

# Bang

the IT Training

# Drum

The founder of the International Association of IT Trainers sounds off about his industry.     By Dave Murphy With Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

I'm an IT trainer, an information technology trainer, and I think that my colleagues and I need to understand our key role in developing employee talent. It's not to encourage people just to like technology or learn to use it. Our responsibility—our goal—is to help them use technology tools to increase their productivity and their value to their employers.

How did I come to be passionate about IT training? In the early 1980s, I took a graduate seminar at Johns Hopkins University on how to write a novel. We wrote 20 pages of fiction a week and worked through five revisions. I typed away on an electric typewriter, sweating because my housemate and I were too cheap to turn on the air conditioning.

My dad worked at an IBM plant in Florida. I called him and asked, "What's this thing called a PC?" Soon, a

PC—a double-floppy portable (which my dad bought with his employee plan)—arrived at my doorstep. He'd also bought me a color monitor and dot-matrix printer.

Shopping for software, I finally settled on an early version of WordPerfect. It was like magic: I could write and edit on the screen, and I could print a clean draft at any time. I proofread on paper, then went back to the computer to make my changes, and printed my finished paper. My peers, still using typewriters, labored six nights a week. I knocked out the assignments in a couple of nights.

I thought to myself, This is what I want to do. I want to teach people how to use this box, this computer. From that day on, I knew I would become a computer trainer.

I still have that passion for efficiency. That's why I think of the computer as my tool. Once you've learned to use a tool well, you understand its value.

### Learning starts at the office

Having the right tools and right skills makes people more willing to do a job. Just as the right hammer can inspire home repair, learning to use new software and hardware can inspire workers, improve performance, and reduce costs.

Take my co-worker Susan (name changed), our office administrator. When she started with us in the 1990s, she could type well but didn't know how to use a computer. So, we had Susan take our level one and level two classes. She learned Microsoft Word, Excel, Access, and PowerPoint.

We gave Susan all kinds of projects. For example, she used Access to create a fax list that tied into our registration system. The morning after a class, Susan faxes every participant a thank-you letter that contains a course-specific postscript inviting him or her to take the next class. It's not just a thank-you letter; it's targeted marketing, made possible by Susan's skill in using Access.

Another example of innovative use of a learned tech skill involves a cartoon character called Dolly Damar, named after one of my companies, Damar Group Ltd. Dolly started appearing in our faxed newsletters. I wondered, Who the heck is Dolly Damar? I asked around and found out that a co-worker, Janet (name changed), had created the Dolly character. She sat through a PowerPoint class and then thought of a business activity to use the skills she'd learned.

What's the dollar value of workers being able to run the components of Office together seamlessly or create a marketing image using PowerPoint? I can't state an exact figure. But if I had to measure, if I had to say how Susan and Janet increased company sales, I'd say they probably added US\$25,000 to \$50,000 over a four- to five- year period.

I'm constantly encouraging trainers to look at how technology gets used in business and the effect that an IT instructor

can have on an overall business process. But a lot of IT trainers just want to improve a specific skill. They have an immediate problem they want to solve, and here I am talking about the big picture. That's OK. I'm going to keep banging my drum. If you want to, you can follow me.

### Join the parade

When I teach MS Office, I like to wrap up about 15 to 20 minutes early and then say, "Before I release you for the day, let me show you how to mail merge from Access to Word." Participants often respond, "Why don't we just merge from a Word document to another Word document, like from a table into a form letter?" That's when I open a practice database that contains tens of thousands of names and merge it with the Word file in about two minutes. I say, "Do you think that would ever work from a Word document to a Word document?" Then people get my point.

I don't want learners to memorize in 15 minutes all of the steps of that process. I want them to know that the capability is there, and I want to pique their interest so that they try to learn on their own—or at least call up the trainer a week later and say, "Murph showed me this in class. Can I schedule a time with you to learn exactly how to do that?" I want people to get excited about technology, not because technology is great in and of itself, but because employees who are excited about using technology will use it in innovative ways to the benefit of their entire organizations.

### Who wants to be an IT trainer?

I founded ITrain, the International Association of Information Technology Trainers, in 1997. ITrain's mission is to keep constant vigilance on improving the skills of IT trainers. We encourage them to share what they know with larger audiences by publishing articles. In addition to having technical knowledge, IT trainers need good personal skills.

When I started hiring trainers, I looked for people who were active in theater and used a computer as a hobby. I still think, after 20 years in the business, that those people make the best novice trainers. They may be introverts and tire of interacting with people all day, but they have the ability to empathize with learners and make them feel comfortable.

Participants are often afraid of looking dumb because they can't learn the new software. A good IT trainer will stand by the door and shake hands with people, welcoming them into the classroom. It doesn't hurt to provide plenty of breaks, laugh with participants, and share personal stories.

A good IT trainer is someone with whom you want to eat lunch. I'm sad to say that probably 65 to 70 percent of companies hire subject matter experts as IT trainers because it's easier to get them in front of the class than it is to get someone ramped up on the technical skills. But by doing that, you hurt your learners in the long run.

Here's my dirty little secret: When I see an subject matter expert who's a bad presenter in front of a class and I know shouldn't be there, I approach the manager of the training department and suggest that he or she make a change. I don't want anyone to lose his or her job, but when you ask me to evaluate your training center, the first thing I'm going to look at is your trainers. Someone with high social skills who understands the technology like the back of his or her hand will be a star trainer. In general, look for people skills first.

For IT trainers to facilitate the transfer of technical skills effectively, they must understand that some to many of their learners may have graduated, whether from private or public school, with low literacy skills and minimal mathematical aptitude. Employers must be prepared to play the role of employee educator. Most knowledge workers

require additional education and development when they arrive on the job.

