



# Ada Agrait

Sales Learning and  
Development Leader MSN,  
Microsoft Corporation  
Redmond, Washington

Microsoft certifications are well known worldwide as a demonstration of competence and achievement for information technology professionals. The same concept is now being leveraged within Microsoft for a group of nontechnical professionals: the sales force responsible for selling online media on the MSN portal site.

Creating and delivering learning and development opportunities was the charge for Ada Agrait when she joined MSN last June. The needs case was clear: Generic Microsoft corporate training, which is targeted at IT professionals, wasn't appropriate for the MSN sales force.

"Selling online media is very different from selling a server," says Agrait. "Microsoft sells a lot of products, but MSN is the only division that sells advertising. That's our niche. And customization is key to the success of the training."

Meeting those learning needs was only one of the goals Agrait hoped to achieve with her new program: She also wanted to raise the perceived value of training and development within the sales organization and to convert her audience into enthusiastic, dedicated users of the training function.

"Training overall was regarded as a cost by the people in the field. I [first] had to build credibility for training internally," says Agrait, who spent much of her early tenure on the road, meeting the people in the six U.S. offices that support MSN online media sales. "I asked them, 'Why didn't you attend training in the past? What would get you there now?'"

Division management supports Agrait's efforts both by speaking publicly about the importance of learning and development and by making a "sig-

nificant investment" in the training initiative. "I was flabbergasted by the amount of support I received from above," says Agrait.

The new certification requires participants to work through three levels: sales readiness, sales effectiveness, and sales mastery. Each level is earned by completing four required courses and two electives. Half of the training is classroom based.

"Microsoft employees are inundated with e-learning initiatives. The sales force expressed a strong desire for face-to-face interaction and the opportunity to learn from their peers," Agrait explains. Courses are delivered at the satellite offices as well as at the headquarters in Redmond.

Agrait maintained a grueling development schedule. The courses for Level 1 of the certification were rolled out in early November; a mere five months after Agrait joined the organization. With the help of a consulting partner, 80 percent of the curriculum was created from scratch. A customized new employee orientation program specifically designed for MSN has also been launched.

Results have come fast as well: "We've gained validation that training can really change the organization. We have seen improvement in onboarding and customer satisfaction. Our success is showing in both internal and external relationships, and managers say the new program is making a difference already," says Agrait.

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