The Case
for Custom Training

Sometimes, off-the-shelf training is the answer;

other times, it's off-the-mark.

Here's how to know whether your training needs

require a custom-designed program.

By Stephen L. Cohen

At a time when sweeping changes are transforming the global workplace, companies are placing unprecedented importance on training to accomplish business goals. No longer dismissed as a "nice but not always necessary" employee perk, workplace learning is being deployed as the first line of attack against corporate obsolescence and mediocrity.

In the process, we've discovered an interesting thing: Although most business trends are universal, affecting virtually every organization in America, their impact on individual companies is strikingly specific. And that can make it difficult for companies to find training programs that match their unique requirements.

In fact, many organizations are finding that the most effective way to address the specific workplace performance issues they face is to have custom training programs developed around their industry, their company, their jobs, and their needs.

But even though our firm designs custom training programs, we're not always strong advocates of that approach. We'd be the first to tell you that custom training isn't for everyone, every time. Off-the-shelf programs (which we also develop) and other alternatives can be the best way to achieve many business goals. On the other hand, sometimes custom training is not only the best solution, but the only one. When? Why?

Basic training

You can divide all training programs into these basic categories:
- generic off-the-shelf products
- tailored off-the-shelf products
- public seminars and workshops
- custom- or specially designed programs

developed in-house or by an outside firm.

Or, you can use a combination of those elements. No one type of training is intrinsically better than others; you can get outstanding or dismal results with any of them. The right choice for you depends on your audience, time-frame, internal resources, and business challenges.

Generic off-the-shelf. These products are best for teaching broad-based skills. For instance, if you have a group of new salespeople fresh out of college to train, there's no need to reinvent that wheel. There are plenty of good generic sales-skills programs to choose from. It's the same with other generic training subjects such as skills in computer use, call-center operations, supervision, service, interpersonal relationships, and presentations.

Generally, off-the-shelf programs are known quantities, tested and proven over time. Because they're standard and ready-to-use, you can often get them up and running quickly, without tying up internal resources for design and development. So, if your need is immediate, off-the-shelf may be an answer—provided that you can minimize the processes for shopping, selection, approval, ordering, and delivery.

There's also the numbers factor. If you're training relatively few people—say, less than 100 over time—off-the-shelf may be your most cost-effective option, depending on who those 100 people are and what you want them to learn.

Tailored off-the-shelf. These products are generic programs that have been combined, revised, scaled up or down, or otherwise altered to fit your requirements. This approach works best when what you need is essentially a personalized version of a generic program. For example, you could use an off-the-shelf program for mid-level management training and insert role plays tailored to your organization's management situation.

Keep in mind that though tailoring is sometimes a good middle ground between generic and custom programs, it isn't necessarily an easy fix. It costs both time and money—whether the work is done by a product supplier, another outside re-

source, or in-house staff. And you still end up with a generic program. If your needs don't follow a more or less standard profile, no amount of tailoring is likely to make a standard program fit perfectly.

Public seminars and workshops. These run the gamut from high-level sessions sponsored by prestigious institutions to glorified pep rallies. One great advantage of this type of training is that it's straightforward and convenient: You pick what you want, pay your money, and go. Seminars are also an opportunity to learn from leading business figures and to network with peers.

The downside is that a seminar's sponsors generally can't tailor presentations to your organization or needs. It's up to you to find out what you're getting into and whether it will achieve your goals. Most public seminars are informational, motivational, or inspirational rather than skills-based—a drawback if you're looking for solid performance results. Because public seminars are by definition generic, they can't address your issues specifically. That can make learning transfer and application difficult. Because travel and tuition costs add up quickly, usually only a few employees can attend. So, if the ones who do go learn something worthwhile, they'll have to find ways to teach it to others in the organization before they can convert that knowledge to action.

