



RISING STARS

Ones to watch

Many of the providers who are now centre stage were once unknowns in the IT training world. Barrie Charles looks beyond the Top 50 to see which operators are currently waiting in the wings

The IT training sector is characterised by continual change, as young, dynamic companies fight their way into the Top 50 ranking of suppliers. Once again, we've sifted through the smaller IT training providers to see if we could identify the rising stars who might be tomorrow's winners.

Firms were asked to submit a short summary of their activities to an independent group of judges, who looked for evidence of high growth, innovation or excellence. Here are their top five.

★ 1. Futuremedia



Leonard Fertig

In many ways, Futuremedia is more like a supernova than a rising star, having already established an entire industry around building IT literacy. Its turnover rose last year from £1.3 million to £18.7 million as a direct result of the government-backed Home Computing Initiative (HCI). Most of this revenue falls outside our definition for membership of the Top 50 list, but Futuremedia is certainly a worthy contender to lead this feature.

The company was founded in 1982 and made its name in computer-based training using laser disks. In the early 1990s, it moved into providing systems to manage learning, increasingly using the internet as a medium. That was a great place to be at the end of the millennium, but it didn't last.

'That whole industry came to a crashing halt in 2001/2002,' explains Leonard Fertig, CEO. 'Futuremedia re-invented itself in late 2003 by creating what is now known as the HCI industry.'

The government scheme provided tax incentives for employees to fund home computer systems out of gross salary. But nothing much happened until Futuremedia came up with a package and signed Royal Mail up to it.

'What had been a low-level, rather unsuccessfully implemented policy turned into an industry,' says Fertig. 'In the first month something like 4,000 Royal Mail employees signed up.' In the second month that became 11,000, and now around 200,000 staff in Royal Mail and elsewhere have benefited.

Futuremedia still also provides learning management packages and has grown a bespoke content capability. It now focuses on providing portals to help communities of users, winning contracts with the Crown Prosecution Service and Barclays, for example.

'It's about work-life balance,' says Fertig, citing the skills development that helps staff get on in their jobs and aids their family to use computers and the internet for recreation or school-work. 'It's about improving people's lives both at work and at home.'

★ 2. BrightWave



Charles Gould

BrightWave also featured last year in the list of Rising Stars, and again at number two, but the company is far from stuck in a rut. It doubled in size, growing to 25 permanent staff, repeating a pattern that has seen an annual doubling of revenues since the company was founded in 2000.

Its aim is to become the number one bespoke e-learning provider in Europe

Futuremedia re-invented itself by creating what is now known as the HCI industry

Leonard Fertig, CEO, Futuremedia

within three years. In March it took on Sambit Mohapatra, for many years the general manager of Tata in the UK, as its new sales and marketing director, allowing Lars Hyland to concentrate on heading the learning services division.

'We will offer consultancy in areas that maximise the impact of e-learning,' says Charles Gould, managing director. 'We think of ourselves as the company that makes e-learning work.'

Recently, BrightWave has worked on a slew of large IT training projects, including new systems training at the Department for Work and Pensions and BUPA, and an SAP rollout at T-Mobile. The latter won the bronze award for e-learning project of the year from the Institute of IT Training in February.

The BUPA project exemplifies a trend in its work that emphasises roles rather than technology. 'It's not just about the skills to operate an IT system,' explains Gould. 'It's about weaving wider business processes and procedures into the job that needs to be done. That makes IT skills training directly applicable.'

Last year, the company brought on-stream an Indian offshore capability. 'We see it as an opportunity to provide our clients with the best of both worlds: local design and project management, and the expertise to do large projects without it being too expensive.'

★ 3. Fast Lane



Peter Olive

Fast Lane only started in business in the UK in June 2004, yet it has already established itself as a major name in the Cisco training arena. The man behind the ▶



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◀ business is Peter Olive, who used to be the MD of Horizon MTS, the specialist Cisco trainer acquired by Azlan in June 2002. Olive left Azlan two years later to establish Fast Lane in the UK.

