4 Free Online Learning Sites for Small Businesses

by Mary Jacobs on September 28, 2012

What could you learn that would help you run your business more intelligently? Whatever it is, if you have a computer with an internet connection, chances are you can find a relevant course for free — or at least cheap — online.

We're not talking about watching YouTube videos, either. Websites like Coursera.org and Lynda.com offer thousands of courses online, ranging from classes in economics and operations management to tutorials in WordPress and InDesign, taught by experts in their fields. You can even learn iPhone and iPad app development by sitting at the feet (virtually) of the Apple engineers who built the devices.

Most courses allow you to learn on your own schedule and at your own pace. Classes are taught in small, easy-to-digest bites, typically in lectures of 15 minutes or less. Most don't give grades or credit, but with motivation and self-discipline, you can master new skills.

Here are four top picks for small-business owners looking to expand their horizons, or give employees a boost:

1. Coursera.org — Started by two Stanford professors, this website offers free courses from world-class schools like Princeton and the University of Michigan. Lectures are formatted into series of short video clips. Some offer automated quizzes; a few give students the option of earning completion certificates. Choose from introductory courses in finance, operations management, and organizational analysis. Coming in January: a two-part course taught by University of Virginia's Edward D. Hess called "Grow to Greatness: Smart Growth for Private Businesses."

2. Lynda.com — This is a subscription-based service (basic individual memberships cost $25 per month), but thousands of its video tutorials are accessible for free. Lynda.com is one of the best places online to teach yourself how to use almost any kind of software. The site also offers courses in business skills like public speaking, negotiation, and brand building. Members receive unlimited access to a vast library of videos; new courses and topics are added every week.

3. Khan Academy — This website earned its reputation as the place to go for help with math homework. Now that it's amassed 3,400 instructional videos, there's plenty of interest to small-business owners, such as the course "Venture Capital and Capital Markets," which kicks off with a lecture on how to raise money for a startup.

4. iTunes U — The array of courses offered by iTunes U seems infinite, but probably its most famous is the one that demonstrates how to create iPhone and iPad apps. Apple engineers teach the live version of the class, CS193P, to Stanford students in a small auditorium on the university's campus; the rest of the world can take the course online for free by downloading videos of the lectures and slides. When the course first appeared online in 2009, it chalked up a million downloads in seven weeks. (Note that these courses aren't technically offered on the web: You'll need to install the current version of iTunes on your Mac or PC, launch the app, click on "iTunes Store" in the source list, and then select "iTunes U" in the top left navigation area.)

For more online-learning websites, visit the aptly named No Excuse List. New York-based blogger Xuan Li, who maintains the site as a hobby, came up with the name because, as he likes to say, "There's no longer an excuse for not being able to learn something."