EDUCATION

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Distance Learning

the next generation of fire service training and education

Over the past three years in its continuous efforts to improve the safety and operations of the fire service through education, training, risk management and insurance programs, VFIS developed a distance learning system to meet the future needs of developing fire service professionals.

The VFIS distance learning initiative has demonstrated key validation factors since inception:

1. Emergency service personnel find distance learning to be convenient and acceptable from which they can satisfactorily gain key knowledge.

2. Distance learning is not just for continuing education topics but pursued for degree or certificate granting programs.

3. There is buy-in from emergency service officers to support distance learning based on individual and organizational successes.

4. While the distance learning system is working and providing necessary information to the emergency service community, there is much to be gained through enhancement of systems, training approaches and student input into program effectiveness.

At VFIS, there has been growth of the system as well as growth in the client base. As technology changes, so do the methods of delivery and testing in distance learning. However, there is no single research study that has provided a defined position on the effectiveness of distance learning.

Research has shown two fundamental challenges:

- Virtual classrooms can be perceived as lonely, challenging and frightening situations that may not provide the right educational experience to either the student or the teacher.

- If the technology is too challenging, it may create a problem and if it is too easy, it could present a challenge.

VFIS has observed both of these issues and adapted by providing programs at various levels of technology and performance demand to achieve program objectives. In fact, one study in emergency service on-line learning found that "virtual classrooms are indeed as effective as conventional classrooms" and "could be as invigorating as a normal course, provided that the teachers know how to use the communication technology available to them."

As with any learning system, there are several keys to creating and utilizing an effective virtual classroom:

- Having hardware and software available to help make the learning experience enjoyable and not distracting from the learning experience

- A fundamental learning process

- When appropriate, the process could drive discussions or create opportunities to have constructive debates and discussions

- Developing a relationship between the training and the local operating practices in place

In developing the VFIS Distance Learning system with St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pa., the attempt was made to overcome many of these challenges by integrating a hardware/software ensemble that was proven in the educational and distance learning (non-curriculum) environments as well as utilizing the skills, knowledge and equipment of a proven academic distance learning system.

The VFIS on-line training began with the Privately-Owned Vehicles (POV) safe driving program and has now grown to 19 courses involving annual procedural review programs, short courses on fundamental risk management topics, several state required programs and national topics of interest. In many cases, courses are being designed to have components available to include department's specific guidelines and officer sign off. A certificate of course completion is provided upon passing the online assessment.