Intelligent training motivates the HR and payroll teams

Kellie-Ann Williams and Jane Lovell

Skimming on training a costly mistake

Towards the tail-end of the 1990s, the prevailing calm of the IT establishment was rocked by a group of academic and business heavyweights. They had begun to advance a disturbing new theory. Despite three decades of substantial systems investment – years which had also seen astonishing leaps in technology – they claimed that few organisations had reaped the promised rewards.

In fact, the bottom-line gap between what had been expected from information technology and what had actually been achieved was as wide as ever. To quote Paul A. Strassmann, a former chief information officer at Xerox and author of The Squandered Computer, “It was a gradual realisation that the emperor had no clothes.”

Chief among the reasons advanced for this malaise was the low emphasis that organisations had placed on building upon their initial investment. Surveys demonstrated that the amount companies spent on the purchase and installation of systems far outstripped what they had set aside to support and maintain them. Many claimed to have been taken aback by the hidden costs of their investment and admitted they had frequently skimped on what they now perceived to be a particularly crucial area of system functionality – user training.

The current boom under way in the training profession demonstrates how quickly attitudes have changed. Many customer organisations now bargain on spending at least double their initial investment on post-installation development and training. As the knowledge economy advances, the pressure placed on organisations to shell out increasing sums on staff development intensifies. “Our people are our most important asset” is now a commonplace assertion in the average Annual Report. And there is growing evidence that the markets are beginning to hold companies to their word – marking down those deemed not to have set aside sufficient resources for “people development.”

No wonder these are heady times for trainers. “Training has evolved remarkably in the past two years,” says Annabel Hall, training manager of PWA, which develops and markets a range of human resource and payroll software. “Not just at PWA, but as a profession.”
She believes this is because organisations have begun to see user education as an important part of the whole software solution. In fact it is now frequently perceived to be the critical factor in the drive to gain demonstrable business benefit as quickly as possible from the new investment.

Fostering "intelligent" system use

"Buyers have high expectations," says Hall. "They want their people to use the software intelligently, rather than just entering data. They want them coming back with questions, answers and suggestions. For instance, 'we could do \( x \) with it and get \( y \) information out if we inserted \( z \) into the software'."

Hall believes this kind of proactive, inquisitive mentality is impossible to foster unless people are intimately acquainted with the possibilities on offer — and it is not enough to simply set aside time in the office for this. "The software functionality is so huge that they need to spend at least a day or more 'playing' under the guidance of someone who knows the software inside out."

Users also need to be shown what impact the new system will have on existing business processes and practices within their organisation and consequently how their own modus operandi may be altered for the better.

Surge towards strategic HR

Many HR practitioners admit they are facing a crisis of sorts as the profession comes under growing pressure to become more business-centric and strategic in its outlook.

"CEOs increasingly know that people are important for performance, but they don't know what to do about it," says Linda Holbeche, director of research and strategy at the Roffey Park training institute. "And if HR managers won't tell them, who will?"

The importance of information systems reaching their full potential as part of this drive is clear. Indeed, such is the demand from customers to ensure they have the appropriate level of training for their organisations that it has fuelled an important new strand of business for consultants.

"We will we go in and analyse the training needs of the customer", says Annabel Hall, of PWA. "How many users, how many sites, what technology they have, what products and business processes are in place, and what sort of priority is given to those processes."

Critical to this service is ensuring user buy-in. "We're not just looking at the project team, we're involving users. They might not have seen the software yet, but we're aiming to get them on side."

The importance of getting this kind of buy-in at an early stage of the implementation, she claims, cannot be overestimated. It is the best way to avoid damaging clashes between the aims of a system's purchasers and its users. Without it, people seconded to training courses can often be downright "bolshie".

"They'll tell you they don't want to be there before even starting, and you immediately have a huge barrier — often with only one day to get over it."

"Soft skills" and psychology the key

In Hall's experience, change of any sort is often met with mixed feelings in organisations. "Instinctively, most people's attitude is 'this is the way I like to do it, and I don't want to change'."