Custom- or specially designed. These programs are built from scratch specifically for clients. Unlike prepackaged products paid for with each use, you can own a custom program in every sense of the word. It's yours to use, reproduce, alter, and update as often and as long as you like. Because it's designed expressly for your trainees, with key stakeholders involved throughout the design and development process, a custom training program engenders a powerful sense of ownership and fit in your organization. On the other hand, because these programs are completely customized, you need to allow a lot of time for design and development. It also requires a lot of time and energy to have stakeholders highly involved.

Here are some actual cases in which

custom programs were used.

❑ A startup venture specializing in multimedia industrial training turned to an outside custom firm to design and develop its first series of CD-ROM products.

❑ A franchise restaurant operation with a unique product and identity used a custom-designed course to help standardize store managers' skills and in-store operating procedures, while maintaining the company's distinctive style.

❑ A British bank that had recently decentralized branch operations to better serve its customers needed custom training to teach branch managers a new skills set and mindset built around specific branch service-management issues.

❑ A computer business wanted to implement its core values throughout its workforce, using custom training for senior managers as a launching pad for a top-down, rollout learning system.

❑ A division of a large, multinational construction-engineering and transportation company facing intense competitive pressures turned to a custom learning system that included workshops and self-development programs to teach senior salespeople high-level strategic selling skills. The course was based on actual opportunities with real customers and aligned with the company's existing business-development planning process.

❑ A mid-sized manufacturing firm chose a custom solution to help middle managers learn business leadership and entrepreneurial skills so that they would think and act more like businesspeople, reinforcing the firm's new direction and accelerating its growth.

❑ An incentives and recognition company undergoing extensive change selected custom training to help managers get aligned with core values and to advance the company's new strategies.

❑ A building-controls manufacturer used a custom-designed, self-study program to teach independent distributors the basics of electricity and circuitry. That helped distributors understand how the products work, enabling them to serve customers better.

The case for custom

Here are several reasons that a customized program might work best.

Results, results, results. Perhaps the strongest argument for custom training is that there's little or no gap between the content of a course and the actual chal-

Think of the difference between heating up a TV dinner and making a meal from scratch. Custom training works the same way.

lenges of trainees' work. A custom-designed program reduces the risk and size of the leap to implementation. Consequently, the direct transfer of learning from a course to the workplace (sometimes a sticking point with generic programs and public seminars) is immediate and virtually certain.

Talks your talk. A custom program is specific to your business and people. It speaks your language, using the terminology of your company and industry; there's no need to translate or approximate concepts. Instead of theoretical or fictional examples, participants learn from real applications, real customers, and real issues they face every day.

Pre- and post-work or self-study fit your requirements and constraints. That can make a custom course far more useful, credible, and results-focused for learners than most off-the-shelf programs or public seminars.

Tuned to trainees. Another advantage is that custom programs can be designed around your trainees' specific learning preferences. That can make a real difference when you're dealing with groups that don't fit into a standard business mold. It's one thing to get an off-the-shelf program for beginning supervisors; it's something else entirely to find one that brings true value to senior-level managers.

If the target trainees like self-inventories or group assessments, the custom program can include them. If they are used to working independently, the custom program can have a strong self-study element. When you attempt that kind of fine-tuning with a ready-made course, chances are that it would take more time and effort than beginning from scratch. And you'd risk undermining the original program's integrity.

Your work makes it work. One reason custom programs are so effective is that your people play an integral role in shaping them, whether they do it them-

selves or with an outside team. Employees from different functions within your organization can serve as internal consultants throughout program development, contributing their own expertise and perspectives.

The time and effort you invest can pay off—not only in the integrity of your training, but also in your people's alignment with it. Their involvement means that they see training not as an imposition dropped on them from above but as something valuable they've helped build from the ground up. That can give them the feeling they've made a personal investment in the outcome, which results in greater buy-in than with other types of training.

The freshest ingredients. Think of the difference between heating up a TV dinner and making a meal from scratch: The frozen dinner tastes OK, and it'll taste the same whether you eat it in January or July. But when you make a meal from scratch, you can take advantage of the best, freshest seasonal ingredients and serve something that's exquisitely right for that time of year, that day, and that occasion.

