

# South of the Equator

By Stacey Wagner

Half a millennium ago, adventurers sailed the oceans searching for uncharted lands and untold riches, often targeting Latin America as their destination.

As the third millennium begins, global businesses are the new world explorers, and trainers and HRD practitioners are struggling to stake their claims and plant their flags in the uncharted territory of worldwide markets. Although politically and economically unstable for the past 50 years, Latin America is attracting more business investment, and workers are discovering new forms of employment as businesses expand to meet global demand.

The demands of new business growth in Latin America have created a vital role for training and HRD professionals as they undertake to remake employees into the workforce of the future. A concurrent challenge for practitioners is to establish a strategic role for themselves and the HRD profession. However, they face several obstacles. Although not unique to Central and South America, these obstacles have historic and cultural dimensions that make them especially challenging.

Training hasn't been viewed as strategic. Latin American training professionals have a pressing need to change the current mindset about training, from a discrete activity to an ongoing focus on human and organizational performance improvement. Historically, training has been viewed as a perquisite or benefit in Latin America. Training's goals weren't to spur employee growth, develop careers, or enhance business performance. Training was provided as a matter of course, without relation to the needs of the business. Subsequently, trainers haven't been considered strategic players in helping Latin American businesses achieve their goals.

Training lacks support from management. A true commitment to training has also been lacking in Latin America. For example, employees attending training courses are often pulled from classes to attend to sudden problems. Employers have been skeptical

about providing training, due to its expense and unquantified results, as well as their fear that trained employees will be poached by other organizations.

Impaired access to information. Change is difficult without information. Latin America suffers from a lack of information for training and HRD professionals, in part because most of the current research is conducted in English-speaking countries. There are no competency models and standards, nor is there any regulation of the training profession. Furthermore, language differences between countries make it difficult to share information. Because there is little standardization in collecting information, cross-country comparisons are virtually impossible.

But progress is being made. Recently, trainers in Latin America have begun to see themselves less as suppliers of courses and more as strategic drivers for improving employee productivity and enhancing organizational performance. They're looking at employee needs with a critical eye and are investigating underlying problems to determine whether there's a need for training. Senior executives are calling on HR to add value to the business and are creating more opportunities for training professionals to become experts in business and HRD.

Eduardo Saleh, general manager at Adistra Capacitación Ltda., Chile, believes that the profile of HR managers in Latin America is changing from "a humanistic, relationship-oriented" approach to one that focuses on business, "ideally with [experience] in line positions."

The burgeoning use of technology also may help trainers overcome some of the obstacles. Use of the Internet, computer-based training programs, and intranets is increasing. To become more competitive, many businesses are updating their information and telecommunication capabilities. HRD professionals can take advantage of those infrastructure improvements by leveraging more technology into training and learning initiatives.

Some large companies are also working with training suppliers who have

global capabilities, enabling them to distribute their courses to more employees. Amanda Reyna, director of international training and development at BellSouth, tries to ensure continuity of content and broad dissemination by working with BellSouth's Latin American joint ventures to identify employee needs and recommend suppliers that can deliver programs globally.

Mayra Baez, staffing specialist for the U.S. Army's Directorate of Personnel in Panama, suggests that the process of recruiting and retaining employees should be more systematized, and that organizations should provide career development and upward mobility paths. That will build employee loyalty and decrease turnover, she says, and may help prevent poaching: Employees will stay with the organizations that provide them with the skills they need, both now and in the future. Organizations can then begin to quantify return-on-investment by monitoring and evaluating training and linking it to organizational performance.

Saleh, Reyna, and Baez believe that training and HRD in Latin America will encounter several new emphases in the near future:

- ❑ the creation of corporate universities
- ❑ the more intensive use of technology
- ❑ the need to provide better education to children and training for adults
- ❑ the creation of learning organizations.

Viewed as a whole, those four future directions are the necessary pieces to create a systematic process for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is underpinned by quality education systems, skill-building and continuous learning for adults, and the systematic use of technology to provide access to learning initiatives.

Latin American training professionals have begun to take the necessary steps to ensure that when the new explorers discover the wealth of opportunities that is Latin America, they will have a top-notch workforce to help them achieve their business goals.

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