

Training for Knowledge ≠ Training for Competency

As an active member in the training industry for more than 20 years, I have learned one of the most important lessons for an educator to understand...training doesn't work. To a growing extent, business has been learning this lesson as well, usually after a large expense of time, effort and money. Occasionally, as in this article, a successful business recognizes that improving their performance demands programs that go beyond the simple and traditional training approach of lesson plans, lectures, binders, textbook and tests.

I have already reported on the success my colleague Geoff Davidson of *sales.org* has had with an innovative approach to developing competency and performance learning for the workplace. This article will focus on some of the details and results that have been accomplished by applying this approach.

In November of 1996 Geoff was approached by Stoney Kudel and Steve Brent, Learning Consultants with the CIBC Investment Specialist Group, and asked to assess the design, delivery, and effectiveness of their development program for new Investment Specialists. Geoff observed, "At that time this group of financial advisors was already considered the benchmark that many in the financial services industry were being measured against, a distinction that CIBC wished to build on and sustain.

"I was asked to evaluate all aspects of the training and support that the new Investment Specialist (IS) was receiving, as well as to provide specific recommendations on any areas where improvements could be made. Those initial assessments showed that the development program was delivering very acceptable results, with participants reporting an average of 7 actionable adult learnings for each day of training. At the time I shared the general belief that longer programs should deliver at least 3 actionable learnings each day, and that in the rarest of cases, that number could go as high as 10 per day. At 7 learnings per day, this ten day program had participants leaving with the knowledge and ability to apply 70 or more new actionable responsibilities.

TRAINING



**NORMAN L.
TRAINOR**

It was clear to me, from those numbers, why this group was enjoying industry respect and recognition for their success. That was not enough for Stoney, Steve, or the rest of the IS Group's management team. They were seeking ways to add more content, reduce the amount of time it was taking for the new IS to convert training into productive results, and to increase the value of the more than 3,500 pages of reference materials each IS packed away in boxes following the initial training program."

Working closely with Brent and Kudel, Davidson was able to identify three key elements in the program design that could benefit by applying newer and more effective learning and competency methods. By using specific 'constructive learning', 'criterion referencing', and 'action planning' approaches, they hoped to simplify the learning process, add more content, increase the long term value of the training materials, and assist the new IS in putting the learning into practice starting on their first day of work after the program.

Davidson describes these methods and how they were applied. "We know that adults are constructive learners, building on their own experience and existing knowledge. This meant that our first challenge was to apply the principal of '*constructive learning*' requiring us to identify the order in which training material should be organ-

ized. We started by looking for barriers to learning. What individual concerns, preconceptions, and misconceptions were the new IS's, as adults, likely to have that could distract them from achieving the key learning objectives. Some of these were obvious. On starting a new role, individuals will have concerns about their compensation packages, employee benefits, probation periods, compliance and regulations, job descriptions, phone number, desk, expense reporting...and so on. These all needed to be dealt with on the first day of training if we were to earn the attention of the participants.

"We next looked at the order in which content was delivered. This involved breaking each of the 38 modules into lists of prerequisite knowledge or experience needed to accomplish the key learning objectives. We discovered that more than half the modules had prerequisites that were being delivered much later in the program. This left us with a relatively simple task of re-ordering the sequence of the modules. We were also surprised to discover that the smallest module itself had 8 actionable learning objectives already listed. The development programs were only achieving results of 70 actionable learnings from a list with over 400 objectives.

"Our second challenge, following the principles of 'criterion referencing' was to convert the boxes of binders, books and handouts into a meaningful and valuable library of information for the IS. We achieved this with the simple and elegant solution of providing each participant with a series of 3 ring, 3½" binders, divided into the 43 modules, into which all the learning materials were placed. Each participant was provided a master index of the four binders which were then ready to place on the shelf, in the office, for easy reference by the IS, or for use by the IS in their training and mentoring activities.

The extra attention to sequencing of the modules, organizing reference materials, and planning those post learning activities

Continued on next page

has produced results well above expectations, three of which are illustrated in the table below.

When they began this process, all three were asked the same thing, ‘Why would you want to consider changing a program that is already among the best in the industry?’, a question that comes from the traditional thinking of *‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’* Davidson has his own version for this age old adage *‘If it ain’t broke, and you don’t fix it, you soon could be.’*

“In today’s marketplace, complacency is an all too dangerous rut that a business can easily fall into,” Kudel comments, “Instead of leaving well enough alone, we concentrated our efforts on improving our program’s focus on developing specific

competencies and support for the participant’s post learning success. One key to building sustainable competitive advantage is an unshakable commitment to excellence and continuous improvement.”

“To be a leader in your field, part of your responsibility is to keep moving forward in both your thinking, and your actions,” adds Brent, “Experiences like this help to emphasize that the best opportunities in business are often found in reexamining and improving on current strengths, instead of focusing attention and efforts on trying to find and fix problems.”

These results also set a new standard for those of us involved in designing, building, and delivering adult learning programs.

We now know it is possible to achieve 100 or more actionable learnings a day, and our programs should be assessed on how effectively we identify, measure and deliver competency based learning objectives. We owe it to ourselves as training professionals, to our clients for the obvious bottom-line value it will add to their business, and most importantly to the participants that these programs are intended to serve and empower.

Norm Trainor is a principal with The Covenant Group, a consulting company specializing in training and development.

This article first appeared in the September 1997 edition of the Canadian Human Resources Journal, the HR Reporter.



	ORIGINAL PROGRAM	AVERAGE OF REVISED PROGRAMS
LEARNING MODULES	38	43
ACTIONABLE LEARNINGS	73	> 800 [with 86 started and/or completed during the program]
PRODUCTIVITY	4 ~ 12 weeks	1 ~ 4 weeks