

IT and telecoms

Software that's no pipe dream

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Hundreds of budding Kent plumbers are using computer game technology to train in a virtual house – with no risk of flooding anyone's carpet.

Skills training firm Train4Trade Skills is helping 300 trainee and working plumbers in the county to learn new techniques by using so-called "serious games" technology to create a virtual house for on-screen exercises.

And with burst pipes and dodgy hot water tanks all safely tucked away in cyberspace, there is no danger of costly or dangerous mistakes.

A voice-over accompanies the PC-based tutorial and students can practise and revise what they learn, before being given a score.

Students also take part in practical workshops.

It is estimated that around 30,000 new plumbers are needed in the UK to fill a gap.

Mike Head, marketing manager for Train4Trade Skills, said: "The

virtual house is an important part of this plumbing course and has been enormously successful in helping students.

"It gives them excellent visual recall of the steps necessary for the skill involved.

"It enables students to study in a safe environment, without getting under the feet of a plumber or causing costly mistakes.

"We are unique in offering virtual reality training on a plumbing course.

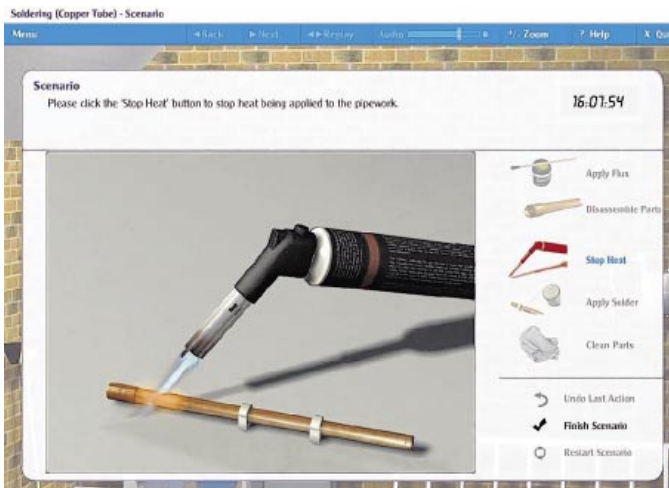
"This is a learning technique that students would never be able to experience on a traditional apprenticeship scheme.

Oliver Clark, 23, from Rochester, hopes to follow in his plumber father's footsteps by training on the Train4Trade Skills Foundation Plumbing Course, which he started in October.

He is doing it side-by-side with his present job of pub manager.

Oliver said: "The virtual reality house is really good because it gives me a chance to do things that I wouldn't be able to just go out and do in the real world at this stage of training.

"I'm looking forward to starting the practical side of training."



■ Tube journey: Software created by skills2learn allows trainee plumbers to solder a virtual copper tube

Andrew Everest, 50, from Chatham has worked in the plumbing fittings industry for 25 years and has been studying advanced plumbing with the course since October.

He said: "The virtual reality software helps to give you an idea of looking around for the different bits and pieces involved in plumbing.

"It makes you go through the tasks in a methodical way."

Postman Paul Fyffe, 45, from Gillingham has dreams of running his own plumbing business. He said learning to bend copper pipes in the virtual house had been a great learning experience.

He said: "It's good because it points out straight away if you've made any mistakes and allows you to go back and do it again. It prepares you to do things in a certain way. I think the software is beneficial."

Majid Al-Kader from Skills2Learn, the firm which used the 'serious games' technology to create the software said: "Everyone has seen or played a computer game and we're all very familiar

with the technology.

"Using it to practise a skill, such as how to diagnose and remedy a burst pipe, helps endorse what has been learnt during the written, theory part of the course."

He added: "By the time a student comes to actually repeat that skill for real, he will be very competent and far less likely to make mistakes."

Outsourcing squeezes pay of IT workers in UK

IT managers in the South East are enjoying "inflation-busting" pay rises, a new report on pay has found.

Salaries of managerial level IT staff have increased by 20.5 per cent over the last five years, the report from the Association of Technology Staffing Companies found.

A typical top-rung IT salary in the South East is now £50,000, it found.

But the report also warned that the current IT trend of relocating low-skilled technical support centre jobs to foreign countries, such as India, could mean fewer UK graduates were encouraged to enter the IT industry.

It said that over the five-year period, pay for the lowest IT support staff in the UK had remained stuck at £18,000, as more of this sort of work was sent abroad. Managerial posts were remaining in the UK to remain close to clients.

Ann Swain, chief executive of ATSCo, said: "The outsourcing of entry-level IT jobs has meant fewer graduate-level jobs are available in the UK. It's like removing the bottom rung from

County is home to 11,000 jobs in sector

■ Some 11,000 people work in the information communication technology sector in Kent.

■ Around 1,500 ICT companies are based in Kent, including many small start-up firms.

■ More than 1,000 people graduate each year through Kent universities with computer science skills.

■ Companies such as PAB Technology in Margate and Fuji Copian in Gillingham are among the county's key ICT employers.

Source: Locate in Kent, the body promoting the county as a destination for business.



■ Key skills: Plumber Oliver Clark, training with the help of new computer technology

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