



*The WE TRAIN U company has been operating successfully as a presentation skills training firm for 38 years. It offers programs of various lengths, delivered at one of WTU's many locations worldwide or at a client site. In the past seven years, WTU has continuously been ranked as one of the top three organizations in its field. WTU's marketing and business development strategy focuses on building and maintaining strong relationships with clients. Its top 33 clients continue to provide most of WTU's revenue.*

*Last year, WTU noticed that several of its competitors had modified their marketing and business development strategies. They were sending direct mail to individuals in certain demographics, as well as to their traditional clients. Not wanting to lose market share, WTU began investigating. What it found was that its competitors had discovered a developing group of potential clients—free agent learners.*

*Those learners were seeking presentation skills as a way to prepare for future careers. Their zest for learning often wasn't supported by their employers because presentation skills weren't needed in their current jobs. So, those people were seeking—and paying for—new learning on their own. They were interested in short programs, desktop simulations, and practice. They wanted to locate learning opportunities and take advantage of them quickly, rather than have to wait weeks or even months for a class opening.*

*Recognizing a potentially large target audience whose needs were different from those of its current clients, WTU began planning a line of business around the free agent learner. Its story continues later in this article.*

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*This article is the third and last in our series on free agent learners.*

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# FALS:

**F**ree agent learners: Are they a friend or foe to training suppliers? There's a lot of debate regarding FALS' potential impact on the supplier market. Although some people believe that free agent learners can be a challenging and important new source of business, others believe that their effect will be minimal.

The previous two articles in this series ("Getting to Know the Employee of the Future," August; "It's a Free Agent World," September) have examined the potential impact of the free agent learner on organizations and trainers respectively. In this final article, we'll focus on the impact of free agent learners on training suppliers.

To whom are we referring when we speak of training suppliers? Mostly, we're talking about organizations that serve as external vendors of training and development products and services to organizations. We are employees of a training supplier ourselves, and our goal here is to help t&d suppliers figure out how to meet the needs of free agent learners while protecting business and market share. We interviewed professionals from several training supplier organizations and sought input from free agent learners.

## **FALS are different**

*Deanna, a thirty-something with a Ph.D., is a free agent learner. She is committed to learning all she can. She and her husband have taken courses in Arabic. She recently left a major training organization for a competitor because she*

# Friend or Foe?

*wasn't growing and being challenged. She is looking for more career opportunities. She reads a lot. She tells about going to a professional conference and "running herself ragged" trying to attend all of the sessions of interest to her.*

Our interviews revealed that free agent learners are reflective, and they take the time to seek experiences and learn from them. They may experience more impact from programs than typical participants do because they're more active learners. They may make greater attempts to use and integrate learning into their work than traditional learners do.

Because free agent learners tend to be more training savvy than our typical clients, it's more difficult to design training that catches them by surprise. Like audiences that have seen a lot of magic shows and understand how the tricks work, FALs continue to attend but also demand a higher-quality show. Training suppliers need to be sharp when dealing with free agent learners, to clearly and accurately understand their expectations to prevent them from being disillusioned.

FALs also differ from traditional learners in that they're interested in adding to their personal palette of learning and experiences rather than attending training out of necessity. In our interviews, people described free agent learners thusly:

- *They're similar to high-potential and emerging leaders in that they're mobile, hardworking, and successful at virtually whatever they attempt.*
- *They value learning as an intrinsic*

*motivator and a chance to stretch their capabilities.*

- *They're not learning junkies with a motivation for learning that's unfocused and constant. Rather, their learning is directed, focused, and intentional.*
- *They are more intentional, strategic, visionary, and task-oriented in their learning, and are less reactive and tactical.*
- *They seek clarity about themselves.*

## Potential impact on suppliers

*Faced with a growing client population of free agent learners, WTU adopted a strategy of developing lab-based learning programs and packaged distance learning programs over cable TV and public television. The strategy was rooted in the belief that FALs wanted training and education on their own time, in a convenient and easily accessible format, and at lower cost because they were going to be paying their own way.*

*While its strategies were met with some success, WTU started getting feedback that the programs were too much like traditional programs, repackaged for technology that didn't really fit. Many younger leaders in the international arena, for example, noted candidly that the software didn't measure up to what they were used to. Most had been raised in an environment that included a significant amount of Internet interaction, and many of them already had lucrative e-based businesses of their own.*

*Meanwhile, WTU staff members felt threatened by the invasion of new tech-*

*nologies into their formerly comfortable and stable environment. There was much discussion about giving up their strategies because of their apparent inappropriateness. Others complained there weren't enough resources provided. An organizational survey reported low morale among the faculty.*

*Many FALs were still signing up for WTU courses, but it was clear that their needs were not being met fully, and something more needed to be done.*

"So what?" you ask. Why won't our current strategies work just as well for FALs as they have for our traditional clients? We have identified these key ways in which FALs have potential impact on the business of training suppliers:

- Our current marketing strategies may not be effective with FALs.
  - Our current portfolio of products and services may not fully meet FALs' needs.
  - Our current relationship with clients may not provide contact with FALs.
  - Our current staff skills may not allow us to work with FALs effectively.
- Marketing strategies. Most training suppliers focus their

## Main Points

- Free agent learners value learning and seek it out.
- FALs are more intentional, strategic, visionary, and task-oriented in their learning.
- To gain FALs as customers, suppliers will have to change the way they do business in these areas: marketing strategies, product and service offerings, client relationships, and staff skills.