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Department May Bend Apprenticeship Guidelines

by [Aliya Sternstein](#)

Online learning could qualify as part of an apprenticeship under a new proposal issued Thursday by the Labor Department, which sets standards for the country's apprentice programs.

The quaint picture of a young worker studying under the close tutelage of a skilled shoe cobbler is no longer reality. Today, apprentices supplement workforces in industries ranging from information technology to energy, according to the department. Some [IT occupations available](#) to apprentices are computer programmer, graphic designer and IT project manager. One occupation under consideration is Internet e-commerce specialist.

Labor currently defines a registered apprenticeship as a combination of on-the-job learning, mentoring and classroom instruction. The draft rules would make apprenticeship training as flexible as continuing education and part-time degree programs.

"Electronic media" would be added to the definition of classroom instruction, so Web-based and distance learning would count toward an apprenticeship certificate.

"One of the challenges in education is you have to physically get to a classroom and take time out of your schedule," said Mark Jones, senior vice president and general manager of Echo360, which sells online lecture technologies. "That is increasingly a relatively arbitrary thing if you can get the information via the Web."

Echo360's tools have been incorporated into a number of certificate programs at two-year community colleges and technical trade schools that are similar to apprenticeships, he said.

Online courses are still more common in pursuing a degree, Jones added, but they are working their way into every aspect of education.

The Florida Virtual School offers Internet-based courses to public, private and home-schooled students. Pam Birtolo, the school's chief learning officer, said, "Just like online learning levels the playing field in the K-12 situation, it will level the playing field as people begin to change careers."

Workers in rural locations and high-poverty areas would have the opportunity to be apprentices in occupations that have traditionally required classroom instruction, she said.

"We know that the Millennials are going to have at least a dozen different careers in their lifetime," which will demand flexibility and financial security, Birtolo said. Online apprenticeships would offer both, she noted.

In releasing the proposal, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Employment and Training Emily Stover DeRocco said, "Apprenticeship is a proven model of training" with a 30-year history that has grown beyond its origins in industries like construction. "We have proposed new regulations to reflect the 21st-century global economy."