



By Jerry Loza

The one thing we know for sure about IT is that the technology is constantly changing. Staying current with that technology, and acquiring the skills to support it, is a career necessity. Whether you simply need to learn the latest techniques or you want to completely retool, if your employer or client does not fund the training, it could be very expensive for you. Fortunately, there are some low/no-cost alternatives to conventional training programs that might even be more effective and be a better fit for your learning style.

## 1 Public library

As obvious as this resource is, I am always surprised at how many people never think of it. Though some of the material may not be the latest, you might be surprised, especially if you have access to a fairly large metropolitan library. Do not forget about videos and DVDs either, especially for training on less technical, common applications, such as QuickBooks or Microsoft Access. If you are looking for business or methodology training, you may also want to look for audio books. You may not be able to find detailed information on the Rational Unified Process (RUP), but Six Sigma and other initiatives in which your company or client may be involved may well be there. Audio books also enable you to convert idle drive time, or exercise time, into a value-add for you and your client.

If you are stuck in a small town with limited resources, consider approaching a larger library system to become a guest patron. Many times this is available to the public for a fee, but your local library may also have a reciprocal agreement with them, in which case access to the other library system may be free. Also, if you do teaching at a school of any type, you may be granted access to a library system if you can show proof of your status as a teacher.

University libraries are another rich store of material from which you can learn new skills. But unless you are a student at the school, it may be less than straightforward to check out materials. If the university is state-funded, you might be permitted to check out material if you are a resident of the state. If the university you approach does not permit you to check out material, you can always make a routine of camping out there for a couple of hours each week and learning on the premises.

## 2 Company library/resources

Many companies have their own libraries and training that are available for the asking. Training is usually a part of human resources, so you might start there if the company doesn't have a formal training department. If you are an independent consultant, does your client have a library you could tap into? It has been my experience that clients are generally quite willing to open up their training to outside consultants, especially if the training makes the consultants more effective in working with them. If there is a cost associated with the training, however, reimbursement can be complicated, as clients usually lack a process for accepting that type of payment. Very large companies have particularly difficult time accepting money for training, but do not give up. Your client's department may still be willing to carry your training if they see a material benefit.

## 3 Vendor training

It is to a vendor's advantage to have you use their product, and use it effectively. To that end, many vendors offer training for little or no cost. This training is made available in a variety of formats, including:

- Training sessions at conferences and trade fairs
- White papers
- Online tutorials
- Online/on-demand videos
- Special training events

You will not find a five-day intensive training session available for free, but you can still learn quite a bit from these free vendor resources. The more prepared you go into a vendor's event, including being armed with questions, the more you will gain from the experience.

## 4 Podcasts

Podcasts are becoming increasingly popular among the typical channel of technical media and vendors. They include product information or interviews with experts in a particular field and tend to cover fairly narrow topics, such as the software quality topics offered by [StickyMinds](#). There are also a number of resources from more public sources, such as iPod and YouTube. These may come from a number of academic sources, or they may be the product of someone who simply has a passion for the subject.

## 5 Webinars/webcasts and virtual trade shows

One of the greatest developments for people who actually have to work for a living, webinars and virtual trade shows offer a no-travel way to accomplish in an hour what used to take an entire day. Virtual trade shows are not as well attended by vendors as live trade shows, but as vendors figure out how to use the new venue, I expect more will start to join in. Advantages, besides the obvious lack of travel and enormous time savings, include having a fairly narrow topic focus and relatively easy access to representatives. There are also some pretty awesome networking opportunities, as well.

Webinars usually consist of an industry expert providing general information, followed by product information from the sponsoring vendor. The product typically has some tie to the overall topic, and many times, the product information portion of the webinar may be as informative as the general topic portion. If the sponsor has a broader interest in the industry, such as an association or a publisher, the entire webinar may be information-oriented, with no product application.

Various webcasts can be found at [TechRepublic](#), as well as at other publishers.

## 6 Associations and user groups

National organizations typically have a number of resources that you, as a member, can participate in. These may include online libraries, peer forums, and training courses. There may be a cost associated with some of this training, and access to some of the resources may require a paid, or premium (read: more expensive), membership. But when you consider that a membership to the [Association of Computing Machinery](#), for example, can give you access to more than 1,100 books online, in addition to their journals and proceedings, it might well be worth the annual membership fee.