Custom training works the same way. Because it's made from scratch, you can build in up-to-the-minute business thinking, leading-edge strategies, and pertinent current events and examples. So, your program is always fresh, compelling, and on top of the times.

Sets you apart; sends you ahead. Many companies see custom training as a differentiator that gives them a unique competitive advantage. They also see it as a way to make a real difference in the bot-

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Is Custom Training On the Mark for Your Training Needs?

If you answer *yes* to any of these questions, custom training may be the right solution.

1. Do you want to teach a combination of knowledge, skills, and paradigms that are unique or specific for your business? Industry? Jobs? Needs?

2. Is the training that you need company-confidential or likely to be a key contributor to your competitive advantage?

3. Does the training topic or major goal require a snug fit with your organization's culture, strategy, terminology, values, or expectations?

4. Do you have special learning-program goals, ideas, budgets, or features that you can't find in prepackaged programs or open seminars?

5. Do your training needs and objectives require a highly individualized approach or use of cutting-edge technology?

6. Will your training address highly experienced participants or include advanced or specialized content?

7. Do you lack some of the necessary time, resources, or expertise inside to design and develop this training?

8. Do you or others in your company want to play an integral role in the design and development of this learning program or system?

9. Do you prefer creating training with a team of specialists or shopping for it?

10. Do you want to pilot and prove the effectiveness of this training within your own company before rolling it out?

11. Will it be a cost savings to reproduce an unlimited number of learning materials internally?

12. Do you want to be able to modify, update, or revise the training materials yourself on a just-in-time basis over the next few years?

13. Does your organization generally endorse the use of outside resources for training?

14. Can you proceed confidentially on the basis of a supplier's reputation and references without seeing the actual program in advance?

15. Is speedy and specific transfer of learning to the job an important goal?

16. Can you wait three to six months to begin rolling out this training?

17. Do you think that customization is the best option for this training but assume it may cost too much or be too difficult to do?

18. Does it make sense to investigate and compare all four types of training—generic, tailored, public seminars, and custom training—for this particular training need before deciding?

tom line, a culture change, teamwork, or any other business strategy—and no other organization has anything like it. The proprietary nature of custom training means that it can be an essential element in your company's identity and market strategy.

Framed by the big picture. There's also an important indirect benefit to custom training solutions. Working with a wide spectrum of stakeholders to clarify training needs prior to design and development often uncovers business or performance issues that might otherwise not have been addressed in training. That helps align your program not just with department goals, but also with the strategic intent of the entire organization.

Custom doesn't cost more. People often assume that custom programs are more expensive than off-the-shelf products. But that's not necessarily the case. In fact, the break-even point may be as low as 100 or fewer trainees. In other words, your cost-per-learner with custom training could be lower than for many prepackaged programs or public seminars. A typical off-the-shelf workshop including facilitator materials, training, and licensing can run $300 to $450 per person for a one-day course—more with travel and hotel expenses. That's $30,000 to $45,000 to train 100 people, and the fee covers only a one-time use of the materials. For every subsequent session or additional trainee, you'll pay more.

For the same $30,000 to $45,000, you should be able to hire an outside firm to design and develop a one-day custom program. That program becomes your property. You can make as many copies and use it as many times as you want when you need to, without incurring additional costs. The upshot is that you can see how rapidly you recoup your investment. You can also continuously update your program, using internal resources at no outside cost. It's tough to do that with either off-the-shelf products or public seminars.

The timing is right. In a business climate where faster is considered better, you may have reservations about the time it takes to get a custom program up and running. Though it's true that you need to allow sufficient start-up time for custom design and development, technology has dramatically streamlined the entire process, and you save time in the end because you know that it will work for your specific needs and situation. You'll also see an immediate transfer of learning to the real world.

In-house or outside?

