

Software trainers don't foresee a return to glory days

BY CHUCK GREEN
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

A few years ago, **Chip Mann** was a go-to man.

"I was offered work 10 times a week," said the software trainer. "There were a lot of big training companies and I'd get requests that would basically equate to every day of the week."

Then came 2000-2001 and the dot-com bust, and the "whole industry went belly up. Companies cut IT budgets, so they weren't training as much. A lot of training companies went out of business."

The 54-year-old Townsend resident is also a Microsoft Access developer, which helped his marketability — somewhat. "I got calls here and there, but it was like one day a month."

Things improved a bit more for him over the past year — he teaches about seven or eight days a month now — but while Mann and others say action seem to be picking up, they don't expect the software training field to see anything to compare to its dot-com heyday anytime soon.

Kiersten Kaye of Boston sold her services as a freelance software trainer from 1998 to 2001 because the market was ripe. Since then, Kaye, 37, has worked in-house human resources roles for both an international high-tech consulting firm and a high-tech public relations agency. "At this juncture, I am conducting a job search for a manager/director level role specializing in employee development and retention."

Evaluating the software training market from a human resources per-

spective, Kaye, who was a full-time software trainer for an IBM subsidiary from 1996 to 1998, is only mildly optimistic about the ability of the industry to restore itself to its heyday state.

"As an HR person, if I need my people trained, I am going to investigate the most cost-effective options. That generally means I will purchase an off-the-shelf training solution like Web-based or computer-based training. Organizations that hire trainers to deliver training, nine out of 10 times, bring in the trainer for the value-add — the warm fuzzy — because they have the budget and want to ensure their employees receive individual care and attention in the learning process," noted Kaye.

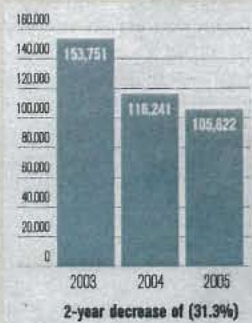
Elizabeth Brown, founder of **Softteach Inc.**, a national software training and consulting firm based in Newton, is somewhat more confident about the market for software training.

"I think the demand for computer/software training is growing," said Brown. "The demand for on-site customized training has grown tremendously. Companies need to increase productivity to stay ahead of competition by utilizing their technology to the max with computer training."

However, her outlook for public classroom training isn't nearly as upbeat. "It has definitely peaked. People are frustrated when classes get canceled, and there's self discipline involved in online training. The only way companies have gotten their people to do online training is to make it mandatory. I think online training does better in a university environment, because they combine it

TRAINING DECLINES

The Boston Business Journal earlier this year surveyed the region's 20 largest software and computer training firms about their enrollment.



Source: BBJ Research.

with on-site, face to face classes."

Sid Lejfer, president of Waltham-based **Harvest Solutions**, a customer relations management firm, beats the drum for online training. "There's a big cost benefit for clients; they don't have to fly people in or do regional training. Today you really can do it anytime, anywhere, anyplace. That being said, it's still important to have face-to-face between the student and instructor."

As a former software trainer, **Pamela Conway**, director of business development for Wakefield-based **CompuWorks**

Systems, a computer training company, said the best method depends largely on the needs of students. "I've always liked classroom time with students. I think there's value in both. I think there are things companies have to consider when looking at both types of training, like the students themselves. What are their expectations and what training environment will make them successful?"

To succeed in the market, Conway says, it's important for software trainers to be "strong in more than just the core desktop applications." She said they must have a firm command of applications like Microsoft Project, Microsoft VBA, Adobe Flash and Dream-Weaver and other similar higher-end applications.

"With Office 2007 on the brink of hitting the market," she noted, "someone who knows SharePoint from end-user all way up to the technical side to development, and has the ability to install SharePoint will be huge, especially with the push Microsoft's making with SharePoint."

Given the ability of many today to work with software programs, **Tony Holowitz**, owner of computer training company **John Anthony Group** in Arlington, believes the need for trainers might be somewhat diminished.

"When I started my business, people were learning the basics, but they're more experienced now. Although many software programs can do lots of things, people fall into their niche and don't go much further. In most cases, that's adequate."

Web 2.0 stands to take the office out of the office

BY JOHN SAILORS
AMERICAN CITY BUSINESS JOURNALS

Technology and widespread broadband are moving office software off the PC and onto the Internet, making it available anywhere to anyone who has access — and more importantly, making it free.

This development was highlighted by the first Office 2.0 conference, held Oct. 11 in San Francisco. It also was underlined by Google's Oct. 11 launch of Docs & Spreadsheets, which combines Writely, a free Web-based word processor that Google purchased in March, with Google Spreadsheets.

As early as 2000, **Sun Microsystems Inc.** (Nasdaq: SUNW) made its newly purchased StarOffice suite available as OpenOffice.org. In 2005 it released version 2.0, which added a database component.

In the past year, other players have entered the arena, among them ThinkFree, Desktoptwo and Pleasanton, Calif.-based **AdventNet Inc.**'s Zoho suite.

Each emphasizes different features

in trying to create a more popular package, and each takes advantage of the Web 2.0 trend that adds collaboration and other features to the Internet experience — a great advantage of online suites, which allow users to share access to files.

With Zoho, AdventNet has gone beyond the typical suite of word processor, spreadsheet and presentation software. The company, which survived the dot-com bust by diversifying and now offers a wide array of software and services, has created a suite that includes programs for customer relationship management, project management, e-mail, and calendars.

A company spokesman, **Raju Vegesna**, said AdventNet has 60 to 70 of its 550 staff devoted to the project. The first component, the word processor, went online in September 2005.

Like the other suites, Zoho surprises first-time users who are accustomed to paying for the features it provides for free: a word processor that looks like and has many features of MS Word, spreadsheet and presentation pack-

ages, compatibility with Microsoft Office files, and the ability to save files in HTML, PDF and other formats.

Also like the others, Zoho has resisted the temptation to turn to advertising for revenue. They hope to make money as companies adopt packages. Pricing has not yet been set, they have plans to charge for multiple users of some components, such as the CRM software.

Vegesna said they are still using some parts of OpenOffice, which is open source software. AdventNet itself contributes to the open-source community, making its CRM application available.

San Jose, Calif.-based **ThinkFree Corp.**, a subsidiary of the Korean Haansoft Inc., has made compatibility with Microsoft Office a major focus of its package. The company's director of marketing, **Jonathan Crow**, said ThinkFree supports about 85 percent of Office's functions, and works to ensure that data from other functions is not lost when files are opened by different packages.

The online suites often are used by people who don't buy Office, but need to share files with people who use it.

ThinkFree also offers an enterprise version of its package, as well as a desktop version, sold in stores, through **Avanquest Publishing USA Inc.**, also based in Pleasanton.

Another package, Desktoptwo, is put out by New York-based **Sapotek Inc.** This company has a different goal. CEO **Joshua Rand** explained in an e-mail that his team is focusing not on the normal office-productivity components but on the desktop.

They are working to create a Web-based desktop that mimics the look and feel of a PC's and will ultimately provide the foundation of a Web-based network operating system.

He said that while the Web "isn't quite there as a medium," the company is getting closer.

Microsoft Corp. also is widely rumored to be eyeing the market. Many say it will have to, to retain the dominance of its Office software, now a worldwide standard.