User groups, or other local groups that share your interest in a particular topic, offer a great forum to learn and share information for little or no cost. Special interest groups (SIGs) within the user group offer further topic specialization and can be a tremendous way to learn or be mentored. Check with vendors that interest you, as they may maintain a list of user groups in your area that relate to your product. Microsoft, for example, has a site with [user group information](#), as do other major manufacturers. Consider, also, simple word of mouth and the "community calendar" section of your local paper to find out about upcoming meetings of groups that may interest you.

## 7 Volunteering

The best way to learn is by doing. However, most companies are not willing to pay you while you learn. If you have all of the books and tutorials, but just need to get your hands dirty, why not volunteer to do a project for someone for free? Churches and nonprofits might need some work done that you can help with. A new Web site, a donor tracking system, or automation of monthly billing are all things that might benefit them and can give you the hands-on experience you need to approach a prospective employer or client. This is an especially good approach if you are trying to retool yourself with some new technology, or least a technology that is new to you.

This same approach can be applied in an incremental fashion with existing work you may be doing. Can you work a little beyond your current job description? If you are working within an old development methodology, for example, but want to try what you have learned about RUP, redo a portion of your work in the style of the new methodology, such as use cases. There is nothing like trying a skill on a real project to give you a real sense of the process, and sometimes a real sense of how much you still need to learn. Who knows -- besides getting some great experience, you might even start to convert your team to the new process (but don't get your hopes up).

## 8 The Internet

Who has not Googled to learn more on a topic or to clear up an office dispute on the origins of some phrase or song lyric? This same resource is a great learning tool. A simple topic search can produce content from college courses, vendor training, and government information sites. Don't be surprised if some of this content offers better explanations than some text books.

Online publishers are another great source for information to enhance your skills. Consider dropping a topic that interests you into the search field at a site such as [DevX](#), and you may be surprised how much detail you will find.

## 9 Continuing education

Continuing education programs, also called adult education or community outreach, offer nondegree classes that are generally conducted in the evening for a modest fee. Besides the stereotypic class on how to weave a basket, many programs also offer database, networking, and a number of other technology classes. Many of these programs are run through high schools and colleges, so if you are not aware of any programs in your area, start by checking with your local high school, career center, or university for contact information.

## 10 Community college

State-run community colleges generally offer a number of affordable classes you can take without seeking a degree. Many of these colleges offer technology and programming classes. Because you have probably not taken the prerequisites for the class, you may need the permission of the instructor, but that should not be a problem if you are already a professional in the field. These programs are usually far less expensive than your typical week-long vendor training and are usually scheduled during the evening to minimize the impact on your workday. There may also be for-profit community colleges in your area. But since they may lack public subsidies, be prepared to pay substantially more for their course offerings.

### One fewer hurdle

Limited time, family demands, and travel may still keep you from dedicating to learning a new skill, but if you're creative, cost doesn't have to be an obstacle. In fact, the nature of some of these suggested training alternatives lend themselves nicely to working around the time and travel constraints that are so often a barrier. Take advantage of as many of these training approaches as you can, and you will have one less hurdle to moving your career forward.

## Additional resources

- TechRepublic's [Downloads RSS Feed](#) **XML**
- Sign up for the [Downloads at TechRepublic](#) newsletter
- Sign up for our [IT Leadership Newsletter](#)
- Check out all of TechRepublic's [free newsletters](#)
- [Training/tuition reimbursement kit](#)
- [10+ IT organizations that can boost your career](#)
- [Technical conference report template](#)

## Version history

**Version:** 1.0

**Published:** September 18, 2008

## Tell us what you think

TechRepublic downloads are designed to help you get your job done as painlessly and effectively as possible. Because we're continually looking for ways to improve the usefulness of these tools, we need your feedback. Please take a minute to [drop us a line](#) and tell us how well this download worked for you and offer your suggestions for improvement.

Thanks!

—The TechRepublic Content Team