For at least the past 20 years, a lot of high school graduates have entered the workforce unable to write a cogent business letter. In fact, many students I teach in the graduate technology and management programs at the University of Phoenix are atrocious writers. Their papers lack structure, paragraph development, and closing statements—astonishing because they're typically executives or mid-career managers.

Many adults also have trouble with math. They usually can't calculate common formulas. Some can't multiply two three-digit numbers without using a calculator; only a handful can do long division. Test that phenomenon yourself: Ask a group of adults which figure represents the largest value:  $3/4$  or  $0.75$ ? There's a good chance you'll get blank stares in return.

Employers must be prepared to weave education into daily job tasks, and IT trainers must work to incorporate broader educational learning into IT classes. Our training exercises should address not only how to enter formulae into spreadsheet cells, but also how to form the equations correctly. A well-conceived IT lesson plan can address technical learning points through realistic examples that also include commonly misunderstood literacy points.

Other examples: A word-processing exercise that reviews the basics of paragraphing, word selection, punctuation, and grammar helps workers recall the lessons they learned as young adults. Or, a database management or mail merge exercise may include a few comments about the United States Postal Service specifications for preparing an envelope: all capital letters, no punctuation, acceptable abbreviations, and so forth.

I don't think there's any long-term solution to the verbal and math literacy problem, and it may become worse. The more

## Got Technology?

One night, I was teaching at a campus I hadn't been to before. I asked the students where I could get a bottle of water on break. They directed me to the snack bar. After I got my water and returned, they said, "It's kind of expensive, isn't it? A buck a bottle." I said, "Yes, but I'm lucky to be able to afford it." Then I said, "We could walk out of here tonight and I bet within 100 feet of this building, we'd run into someone on the street who can't afford a dollar for a bottle of water." I was talking about water, but I could've said information technology. I'll bet that within 100 feet of that building, I could have found someone who couldn't afford to use IT in their work or at home.

If the budgets of state community colleges continue to be cut, there's going to be a ripple effect. A lot of young people who may not go on for a two- or four-year degree attend community college as an inexpensive way to learn technical skills. If millions of dollars are cut from those budgets, such low-cost programs will suffer. I'm worried about my community: A lot of people need to learn computer skills to get jobs.

that technology becomes a job requirement, the more we're going to push technology to less-educated populations. And just because someone has a high-paying job doesn't mean he or she is educated.

What we must do in our training seminars is present more than just narrowly focused technical content. We must help learners apply their newfound technical skills to the real world. IT trainers are employment educators who improve organizational productivity, not just seminar trainers presenting specific technical skills.

### The outlook

IT training is a great career to be in, especially if you work within a training center or department. There's very little job turnover, and we don't see a lot of firing except due to performance. (You'll see that in any profession.)

The new information, the technology that needs to be trained, is increasing. For example, I think we're going to see Linux on our desktops sometime in the next year or so. It's not going to replace Windows completely, but the competition

will have a big effect on the IT industry. I've got three Linux servers running in my office. The servers don't care whether the computer chips are Intel or AMD. A company that accepts different brands of hardware may be willing to accept different brand-name operating systems and word processors. I have no proof of that, no statistics; I'm just running on a hunch. When that happens, the IT training market is going to boom. For trainers, that's great. Even if it doesn't happen, new products will always come on the market.

Many IT trainers say they can't keep up with the technology. But I'm going to tell you that the biggest challenge we face is that we're not improving our skills—our pedagogical skills—as trainers. I think IT trainers tend to hide behind the statement, "The technology changes so fast, so I'm going to put my professional development time into learning new hardware and software applications." I think we should be putting our time into developing our teaching skills.

At the risk of sounding self-promotional, I suggest that people read my book, *The Training Book*

↳ <http://itrain.org/ttb> and join ITrain to network with other IT trainers and participate in our train-the-trainer programs. I also recommend Diana A. Bruners's book, *How to Deliver Dynamic Training: 77 Sensational Tips for Computer Instructors*. Her tips are simple yet practical. Such as, "A common dilemma for computer instructors is how to keep up with handouts that need to be updated." Bruners suggests keeping a master file in a binder.

For IT trainers, improving teaching skills may mean specializing in only some part of the technology, such as keeping up-to-date on spreadsheets and word processors, or being a network administration trainer. But it worries me that such specialization may narrow job prospects and employability.

On the other hand, I think that trainers had a valid complaint in the late 1980s and early 1990s when WordStar, Word, and WordPerfect were on the

market at the same time. That was a pain in the neck. Every new version meant buying new training manuals and rewriting syllabi. Microsoft is about the only game in town right now and when it comes out with a new version, it isn't that different from the previous version. I want to tell people that if you're going to whine about technology changing, get the heck out of IT training.

### To certify or not to certify

The IT industry tends to judge competency based on the number or types of certifications a trainer holds. I argued against IT training certification for many years, but I was finally convinced to let ITrain create a professional certification program because the technicians had certifications and customers were asking, "What certification do you hold as a trainer?" I'll be honest with you: The trainer certification is a measure of a trainer's ability to communicate well and

help customers learn. Basically, it's a measure of his or her customer satisfaction. Certification can help trainers going for a promotion, interviewing for a job, or setting up private practice, and they can make money with it. IT certification is necessary mainly when the engineers in the IT trainers' companies are getting Microsoft, Red Hat, or Novell certified.

I hate to say this, but IT trainers tend not to want to share what they know. We show our stuff in the classroom, but we don't want to help the trainers down the street because we think of them as our competition. But I have a vision: I want to change the IT training industry so that we do share what we know. That's really what ITrain is all about. TD

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