
TechTalk

T E C H N O L O G Y L I T E R A C Y

If you want to be a viable player in training and development, you can't afford to ignore technology. Here are some tips for raising your level of technoliteracy.

We in the training world spend a lot of time trying to identify and meet the training needs of our target audiences. But what about us? As a group, are our training and development needs being met?

In nearly every major review of the topic, it is clear that technology (both hard and soft) will continue to play an increasingly important role in training and development. If you plan to be a viable player in the training and development world you cannot afford to ignore technology.

As noted by Admiral Hyman Rickover (among others), **technology exists in two forms:**

- ▶ hard technologies (such as computers, projection systems, and high-bandwidth networks)
- ▶ soft technologies (such as software, processes, and procedures).

Collectively, hard and soft technologies represent an increasing percentage of the tools, processes, and procedures we must utilize to succeed in the training and development profession.

Just use it. How can training and development practitioners meet our need to be technology literate? By starting with the basics. Before you can deal with the complexities of global information systems, you have to have a basic understanding of computer applications.

One of the best ways to get this understanding is to use a computer. I suggest that everyone in our profession, from executives on down, should learn to use a wordprocessor, a spreadsheet, a data base, and a presentation package. You can buy these packages one at a time, or you can buy a software "suite" that contains all of them in one integrated package, at a discounted price.

Why should a busy HR executive

know how to use a wordprocessor? In this context, the major benefit isn't in being able to type a letter. The major benefit is in keeping up-to-date with training paradigms. If you have ever used a Wizard (a type of embedded tutorial in Microsoft products), for example, to accomplish a task, then you understand what I'm saying. Once you've used a Wizard, it becomes easy to envision how to use similar embedded training in your company's training efforts.

How can you conceive of a technical solution to a training need, if you don't know what technical solutions are available?

The market for basic software applications (such as wordprocessing) is so competitive that technical innovations are likely to show up in these kinds of products before they appear in more specialized programs. Basic software programs are relatively inexpensive, and they provide an easy way to monitor developments. There is a catch: You have to use them to see the benefit.

Obviously, there are much more involved ways to keep up with all the industry innovations, but this approach represents a good first step toward technology literacy.

Operating systems. If you haven't logged many hours on a computer, you might want to take some time to learn about operating systems before you run out and buy a suite of applications. I know—learning about operating systems sounds so, well, technical. But if you spend a little time up front learning how to take advantage of your computer's operating system, life will be a lot easier down the road.

Currently the operating system that dominates the personal-computer market in industry is Windows 3.1. In one sidebar, I've described a software

Windows Fundamentals

Windows Fundamentals is a primer for Windows 3.1. Topics include installing Windows 3.1, using key Windows menus, understanding dialogue boxes and messages, organizing applications and programs, using the Program and File Managers, using the Clipboard, using "help," and more.

The program features interactive, self-paced, easy-to-follow tutorials and workbook exercises, as well as supporting manuals and a troubleshooting guide. Your purchase includes lifetime technical support via an 800 number.

You can run Windows Fundamentals on either DOS or Windows. For DOS, you'll need PC-DOS or MS-DOS 3.1 or higher, a high-density 1.2MB or 1.44MB floppy drive, a hard-disk, a color EGA or VGA monitor, and a mouse.

Windows is not required to run the tutorial, but you will need it to complete the practice exercises. To run the program on Windows, you'll need the same configuration as required for DOS users, above, as well as Windows 3.1.

You can buy Windows Fundamentals for about \$149.95. Contact InfoSource, 6959 University Boulevard, Winter Park, FL 32792; 407/677-0300.

tutorial, Windows Fundamentals, that I've found to be very effective (and painless) in bringing people up to speed in the basics of Windows 3.1. The tutorial teaches you how to navigate through Windows 3.1 and lets you get hands-on experience tapping into its capabilities.

Understanding your operating system will allow you to take full advantage of the software applications you later buy and use. I should mention that numerous operating systems are on the market: DOS, Windows, OS/2, System 7, and UNIX are just a few of them. You will have to find out which one your system uses before you buy any software applications.

Scaling the tower of technobabble.

Spending time on a computer will go a long way in helping you become technology literate. But you also need to speak the language, which some refer to as technobabble. It's true that some of the jargon you hear may be nothing more than mumbo-jumbo. Still, it's important for you to be able to follow technical conversations and articles.

One should not underestimate the power of speaking computerese—it's not just for show. Did you know that some historians credit the success of the Roman army with the fact that leaders required a common language among their conscripts? How many opportunities are lost because we in training and development don't understand the technical issues discussed by our target audiences? Could you adequately respond to the training needs of your French subsidiary if neither you nor your staff (or consultants) spoke French?

Given that an understanding of technical terminology is important, how then can one master such a vast array of information?

In many ways, it really is like learning a second language. You certainly can't get there overnight. It is a lifelong journey. Like any journey, you have to start with the first step. In this case, I highly recommend you start by listening—really listening. Talk with people who seem to have a good understanding of technology relevant to your organization, and ask them to explain issues or terms that you don't understand.

It is all too easy (and sometimes less awkward) to simply nod and smile when someone launches into a technical subject. Don't. The next time someone says something technical that you don't understand, try responding with something like this: "What you just said sounds important. Could you explain that to me in nontechnical terms?"

I also suggest that you do your homework. Keep a list of terms or issues you don't understand and resolve to learn about them.

A useful tool is the Electronic Computer Glossary, published by the Computer Language Company. I fell in love with this software program as soon as I put it on my computer.

The Electronic Computer Glossary

The glossary is really a mini-encyclopedia with more than 6,000 entries. It covers client-server technology, multimedia, data management, desktop publishing, networks, PCs, Macs, UNIX, communications, and much more. Some features:

- ▶ ability to add words and definitions
- ▶ full hypertext links
- ▶ searches by words, acronyms, or phonetic entries (for example, you can type in "scuzzy" to find "SCSI")
- ▶ charts and diagrams
- ▶ print capability
- ▶ DOS and PKZIP tutorials
- ▶ quarterly updates.

The glossary supports DOS, Windows, and Macintosh systems. To run with DOS, you'll need DOS 3.3 or higher, with 256K RAM and 2MB of hard-disk space. For Windows, you'll need Windows 3.0 or higher, 2MB RAM, and 2MB hard-disk space. Mac users should have HyperCard 2.0 or higher, with 2MB RAM and 3MB hard-disk space.

The electronic glossary runs about \$29.95. Contact the Computer Language Company, 5521 State Park Road, Point Pleasant, PA 18950; 215/297-5999.

You just type in a word or phrase, and there appears the simple, non-technical definition. If you think Leapfrog is a child's game, or that CAIRO is a place in Egypt, this software package is for you.

The Computer Language Company also offers a book version called *The Computer Glossary* for those who haven't made it on-line yet. Both the book and the software are updated regularly. They may prove to be valuable tools in your lifelong journey toward technology literacy.

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