

“Is that all there is?” How many times have you asked yourself that after teaching the same course for the fifteenth time? There is more out there for communications and interpersonal skills trainers, but finding it requires looking outside your present job. Pundits and prognosticators claim that technical training is increasing in volume and importance and that many trainers of “soft” skills will have a chance to move into the more “concrete” world of technical education.

A recent survey of *Fortune*-500 companies, reported in the October 1986 issue of *Training & Development Journal*, showed that 44 percent of all training delivered is technical, and 74 percent of the surveyed managers indicated that technical training needs in their companies would grow. In addition, according to an estimate in ASTD's *Serving the New Corporation*, over 5 million new jobs have been created in high technology industries in the past 14 years. And workers in these industries get more training than those in other types of business, write L.A. Lillard and H.W. Tan in *Private Sector Training: Who Gets It and What Are Its Effects?*

A growing number of professionals in soft areas brought their skills to technical training with great success, and several of these senior-level technical training experts shared their observations and recommendations in recent interviews. The strong similarity of their experiences and advice makes their message to other training professionals especially important.

You can take it with you

Strong knowledge and skills can ease the transition from high touch to high tech. Learning theory remains the same, and successful crossover trainers are quick to point out the portability of this knowledge base. Many of those who make the transition to technical training value the physical reality of the technical world, and the tangible nature of most technical training places a premium on good design and effective evaluation. As one training manager put it, “There clearly are right and wrong answers in this business.” Because the impact of technical training is measured more easily than that of other types of training, the skilled technical training professional can apply design, development, and delivery skills to good advantage.

Writing and presentation skills are as valuable in high tech environments as they

Kuhn is a supervisor of instructional development with Alcoa Laboratories in Alcoa Center, Pennsylvania.



Merging High Touch

Professionals once relegated to the soft side have discovered that

By NANCY J. KUHN

are elsewhere. After writing a strong proposal for establishing a manufacturing training department, Carol Chastaing of IBM was transferred into the newly formed department and later became its manager. Mark Spear of Community College of Allegheny County, in Pennsylvania, also created his own job as director of an energy technology program by writing a successful grant proposal for program funding.

Trainers who make the transition to a technical job rely heavily on well-developed listening skills. With a new language to learn, newcomers leverage their interpersonal strengths by participating in discussions, asking the right questions, and listening carefully to the answers.

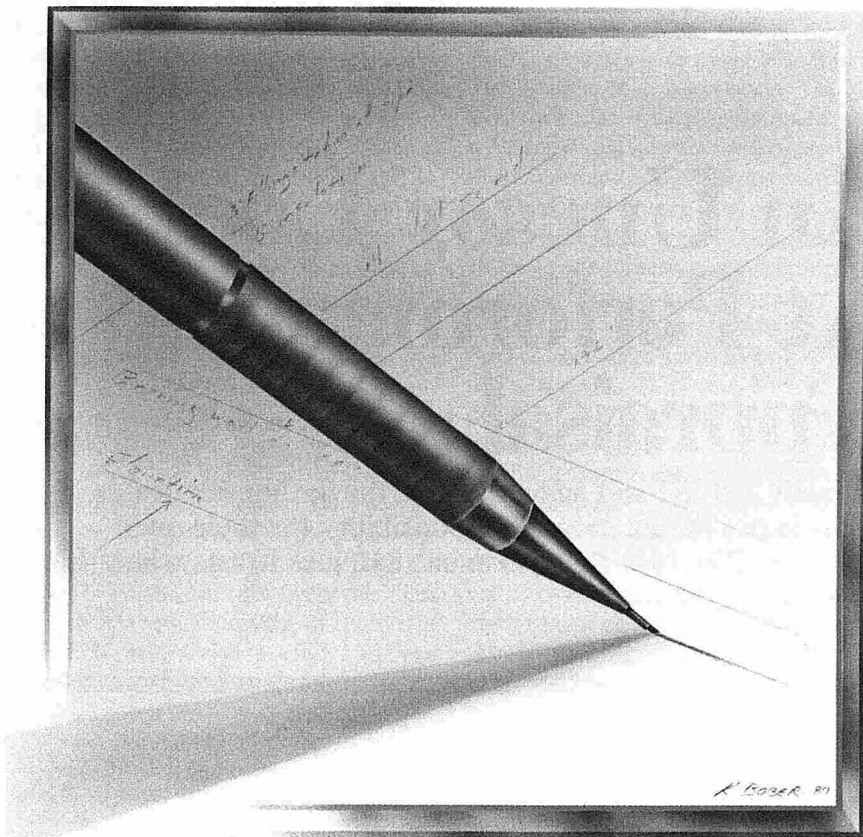
Analytical skills that may not be as highly valued elsewhere can be used to good advantage in the more logical world of technical training. Chastaing's ability to “go in, look at the process, and make decisions” placed her in a position of strength during her career transition.