But she firmly believes that such obstacles can be overcome, if handled in the right way. In many ways it is a question of getting the psychology right. Indeed the company places great emphasis on ensuring that its trainers are as well versed in the "soft skills" inherent in the learning process as they are in the technical nitty-gritty of systems, and earlier this year was awarded the status of Gold Standard Accredited (GSA) Training Provider from the Institute of IT Training (IITT).

The IITT, a professional body whose main remit is to spread best practice in IT training delivery and development, both in the classroom and through e-Learning methodologies, claims it is impossible to underestimate the importance of fostering
such a human-based skill set. They believe that more than 90 per cent of the effectiveness of a classroom learning experience is due to the trainer’s people skills.

Yet the continuing failure of training organisations to take this into account is selling customer companies short. Most trainers continue to concentrate exclusively on technical and product-oriented skills. Consequently, the IITT claims that, although some £1 million will be spent on IT training in the UK this year, much of this investment will be wasted – “spent on training that’s ineffective, unsuitable, and is not measured in any way to gauge its business benefits.”

One thing that distinguished the PWA accreditation bid was a distinctly hands-on approach. People on courses are encouraged to make connections for themselves.

“With our methodology we don’t ‘present’ to delegates – our training is much more workshop-based,” says Annabel Hall. “We don’t tell people what they need to do, we get them to work it out for themselves.”

For this reason classroom sizes are small – never more than six delegates. “If you’re one of ten, 12 or 15 it’s not a training course, it’s a presentation. There’s no time for one-to-one tuition or coaching.”

The most important quality the company looks for in recruiting potential trainers is a genuine love of training. According to Hall, “It’s about loving teaching and helping people to learn – something you’re born with really. The people we work with make individuals want to achieve for their company.”

Helping organisations help themselves

PWA believes another significant aspect of its work is the emphasis it places on the trickling down of training skills throughout the organisation both at client companies and in-house. Essentially this amounts to a dual-pronged didactic approach. First, empower people to learn for themselves. Second, imbue them with the skills and confidence to train others.

One customer organisation that has benefited from this approach is NCH Action for Children, one of the UK’s longest-standing charities devoted to children and families. While this charity has come a long way from its roots in 1860s Methodism – it now has some 430 ongoing projects across the country, 5,000 employees and an annual income in excess of £95 million – their spirit of innovation remains unchanged.

In 1869 the charity founded the UK’s first children’s home – a radical step in the age of Oliver Twist and the workhouse. And their revolutionary work continued throughout the twentieth century, as pioneers of adoption in the early years, and then taking their position at the forefront of preventive action against child poverty, neglect and abuse during the 1960s and 1970s.

Having re-evaluated the idea that children needed to be “rescued” from “problem” families, the charity began to concentrate on building the infrastructure to support these groups. It now boasts an established nationwide network of day nurseries, residential homes and family centres, and is an active campaigner for young people’s and children’s rights.

Given the diversity of its operations up and down the country, NCH Action for Children wanted to upgrade to a network-based HR and Payroll software suite that would guarantee a degree of central control and homogeneity.

It was essential that the use of this system be consistent in all offices, and that it be clearly established exactly who would have access. And most significantly, it wanted the ability to link data emanating from its network of branch offices back to the centre, so as to better identify any emerging trends affecting its workforce.

Given the charity’s strong track record in training – its nineteenth century founder was one of the first to recognise that those responsible for children needed professional training – it is no surprise that particular emphasis was placed on this from the outset.

Primary responsibility for the project fell to the charity’s head of Payroll, Kim Whetlor, and its new HR adviser, Deborah Macaly. Their strategy was to discover exactly how a specially customised system would be used in the organisation, assess the charity’s training needs, and then take responsibility themselves for training the 30 or so eventual users.

Macaly in particular believed that such an in-house approach was critical if the training was to relate properly to NCH Action for Children’s specific daily operations.
"Train the trainer" delivers ongoing benefits

To gain the skills necessary to tackle this potentially daunting task, Whetlor attended PWA’s “Train the trainer” course. And by shadowing PWA’s Annabel Hall as she presented a training session on the Personnel module, Whetlor also gained a practical insight into how their own courses were likely to unravel. This particular training session, conducted on the charity’s designated pilot region for system testing, became the primary model when it came to the organisation’s own training programme.

