Getting a Return on Your Manual Labor

When you invest time and money to produce a procedures manual, how can you make sure people will use it? Some federal court managers developed an innovative solution.

By Markus B. Zimmer

In 1985, the General Accounting Office conducted an audit of the U.S. federal court system's internal control and management procedures. When GAO's final report, *Stronger Financial Internal Controls Needed Over Court Resources,* was released in April 1986, it was clear that the court system needed to refine and strengthen its system of internal control and management.

A central management team was put together to develop a plan of action. Part of the plan involved the creation of regional committees that would develop recommendations for the courts in the 12 geographic regions or circuits. Not surprisingly, a common recommendation by many of the committees was to develop a manual of procedures.

The classic training tool

Manuals are nothing new. They are extolled frequently as a way to present information and instruction in a concise, accessible form.

No self-respecting government agency or new business enterprise manages for long without developing manuals, on subjects that range from personnel to training, and from security to operations. Many organizations contract with firms that specialize in creating manuals. Such firms handle the tedious tasks of collecting, synthesizing, and categorizing detailed information into what should be coherent and readable text.

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The challenge

As one regional group, the Committee for the Tenth Circuit, began working on an internal controls manual for the courts, it took up the question of utilization. If the committee developed a practical, well-written manual and sent it to all court administrators, would they read it? More important, would they use it? Unfortunately, their more likely response would be to put it in a stack of "must read" dispatches. In the press of everyday priorities, they'd probably never get around to reading it.

Would court administrators read a manual? Would they use it?

The committee discussed that problem at length. It identified the true target audience for the manual as the financial administrators, because court administrators rely heavily on them for the processing and control of daily transactions. How could the committee ensure that these financial administrators would read the manual and use it on a day-to-day basis?

What about a workshop?

One committee member had a good idea: What if the committee conducted a special workshop for all financial administrators in the Tenth Circuit—*before* formally distributing the manual? The workshop would introduce the administrators to the manual and show them how implementing its recommendations could strengthen the integrity of court operations. During the workshop, each financial administrator would receive a copy of the manual.

The committee was enthusiastic about the idea and set about to implement it. Funding was approved; a subcommittee began to develop a curriculum for the workshop.

Early in the process, it became clear that no one knew how familiar financial administrators might be with the material covered in the manual. Obviously, if many of the circuit's courts were operating within the manual's guidelines, a workshop would be unnecessary. Although that was unlikely, the subcommittee realized that it was essential to find out what prospective attendees did and did not know. But how could the group gather this information before the workshop without burdening attendees with long-winded phone interviews or raising their suspicions with a lengthy pre-test?

A risky proposition

At this point, the subcommittee discussed a risky proposition. The committee had completed a draft of the manual. Would it be possible to convert the draft into a pre-workshop test, but to disguise it as a needs-analysis questionnaire? The challenge was to develop an instrument that would measure knowledge and understanding while stimulating curiosity and providing entertainment as an incentive to complete it.

Over the next two weeks, each recommendation in the manual was converted into a question. To ensure ease of scoring, some questions were designed as true/false, others as multiple choice. To alleviate boredom, some of the multiple-choice answers were outrageously wrong and would have been patently illegal if put into practice. Here and there, humorous alternatives to the correct answer were given. The language of some of the true/false questions was adjusted in subtle ways to make otherwise perfectly correct policy statements false. But most of the questions were clearly legitimate and designed to stimulate careful review.

When completed, the questionnaire was more than 20 pages long, with two or three questions per page, generously spaced. Its length gave some committee members pause until they reviewed it and found themselves swept up by its entertainment value and the challenge of recalling precisely what procedures were set forth in the manual they helped draft.

The subcommittee chair sent each court administrator in the Tenth Circuit a brief letter of explanation about the workshop. The letter made it clear that the workshop was not designed to question any court's internal operating procedures; rather, it was to refresh the attendees' understanding of an effective internal controls system and to introduce them to the contents of the manual. The letter also invited court administrators to respond if they had misgivings about the project. None were voiced, so the subcommittee mailed each court's financial administrator a copy of the questionnaire with instructions and answer forms.

The instructions carefully introduced the questionnaire as a workshop planning aid and noted that the agenda would include time to review any areas of disagreement. Within three weeks and after some prodding, the subcommittee received answer forms from every court.

The results were surprising. The average percentage of correct responses was around 78, but very few questions were answered correctly by everyone. No clear pattern emerged: Some administrators scored high in one area but did poorly in another, while their colleagues' profiles reflected the opposite. Several demonstrated a strong understanding of the basic principles of internal control systems, but lost their way when the questions raised more subtle and

Preparing the Questionnaire

1. Review the text of the manual. Based on its length and how much of it the questionnaire will cover, determine how long the questionnaire should be. Bear in mind that when mixing true/false and multiple-choice questions, the average page will hold three to five questions. A fairly detailed questionnaire will average one and a half to two times the number of pages in the manual.

To create a shorter questionnaire, you have two options:

- Test only for an understanding of the general principles of the manual's subject matter.
- Test for an understanding of detailed information, but limit it to a specific section of the manual. Later on, you can produce additional questionnaires to cover other sections.

2. Mark up a hard copy of the manual to break down the text into relatively small conceptual chunks that can be adapted to a question format. Avoid confusion by limiting each item to one or two basic points.

3. Convert each chunk into a question. True/false and multiple-choice questions are commonly used. If the time required for scoring and collating responses is not an issue, you can also include some fill-in-the-blank questions.

