

# Training Goes Mod(ular) at Apple

*When Apple University surveyed the changing landscape of competition, it decided to make some seismic shifts in the thinking that underpinned its training strategies.*

All companies scramble to keep ahead of constant change, but computer firms such as Apple scramble even more than most. The average life cycle of a computer product has dropped from two years in the late 1980s to six to nine months in the 1990s. Computer-company stock prices can fluctuate 10 points in a week. Over the last two years, as computers have evolved into a commodity, the industry has seen its profit margins shrink along with its resources.

For a firm to survive under those circumstances, all service and support staff must understand that they operate under the same conditions as the organization overall—and must act accordingly. Training and development specialists, in particular, should adopt strategies aimed at helping their organizations cope with rapid change and intense competition.

About one-and-a-half years ago, the staff of Apple University (Apple Computer's management-training and

organization development function), began questioning its practices and its assumptions about training. The training and development staff asked themselves if they were keeping pace with their internal customers' needs.

The staff evaluated changing market conditions and considered new insights into the way adults learn. Research from several sources, including the Center for Creative Leadership, shows that executives and managers learn their most important

BY LINDA KEEGAN AND BETSY JACOBSON

lessons from experience, not in the classroom.

Apple University trainers decided that they needed a different way of teaching management skills, one that addressed the fast-paced conditions under which Apple employees work. They needed to deliver the training employees wanted, where and when they wanted it. And they needed to make classroom training mimic on-the-job training.

Robert Tucker's book *Managing the Future* (Berkeley Publishing, 1991) gave the training specialists a starting point. Tucker identifies and describes 10 driving forces that influence consumer behavior. (See "Driving Forces of Change.") By viewing their customers' needs from this perspective, the staff saw that to serve them well, they had to achieve the following objectives:

- ▶ develop new products faster
- ▶ shorten the length of training sessions without diminishing the quality of the training
- ▶ provide learning that is relevant and useful
- ▶ provide training that learners collectively can leverage into expanded knowledge
- ▶ cover a broader array of topics
- ▶ make training easily accessible.

To meet those needs, the staff created short training modules on a series of topics. Apple University customizes the modules as needed to meet employees' specific needs.

### Shifts in strategy

The new approach departs from old practices in the following ways:

Trainers shift from behavioral to experiential training. Trainers assume that trainees already grasp the basic principles of management. During class, trainers consult learners about the challenges they face. Trainers help participants learn from their experiences on the job, rather than feeding them learning that the trainers think they need.

Trainers shortened training sessions from three days to three hours. Given the time pressures they face, managers are more willing to sign up for half-day classes that let them return to their jobs quickly. All of the training modules follow the same design, and all are three hours long.

### Driving Forces of Change

In *Managing the Future*, author Robert Tucker identifies and describes the following 10 driving forces of change that influence consumer behavior:

- ▶ speed—saving people's time
- ▶ convenience—making it easy to do business
- ▶ age waves—understanding and taking advantage of demographic shifts in the population
- ▶ choice—knowing when to offer customization, but understanding your limits
- ▶ lifestyle—knowing when something is a trend and not just a fad
- ▶ discounting—saving people money
- ▶ value adding—understanding what to compete on besides price
- ▶ customer service—building customer loyalty
- ▶ "techno" edge—adding value through automation
- ▶ quality—enhancing the overall customer experience.

Trainers train intact work groups rather than groups of people who don't work together. "Stranger training" works well when the aim is to help individuals learn and practice new skills. But targeting training to a work group helps build teamwork and multiplies the spin-off benefits of training.

Training offers a break in the work group's daily routine that can foster new ways of thinking, solving problems, and communicating. In addition, co-workers learn common models and develop a common vocabulary. Shared knowledge and language enhance team effectiveness and help team members communicate and coach others effectively.

Trainers stress consulting over consistency. Instead of walking participants through lesson plans, trainers follow a basic design and let participants identify the issues they want addressed. Instead of serving solely as instructors, trainers serve as consultants in the classroom.

Trainers moved from generic training to customized training. All classroom exercises derive from participants' actual challenges and problems

on the job, so employees get training specifically tailored to their needs instead of training built around generic case studies.

Trainers decreased the training-development cycle from six months to two months. Because trainers address only one topic in each module and use a standard design, they have slashed their development time.

Trainers reduced class sizes at Apple from 24 to 12 trainees. Smaller classes enable trainers to pay more attention to individual participants as well as to focus on the group's developmental needs. Also, instructors can cover material more quickly with fewer people, which trims the hours spent in class.

In addition, small class sizes offer more flexibility. On the spot, an instructor can opt for different instructional strategies depending on the needs of the group.

Trainers moved training from a remote location to the customer's location. Until last year, Apple University was housed in its own building five miles from corporate headquarters in Cupertino, California. The site, with its well-equipped classrooms, was convenient for the management-training staff but inconvenient for trainees.

The new training format doesn't require the overhead of bricks and mortar. Trainers deliver the modular training sessions at trainees' offices, usually in conference rooms. Such rooms are not well-suited to training, but with only 12 people in a class, it's easy to make do and save trainees commuting time.

Trainers shifted from providing training as a program to providing training as an intervention. Departments and teams can request training to help them solve specific issues in a way that is convenient for them.

For example, training modules are available to help work groups or departments resolve conflicts, make decisions, run meetings, or understand individual styles. Employees can take modules in any order, in a series, or as stand-alone sessions. No modules require any previous training.

Trainers often continue to work as consultants with trainees' work groups on a long-term basis, in an effort to bring about positive changes in team or department behavior.

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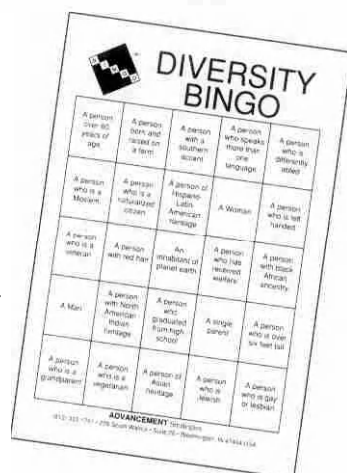
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### Guidelines

The just-in-time training strategy has not replaced all other management development efforts at Apple, but it does serve as a cornerstone for other efforts. If your firm wants to take a similar approach, here are some guidelines to keep in mind.

- ▶ Design training around a single model, framework, or theme.
- ▶ During training sessions, quickly address what participants do—or don't do—effectively, rather than focusing on what they know or don't know.
- ▶ Present a model or set of principles during the training, and then allow participants to apply it.

### USE CASES

THAT

ILLUSTRATE

CURRENT,

REAL PROBLEMS

▶ Use cases that illustrate current, real, and pressing problems. Do not use contrived cases.

▶ View the training as part of an organizational-change effort.

By shifting delivery of management training to meet customer needs, management trainers at Apple University increased customer satisfaction, aligned training more closely with organizational strategies, and created a structure that boosts team building. ■

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