant feeling as though he or she doesn't know everything there is to know about diversity! This is intentional, and one concept that is reinforced throughout is that "Not knowing is NOT the same as being stupid – it is just uniformed." This "uninformed" designation probably describes most of the typical participants because some of the questions are very challenging, but all are informative and provide feedback on the correct choice after a selection is made.

The program outlines the three primary dimensions of diversity as being Biological, Cultural/Personal, and Workplace. The expected visible characteristics such as race or gender are attributed to biology, but then there is a provocative discussion about the nature of homosexuality and whether it is genetic or a preference. This introduces a potentially controversial issue in a sensitive manner and is handled in a competent, albeit somewhat limited, manner. What the program cannot do—being a self-paced and pre-recorded endeavor—is to identify participants who may not agree with some of these fundamental principles and just go along with the program so that they can "check it off" their list of things to do. The limitations of computer or web-based training aside, the first module does an excellent job of covering the basics of diversity.

Trouble on the team

The second module, *The Awareness Edge*, introduces some realistic controversy on the virtual team. Michael, a white male, suggests that the team not focus on differences, but rather just concentrate on similarities as a way to bring people together. Valerie, a black woman, counters that this creates a "no win" situation and actually puts the burden back on the person who is in the minority to advocate that diverse characteristics be recognized and valued. This is a very effective use of the virtual team and brings the issues home for the participant because this is a "real" problem and, more importantly,

is presented credibly—something many video or web-based presentations fail to carry off.

The next section, called "Ask Yourself," is very effective at getting people to start looking inward and seeing how comfortable or uncomfortable they are interacting with people who are diverse. The questions start out a little easier with scenarios such as serving a person with disabilities in a restaurant setting and then progressing to much more difficult situations such as being a nurse in a pediatric hospital ward who is confronted with a Caucasian family who do not want their baby sharing a room with non-white babies. A very thought provoking exercise indeed!

The section segues into a broader discussion on the differences between prejudice and discrimination. The virtual team then talks about the race barriers that exist in sports and life in general, which sets up the next section on stereotypes and how they are more pervasive than we might realize.

The "Dot Exercise" has the participant go through a long list of potential stereotypes about many different groups (e.g., women are bad drivers, or Asians are better at math) and indicate which ones they feel might have some truth (black dot) and which ones others may hold (a red dot). At the end of this long list, the participant receives a tally of the number of black dots and red dots. Usually participants will have far more red dots than black dots, indicating that they feel others may hold these stereotypes but they themselves do not. This is a very effective tool for illustrating that we have many stereotypes in our heads and that while we certainly may not believe them all, they may influence how we perceive others. A very good organizational diversity question raised at the end is, "Who manages the Red Dots in your organization?" This is, of course, supposed to prompt individuals to start thinking about what their organization is doing to foster a supportive diversity climate.

Legal issues

The third module, *The Legal Edge*, resumes with the same virtual team after six months have elapsed, and they are considering adding another member to the team. They want to make sure they are all on the same page in terms of legal issues. This module does a decent job of reviewing labor laws, EEO, affirmative action, and reverse discrimination. The program depicts a very realistic conflict on the team and how the team is able to resolve their situation. The module ends with a bit of uncertainty as Stephen, the current manager, is going to take an international assignment, and one of the team members will be promoted in the next module.

Perhaps the instructional designers took a cue from Hollywood in constructing this cliffhanger, but it is a relatively effective hook in getting participants to want to see how it all turns out. The character development is more than you would typically expect in video or web-based training, but it is effective because you feel like a part of the "virtual team" by this point in the program and want to know what happens next.

Finally, competition

The last module, *The Competitive Edge*, covers internal and external factors that affect market share and productivity. The program asks participants who they would select as the new manager and why. It is then revealed that Valarie has been selected as the new manager. The participant is asked to rate various attributes of the "virtual team" and his or her "current team" at work on such characteristics as being trusting, candid, honest, and so on. This leads to a discussion of what could be done to improve the effectiveness of your current team.

What is not clear is how the feedback about the participant's current team is processed and used. One potential drawback of the program is that participants may feel that all their answers are being recorded and that they are being evaluated on their "diversity knowledge" or their political correctness and thus give more socially desirable answers. For the most part, this isn't really a concern for the effective delivery of the course content, as the red-dot, black-dot exercise demonstrates. However, the potential use of the data from these embedded questionnaires may cause some employees to think twice before answering candidly. This can be avoided, for the most part, by communicating clearly to employees why the questions are being asked about their team and what will happen to the data after they complete the workshop.

The fourth module workshop covers the important aspect of "social distance" (the concept that factors such as age, gender, race, etc., can have an additive effect in creating perceived psychological distance between employees) and how the quality of work relationships may decline if employees are not aware of this potential diversity issue. The program indicates that research has found that social distance can lead to declines in resource utilization, task effectiveness, and informal training by managers.

All of these, in turn, can lead to a decrease in employee development and organizational effectiveness. The good news is that by making diversity an individual and organizational objective, employers and employees alike can harness the positive power of diversity, enhance organizational effectiveness, retain customers, and tap new markets. The module ends with a generic version for an action plan for organizational diversity and then has the participant complete a rudimentary action plan online following the post-quiz.

Recommendation

Overall, the Edge Advantage is a very good training product and can serve as an excellent foundation for understanding diversity issues. While the program is very competitively priced when compared to the cost of having an outside diversity consultant provide similar training, it cannot truly substitute for having real people who know the organization facilitate a dialog on the actual diversity issues faced by a particular work group. With that said, however, I would not hesitate to recommend the program to an organization that wants a solid, engaging online diversity program to get everyone on the same page before embarking on the organization-specific aspects of a comprehensive diversity initiative.

Matthew Reis (reis@babson.edu) holds a doctorate in organizational psychology and has over 10 years experience in management and internal consulting in organizational development. He is currently manager of Organizational Development at Babson College in Wellesley, Masssachusetts.

The Edge Advantage product rating

Holds user interest	★★★
Production quality	★★★ 1/2
Ease of navigation	★★★ 1/2
Interactivity	★★★
Value of content	★★★ 1/2
Instructional value	★★★ 1/2
Value for the money	★★★ 1/2
Overall rating	★★★★

From the vendor:

Check out the demo of The EDGE Advantage by registering online at www.diversityuniversity.com. Myca-Pope offers a variety of innovative e-learning products focused on the topic of leveraging diversity to reduce barriers and improve productivity. The TEAM Advantage explores how diversity can strengthen teams by improving interpersonal dynamics and fostering a high performing culture. The company recommends a blended learning approach, and leader guides are provided for facilitating dialogue after participants complete the e-learning courses. In addition, a robust learning management system collects powerful data as users interact with the e-learning modules, and data reports are available on an aggregated basis by a variety of filters such as race/ethnicity, gender, length of time with company, position, etc.

Contact information: www.diversityuniversity.com
pmassey@popeandassociates.com   513-608-6033

Unbiased reviews

Training Media Review (www.tmreview.com) is a privately-held company dedicated to serving anyone with training responsibilities. All of our reviewers are independent training professionals. TMR does not charge vendors for reviews or accept subsidies from them. We work hard to prevent "grade inflation" in our product ratings. Our reviewers cannot have consulting relationships with the vendors of products they review. Because of its objectivity, TMR is the sole supplier of media reviews to T+D magazine, published by the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD).

Outstanding	★★★★	Above average	★★ 1/2	Poor	★
Very good	★★★ 1/2	Average	★★	NA	Not applicable
Good	★★★	Below Average	★ 1/2	NR	Not rated (usually not enough information)