Working as a double act, Whetlor and Macaly introduced the new software’s prospective users to both their technical and business capabilities, with Whetlor assuming responsibility for taking them through the products and Macaly demonstrating how they would facilitate their day-to-day working lives as HR professionals. As the objectives and anticipated outcomes of the courses had been carefully defined in advance, each delegate knew what was expected of them.

Three of the team undertook further training in report writing directly from PWA because it was felt they needed to gain full expertise at the start of the development process. However, the charity’s eventual aim is to build its own levels of technical experience to the point that all future training in report writing can be done in-house.

Promoting branch autonomy, most of the systems’ users will be encouraged to take this course. As a controlling balance, however, the organisation’s IT specialist, Bill Charlton, also took a PWA Systems Supervisor technical course – to hone the central management of the systems and brush up on any trouble-shooting skills that might be required.

Gauging success

An important part of any project is measuring its impact. This is notoriously difficult to gauge scientifically in the training arena – and to some extent the best measures are based on informal feedback.

“We do have feedback forms,” explains Annabel Hall, “but these can differ substantially according to the subjective views of an individual. What is ‘excellent’ to one person is only ‘satisfactory’ to another, and so they’re really more useful for spotting general trends.”

For instance, if the level of feedback drops it may indicate something has gone awry – and perhaps Hall will sit in on that course to do some delving and coaching. But she says the primary motivation of most PWA trainers is not the formal feedback they receive from their courses, so much as informal remarks.

“Seeing ‘Thanks ever so much, that was a great day’ written on the bottom of a feedback form is more rewarding than getting a tick in the ‘excellent’ box. It’s personal then.”

As far as Macaly is concerned, the success of the NCH Action for Children training programme has been amply demonstrated by the ease with which the majority of users have taken to the system. Many have shown a proactive interest in future application developments and how they might enhance their work, which the experienced Macaly takes as the best possible indicator that user “buy-in” has been achieved.

From a technical point of view, Whetlor claims to have “pinched” several PWA follow-up ideas. She has instituted a series of “incident reports” which allow users to communicate any problems they might have with the system directly to the head office. She believes the fact that these reports are being filed with ever-decreasing regularity demonstrates that the training groundwork is already paying dividends. But to ensure a consistent flow of advice and troubleshooting if necessary, NCH Action for Children has also set up a centralised user help desk.

Team spirit, enthusiasm and determination

At PWA, trainers work closely with project management teams to tailor courses to customer organisations’ specific requirements. This ability to work in tandem with other departments within PWA also boosts the trainers’ understanding of the particular business needs of customer organisations, and has allowed them to play a critical role in new product development.

“The ideas come from all sorts of people,” says Hall. “Sometimes from Support, sometimes from Sales – they know what they can sell and we can see if it’s viable or not.
lot of ideas come from trainers. They all want to improve the service we give.”

To keep these new ideas ticking over, the company invests strongly in continuous staff education. “Self-development at PWA is massive,” says Hall. All new trainers are sent on IITT courses and they also undertake technical courses.

“They take a course in product development and one for training techniques. When they eventually deliver their first course, it’s their choice whether I’m in there with them. But after they’ve run two or three, I’ll sit in on their course regardless and then we’ll do a feedback session. So they’re monitored all the time.” Experienced trainers, meanwhile, are kept up to date by going on site with project managers and implementation consultants.

What then are Hall’s tips for other trainers? Of this she is certain. First, be confident in your abilities. And second, maintain momentum in terms of team morale.

Nurturing this kind of buzz and enthusiasm internally is obviously critical if it is to be passed on to customers. But Hall claims to have learned the hard way that for projects to be successful there must be a degree of steely determination beneath the buzz.

“Nobody will do anything for you – you have to do it yourself. Everyone else has their own motivations and agendas,” she claims. “I really had to beg for the time to get the training consultancy up and running, but that’s since furthered my career in a lot of ways.

“You must have the motivation to succeed.”

PWA would welcome your comments and can be contacted on 01628 404505 or via the Web site: www.pwahr.com