FUNDAMENTALS

The Time-Cost-Quality Triangle

Simple needs analysis can help you save big.

By Melanie G. Snyder

Are you being called upon to train more people faster, in more places, with shorter notice, and fewer resources? The 2003 ASTD report "Training for the Next Economy" cautions that pattern is likely to continue. Even in companies where training investments haven't been increased, return-on-investment expectations are growing rapidly. Short of you learning magic or making miracles, in the time-cost-quality triangle, something has got to give.

The good news is that you can identify time- and money-saving options while still delivering high-quality training by thinking of the standard training needs analysis in a new way. Ask why, who, what, when, where, and how before investing any time or money.

To train or not to train?

Who would have thought of needs analysis as a cost-saving tool? Yet, the Institute of Management and Adminis-

tration (IOMA) cites "training needs assessment" as one of the most successful cost-control ideas given by respondents to the "2003 Training Management and Cost Control Questionnaire."

The next time a department head approaches you to create a class, combat your trainer's instinct to immediately say, "OK!" Instead, put on a performance consultant's hat, and question that department head in order to identify skill gaps and determine whether training is the optimal solution. You could discover that such informal learning activities as coaching, mentoring, targeted on-the-job experiences, and peer-to-peer information sharing may adequately address skill gaps, while costing less time and money than a training class.

The who

If you determine training is the right solution, clearly define the intended audience. Question assumptions about whether an entire department or team truly needs to be trained. Perhaps the learning is critical only to certain key people. Once trained, those key people can then share their new knowledge with others back on the job.

More formal train-the-trainer approaches can be effective when trainees are geographically dispersed. For example, at LexisNexis, a new mentoring program required training nearly 200 mentors and mentees across the United States. A small team of human resource and training and development staff developed a program that could be delivered in a classroom setting or through audio- and Web-conferencing. HR staff in the major corporate offices went through a train-the-trainer program, delivered virtually, and then conducted local sessions to the rest of the participants. In addition, all resource materials were posted to the company intranet for easy access and local on-demand printing, thereby reducing materials costs.

Cut the extras

Once you define what participants need to understand or be able to do after the training is completed, you can determine the most cost-effective way to deliver it.

For basic topics, make use of off-the-shelf training materials to save curriculum development time and money. Leverage in-house experts to help create and conduct the training of company-specific topics. That provides recognition for the expert, saves development time and money, and gives participants access to highly knowledgeable company resources.

Focus on meaty content to achieve the desired outcomes. Scrap long introductions and icebreakers. Take the same approach with class materials. Forgo bulky binders in favor of tip sheets, checklists, and FAQs. If participants really want a copy of the full presentation, provide it electronically to avoid printing costs.

Full courses, little bytes

While industry predictions of a move toward two-minute training bytes haven't materialized in most companies, trainers still should think in terms of shorter, modularized sessions rather than week-long courses. Modular training segments can be mixed and matched to create customized programs. Shorter segments can sometimes be offered outside of normal business hours when participants may find it easier to attend without distractions. Even better, modular segments can be delivered over a period of time through a variety of approaches: instructor-led trainings, Web and audio conferences, or self-study.

Though the Corporate Leadership Council and IOMA cite technology as a popular and cost-effective learning solution, be careful not to let it become a one-size-fits-all response.

Location, location, location

Every trainer's dream is to have a fully equipped, state-of-the-art training facility at his or her disposal. But in reality,

many have only a patchwork of in-house conference rooms, hotel meeting facilities, and other venues. Due to the effects of the increasing globalization of many businesses, participants and trainers may not even be in the same time zone, let alone the same office. By questioning where the trainer and each participant really need to be, significant savings can be realized.

Explore whether the information can be delivered as a distance-learning program to participants in multiple locations, saving time and travel expenses for all.

If out-of-town participants must contribute in person, take their time and travel demands into consideration. When scheduling, look for opportunities to minimize travel expenses, especially the number of separate trips and overnight stays for each trip. Examine the cost of the facilities being used for the training. Conference room rentals can quickly decimate a training budget. Compare prices at regional hotels, conference centers, college campuses, and training room rental companies.

Be sure to compare add-on costs such as equipment rentals. One t&d professional saved online court records provider, CourtLink, more than US$4000 on a one-day training program by comparing the hotel's rental fees with the cost of sending company laptops, projectors, and a specialist to set up and troubleshoot.

Special delivery

Match the complexity of the training topic to your level of expertise. If you're a highly experienced trainer teaching basic topics, your programs probably cost more than they should.

Instead of hiring external vendors for various programs, consider using certified, in-house training staff to conduct those programs. If a program requires using an external vendor, perhaps intro-

ductory portions of the program can be handled by staff, or through participant pre-work or self-study.

For example, when a new product team at multimedia publisher Elsevier Science needed a crash course in requirements writing, it negotiated with an external vendor to provide pre-work for the participants, including advance reading from the course textbook. The vendor condensed the usual four-day course into two power-packed days, and then offered follow-up to all participants via phone and email.

What free lunch?

Creative partnerships with training vendors can result in unique, low-cost programs that otherwise might not have been possible.

For example, at LexisNexis, a consultant knew that a highly regarded innovation expert was coming to town to speak at a conference. So, that consultant asked that expert to conduct a free "Lunch & Learn" session on innovation and creativity. In exchange, LexisNexis would give him additional visibility within the company. The expert agreed, and more than 90 people from across the United Sates participated in the session.

Think outside the concrete box

In Dayton, Ohio, training professionals and managers from more than 50 companies participate in a collaborative program, called Training Exchange, in order to receive negotiated discounts from major vendors. A regional industry association consolidates members' training needs and negotiates on their behalf for volume discounts. For the past two years, members enjoyed more than 6000 days of IT training at a 30 to 40 percent savings.

By questioning assumptions and thinking creatively about all aspects of every training program, you can deal effectively with the reality of the current economy: doing more with less—faster and better than ever before. And who knows, you may even get a free lunch.

Melanie G. Snyder *is a senior training consultant for LexisNexis in Charlottesville, Virginia; melanie.snyder@lexisnexis.com.*