

A trainer's biography: 1975

IN THIS ARTICLE
Trends

Training's HOT

Well, very, very warm.

By Shari Caudron

Main Points

- Training jobs are paying more as companies are seeing the value of investing in training their employees.
- The movement toward e-learning is forcing more firms to focus on training and the people who provide it.
- Trainers in many companies have confidential access to performance data that many other people in the organization don't.

After three years of teaching high school English, Josie Kirkpatrick* was weary of teenagers. She liked teaching but wanted an opportunity to teach people who didn't have peace signs drawn on their jeans. Seeking opportunity in the grown-up world of education, she accepted a job as a corporate trainer.

Josie liked the business world and the variety of classes she taught. Leadership training one day, sales skills the next. The employees, who liked her broad smile and red Afro hairstyle, rated her highly. "This is what my education degree prepared me for," Josie thought. "I have arrived."

Then one day, while watering the fern that hung in a macramé hanger in her small office, Josie overheard two managers talking in the hall:

"He's not working out in manufacturing," said an older man with a gruff voice.

"Maybe we should get him a job in training," suggested the other. "Anybody can work there."

"Great idea," said the gruff one. "You know what they say: Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach."

It was the first time Josie realized that her training skills weren't as highly valued as she had thought. Nevertheless, she endured her job for seven years before returning to school to obtain an advanced degree in organizational development.

1985

It was a warm August day when Josie walked proudly across the university stage to accept her master's degree. "No longer am I just a trainer," she mused. "Now, I'm an organizational development consultant."

Accepting a job with a consumer products company, Josie straightened her hair, traded her old Chevy Vega for a new blue Honda Accord, and read the book *Dress for Success*. She was serious about making her mark in the business world—even if that meant wearing white blouses with floppy bow ties and man-tailored suits. And she was pleased when her new employer asked her to seek opportunities to boost performance. Unlike at her previous job, here she felt uniquely positioned to have an impact on the business.

Over the next few years, Josie headed several major training initiatives, but just when she began to think her old challenges as a undervalued trainer were behind her, she received a memo: I regret to inform you that due to corporate restructuring, your department will be eliminated.... She later learned that no other department had suffered the same casualties.

1995

After spending a couple of years doing temp work, Josie accepted a job with a high-tech firm whose CEO had read Peter Senge's work on the learning organization. He wanted the Learning Department, as he called it, to report directly to him and be involved early in all major corporate initiatives.

Josie wasn't sure what to be happier about: that she finally worked for an executive who understood the value of employee education or that floppy bow ties had gone out of fashion. Regardless, Josie immersed herself passionately in her job. All around her, amazing things were occurring in the business world. The economy was growing, profits were up, Wall Street was starting to invest in training companies, new modes of electronic training delivery were being developed, and the corporate university movement was taking hold. Businesspeople were starting to argue—vehemently—about the importance of ongoing employee education.

Daily, as Josie drove home in her shiny new SUV, she gave a silent prayer

of thanks. It had been a long, frustrating road. But she and her profession had finally arrived.

Has it? Yes, and no. (*Josie Kirkpatrick is a fictional character.)

In the eye of the beholder

First, let's talk about image. A person's image is often created by superficial influences as much as substantial ones, especially in American society. As a result, rich, pretty, and popular people often project a better so-called image than, well, their less-gifted counterparts.

When judged by surface-level qualities, how do today's trainers stack up? Here are what some industry watchdogs had to say.

Who are the glamour boys and girls of training? Tony Robbins, Zig Ziglar, Stephen Covey, and others like them get

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a lot of press and credit outside of the industry for their polished presentations and pizzazz, but people inside the profession are more apt to admire the directors of large internal training programs.

"They have the resources to do what the rest of us only dream of," says Alan Landers, vice president of training at Centex Home Equity Corporation, based in Dallas. Industry insiders also admire academics who contribute to trainers' understanding of adult-learning principles.

"I think Tony Buzan, a psychologist from London, is by far ahead of this curve," says Anthony J. Dottino, president of Dottino Consulting Group. "Buzan has spent more than 30 years researching how people's minds think and has developed leading-edge work from that."

So, let's give a hand to trainers for being able to see past the glitz to recognize the substance.

