

TOP TIPS

3 Tips to Better Digital Firefighter Training

Whether you are contemplating subscribing to a digital firefighter training platform, or you've been using one for a while, there's one big issue: How do you ensure you are getting the most out of your training platform?

The answer is simple. Firefighters need to be using and actually learning from the platform. And it has to be integrated into your overall training program and allow you quick access to training data.

The hard part, of course, is making all that happen. We sat down with Vector Solutions' Tim Riley for advice on just how to do that. Riley is a former fire training officer and an early adapter of digital training platforms. He is now a solutions engineer for Vector Solutions, where his job is to assist fire departments in getting the most out of their online platforms.

Here are Riley's top three tips for maximizing fire department training with a digital system.

1. It must be easy to use and integrated

Whatever program is used, it must be user-friendly and easy for firefighters to log into and navigate. It must be easy for officers to track digital, classroom and hands-on training. And it must be easy for training officers or chiefs to retrieve firefighter training data when needed — such as prior to an ISO audit.

Training officers want to get out there and conduct trainings; they don't want to become glorified data-entry clerks constantly logging training hours completed by their firefighters.

Likewise, volunteer and part-time firefighters want to get their hands-on tools on training nights. They have full-time jobs and don't want to spend their time in classrooms listening to PowerPoint-driven lectures. They don't want to talk about ropes, knots and ladders; they want to get out and get their hands on it. Yet the book work part of training needs to take place so that the hands-on is both effective and done safely. Letting volunteers and part-time firefighters knock out the classroom learning in a self-guided learning platform allows more time for hands-on and face-to-face instruction.

2. Get firefighter buy-in and hold them accountability for digital training requirements

Not all firefighters are equally adept to technology or new training platforms. You need to be concerned about the 45-year-old who didn't grow up using computers his whole life. Those late technology adopters may well be experts in other areas of the fire service. And they may require more time and more instruction to adapt to a new platform. Let them learn to crawl before they walk.

One option is to establish a type of reverse mentoring program. Here, firefighters who are slower to grasp technology and education platforms are paired with those who are quick to grasp the new platforms. This often means putting older, seasoned firefighters with newer members. That reverse mentorship can have collateral benefits as there will likely be cross generational bonds formed and more education passed back from the older firefighter learning the new tech to the younger firefighter teaching it. For example, the older firefighter may impart apparatus operation expertise while learning online training from a younger member.

