

CHAPTER 1

Beg, Borrow, and Steal

How the Best Training Professionals Keep Up

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Editor's Note: In planning this volume, Eduardo Salas, editor of the Practice Series, thought it would be informative to begin with the perspective of practitioners who are selling, implementing, and evaluating training systems on a regular basis in the field. As we planned the contents of this volume to fit the needs of practitioners, we wondered what, exactly, those needs are. Where do they look for information on new methods, new tools? How do they see us? What types of knowledge or information are they looking for? In thinking of people we could get this perspective from, I came across a profile of Colleen Petersen, a training and development manager for Cisco Systems, in a training trade magazine. Consistent with this volume's title, Petersen's views seemed very much on the cutting edge, and with Cisco at the center of the burgeoning e-learning phenomenon, one of that company's training leaders seemed a good candidate.

As the project took shape, Petersen invited a peer at Cisco, Linda Rogers, to collaborate with her. Eduardo Salas and I drafted a set of questions and sent them to Petersen. Petersen and Rogers forwarded them to a number of their colleagues in Northern California, all working as internal or external consultants either in training or in performance consulting. The two then compiled the responses to each question into one coherent answer. Thus, as you read the following questions, what you will see in response are the joint opinions of several training professionals, not one (although

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admittedly sampled from a single geographic region). Following these answers, Rogers adds her own commentaries; the “I” in the following paragraphs is Rogers speaking.

As you read the responses, ask yourself to what extent the respondents’ perspectives and needs match your own. Then, as you read the rest of the volume, judge how well our authors anticipated and responded to their needs for information on tools, methods, and strategies for training. In general, you will have to read the volume for yourself to see how well the chapters address the practitioner issues raised here. But I have added parenthetical mention in a few places of chapters that address concerns and issues raised here.

Question: What are the primary sources of information you look to when investigating new methods or trends in training and development?

Answer: Although respondents named a number of different sources, the two sources for which there was the strongest consensus were other professionals in the field, including coworkers and peers in professional organizations, and trade publications such as *Training and Development Journal*.

Question: Do you rely on the science of training to make decisions about new training systems, tools, or methods? If so, in what ways? If not, why not? Why has the body of knowledge generated by the science of training not had a bigger impact on your practice?

Answer: Most respondents make decisions about training based on their own experience—in other words, trial and error—or on the experience of others in the field whom they respect. Those who said they use the science of training indicated that the primary value of this body of knowledge was with respect to evaluating the effectiveness of a new training offering or methodology and ensuring its instructional validity.

This was a difficult question for many respondents because they were not clear about what the phrase “the science of training” actually meant. I am not sure I know either. Lacking a clear definition, I took it to mean the (published) body of knowledge on

subjects like training metrics, methodology, psychology, and so on, which has been developed from such scientific methods as formal research, surveys, planned assessment, theoretical papers, and so on.

Frankly, the training professionals I know—unless they are Ph.D.'s with limited exposure to an actual training and development environment—use this type of research to stay up to date on the discipline of training and development, but they are pretty down to earth when it comes to implementing new techniques and methodologies. The overriding question for them is “Does it work?”—meaning, “Is it short, to the point, relevant, and compelling enough to keep participants’ attention, and can people apply what they learned immediately back on the job?” These questions can be addressed through formal research, but they can be answered from direct experience as well.

From my experience in the real world, the body of knowledge generated by the science of training probably most often appears in the form of footnotes to training investment proposals and presentation slides at operations reviews; thus, the value of this information is to support preconceived training notions and plans or to justify training investments proposed or already made. In most cases the decisions of what to do have already been made based on “gut feelings” or personal experience.

Question: In your opinion, why has the body of knowledge generated by the science of training not had a bigger impact on your practice?

Answer: The training professionals surveyed indicated that a change in training methods is often costly and hard to sell internally; thus, they tend to stick with methods and practices with which they are already comfortable. Furthermore, corporations are generally satisfied with so-called smile sheets as a primary evaluation tool, eliminating the need for more extensive evaluations of alternative delivery methods.