Are trainers dressing better? Perhaps not, sorry to say. It didn't help when

Richard Hatch, one of the most famous trainers in America thanks to his \$1 million winning stint on last summer's *Survivor* TV series, ran around the island in his birthday suit. Though, admittedly, once he hit the media circuit, he looked superbly attired in Armani or at least a good knockoff.

But like most everyone else in corporate America, trainers have ditched the business suits and donned the khakis of casual dress. Is that a bad thing? Not necessarily.

"We've found that a casual environment in the training room allows for better learning and more willingness to try new things," says Eliot M. Shapiro, partner at EMS Communications.

Here, here!
Are trainers getting richer? The short answer: Yes. (Now we're talkin' image!) "Training jobs are paying more," says Landers, "as companies are seeing the value of investing in training their employees."

Hooray! Though we should remember that rich is a relative term. Are trainers having more fun? Geez, let's hope not. This is serious work after all. But in between generating bottom-line results, adapting to e-learning, and justifying their value, trainers are probably having more fun than most people in today's companies.

"I believe trainers are having more fun, or at least they should be," says Edward E. Scannell, director of the Center for Professional Development and Training in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Shapiro agrees: "We get to have a good time, do something we love, and get paid for it. What a job!"

But then trainers have always had fun. Is it a coincidence that the word *standup* applies to trainers and to comedians? We don't think so.

Has the media taken more interest? Well, *60 Minutes* was at Online Learning 2000 in Denver, shepherding e-learning providers through its interview process, which ends with an on-camera meeting with Lesley Stahl. There must be something newsworthy and...well, sexy...to attract the interest of Mike Wallace (or at least the show he defined with his penetrating reportage).

And then there was the media attention drawn to corporate training through *Survivor Hatch*. Viewers began wonder-

ing what the heck a corporate trainer is and does—other than form secret island alliances and dive for stingray.

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What could be next? Imagine a sitcom featuring a trainer, perhaps played by Dana Carvey, who is constantly fighting with his CEO (played by Roseanne Barr) for money to fund his e-learning efforts. Could happen.

How do people in the field view the typical personality of a trainer? Here, without editing, are some of the actual words used by trainers in our survey to describe the personality make-up of the average trainer:

- amiable, expressive
- people-focused
- idealistic
- entertaining
- interesting
- lifelong learner
- outgoing
- friendly
- enthusiastic
- dynamic
- excitable
- willing to take chances.

“Oh yeah,” adds Shapiro, “and we all collect Hummel figures.”

Substance over style

Long before Richard Hatch enjoyed his 15 minutes of fame as a post-tummy-tuck media darling, *Training & Development* has certainly put trainers at the forefront—celebrating their growing professionalism, pumping out reports that link training with profits and retention, and heralding the emergence of corporate universities and e-learning. (See Patricia Galagan’s article “The E-Learning Evolution” in the December 2000 issue.)

The hard questions:

- Has the image of corporate trainers changed as much as hoped?
- Have training departments overcome their reputation as places where corporate nags are put out to pasture?
- Are trainers finally being recognized as strategic performance consultants?

The answers are yes—and no.

First, the good news. As the Josie Kirkpatrick of the world have realized, corporate training is in demand and

training expenditures as a percentage of payroll continue to rise. Employee education is now routinely cited as crucial for corporate competitiveness. Furthermore, the movement toward e-learning is forcing more firms to focus on training and the people who provide it.

Dick Lyles, president and COO of The Ken Blanchard Company based in Escondido, California, explains: “There is much more respect for trainers today than there was 10 or 20 years ago. Training is now regarded as a noble profession.”

But in this noble garden there are still a few weeds. One, according to Roderick Munro, program director at Ford Motor Company’s Fairlane Training and Development Center, is that trainers are still far more dispensable than they may want to believe.

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trainers, of whom 80 were Ford employees who managed the training design and delivery for a large part of the company,” he says. “Today, there are just 30 employees in the center, and none of them provides training design or development. It has all been contracted out. There are very few fulltime trainers inside of Ford today.”

When asked why it is that training is now seen as an outside, vendor-provided function, Munro sighs. “Cost-cutting is the only reason I can think of. We think we’re valuable, but the company treats us like we’re expendable.”

A second reason the trainer’s star is still not shining that brightly is because many employees claim not to receive any lasting benefits from training.