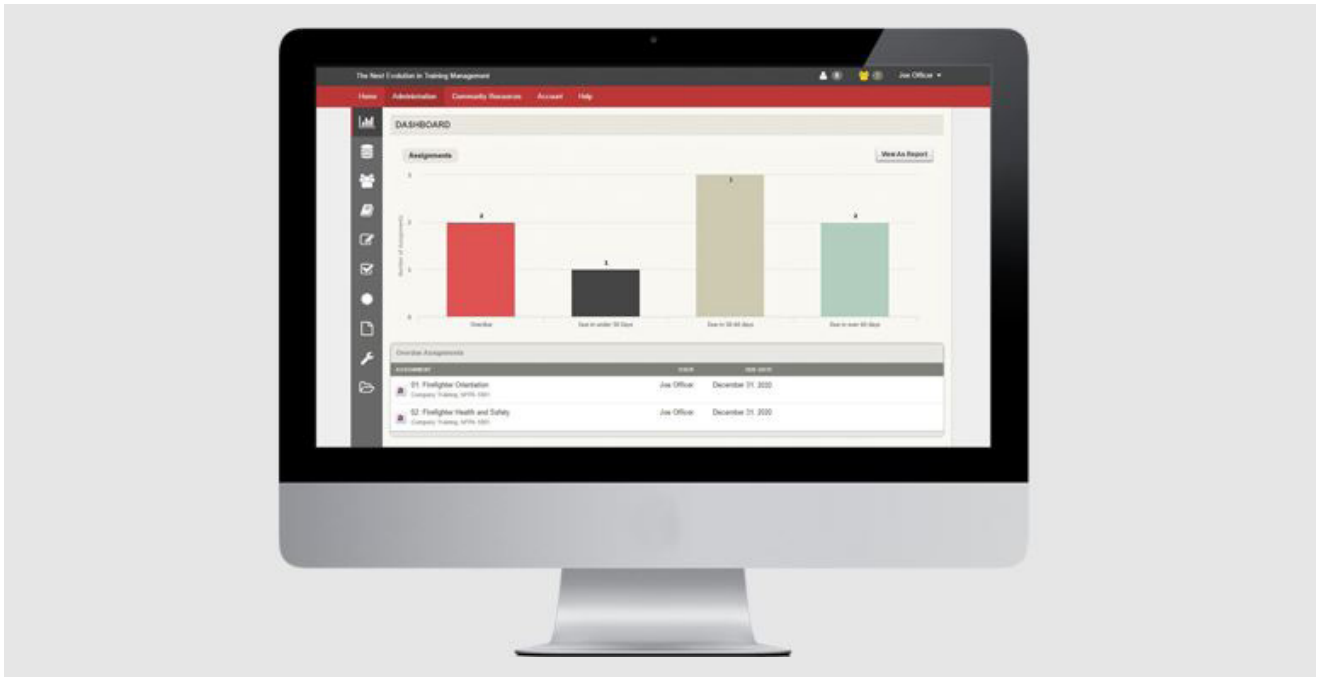
Another way to improve firefighter buy-in is to not overload them with platform-based training. It is important to remember that a program like Vector Solutions is not a replacement for face-to-face and hands-on training. It is a supplement to those necessary teaching methods. Assigning eight or 10 modules per month will likely overwhelm firefighters, which may result in them not doing them completely.

No matter how much effort goes into motivating firefighters to accept an online training platform, plan for resistance. Firefighters are notorious for hating change; in fact, nearly all humans are change-adverse. Some form of accountability will probably be necessary.

Get full buy-in for the new training platform from the top — fire chief, union head, emergency management director, mayor or town manager. Then build an official policy covering the digital training requirements, and put some teeth in it. There may come a point where you need to force people to get the training done. And there must be real weight behind the threats of discipline for noncompliance.

Another form of accountability is making sure firefighters are learning from the assignments rather than simply completing them. Quick clicking to the end, best-guessing on the test, recording the missed questions and retaking the test is a common way to sidestep training modules on some platforms.

Platforms like Vector Solutions allows training officers to build in some fail safes against this. For example, a timer can be set so the test isn't available until a set amount of time in the course has elapsed — similar to requirements for EMS and paramedic certifications continuing education credits. The platform should also have a deep test question pool to overcome firefighters taking screen shots or photos of the correct answers to missed questions. Good platforms will also allow administrators to limit the number of tests that can be taken before requiring the course be redone.



3. A digital training platform must have flexibility, freshness and value

A platform's cost will always be high on a department's priority list. Yet, it is important to look for the value that comes with that cost, not just cost alone. For example, a platform's flexibility will add a lot of value. Having one platform that can do multiple, commonly used things — like training, ISO tracking, scheduling and equipment management — offers way more value than will four platforms that each only perform one function. Even something as simple as having one log-in and one password for all those functions will improve firefighter buy-in. Conversely, an everything-in-one platform is going to be unwieldy and difficult to use.

Value is also getting the support you need. There needs to be comprehensive initial training when the platform is bought. And, there needs to be responsive help for when things don't work as they should or when parts of the initial training have been forgotten. Buyers also need to look for ongoing education. Vector Solutions, for example, produces regular, short webinars covering how to get the most out of its platforms. The company also dispatches product experts, like Riley, to do refresher training on site for one or multiple departments.

Make sure the platform stays fresh. Repeating the same training modules over and over will reduce how much firefighters learn and how much they actually use the platform. The platform should be customizable and the content updated often.

Getting the most from your digital training platform will give you better trained firefighters and more value for your department's money.