Rethinking the Workshop

It's time to make some changes in how we contribute to the organization.

By CAROLYN LADD

The heat is on human resource development staffs of forward-looking corporations to help their organizations improve bottom-line results and meet the needs of workers. This new burden forces HRD staffs to ask how training can improve performance to a greater degree than it has in the past.

Although many corporations will not be

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able to increase dollars spent on training for the coming year, there are some new ways to use training budgets to increase the amount of training per person and to increase available training techniques and types. But training professionals must be willing to rethink their approaches to training and development and to take advantage of all the resources available to them.

Out of the past

For many, the workshop is the tried and true method of training. This approach to improving productivity and performance has been used in training for years, and it works. But the stand-alone workshop has some major drawbacks:

■ It is very expensive, especially if you have to fly people to locations and provide lodging and food.
■ It often takes people away from their jobs for several days or weeks, during which time the organization loses money because either some work isn't getting done, or someone else is working extra hours to do two jobs.

■ It usually spends a major portion of the time allotted in a lecture format, introducing key concepts to participants and allowing a relatively small amount of time for role plays, discussions, or other interactive types of activities that are often found to be the most useful to the participants.
■ It rarely allows for much on-the-job follow-up once the workshop has been conducted; thus there is seldom a way to measure the impact of the training on job performance.

The point here is not to eliminate the workshop approach from training and replace it with something else. Rather, it is to rethink the use of the workshop in training today.

For years, training has been confined to the classroom with the primary instruction being in the form of a workshop with presentations, small group discussions,

role plays, and the like. Today, with advancements in technology, training models are changing. In many corporations, trainers and other decision makers are designing training programs that use a mixed media approach to improve productivity and human effectiveness. The range of possibilities for improving training effectiveness—at reasonable costs—is increasing. The major components expanding the traditional concept of training are computer-based assessments, training, and applications; interactive video training programs; teletraining; and multimedia workshops that use electronic key pads, large screen projection devices, computers, and video.

Each of these components makes a different contribution to improving the effectiveness of training.

Computer-based assessments

Computer-based assessments offer trainers a means of
■ assessing individual training needs in order to create a personal development plan;
■ screening and selecting personnel for specific types of training within the organization;
■ assessing the success of a specific training program;
■ giving trainees feedback regarding how their attitudes and skills relate to others within the same organization or in others.

The advantage of using computer-based assessments is that a trainer's time is saved by not having to hand-score assessments.

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In addition, the feedback to the individual taking the assessment is immediate.

Computer-based training

Computer-based training programs offer trainees opportunities to improve their skills and attitudes through the interactive format that only a computer can provide. On the computer, a trainee can be

■ introduced to new concepts through the use of text and graphics presentation;

■ tested and given feedback on his or her understanding of concepts;

■ given opportunities to apply his or her understanding of concepts through simulations, case examples, and problem-solving activities;

■ directed to complete activities off-line in a program guide which accompanies each program.

With computer-based training, the trainer no longer needs to spend time teaching the basics but, instead, is free to develop new materials and to work individually with those trainees who need additional coaching and reinforcement. The repetitive introduction of concepts is left to the computer.

On-the-job application

On-the-job application offers trainees the opportunity to apply skills and concepts learned in a training program to their jobs. These job applications vary in their scope. The following are descriptions of some typical job applications useful in reinforcing training:

■ *Managerial tools.* These applications are designed to help the trainee improve day-to-day performance. They are useful tools that help the manager perform various managerial tasks more effectively and efficiently. Some examples might include planning goals and objectives for a work group, individual, or sales prospector or devising a program for helping sales representatives keep updated information on their customers.

■ *Problem solvers.* The problem-solving applications can be used on a day-to-day basis, as can the managerial tools. They are designed to help analyze and find solutions to problems. For example, one problem-solving application may provide an effective step-by-step decision-making process that helps the trainee define a problem, assess its impact, discover and evaluate possible solutions, and prepare a detailed action plan. A second problem-solving application may give specific help with improving an employee's motivation by analyzing his or her commitment, competency, and perception of the situation

and then providing a summarized report on ways to assist the employee.

Interactive video

Interactive video provides a new opportunity to enhance training. Through the use of videotape or videodisc and the computer, a dynamic training program can be created that incorporates the best of both media. The video component in an interactive video program allows a trainee to experience a more realistic representation of situations than is possible with a stand-alone, computer-based training program or a workshop. Interactive video is particularly effective for simulating experiences and interactions between people.

