A Consumer's Dilemma: Evaluating Vendor Training

By TERRY McDEVITT

Flexible, practical, down-to-earth, cost-efficient, effective, reliable, pretty, sexy and very, very glossy.

The words used to describe most training programs currently being marketed come straight from Madison Avenue. And the typical training director often is faced with a typical consumer dilemma: The company needs a training program but doesn't have the resources to create a custom-designed effort. How does the training director choose from among the thousands of good training programs advertised?

Evaluating a vendor training program before purchasing it can help. Evaluating the program after it is purchased and implemented—a common practice—can be an exercise in self-deception. When was the last time a post-use evaluation of a vendor training program concluded the program was worthless? The time to start evaluating is before the purchase. While there is no fail-safe way to evaluate vendor training programs, you can narrow the field to a few promising choices (see Figure 1).

Start with the organization, not the program

The most common error made in evaluating vendor programs is looking at the program before studying the organizational factors that will affect its implementation. Many training directors commit resources to vendor programs without determining whether the programs will "fit" their organization. This mistake is made most often when a training director succumbs to the marketing mirage surrounding the program, namely that the program can work in any organization.

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A thorough examination of relevant organizational factors includes several elements. A clear understanding of the organization's objectives will help determine if the program being considered can further these objectives. For example, is the organization's primary objective geared toward profits or service?

Along with a picture of organizational objectives, the training director ought to have a working understanding of the corporate authority structure and style. How many trainers have bought a program that promotes one managerial style and found that after the program is completed, the company will not let its managers use that style?

Although it may be difficult to define, a trainer needs to examine the climate of the organization. Is it creative, open to change and flexible? Or is it production oriented, rigid and authoritarian? These are subjective but important factors to ascertain.

Another helpful piece of information to have is the history of training at the company. What have the training successes and failures been in the past? The training director can use all of this information about the organization in determining the proper fit of a vendor program.

Reviewing the program's objectives

After gathering information about relevant organizational factors, the training director should review the objectives the program is intended to meet and the problems it should solve. At this stage, the training director determines whether the objectives in his or her mind actually are appropriate to the organization. This is determined by examining the nature of the training problem, the probable trainees and the resources available for buying a program in relation to the benefits to be gained by successful achievement of the objectives.[1] In other words, are the objectives legitimate for the organization, and will the resources used to purchase and implement a program be cost-effective for the organization? Only when these criteria are clear and positive, is it time to look at the training packages on

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the market which deal with the specific training problems.

Unwrapping the package

Any training program on the market should be available for examination. If it isn't, buyer, beware! The way to start unwrapping a training package is to take a close look at the program's objectives, minus the advertising. Are the objectives clear and defined in behavioral terms that can be measured after the program? If the program's objectives are unclear or unmeasurable, the search should continue.

When the program's objectives are both clear and measurable, they should be compared with the organizational objectives determined earlier. If the sets of objectives are compatible, the appraisal of the program can be carried on.

Comparing notes

A good way to get information about a program is to find out who has used it before and ask them about the results. The vendor should be able to provide a list of companies that have purchased the program. The potential problem with this approach is that some vendors will not release the names of companies that were not satisfied with the program. A good practice is to keep a list of programs along with companies that have purchased the programs. This list can be correlated with organizational characteristics such as size, objectives, climate and authority structure. The training director then can contact companies comparable to his or her own and ask for their evaluation of the program.

Another good source of information about vendor programs is university business schools. Business school personnel often are familiar with well-known vendor programs or with critical reviews of the programs published in business journals. A little effort in this direction can prevent a bad decision about a vendor program.

Figure 1.

I. **Determine Relevant Organizational Factors**	Look at: • Objectives • Authority structure and style • Climate • Training history
II. **Examine Your Training Objectives**	Are your objectives congruent with organization's objectives? Look at: • Nature of training problem • Trainee characteristics • Potential benefits to organization
III. **Examine Vendor Program Objectives**	Are they clear and defined in behavioral terms? Are they measurable? Do they match closely your training objectives?
IV. **Contact Other Vendor Program Users**	Look at evaluations from organizations comparable to your own.
V. **Research Vendor Program**	Contact local business schools. Examine any written reviews.
VI. **Examine Methodology**	Look at: • Methodology of program • Methodology successful in your organization
VII. **Decide on Vendor Program**	Choose from alternatives. Have decision reviewed by colleagues. Sample the program, if possible.
VIII. **Do Post-program Evaluation and Share the Results**	Write review or document evaluation results for others.

Matching methodology with the organization

When as much information as possible about the program has been gathered, the program's instructional methodology must be examined and compared with what methods succeed in the organization. Is the methodology self-paced, lecture, audio-visual or computer assisted? What instructional methods have been most effective in the organization? Using the information developed about the organization, a fairly accurate opinion can be formed regarding the potential success for a methodology. If this vendor program's methods are not appropriate for the organization, it's time to cast out the nets once again.

Decision time

Once a program has met all the requirements, it can be designated a possible selection among several choices. The final buying decision will be a much better one if there is more than one program from which to choose.

It is a good idea at this point to have a few colleagues review the potential selection. It is even better if several people from the organization can experience the programs in question and then give their opinions. When all the information has been gathered and reviewed, a decision can be made. If no program meets the requirements, another approach to your training problem is needed.

Once the program has been implemented and completed, a post-program evaluation should be done.[2] A critical review of the program for the benefit of other training directors is desirable. There is a tremendous need in the HRD profession for critical reviews of vendor programs. The computer software industry has weathered successfully and even invited critical software reviews. The HRD profession must do the same if we are to make wise decisions regarding the purchase of vendor training programs.

Choosing a vendor training program requires some careful research and a good front-end evaluation. There are a great many valuable and effective training programs on the market. By carefully matching programs and organizations, training professionals and their constituents can benefit even more from these programs.

References

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