

training

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Taming Tech Training

By Matt Bolch

Many people shudder when it comes to being trained on technology, but the right program and delivery can dispel their fears.

As technology continues to permeate nearly every aspect of the business world and as four generations of employees work side by side, delivering the right training in the right way to each group of learners is like performing on the high wire without a net. But knowing the audience, keeping the training goals firmly in mind, and extolling the virtues of training will help every worker embrace the program.

Bill Bateman, technology training specialist at the University of Portland, deals with a wide range of people, from incoming freshmen raised in a technology-rich world of video games, iPods, and smartphones to long-serving professors who are resistant to change. When students started submitting work using the Microsoft Vista operating system that professors couldn't open, the university sped up plans to train on Office 2007 and Vista. "We don't have problems, we have opportunities," says Bateman. "I know that's corny, but I try to keep the message positive."

Bateman also tries to involve employees and students at their skill level, scheduling separate classes that cover the same material for both groups. Anyone can attend any session, but he finds that groups similar in terms of age and familiarity with technology work better. He also relies on early adopters in each department, debuting new technology to these power users, who, in turn, spread the message to others in each department.

Eighty percent of training occurs in the university's full-time training room, with the rest occurring one-on-one or in other specialized settings. But Bateman stresses that the information conveyed is the same—regardless of audience. "It's the same class for the president of the college as for the new hire in the maintenance department," Bateman says. "We deliver the same quality of information."

TAC Team

The biggest client for Learning at Cisco, which is responsible for internal and external training at San Jose, CA-based Cisco Systems Inc., is the company's Technical Assistance Center (TAC), which handles product calls. The training team conducts 150 new product training sessions a quarter for three to four dozen new products. Frank Chacon, technical services training manager, says this group is motivated by customer service index scores to stay abreast of the latest technology. "They have to be proficient from the first call," Chacon says. "The better trained TAC [employees] are, the better customer service they can give."

The business unit is involved in selecting the modality of training, which can include e-mailed white papers, wiki pages developed by engineers and TAC workers, instructor-led distance learning, Q&A sessions with subject matter experts, online demos, and audio and video on demand.

Get With It

When Verizon Business started certification training on Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) topics in the IT realm, the Baskinridge, NJ, company used an amalgamation of SkillSoft offerings with a Verizon twist, says James Beck, manager of engineering training. The blended training program combines online offerings with instructor-led distance learning; live, collaborative sessions in which participants can ask questions; and virtual learning laboratories. When a group of employees falls behind on lessons, remedial classes or study sessions are offered.

Verizon Business has been pleased with the results, obtaining certification pass rates above industry average, Beck says. "Because of demand, we have an 80- to 100-person wait list for the next sessions," Beck notes. "The best advertising we get is someone who's taken the training and talks about it."

Training for All Ages

The Beryl Companies in Bedford, TX, employs 300 people from ages 20 to 65 mainly to staff call centers that are outsourced by hospitals. Bob Willey, "prince of performance improvement," uses fast-paced learning to appeal to younger generations, coupled with paper-and-pencil exercises for older learners.

"Boomers can feel like you're coddling them, so there's a fine line there," says Willey, who's been with the company for less than a year but who has more than a quarter-century of experience working in the organizational development space.

Each call adviser receives a minimum of eight hours of training yearly, both general technology offerings and specific training based on client needs. When Willey arrived, the company had just started using Donald Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Evaluation—reactions, learning, transfer, and results—with lower levels building upon each other. His goal is to implement Level 3 and 4 evaluations to help company executives realize the value of training.

"Because of recurrent training, taking 12 to 14 advisers at a time for 60 to 90 minutes of training, we've observed that service levels go up 3 to 5 percent because they're using their time more effectively," Willey says. "And our turnover is 17 to 20 percent a year versus 60 to 80 percent, which is the industry average."

Sidebar: Quick Tips

Andrew Miller is president of ACM Consulting Inc., a consulting and advisory firm that focuses on improving organizational efficiency and communication. Miller has led clients in many industries through complex business transformations and organizational changes and offers these tips to develop an effective technology training program:

- Mandate employee representation in the decision-making process. Users gain a sense of ownership, which gives rise to comments about "our" system, not "their" system.
- Know the audience for each training session. The organization can communicate a customized message to employee groups, identifying the strategy behind and the benefits of the new technology.
- Implement a method to track usage compliance. Employees then know it is a strategic investment, and the organization is serious about its effective use, positively impacting company performance.