How Teaching Employees to Be Trainers Pays Off

Using your subject-matter experts can be a cost-effective way to teach the rest of the organization, provided you're aware of the challenges they'll face in becoming trainers.

By Mary Anne Donovan-Wright

Our training budget has been slashed, yet managers are screaming for supervisory training, software training, product training, and every type of training in between. No matter that there’s no money -- you’re still accountable for seeing that customers and employees are trained, and trained effectively.

Cutting training entirely may not be an option. "Today’s employees often judge the quality of company management by the quality of the training they receive," says William J. Rothwell, a professor of workforce education and development at Penn State University. "If training is poor, employees are likely to assume that management does not know what it is doing. That can lead to turnover -- even in a recession -- since the high-potential employees have portable skills."

One way to deal with this problem is to use subject-matter experts as trainers, a strategy that, if implemented with care and planning, can pay off for your company.

Does training come naturally?

Making this strategy work is not simply a matter of plopping your experts in front of a classroom one day.

"Training is not intuitive," notes Rothwell. "People may know their subject matter, but that does not mean they know how to train others."

"I think subject experts are a mixed bag," agrees Patricia Walsh, an operations manager at Xerox. "As technical experts, they are on the whole very intelligent, detail-oriented individuals who know their specific functional or technical areas very well. Individually, it’s more a personality and interest issue when you talk about an expert knowing (or wanting to know) how to train."

The fact is, your experts may know their stuff, but "trainer" has not typically been part of their job description.

So, experts advise, pick your expert trainers with great care.

"Besides performing the job well, the experts need to have a good personality, be able to deal with people, have patience, and be able to go
back to basics, which is sometimes difficult for an expert to do," says Joe Benkowski, of the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Brant Blumstein, training performance coach for the consulting firm AchieveGlobal, says that people determining whether subject-matter experts would make good trainers should ask: "Can they logically communicate ideas? Are they credible within the organization on the subject matter?"

Use an arduous selection process, agrees Benkowski. "First, interview the person. Ask them, do they want to train? Perform a pre-assessment. Look at the way they communicate. I ask them to explain to me how they do their job from the beginning. You can pick up if they have good communication skills from the interview."

Training may not be needed

Once you’ve determined that your experts have the basic personality traits, what next? Can you train them to become effective trainers? And if so, in what areas do you need to train them?

A myriad of train-the-trainer courses exist in every possible medium, including online courses, local college courses, and vendor-offered instructor programs. But the gospel of training competency can be found within the pages of ASTD Models for Workplace Learning and Performance: Roles, Competencies and Outputs, by Rothwell, Sanders, and Soper.

Rothwell says the study took three years, cost $50,000, and included data from training experts, skilled trainers in 22 nations, and a panel of well-known subject experts who set forth the competencies required for the professional practice of training.

According to the study, there are four broad competency areas for effective trainers: needs and assessment, design, delivery, and evaluation.

"Make a connection with people"

Under training needs and assessment, the required skill is the ability to determine whether training is needed in the first place. "The world is filled with problems. However, they boil down to only two kinds: those that can be solved by training and those that must be solved by management action," notes Rothwell.

Training design is the next key skill that experts need. "The average person does not, like a brain surgeon, just naturally know how to do brain surgery," says Rothwell. "But experts often assume that other people know what they know. The key to training design is structuring information in ways that novices can learn it."
Karen Peters, director of instructional and information technology at the Dickinson School of Law, agrees: "They [subject experts] need to remember what it was like to be a novice in their field of expertise. They need to be able to break their knowledge down into reasonable chunks."

Once experts understand how and why the training is designed the way it is, they must be able to effectively deliver it. Jill Mancini, account executive for AchieveGlobal and a former trainer, identifies three roles that trainers must fill to deliver effective training. First is that of administrator: "They need to know how to navigate the materials," she says. Second is the role of instructor: making sure the learners "get it." And third is that of facilitator: "They have to make sure learners can take the knowledge back to the workforce."

Some experts refer to these as "platform skills" -- the ability to make eye contact, use questions effectively, generate discussion, give clear instructions, work with groups, and handle conflicts, disagreements, and disruptive behavior.

"They have to learn the platform skills," says Blumstein. "They need to be able to make a connection with people."

Rothwell’s fourth trainer competency is training evaluation. Once the training has been designed and delivered, how do you know whether it was effective? "Given the demands of decision-makers to know whether their investments in training are paying off, today’s trainer needs to know how to forecast the benefits of training and how to follow up to see how well people liked the training, how much they learned, how much they carried back to the job and applied, and how much the company gained in improved productivity from the training."

How then do you take an expert and make him or her into an effective, dynamic trainer?

Xerox’s Walsh offers a plan. "What has worked with my group is to hire a good technical trainer to work with the experts to develop a solid training curriculum, and then perform a train-the-trainer class, with the expert acting first as student and then as trainer for the modules of the training at first, then the whole course -- to an internal audience with the curriculum developer as coach and backup."

Daryl Hunt, project manager for the software company MatrixOne, offers a variation on this theme. Hunt agrees with pairing experts and proven trainers, as well as engaging complementary skill sets between classroom instructors.
"I look at a person and use what they already do. What can they contribute? I’ve got some people who are incredible at answering questions, but no way can they do a lesson plan. I’ve got others who can bluff their way through anything, but a question comes up and they don’t know how to deal with it because it wasn’t in the plan. I need one of each in the classroom -- and then I can teach one how to answer questions and the other to deal with the lesson plan.”

It’s less expensive

Blumstein identifies three payoffs to using subject-matter experts. First, a company can develop its own in-house subject-matter experts/trainers. "You create a cadre of trainers who can be flexibly employed to meet any organizational training need. In addition, these are people who know the organization and therefore bring knowledge and credibility to the training."

Second, cross-training experts in this manner provides value-added career development. "This develops aspects of leadership in the organization such as good communication and presentation skills."

And third, using experts for training is cost effective. "Financially it's less expensive than hiring outside trainers," says Blumstein.

Benkowski describes other dimensions to the payoff of this approach. First is a continuity in the training. "It allows you to have standards in the organization for how you do things. Everyone is trained alike." Also, subject-matter experts who train know the organization’s business. "They know where to put the greatest emphasis, what skills are the most difficult to learn."