Custom training may be something you can handle in-house. If you have extensive internal resources and they have the time and expertise in the area being addressed, you can do it yourself. Still, it can make sense to work with an outside firm. You can choose to handle some parts and let the outside firm fill in the gaps. Or you can turn over the entire project, while maintaining control and participating actively. Either way, you stand to gain some important benefits.

An outside resource gives you fresh perspectives and new solutions to the challenges you face. You can draw on outside strengths in areas in which you don't have in-house expertise. Many companies find that their training is viewed as more credible when they make the commitment to work with an outside provider. Sometimes, in-house resources are stretched too thin and the timeframe's too short to go it alone. Or the stakes are so high that you need every possible advantage, including top-notch outside help.

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Which brings up this question: What makes a successful custom design partner? Just as there's a wide range of quality in prepackaged programs, you'll encounter very different levels of capability in custom-design companies.

Here's what should you look for.

Business knowledge. For an outside resource to fully grasp your organization's challenges and address them successfully, it needs to understand business in general. The outside people you work with should have an extensive business background, particularly in such strategic areas as leadership, sales, service, and quality. A depth of knowledge helps the outside firm align your immediate training needs with your organization's overall business strategies.

It also helps the provider to understand your organization's agenda from a broad business perspective.

Quick to learn your business. Your outside consultants need to be quick studies who have proved with a variety of organizations that they can get up-to-speed quickly on the specifics of your business. Although it can accelerate the process if a provider has worked with other companies in your industry, it's not necessary to eliminate one that hasn't. That provider could offer fresh insight and more creative solutions than one with years of industry-related experience.

Astute in the business of learning. The outside firm should have an outstanding track record in developing training for a wide range of organizations and be supported by extensive HRD experience. Look for people who are actively publishing, speaking, and advancing leading-edge ideas in workplace learning.

They should also have a thorough command of the financial side of the learning business. You need to be able to work closely with them in calculating your ROI for different learning strategies and for getting maximum value for your training dollars.

Content-development expertise. Content is the guts of your training so you need to work with people who have the experience, skill, and creativity to develop content exceptionally well. They should be able to process complex ideas, issues, strategies, and parameters into practices, models, and materials that are compelling and clear.

A powerful process. A program's strength comes from the discipline of its development process. A successful process leads you through interlocking steps to reveal your distinctive competencies and needs, while being flexible enough to let you control the outcome. The process then builds on your competencies and needs to create a uniquely effective program.

Think of the process in terms of five *D*s: Begin by establishing your *direction*. Where are you going as an organization, and how can training help get you there? Next, move on to the *discovery* phase, in which your needs are identified and analyzed and the parameters of your project are defined. The program's *design* follows in direct response to those findings. After an in-house project team reviews and approves the design,

your course materials are ready for *development*. The *delivery* phase involves marketing and implementation. In the final phase, you continuously evaluate and improve the program.

The payoff in working through each of those steps is that the training will accurately mirror your company's identity, values, and strategies—and provide a lasting competitive advantage.

Intelligent project management. Another key success factor is your outside provider's skill in coordinating with your internal resources to achieve successful results in an efficient, timely, and cost-effective manner.

Typically, an outside firm focuses on what it does best and lets you do what you do best. It respects your time and meets with you only when necessary. It makes sure you're fully prepared for the task at hand so that you can give it your complete attention—for the shortest possible amount of time. That way, your participation is mindful and organized.

Sound project management builds a relationship of trust. The people you've contracted should do what they say they're going to do, and see to it that you understand how your decisions will affect logistics, timing, and costs.

Project resources. A provider's principals may make an impressive sales presentation and then vanish, leaving you with the B team. Make sure you know who will actually be working with you and that you're equally impressed with them. You deserve the best; don't settle for less.

Added value. Just as other businesses strive to add value to everything they do, the best training-design firms anticipate your needs and delight you with services you may not even have realized that you wanted or needed. That could be skills for helping you sell the value of a program to your company's leadership and market it company-wide. Or it could be the way they help package and present your materials to appeal to your trainees. ❏

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