Once in a job, trainers can use good analytical skills to build bridges to the technical community. Claire Slemmer of Hughes Aircraft credits an early promotion to the rapport she established with technical colleagues; her analytical ability enabled her to learn quickly their new technologies.

Good business practices remain good practices anywhere in the training world. Project management, strategic planning, financial skills, and the ability to develop a business plan are all valued in technical organizations. Training professionals who have learned these skills while working in management or personal development areas find themselves at an advantage in more technical positions.

The interpersonal edge

Political savvy can simplify the transition from nontechnical to technical training. Those with sharp political instincts quickly sense what is important or, more simply put, “what business we are in.” Be-



Kathleen Bober

with High Tech

Opportunities abound in technical training.

ing able to identify key players and work the informal system in any organization strengthens the crossover trainer's chance of success.

While a sense of humor is helpful anywhere, many of those who move into a technical field find that humor helps establish and connect them with their new colleagues. Lois Bartelme of Rockwell credits part of her success to her sense of humor and her ability to "roll with the punches." She is just one of many who have found real enjoyment in their chosen area by finding humor in themselves and the situations around them.

An openness to new experiences and a thirst for knowledge are additional common denominators for crossover trainers. Most are not intimidated by their new technical environment. They study their new discipline, work long hours at first, and apply the skills they bring with them. For some the change is a real adventure; for others it seems the result of a natural evolution.

The voice of experience

Just as their skills are similar, crossover trainers offer nearly identical advice to those who are considering the transition. An honest self-assessment paves the way for success. What are your skills? What are your limitations? Are you ready to apply your skills in a different way and work to lessen your limitations? A thorough development plan based on self-assessment can help the newcomer build knowledge, skills, and credibility in the new technical organization.

Dig in and learn! All newcomers to technical training mention a sharp learning curve at the beginning of a job. Some, like Spear, return to school to build new technical skills before making the transition. Others, such as Slemmer, get thrown headlong into intensive training the first day on the job. Regardless of the route, hard work and long hours, at least initially, are required. One trainer explained that he set aside time to research new areas

after each meeting during the first few months of his employment.

More than anything else, unfamiliarity with the new language holds newcomers to the role of "strangers in a strange land." Nearly all crossover trainers stress the need to make learning the new language a number-one priority. Getting immersed in a class can be an easy way to learn the language; many industries, companies and professions have glossaries to help the new employee. At the very least, purge your vocabulary of words that will make you different. And, whenever possible, ask technical people to explain what they are talking about. Most will be flattered that you consider them an expert.

The value of a good boss on any job can't be overrated, but that supervisor often holds professional life-and-death power over the new technical trainer's career. Slemmer notes that her first technical supervisor was "very wise." By acting as a filter, the manager protected her from the demands of others long enough for Slemmer to learn the language and technical aspects of the business.

Other people have not been so lucky. A training manager for a large service corporation tells of her experience in leaving a management development position with a university to take a job in the computer field. "My manager knew less than I thought he would know. He couldn't support me in the beginning," she explains. Even though she had done everything else right, her efforts were not enough, and she left the company and the technical training field. Her advice to people making the transition: "Interview the company and your new boss carefully."

For the training professional who has not built up business skills, this is the time to work on them. The trainer in the technical education world is often held more accountable than a colleague in the field of management or interpersonal skills training. If crossover trainers have not brought business skills with them, they should learn planning, budgeting, marketing, and public relations early in their technical careers.

The final advice from old pros to trainers considering a change is to remain open to opportunities and be willing to learn. The world of training is changing and opportunities are growing. As one successful crossover professional explained, "If you never take a chance, you never get lucky."

