

# THE CHANGING FACE OF TRAINING



The IT training industry is going through plenty of changes. With the credit crunch and recession biting, training budgets have been cut, and we're moving towards commoditisation of many areas within IT training says **Allan Pettman**, UK Managing Director of Global Knowledge.

There are several key trends, which we're already experiencing. Training will not die out, the role of the instructor will not become redundant, but flexibility and adaptation will be key.

## **Innovation or differentiation?**

As we've already seen in the market, there's been and will continue to be a lot of consolidation. As training providers are acquired and existing ones buy specialist companies to fill in the gaps, the market will change. This is likely to result in less but fiercer competition.

While this matters to the training providers, all the customers care about is how well companies cater to their needs. The survivors in the training industry will be those who are flexible and agile and those who turn themselves into the 'right shape'.

A more consultative approach is needed. Customers shouldn't be afraid of asking for more focused training aligned to their business context and ensuring the content addresses the real need. For example, PRINCE2 courses, the process-based method, doesn't

create good project managers in isolation. Project management techniques and personal skills are also required. So, while PRINCE2 training may happen, companies and stakeholders still seem surprised that effective change doesn't follow by default.

Two things will help here: Firstly being consulted properly on what each course or certification provides in the long-term, from a business perspective rather than just delivering a 'badge'; and secondly having the necessary evaluation in place to measure the outcome of sending staff on a training course.

## **Evaluate to justify**

Evaluation is something that is often overlooked by both training providers and customers. At the moment it's not being assessed at the business level, where its impact can be measured. It should be a 360 degree process, not just asking training course attendees what they thought of the instructor, but managing expectations from the start. A learning and development programme should be treated in the same way as any other

investment a company makes – you need to prove that it is an investment and not a cost.

Often training is treated as a tick-box exercise instead of an output. It can be seen as a business driver, leading to competitive advantage and improved efficiency, but it's just about how to make those links. At the moment people are sent on courses as part of the wider business activity within a company – upgrading software, an increased workforce, updating skills and so forth – but these theoretical benefits aren't always realised after training. Companies need to know how to implement the acquired skills and knowledge in advance. On average, 80 per cent of the skills and knowledge gained within a training environment have the capability of being applied in the work environment: the question is how to make sure they are?

## **Tailored packages**

To come back to the consulting aspect, often it's better to work out what the customer wants at the start and how much they're prepared to invest in their

staff training. It's always worth helping them work out whether it's better to spend money or an employee's time. A two-day intensive yet more expensive course might be more suitable than a five-day course that removes the employee from their job for a whole week.

One of our customers is a major telecoms provider and their challenge lies in rolling out education to their own clients. We try to add value by understanding the idiosyncrasies of each customer and tailoring learning packages based on what the 'result' needs to look like, but within the context of the clients' limitations. These include timescales, audience, budget, technology and geography, and the risks that poor implementation creates.

In this case it's vital for the training provider to be flexible and evaluate, or even challenge, clients to ensure informed decisions are made with regards to what kind of training is best. This will help better manage the resulting benefits.

#### 'Flexi-e-collaborative' learning

E-learning is one method that has been touted for a while and I'd say it's in its third generation now. It's already been vastly improved due to its own limitations. In its second generation, it was thought that giving people the opportunity to consume and understand content by themselves would mean they also learn it. It didn't.

Only in its third generation are people beginning to understand that engagement and motivation needs to be thought-out and addressed – for example with the use of video and social media (instant messenger, virtual instructor and so on) embedded in the course. E-learning still needs to be managed. It's labelled as being good for theoretical learning, but needs to be blended or collaborative with access to mentors, learning resources and hands-on development for practical skills to be cemented.

E-learning is gaining traction, particularly in areas where volume, cost or disparate workers are involved and the learning transfer is simplistic, such as compliance and induction activities. With increasing cost pressures and targets for organisations to deliver more training through alternative (non-instructor) routes and providers getting more savvy about engaging media, such as embedding video and practical tools rather than bland PowerPoint, it will continue to evolve at a pace.

In general though, e-learning won't ever become the 'only' form of training and the instructor's role won't die out.

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#### The future

Training remains a key asset that companies can use to differentiate themselves from the competition. It also enables them to remain up-to-date with the latest technological advances and to better manage and run their operations.

What will change is the type of training that's offered. Not only will it be more heavily tied into business and demonstrating ROI, but the level of IT training is also likely to be higher. With 'digital natives' who already have the relevant technology knowledge and skills coming of working age, lower level generic end-user IT training will disappear

to make way for more advanced skills acquisition training. 'Push' learning in smaller soundbites and modules via text, video and file-sharing is something we can expect to add to the blended mix that already exists. It's down to the providers to tailor each course and package to the trainee.

The lifelong learning agenda will continue. It is about the options provided and how people consume them (formal or informal learning), instructor-led versus e-led, and how people are able to measure the value of the activity. As organisations increasingly look to measure ROI, this will naturally lead to a healthier analysis of whether commodity education actually aids workplace productivity.

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