

Trends to Watch: The Training-Technology Connection

By Lynda Ford, The Ford Group



My curiosity was piqued when I heard a group of HR professionals discussing training in their organizations and bemoaning the lack of coordination with their IT counterparts. They felt that better communication and understanding between HR and IT would allow them to stretch scarce training dollars *and* improve their ability to support the goals of the business.

Granted, this is anecdotal evidence, but it highlights an issue I've observed for years: HR and IT staffs must integrate more skillfully to capture the promise and value of employee education.

There's clearly room for improvement. A 2004 survey conducted by Accenture and The Gantry Group found that only a small percentage of chief learning officers (CLOs) deliver measurable value as related to key business indicators. The survey also noted that only two percent of CLOs are held accountable for aligning the learning function with business goals.

The greatest challenge for those tasked with the learning function will be to link training with business results. Three key trends will shape how CLOs and HR managers design and deliver high value education that makes a significant impact on business performance.

Emphasis on Soft-Skills Training

The trend toward flattened organizations continues, allowing managers greater influence with employees. More than ever, front and middle-line managers are the critical link in retaining top talent. To function effectively

in this environment, managers need well-developed skills in areas such as communication, conflict management, emotional intelligence and leadership development.

To accomplish this objective, traditional training approaches, such as broad-based, full-day programs will give way to shorter, more narrowly focused sessions with a strong practice component. The key to success will be designing education programs that result in improved workplace practices for attendees. An employee's supervisors are an important part of the skill development program, offering coaching, mentoring and support as needed.

Expect more emphasis on "just-in-time" learning. Instead of attending a program where skills are taught that will be used in the future, the focus will shift to learning skills that have immediate applicability and return on investment.

Targeted, Individualized Learning Solutions

Employees will be required to take more responsibility for their own learning and development, and to achieve this objective through the use of blended learning solutions. Training will combine different delivery methods, such as online training, instructor-led events, and other learning opportunities that result in a tailored program for the individual.

At Utica National Insurance Group, for example, managers have a unique approach to career planning. Together, the manager and Clarke Peterson, senior vice-president of organizational

development, examine the employee's career goals; skills that are needed to achieve those career goals, and competency strengths and deficiencies. Using a 360-degree assessment process, information is gathered on 67 competencies.

Peterson says, "Technology has made many things possible, particularly in data collection. The entire process is faster; raters are contacted within minutes. We have real-time information and that provides richer feedback. What used to take six months now takes only two months." Peterson points out that updated software makes it much easier to gather narrative information on each competency, which gives a more complete picture. Utica National's process is highly individualized, with a customized development plan.

However, technology does have its limits. Peterson has tried video conferencing for feedback sessions. His verdict? "It just doesn't work."

Effective Use of E-learning

E-learning continues to gain popularity as an integral part of an organization's training strategy, with cost-effectiveness as a major driver. Paul Walliker, virtual collaboration/online training manager at Caterpillar University, found that when similar programs are compared, e-learning was 40 percent less expensive to deliver with a student population of 100 or less. With larger groups, savings as high as 78 percent have been achieved.

E-learning lends itself particularly well to compliance and mandatory training, refresher-type courses, and as

a supplement to soft and certain hard skills training. Employees and managers attend courses at a convenient time and complete courses at their own pace. Employers cut administrative time and have an accurate audit record of where each employee stands in the training process. There is more timeliness in the training process, especially if large-scale programs must be rolled out in a short time frame. There is great consistency; the message is delivered the same way every time. And, information is easily updated from a single location.

The challenge for those heading the e-learning function will be three-fold. First, decisions about the types of training that are appropriate for e-learning and how the content will be delivered must be agreed upon. Walliker says, "Programs that require role playing or close observation by the instructor may not be candidates for an online program." Second, a mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of e-learning must be developed and implemented prior to program inception and at specific points after implementation. This will give a real-

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time assessment of what's going well and what needs modification. Third, skills retention issues must be addressed. In speaking with half a dozen users, there was agreement that they didn't always retain the e-learning information as well as the classroom information. As technology sophistication grows, a key area will be enhancing the e-learning experience beyond a glorified PowerPoint presentation through simulations and adapting adult learning principles.

The Next Move

The June 2005 issue of *Training and Development* magazine reported that companies with best practices in the learning function also have high levels of financial performance. It's no surprise that an educated workforce

makes business sense. And one clear senior leadership mandate emerges: clearly connect learning and organizational performance. It's up to the people side and the technology side of the house to collaborate and make that statement a reality.

About the Author

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