

It's a Free Agent World

By Darren Short and Rose Opengart

This is the second in a three-part series about free agent learners, who will increasingly populate the workplace and change the traditional ways work, jobs, employees, and loyalty are viewed. For part 1, see "Getting to Know the Employee of the Future" by Arnold Packer in the August issue of Training & Development.

What are
you trainers
going to
do about it?

The times are filled with uncertainties but also with promises, challenges, and opportunities. Headlines warn us of dramatic changes in the job market and in organizations that will and already are affecting how employees view their jobs and careers. For one, more workers are focusing on employability rather than employment security. Enter the free agent. Like their counterparts in professional sports, free agents are not bound to any one team or franchise—or organization.

Free agents focus on long-term employability based on their expertise, knowledge base, reputation, and networks. They speak of

having a "portfolio of assets"—a collection of skills that makes them value-added contributors. They offer their assets to organizations, which benefit from increased competitiveness. But free agents expect something in return: They expect their employers to offer them opportunities for growth through learning and the application of that learning. Where the growth enhances

employability, the free agent is more likely to stay with the organization. But where growth is limited and employability is threatened, free agents may seek alternative organizations that offer desired incentives and structures around learning.

With their focus on employability through growth and learning, free agents are essentially free agent learners—independent, highly motivated adults who take responsibility for their own learning and development, use their spare time to learn, use new approaches to learning, and self-teach using a variety of resources. Free agent learners take the initiative by orga-

nizing and structuring their own learning experiences and by seeking the best opportunities for learning and growth, and for applying that learning. They're likely to have little patience with planned learning experiences that don't match their desired format, timing, and location. Instead, free agent learners seek to learn wherever and from whomever they can.

Arnold Packer's article (August) about free agents discusses their effect on organizations in detail, suggesting that if organizations fail to deliver the desired learning and growth, they risk losing key employees and becoming less competitive. As employability and learning become more important, fewer employees will accept without question the training provided by their organizations, and more will take learning into their own hands.

So, what should training and learning specialists do? What key strategic role do they play in helping an organization attract and retain free agents? How do workplace performance professionals operate in an environment where learners are independent and more selective about their training?

With organizations looking to use learning as a strategic tool and individuals using new approaches to learning to enhance employability, training faces a new challenge: to make an evolutionary change or be considered dispensable. Training functions that fail to adapt to the modern game of free agent learners may find themselves cut from the roster. We believe that training functions need to consider this evolutionary path:

1. Alter the training function's focus of attention.
 2. Partner with organizational systems.
 3. Adopt new roles for trainers.
 4. Develop new competencies for trainers.
- Alter the training function's focus of attention. The process of training is but one means of learning. Training functions need to break away from their current fo-

Main Points

- Free agents focus on employability rather than employment security, and on growth through learning.
- The workplace—and not just in the high-tech sector—is becoming filled with free agent learners who are more selective and independent about the training they receive.
- The implication for learning specialists is that they will have to make an evolutionary change to attract and retain talented free agents.

cus on courses and programs toward more informal learning. If employees and organizations are already focusing on learning and career employability, then training functions must shift the emphasis away from training and toward continuous learning and careers. That's supported by linking formal and informal learning and helping employees learn how to learn. To do that, training functions must complement self-directed and informal learning with an emphasis on formal development (such as courses and education) and place greater attention on the environments and structures needed to encourage such learning. Indeed, the whole HRD community needs to focus on what it does that encourages and sustains learning, change, and growth.

Trainers helping employees with career development isn't a new concept. However, free agent learners are challenging HRD to become a strategic force with leverage and impact beyond training interventions and practices.

The free agent learners' focus on employability implies a need to update and expand expertise, technical knowledge, and skills; to build and maintain networks; and to bolster and promote reputations. Therefore, training functions need to take these steps:

- Make employee learning, growth, and career development the center of attention.
- Change how the training function is viewed in the organization: It needs to be seen as more than a provider of courses.
- Create an environment in which learning is flexible and designed around employees' goals and choices.
- Pay more attention to developing and maintaining levels of expertise, specialist knowledge, networks, and reputations.
- Recognize the free agent learner desire for independent, self-managed learning by opening up new internal and external learning avenues.

The rewards for changing the focus of attention are threefold: 1) Employees are more likely to learn, grow, and enhance their employability; 2) the organization is more likely to retain its key employees and benefit through increased competitiveness; and 3) the training function is more likely to be recognized as playing a key strategic role in the organization. Consider it a win-win-win.

Partner with other organizational systems. When the training function is not strategically aligned with the goals and vision of the organization, it becomes vulnerable. The more that training tries to tackle the challenges of the free agent learner alone, the less successful it and the organization will be. Responding to the free agent challenge needs a coordinated effort based on a view of the organization as a system. Learning by individuals and organizational learning are coordinated and complementary, each serving the other's purposes. So, what does that look like, and what is the role for the training function?