“I can’t recall 85 percent of the training courses I’ve participated in over the last 12 years,” says a supervisor with American Express. “That’s because the trainers are ineffective or the training is too late or it’s not delivered in a real-world context.

Here, we’re either begging for training or complaining about it.”

Another reason the profession continues to struggle is that not enough trainers have learned to prove solid business results, and even those who have must combat the reputation of trainers as professionals who know how to make employees feel good but not build the bottom line.

John Spears, who is now chief of operations for the United States Service Academies Business Leadership Institute, used to be the director of training for IMPAC, an international productivity improvement company.

“When I first started working at IMPAC, managers were dead-set against training, believing that on-the-job experience taught employees more than formal classes. It took me 18 months to realize how entrenched that perception was. When it came to training, there were far more naysayers than yeah-sayers.”

If you’re still not convinced that trainers have a way to go, recall (again) the example of corporate trainer Richard Hatch from last summer’s *Survivor* TV series, in which he outlasted 15 other island contestants to win \$1 million. He was described in the press as arrogant, manipulative, and a “duplicitous schemer”—characteristics that were often attributed to his work in the training field. A critic for the *New York Times* wrote: “Richard cold-bloodedly strategized from the start. It’s no accident that he was identified as a corporate trainer, almost the embodiment of cutthroat maneuvers.”

Ouch! What’s up with that?

Trainers have been working diligently to change their image and effectiveness, but, clearly, many people still regard them as ineffective, expendable, and perhaps unethical. What’s wrong? A simple answer is that change takes time. A more complex response is that there’s still a lot of work to be done by people in the profession.

To find out how trainers can continue to boost their image, I talked to academics, corporate executives, rank-and-file employees, longtime trainers, and consultants and came up with the 10-point image makeover checklist that follows. None of these points will be new to anyone who has been in the training profession for a while. But struggling to

change an image is like struggling to lose weight: It's a battle that must be fought constantly and the techniques continually revisited. With that in mind, consider the checklist as a reminder to keep up the good work.

1. Understand the business. In the past, trainers were judged by how well employees enjoyed the classes and whether they claimed to learn something useful. That's no longer enough. Trainers have to understand business objectives and develop learning interventions that help their companies reach their objectives.

According to Alan Landers, trainers must "understand strategy, identify emerging or potential problems, and utilize cross-functional, multilevel teams to generate appropriate solutions—which may or may not be training."

Today's trainers must learn the language of CEOs and be able to talk about profits, operations, markets, and how training can affect them. The importance of learning the business can't be overstated.

2. Be proactive, not reactive. Once trainers understand the business, it's a short hop to becoming proactive strategic business partners as opposed to reactive course designers. At Centex, Landers and his training team work hard to stay ahead of the curve by constantly monitoring key business indicators in order to identify training needs.

"We have confidential access to performance data that many other people in our organization don't," says Landers. "For example, our trainers are constantly looking at sales productivity and performance data on all of our units. When they spot areas that are lagging, they call up the branch managers and offer to work with them to devise training programs geared toward sales improvement."

3. Conduct needs assessments. Even when you are proactively identifying learning opportunities in your company, there will be times when managers come to you in search of training. Instead of leaping at the opportunity, trainers must be cautious and not assume that training is what the manager really needs. To get to the heart of a manager's performance problem, trainers should make needs assessment a routine part of their jobs.

4. Know when to say no. Once the needs assessment is complete, it may become obvious that training isn't the best

The Military Model

The United States Service Academies Business Leadership Institute is a training and consulting organization founded by a group of military academy graduates who have extensive experience in the military and private business sectors. According to CEO Dennis Haley, corporate trainers can boost their image and effectiveness if they adopt more of a military mindset. That includes

- self-discipline
- commitment to something larger than oneself
- passion to lead others
- persistence and a drive to win
- a duty concept
- integrity
- treating others with respect and dignity
- moral responsibility
- clarifying each person's contribution to the overall mission.

way to improve performance in a given department. Some other intervention—changing the performance management system, upgrading technology, or improving the work environment—may be more appropriate and cost-effective. Learning when to say no to training, while encouraging managers to consider other performance improvement projects, has become a necessary key skill for learning professionals.