I am convinced that the reason corporations are satisfied with smile sheets as a primary evaluation tool is because they have no idea and no expectation that training can solve real business problems. (See

Chapter Two, this volume, by Scott Tannenbaum, on connecting the training function to business challenges.) Furthermore, the reason they have no expectations of training impact is because we as training professionals have fallen into the “I’ve got a hammer, so everything looks like a nail” syndrome. Every training organization I have ever been involved with has dealt with the same fundamental challenge—“How do we tie or link our training solutions to the customer’s business problems?”—after the fact. Basically, the training organization leads with its training “hammer,” then identifies leadership or management or interpersonal skill “nails,” and starts pounding away while explaining to whoever will listen that if the company addresses skills in collaboration, teamwork, coaching, and so on, its “real problems” will go away. Unfortunately, there is no way to prove that connection, even if it does exist. As a business development consultant, my clients were primarily CEOs or equivalents, vice presidents of business units, and other managers with profit and loss responsibility. Over time, it became clear to me that many of the business solutions or recommendations I presented to them had significant organization development (OD) implications requiring training and development products and services. An example of the relationships between common business issues, typical business solutions, and implied OD or training interventions are shown in Exhibit 1.1.

For this reason, I built a training component into my business (a strategic partnership with multiple training professionals), and used my business consulting work to “pull through” additional revenue from training. It was fairly simple for my clients to see the link between the business issues I was helping them address and the OD training issues that were raised as a result. I do not believe that they would have made the same connection if I had led with training products and services. In addition, during times of economic downturn, my clients’ demand for real business solutions remained the same or increased, but many postponed buying my pull-through training and development services. My business did not suffer significantly, however, because my value to clients was primarily as a provider of business solutions, not training solutions.

So what is the implication for corporate training professionals? Perhaps that leading with an assessment of the business problems up front, providing training and consulting (even if outsourced)

Exhibit 1.1. Sample Links Among Business Issues, Business Solutions, and OD-Training Implications.

Business Issues	Business Solutions or Recommendations	OD Implications
Reduction in revenue	Revise sales or marketing strategy	Leadership or strategic direction Strategy facilitation
	Increase market penetration	Performance management
	Reorganize or reduce head count	Change management
		Conflict management
		Motivation
Declining profit margins	Reconstruct pricing model	Communication
	Reduce expenses	Finance training
		Collaboration
	Eliminate or expand product line	Communication
	Add or change distribution channels	
Intensified competition	Revise competitive strategy	Strategy facilitation

to address them, and then following through with training to address the organizational and personal development implications is a more effective way of linking what they do to real business issues. Why? Because the science of training will never come up with a metric that will show how a collaboration training course solved a revenue or profit problem.

Question: Which training tools, methods, strategies, guidelines, and principles do you need and why?

Answer: The tools, guidelines, and principles most commonly cited by respondents reflect fundamentally the key objectives or processes for training managers and consultants. They include the following:

1. Evidence that the training works (for example, method A changes or enhances behavior, attitude, or performance as measured by ___) as well as strategies for showing that training works, strategies for showing that its value outweighs its cost, and ways to convince management that training works and is cost-effective.

The key here is what we mean by the word *works*. If it means “solves a business problem,” then it seems to me it would be fairly simple to show that its value outweighs its cost and to convince management that it works and is cost-effective.

2. On-line tools to conduct needs assessments or training evaluation, or authoring tools to create the measurement (assessment-evaluation) instruments.
3. Tools to measure training outcomes and training effectiveness, and to aid decision making around training. (See Chapter Eleven of this volume, by Kurt Kraiger, for an explicit discussion linking evaluation to decision making on training.)
4. Return on investment (ROI) measurement tools: strategies to link business needs and objectives with appropriate training content, methodology, and resources (and needed competencies).
5. Strategies to motivate and facilitate self-directed learning over the employee life cycle. (Chapter Three

of this volume, by Noe & Colquitt, deals extensively with trainee motivation; Chapter Seven by Brown & Ford addresses enhancing motivation in learner-centered computer-based applications.)

6. Customization—proven tools that relate to *my* company, business, and training clients.

Question: What is the best forum for researchers to communicate new findings, tools, guidelines, or principles to training professionals such as yourself?

Answer: Training Web sites, conferences or seminars, or trade publications.

Personally, I liked your questions on research, its limitations, and the types of research training professionals would really like to see done. I've been involved in various aspects of the training and development industry for more than twenty-five years, and if I ruled the research world I would ask the following questions:

- Who actually uses the Internet to access training and development resources? Can this be broken down by age group, industry, function, role (individual contributor, manager, executive), geography, and gender in terms of usage patterns, why they are using the Internet, and when in the decision-making process they are accessing this information?
- What is the profile of the self-directed learner? Self-directed learners appear to be the key to the future of training and development, particularly with the growing influence of the Internet. Therefore, it would be interesting and helpful to know more about them. Who are they? What makes them self-directed? How can training professionals encourage or facilitate self-directedness among employees?

As noted above, we as training practitioners often rely on trial and error when adopting new techniques and look to training research to validate or support new initiatives. Perhaps our comments here can stimulate more research, more communication on methods, tools, and techniques that really work.