4. Every seven to ten questions, include something funny or outrageous to avert boredom and to offset any impression that the questionnaire is a test. At first glance, these questions should appear legitimate and should have definite correct and incorrect answers.

5. Prepare a simple answer sheet, taking care that the instructions are clear, that both the questions and answers are numbered, and that the answer numbers and blanks for each question are easily discernible. As a rule, it's better to add an extra page to the answer sheet than to squeeze the answer blanks together and risk confusion and frustration. Don't expect your respondents to believe that they are not taking a test if the answer sheet looks like the one they used with their college placement examinations.

6. Keep answers anonymous; don't request any names on the answer sheet.

7. Prepare the instructions for completing the questionnaire. Be careful to avoid typical test jargon; instead, keep the instructions brief and chatty. Explain how the responses will be used; for example, to create a more effective workshop or training program that concentrates only on what respondents don't know. Note that the answers will be confidential and treated anonymously.

8. Inevitably, some participants will forget to bring copies of their answer sheets to the workshop. You can make sure all attendees have copies of their answers by using a "blind" identification method, such as a numbering system or postmarks on the return envelope, to match the original answer sheets to their owners.

9. Ask two people to review the questionnaires and instructions before you mail them. An expert on the subject matter should evaluate the technical content of the questionnaire; a writer or editor should review the grammar and clarity of each question.

sophisticated issues.

The subcommittee had expected the questionnaire to reveal common problem areas that would serve as the basis of the workshop. Instead, it revealed that everyone was deficient in some areas, and that those areas differed—sometimes drastically—from one person to the next.

One clerk called to note that his financial administrator had approached him with some apprehension because she could not answer some of the questions. He had reviewed the questionnaire and discovered to his dismay that he couldn't answer them either.

With its work now clearly defined, the subcommittee set about to develop an agenda.

Conducting the Training

1. In addition to imparting the subject matter, the primary objectives of the workshop are to stimulate the participants' curiosity and provoke and sustain exchange among them. To generate discussion, prepare overhead transparencies of the answer sheets, indicating the number of participants that chose each answer.

2. Set aside time at the beginning of the workshop to discuss the questions. Each participant should have copies of the questionnaire and his or her completed answer sheets. Keep the atmosphere informal. Proceed through each question, asking first for the correct answer and then for the reasons for selecting the other answers. Spend little or no time on the questions that nearly everyone answered correctly.

3. When a participant tells why he or she chose an incorrect response, ask someone who chose the correct answer to respond. After a few questions, participants will pick up on this informal sequence. The exchange will start to build momentum and rely less and less on the facilitator.

4. Focus subsequent workshop sessions on issues that generated the most number of incorrect responses and that cover the most crucial sections of the manual. Experts on particular topics can make brief presentations, including relevant background information to enhance attendees' understanding of procedures. Include sufficient time for questions and answers. If participants represent more than one kind of specialist, break them out into their respective groups.

5. Finish the workshop with an open-ended session that allows attendees to discuss how to implement the manual's recommendations in their respective organizations.

Because such sessions can foster confidential exchanges among peers, the program facilitators and faculty should excuse themselves from the group. It is important to select a discussion leader who is a respected peer of attendees, and who is positive and strong, but not dogmatic. Brief the leader in advance that the session should accomplish four objectives:

- Create an environment that encourages frank conversation—from those who feel the need to vent frustration about their bosses and from others, to offer consolation and advice.
- Formulate strategies to implement procedures in participants' organizations. More succinctly, attendees will discuss "how to manage the boss" so they can put the manual to work.
- Encourage the creation of a peer-support network. Contacts made during such programs can lead, if properly nurtured, to professional relationships that span entire careers and strengthen organizations in numerous ways. Encourage participants to exchange names and phone numbers.
- Cultivate a strong pat-on-the-back atmosphere by reviewing the important functions that attendees serve in their organizations.

Conducting the workshop

Several of the financial administrators had asked to see their corrected answer forms, so the subcommittee decided to begin the workshop with an informal review of the questionnaire and the attendees' responses.

Corrected answer forms were returned to attendees on the first day of the workshop, and overhead transparencies plotted the responses to each question. That made it possible for attendees to compare their answers. The results prompted considerable discussion between the survey participants. They advised, corrected, and prodded one another, leaving faculty largely on the sidelines. That created a momentum that carried through the entire program.

A success story

Participants accepted the questionnaire as a kind of novelty; it never occurred to them that the agenda was structured around the contents of a procedures manual.

As it turned out, the success of the program depended only peripherally on the faculty; the question-and-answer review provided a forum for participants. They initiated discussion, argued fine points, corrected and cajoled one another, and remembered the faculty only when an overhead transparency needed to be changed.

The workshop concluded with a special session for financial administrators only—workshop facilitators and faculty were excluded—called "Managing Your Court Administrator."

Led by one of the financial administrators (who also happened to be a subcommittee member), the session allowed participants to exchange confidences and develop strategies to implement the recommendations made in the manual. It closed on a high note as participants reminded one another how much their court administrators relied on them.

The results of a post-workshop evaluation questionnaire revealed that nearly all participants found the workshop to be valuable and highly motivating. The subcommittee managed to transform a generic organizational controls manual—the kind of sleep-inducing workshop material that human resource professionals dread—into a device that sparked curiosity and fostered a productive and positive learning experience. ■