Fast Lane was founded in 1996 in the Middle East, and then expanded into the German-speaking parts of Europe three years ago, growing rapidly to become the Cisco training market leader in Germany and Austria. The company has worldwide ambitions and has now opened operations in Holland, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, in addition to the UK.

'We look for expansion into countries where we can identify people who have run a similar type of business before,' explains Olive, the managing director for UK and Ireland. He has repeated the strategy internally, employing many people he worked with back in the days of Horizon MTS. 'I've recruited a team of people who are all industry experts – they've all worked in the training industry for a long time and all bar two in Cisco training.'

The firm is now a Cisco Learning Solution Partner – the highest level of certification – and enjoys a close working relationship with Cisco as a result of its growing worldwide status. In addition, Olive has established a partnership with InterQuad that provides both a national public schedule and a strong sales capability.

Fast Lane claims to already have a 10% share of the market and plans for leadership within three years. So what's the secret of its success?

According to Olive it is down to customer relations. 'I always find that customers are looking for somebody who is responsive and understands what they are asking for, and then comes up with something that fits their specific requirement,' he says.

'We're able to bring our experience and networking contacts within the industry to bear and that means we can react quicker and more creatively than some of our competitors.'

★ 4. ComputerLinks



Martin Hall

We also featured ComputerLinks in last year's Rising Stars, but we make no apologies for listing it again, as its business has continued to grow by leaps and bounds.

Revenues nearly tripled last year to £467,000 and the company has continued to expand rapidly in 2005.

ComputerLinks is the training arm of Unipalm, a specialist distributor of IP-based products with a turnover of more than £50 million. During 2004, the training division continued to expand its security and e-business courses to provide greater coverage of UniPalm-distributed technologies. This process is continuing in 2005 with, for example, the launch of training for Fortinet, a provider of anti-virus firewalls.

The company's main route to market is through UniPalm's reseller network, which is encouraged to offer training as part of the package. ComputerLinks is also using its strength in what is essentially a niche market to gain additional revenues through working with others.

'We're beginning to develop relationships with training partners,' says Martin Hall, training manager. 'We are specialists in the security area and there is no way larger training companies can offer the specialisms that we can.'

Although ComputerLinks does run some technology-heavy courses in UniPalm's Newmarket headquarters, most training is delivered in London out of two classrooms located in the old Royal Mint. If this building serves as a historic reminder of the need to protect money in today's e-business world, then the building opposite is a good stand-in for the security required. It's the Tower of London, and Hall believes the choice of location is very appropriate: 'As far as security is concerned, it's obviously the place to be.'

★ 5. IRM UK



Jeanette Hall

Despite a name that suggests the local subsidiary of an international corporation, IRM is essentially a UK company with just a minority shareholding held by a firm called IRM

Sweden. The company specialises in seminars and conferences, and operates in a different market from most of the other suppliers reviewed here.

IRM UK concentrates on the strategic side of IT and tends to attract more senior delegates than the usual IT professionals who make up the audience in most technical training courses. 'Across the board it's a lot of IT managers, consultants, business analysts, data architects and project managers,' explains Jeanette Hall, marketing manager.

The main draw for customers to sign up is the internationally renowned roster of presenters. 'They are all leading consultants,' says Hall, 'like John Zachman, the father of enterprise architecture, Roger Burlton, a leading figure in business process management and Larry English, who works in information quality improvement.'

All three are American, as are the majority of the instructors, and the seminars typically attract between 10 and 20 delegates and run for two to three days. The company also runs conferences, such as the upcoming Data Management and Information Quality event, which lasts for four days with up to 50 sessions and 250 delegates.

IRM UK revenues grew by 21% last year to just over £1 million. Customers typically come from the financial services or IT industry, although the public sector is becoming more important.

'Most recently, we are getting a lot of our bookings from the government side,' says Hall, citing in particular the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Work and Pensions. ■

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Martin Hall,
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ComputerLinks