5. Embrace new technology. Last October, Online Learning 2000 in Denver drew close to 8,000 participants, there to learn how to harness the potential of e-learning. What made the conference so interesting is that it was the vendors (who are from a technical background) who truly seemed to understand the value of e-learning. Some corporate trainers appeared less willing to embrace the technology.

That has got to change, says Dick Lyles. "E-learning will change everything about the training profession," he says. "If trainers want to enhance their image, they have to capitalize on the momentum presented by new technologies. The e-world is here. If trainers don't get comfortable with it, they'll lose the ground they've gained."

6. Understand adult learning. In addition to embracing cutting-edge tech-

nologies, trainers also have to thoroughly understand the basic theories of adult learning and become schooled in instructional design processes. Rod Munro from Ford, who has a Ph.D. in curriculum and instructional design, believes that's one reason he has retained his position with the company at a time when most of the training activities have been outsourced.

"If trainers want to keep their jobs, they have to be able to show bottom-line results," says Munro. "You can't provide results unless you know how to design effective training."

7. Polish your delivery skills. The best-designed training in the world will certainly fail if you aren't able to present the material effectively.

"In my experience, the best trainers are those who keep my interest, relate the material to current challenges, encourage interaction, and demand participation from the audience," says the supervisor from American Express. "Talking heads in front of a classroom lose me instantly."

8. Become a subject matter expert. In talking with our panel of experts about how trainers can improve their image, one mandate was mentioned time and time again: Become a subject matter expert.

"It doesn't matter what the discipline is. If a person doesn't have experience in that discipline, he or she will be less effective in training that discipline than someone who does have experience," says Dennis Haley, CEO of the United States Service Academies Business Leadership Institute.

Melissa Gibson, assistant professor of organizational communication and training and development at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, agrees:

"In the past, trainers who were good could be all things to all people. Not anymore. Now, good trainers also have to become subject matter experts because technology training has raised the bar. Only people who thoroughly understand new technology can provide training on it. As a result, people have gotten used to being trained by experts. The expectation now is that leadership training will be taught by leaders. Sales training will be taught by experienced salespeople and so forth."

9. Learn how to measure ROI. Let's say that you've done everything right. You've learned to understand business

needs. You suggest interventions when necessary. You've become schooled in adult learning, instructional design, and effective delivery. You've concentrated on learning subject matter important to the business. With all that in place, chances are your training will be effective. But in the current business climate, you're still going to have to prove it.

"If trainers are going to be successful, they have to be able to demonstrate the outcomes generated as a result of training," says Rhoda Weiss, president of Rhoda Weiss and Associates and an adjunct professor at UCLA. No longer is it enough to put together a great program in which people feel good at the end. Executives expect training to have some impact on the business.

10. Keep at it. We know that the suggestions presented in the nine preceding points aren't new to most trainers. In fact, you may be tired of hearing about the demands being placed on training professionals. You may have toyed with the idea of giving up the field entirely in exchange for a nice routine job behind a cash register somewhere.

But please, we beg of you, keep at it. The image of trainers has changed, *is* changing. With the collective efforts of even more training professionals, training will continue on the path of becoming one of the most valued corporate functions in the new knowledge economy. And that's hot!

Epilogue: 2005

Josie Kirkpatrick celebrated her 55th birthday and her 30th year in the training profession by treating herself to a spa vacation in Eastern Europe. For the past three years, Josie has been self-employed helping companies and their trainers create more effective learning. A favorite speaker at training conferences, Josie recently had this to say:

"Looking back on my career, I now realize I spent a lot of time trying to overcome resistance from line managers and executives when what I should have done was try harder to overcome my own resistance. I got into this profession because I liked teaching; I didn't want to learn business. I liked the classroom; I didn't want to teach online. I liked teaching a variety of courses; I didn't want to specialize in any one subject. Every step of the way, I defied what needed to be

done. But I must confess that each time I made the changes asked of me, my job satisfaction increased because people needed me, I got more recognition, and my career options grew."

Running one hand through her shoulder-length red hair, Josie quickly checks the mini computer on her wrist for any new emails.

"I have to go," she says. "I'm heading to a local high school to discuss career opportunities in the learning profession." Walking out the door, she turns and wonders aloud: "Do teenagers still draw on their jeans?" □

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