Like computer-based training, this medium can teach and reinforce basic concepts, again saving the trainer time for other types of tasks. One way many organizations are incorporating interactive video into their training programs is by taking their stand-alone videotapes and using them to create interactive video training. Using existing video drastically reduces the cost of creating an interactive video program. It is, however, not always effective in creating the best final product.

Teletraining

Teletraining is a method to bring experts

to the training classroom without the expense. It is also a way to conduct training with trainees who are at multiple sites. No longer is it necessary for everyone to be in the same room to have an effective training session.

Although this use of technology is not for everyone due to the expense, it has allowed many organizations to reduce their on-site training in a more cost-effective manner than workshops.

Mixed media

The traditional workshop with videotape segments continues to be an effective training method, and it allows for group interaction that the electronic media do not facilitate.

But even workshops are changing. Many classrooms in training centers are being equipped with key pads for each trainee, assuring anonymity when answering sensitive questions in a group. This process is one way for a trainer to obtain immediate

feedback about the clarity of the workshop content. Another addition to the classroom is the large screen projection device which often allows higher-quality visuals to be used during the workshop. And computers are being incorporated into workshop activities to enhance the learning process and small group involvement.

Today's workshop

In the past, trainers have used traditional workshops, presession assignments, and postsession applications. But today, a new strategy for presenting workshops is evolving that incorporates the best of all the training media available. This strategy, although similar to the traditional method, is more focused and streamlined. The new approach focuses solely on those elements that cannot be recreated on the new media, namely role plays, group discussion, and some types of simulations. The new, technologically enhanced workshop includes the following elements:

■ *A presession assignment.* The participant would complete this on the computer. The computer-based instruction or interactive video is used to teach basic skills and concepts prior to the workshop session.

■ *The workshop* with very little lecture or instruction by the trainer; this was taken care of during the presession assignment.

The point is not to eliminate the workshop approach, but to reevaluate its use

During the workshop, the trainer would reinforce concepts taught while conducting the role plays, discussions, and simulations. Participants could use the computer during the course of the workshop to assist with completion of activities, complete small group activities, and learn to use a computer-based application program to enhance performance. The workshop could also include viewing videotapes, slides, overheads, or an interactive video program.

■ *Postsession application.* If an application was used during the workshop, participants would take it back to the job for future use. A trainer could conduct additional training to reinforce concepts taught during the training and provide individual coaching and/or instruction for those that may need more assistance applying training concepts to the job.

The approach suggested by the technologically enhanced workshop has the following advantages over the more

traditional approach to training in workshops:

■ The computer-based training or interactive video program can be done prior to the workshop session. This means that time spent at the workshop can be reduced because major concepts have been taught and reinforced during the presession, leaving the workshop time for participant involvement.

■ Doing an hour of training on a computer for several days prior to a workshop means less time is lost on the job. Generally, a person can find an hour a day to complete some presession work without having to slow down overall productivity on the job.

■ During the workshop, time is spent on group activities which assist trainees with applying concepts to real work situations. Many workshops get bogged down teaching concepts and allow little time for role plays, simulations, demonstrations, and other types of group interactions. Because basic concepts were taught prior to the session, trainers have a golden opportunity to use workshop time to get their trainees to interact and get more deeply involved in the content being presented.

■ Once the workshop is completed, the trainer has two tools to use in the follow-up process. First, the CBT or videodisc is available if a participant needs to review key concepts once he or she returns to the job. Then once participants return to their jobs, the application tool, if used, is implemented. After several weeks a trainer or supervisor can meet with the participant and see the reports printed out by the application. These printouts are documentation that a participant is implementing new concepts or skills on the job. Trainers have time to follow up with individuals who need additional assistance.

Where we are now

Many trainers and human resource professionals are reluctant to change their approach to training due to their own fear of using the technology or of the technology replacing the trainer. It is only in the most innovative organizations that training seems to be shifting toward a multimedia approach. These organizations and trainers have overcome their hesitancy of using the technology. And, most importantly, they have discovered that machines are not going to replace trainers but, rather, will enhance the abilities of trainers to better meet the needs of the organization and people they train.

All of the instructional methods described have their strengths and limitations, putting the trainer in the position of deciding how and when to use these instructional methods to improve learning and performance. For the first time, trainers can design training in a variety of ways for a variety of situations and people at a reasonable cost. If trainers are going to contribute to the revitalization of American corporations, they must begin using the best combination of training equipment, methods, and facilities to meet organizational goals and improve employee performance.