To respond successfully to free agents and their focus on employability, organizations and trainers will have to take these steps:

- Improve succession planning.
- Increase the flexibility with which jobs can be redesigned to suit employees.
- Track learning, and compare current knowledge and skills with those needed for the future.
- Create an environment that supports the application of learning.
- Improve the efficiency of knowledge sharing.

Those steps require changes to organizational systems of business planning, internal communication, performance management, rewards, and knowledge management.

There's also a clear partnering role for training in supporting the organization as those steps are taken—for example, by tracking learning, auditing skills, supporting transfer of learning, introducing portable credentials, amending evaluation systems to operate beyond training courses, and introducing new learning delivery systems (making full use of new technology).

Adopt new roles for trainers. What are the implications for trainers whose training functions need to adapt to free agents with their focus on employability, learning, and growth? If training is shifting

Here's Help

Actions for training managers

- Expand focus of attention from training to include learning and career enhancement.
- Introduce more individual flexibility into the design and delivery of learning.
- Place greater emphasis on learning to build expertise, specialist knowledge, networks, and reputations.
- Introduce new systems to track learning, audit skills, and support transfer of learning.
- Amend evaluation systems to cover learning in addition to formal training.
- Introduce more portable credentials.
- Work with other organizational systems to approach free agents in a coordinated, systematic way.
- Consider introducing the learning counselor role into the training team.

Actions for trainers

- Prepare for a training approach that focuses on employability, learning, and growth by developing competencies in
- coaching and counseling learners and learning
 - championing learning and networking
 - facilitating learning and reflection
 - technology-based instruction and instructional design
 - systems thinking and strategic planning
 - career development
 - adult learning theory.

- championing of learning and networking
- facilitation of learning and reflection
- technology-based instruction and instructional design to open new learning avenues
- systems thinking to link learning and training into other systems
- strategic planning to link audits of learning, skills, and knowledge into the business planning process
- career development and links to learning and growth
- adult learning theory to understand how adults learn, stages of adult development, and how to support adult learning.

Coming close on the heels of other changes—such as outsourcing and performance consultancy—to our traditional view of training, it's understandable that free agents and free agent learners have quickly become a hot topic. But should trainers and training managers act now or wait, knowing the potential risks of falling behind competitors who make good early moves? Similarly, should all trainers and training managers refocus their efforts or just those who work in certain sectors of the economy?

At the moment, most analysts seem to agree that free agents are found predominantly in knowledge-based industries such as software, telecommunications technology, multimedia, biotechnology, and health technology. It's said that jobs will become obsolete and people will perform tasks on a project-by-project basis under short-term contracts. In a strong economy, the job market is weighted in favor of employees. But there are signs that increased outsourcing, mergers and acquisitions, and moves to e-commerce are working in favor of free agents beyond the high-tech sector.

It's up to people in the learning profession to assess the free agency phenomenon—in their organizations, in their sector of the economy, and among the potential employees they seek to recruit, especially new graduates. Learning specialists should monitor the trends closely and take actions to anticipate and react to the free agent situation. □

Darren Short *is with Perspectives, Kent, United Kingdom; dazinuk@aol.com.* Rose Opengart *is with the University of Georgia; sk8ladi@aol.com.*

its attention toward learning, career enhancement, and individual needs, where does that leave the trainer who currently spends much of his or her time at the front of training rooms delivering courses?

We're not about to predict the end of classroom training, or c-learning. But the trend of free agent learning does herald a shift toward fewer courses, more individual attention on learners and less group activity, and more attention to alternative learning methods. Perhaps the most significant development we see in our crystal ball is the likely change in trainer activity from the role of course deliverer to learning counselor.

Learning counselors will offer free agent learners a new service not currently available in many organizations. Some specific activities will include

- helping employees increase learning efficiency and effectiveness
- exploring new learning formats and opportunities
- identifying and overcoming barriers to learning and applying learning
- identifying learning and growth opportunities within the organization and elsewhere
- assessing learners' competencies, values, goals, performance, and learning orientations as well as likely areas of

positive contribution

- linking learning to longer-term career goals
- developing and maintaining networks and building reputations.

Learning counselors will be available to work with all employees—from those who are already operating as free agent learners to those who feel they've reached a plateau in their careers, see themselves in dead-end jobs, or have left the organization mentally if not physically. By having individual relationships with employees of all kinds, learning counselors will be crucial to helping employees use learning as the basis for achieving employability, however they may define that. Where demands for learning counselors are great, we envision organizations using managers trained in the learning counselor role.

Develop new competencies for trainers. With the new focus on employability, learning, and growth and the proliferation of learning counselors, the training profession will need to take a fresh look at how new trainers are trained and how trainers develop new competencies. We envision less focus on the traditional competencies for classroom training and these new areas for competence development:

- coaching and counseling of learners