

Reality Check: The New Learner Needs

The only way to survive is to deliver what a client truly wants.

By John Brennan

Clients' needs used to be static and often were centered on quality, service, or price. Now their needs are more demanding and more complex. Speed! Results! Flexibility! Value! These are some of the many cries from stakeholders. Clients still want some of the things they requested 20 years ago, but we continue to offer several services that they don't want. The good news is that the training industry is responding.

Probably the most important issue is

offering a service with tangible results. Too often, our lessons are forgotten weeks, even days, after participants walk out the door. Clients know that and want to see measured return on their investment.

But be careful in how you attack the problem. Clients want to do business with companies that can match the solution to the dilemma. They don't want classroom training if Web-based training can do the job. And they don't want

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training if bad management is the problem. They crave a partner who can diagnose, recommend, and implement a full range of appropriate solutions. That also means offering the right training. Invest some time in analyzing your client's issues. Don't use the universal bandage of menu-driven training when customized, targeted training is more appropriate. Keep in mind that might mean *not* training. Give clients a choice. Be flexible and offer customized products, with the option of teaching and certifying a client's in-house trainers to deliver.

Meeting the demand

It's important to distinguish between change on the job and change in the classroom. It's not enough to promise that participants will acquire new behavior; we must be able to guarantee that the new behavior will be applied on the job and will make a critical difference to performance. That means we must deliver change programs, not training courses, and partner with clients to help them achieve their goals, not just sell them products.

After observing a well-designed training course, a vice president went to the CEO and asked, "Why can't all meetings in this company be like that one?" People need fast-paced, interactive, participant-centered, objective-driven learning activities. Training events should be like the best business meeting people have ever participated in, not like a mundane class in high school.

Training should be an integral and crit-

ical part of the solution to a problem, not a reward or perk for good employees. Clients want training to be aligned with goals for reengineering, SAP installations, business process improvement initiatives, and mergers and acquisitions. They look to training to ensure that their investments in systems and tools will pay off. They expect training to create environments where people prepare for and manage change, learning is continuous, and training events are followed up and reinforced.

Clients want training innovations that promise a competitive edge, with a competitive price tag. Training prices can range from nearly US\$60 per training day for public seminars to upwards of US\$1000 per training day for highly customized training or special events featuring business gurus. Clients expect their supplier-partners to be up to speed on industry innovations and ready with the training products, but not at a prohibitive cost.


A new ball game

There's a flurry of activity to find ways to measure results and return-on-investment. The answer isn't creating better measurement instruments, but more clearly defining client expectations and aligning programs to get results. There's also renewed interest in Level 2 evaluation—testing participants to see whether they actually learned anything—and providing for a testing-out option to ensure that only those who need it receive the training.

From an organizational standpoint, the training business is consolidating.

The industry is made up of thousands of boutique firms and independent trainers and consultants. Big consulting firms are buying training businesses, and specialized training companies are merging to provide broader client services. Brokers are emerging from the rubble to match clients with consultants.

Trainers have new business cards with the title of performance consultant.

 "Demystifying Performance" page 64 At many companies, performance consultants are involved with business units, reporting to the training director and to the business-unit manager.

Suppliers are partnering with organizations to support corporate universities. Companies such as Motorola and West Group have developed corporate university models in response to demand from a new generation of workers who expect professional development as part of the employment deal. Many corporate universities are carrying the responsibility of building a uniform corporate culture.

In terms of product quality, there's enormous effort in improving the efficiency of training through electronic solutions, with some excellent tools that support, prepare, and reinforce learning. But there are limits, both technical and budgetary, to what these tools can achieve. Blended learning and training designed to match learning objectives with the most efficient delivery method show the most promise.

Savvy suppliers are packaging solutions, and interpersonal development has shifted its training paradigm to accommodate new realities. Training used to be viewed as one-time events, with follow-up left to managers and advanced courses. The new paradigm is a series of seamless, competency-driven events, with new tools integrated into participants' jobs. Classroom learning, though still playing a prominent role, is no longer the centerpiece of workplace

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instruction. Rather, learning is delivered, evaluated, and managed electronically. There's no follow-up phase, just ongoing assessment and coaching until the desired results are achieved.

Get the lead out

We need to recognize the shift in client attitudes or risk losing them.

One of the most important issues is time. People don't have time to spend hours in airplanes and days in hotels away from their work. Consequently, they don't jump at the idea of lengthy, residential courses. Once people do commit to a course, they don't want long, introductory ice-breakers, touchy-feely energizers, or activities for activity's sake. The accepted wisdom used to be to get them on their feet and move them around every hour or so. Participants now want high-involvement, fast-paced, relevant learning activities. For the long-term, they want continuous learning tied to current job assignments and company strategy. True, they want less classroom time, but they don't want "here today, gone tomorrow" training. Similarly, extended breaks, downtime, and learning activities stretched to fit an arbitrary timetable are no longer acceptable.

People also don't want slick-looking, bulky manuals. In fact, they don't want manuals at all. They're a hassle to carry on the airplane; when participants get home, the manuals just take up space on a shelf somewhere. What learners want are useful job aids: checklists, action plans, hotlines, and help desks. They want effective follow-ups and reinforcements to make the changes stick, not oversized mementos of a fun time.

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