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How IT Training Pays Off

Emerging and ever-evolving hardware and software technologies require IT personnel who are well-trained and proficient in all aspects of their field.

Karen J. Bannan

This fall, more than 550 Tufts University employees switched over to a new meeting planner system. Despite the significant change, there was no loss in productivity for most users because they were trained onsite by the university's IT Training and Documentation department.

Extensive IT training for a technical rollout is business-as-usual at Tufts, and it is offered to all 150 employees working in the university's Computing and Communications Services department. Training is also offered to faculty, administrators and other staff members who interact with IT programs and hardware.

"We meet the majority of our IT training needs through a comp- rehensive in-house program," explains Dawn Irish, manager of IT Training and Documentation for Tufts' Computing and Commun- ications Services. "Included in our curriculum are several Microsoft certification courses, Linux, general IT security classes and a host of offerings aimed at familiarizing our IT staff with Tufts' proprietary systems," Irish says.

Since training is included in the Central Administration budget, Irish explains that she attempts to cover as much of it as possible in-house. That way, university departments are not burdened with paying for outside training.

Tufts offers more than 100 courses and fills between 1,500 and 2,000 seats each year. While there is no set course requirement, Irish says that supervisors try to include at least one or two courses in their employees' yearly objectives and goals. "It's a major benefit for the employees," she says. "If they paid for these courses on their own, they would be spending $2,000 to $5,000 per class. Our solid training program allows us to remain competitive with other employers and ensures that long-time employees' skills remain current."

Tufts University is on to something, based on a recent report from Forrester Research, a market research firm based in Cambridge, Mass. There's a new directive for anyone who falls under the heading of IT employee, according to the report. It's not enough to train based on a technology infrastructure. Instead, universities have to plan for their future—and that of their employees.

"To motivate IT people you need to train them often because this is a knowledge-oriented field," says Laurie Orlov, vice president and research director of Forrester Research's IT management team. "Organizations need to create an IT worker training plan."

According to the report, this involves creating competency maps—simple outlines that detail each of your employees' skills and proficiencies—as well as creating incentives that will keep your newly trained workers from leaving your university for the higher-paying private sector.

Marilyn McMillan, associate provost and chief information technology officer at New York

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— Vic Jabrassian, IT director at Southern California Institute of Architecture

University in New York City, says this strategy helped her IT staff diversify and fill needs that are as yet to be defined. The university's IT staff spends time talking about professional development goals. Project management, public speaking and other so-called intangible skills are included in NYU's training agenda.

"One-third of our training is in specific products or skills that technology people are going to use right now or in the next minute," McMillan says. "Another third is in broader-range topics not related to specific project needs, and [the final] third is about involvement in other associations. Professional development isn't just about taking a course. It's about using what you learned on something meaningful."

Training the Trainer

Figuring out who should be trained first is tricky. Of course, anyone involved in a new technology rollout should be offered a class slot. But there are other variables as well. Can you tie a new class or skill with a performance review by making that class a reward for exemplary service? And then there's the "training the trainer" option.

Suzanne Montague, vice president for information technology and CIO at the University of Texas at Arlington's Office of Information Technology, says her employees are often tapped to head an in-house training program. For example, the university recently rolled out a new campuswide Oracle program. More than 20 people needed training, but Montague sent a handful of people instead, saving time and money.

"Three went to lessons and came back and taught the other 17," Montague says. "They were able to go to the class and draw up lessons that highlighted how the new information was pertinent to our campus."

Of course, using IT people to train others on staff also has drawbacks. Someone who is just learning a skill might not have the depth of understanding to convey its intricacies. There are also the personality factors and the ability to teach. Someone who is a brilliant technologist might not be a great trainer.

The trick, says Cathy O'Bryan, assistant director of user services at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is tracking the success and quality of all your IT training, whether it happens in-house, remotely or online. Her university ensures that its IT training is successful by maintaining quality standards. It monitors those standards by asking those enrolled to rate teachers—both in-house and visiting instructors.

"The end users have formative and summative items," she says. "And we maintain certain quality standards within [our own] courses. Instructors must have a 4.5 [out of 5] on quality points."

Tufts University goes one step further: It tracks and documents the return on investment (ROI) of its training programs, something that Irish says is simple to do. "A+ training runs $2,000 [per person]," she says. "If we fill a class on campus with 10 people, we're saving $20,000 in outside training costs."

Irish also mentions the intangible ROI: "the time we would spend rebuilding a machine that went down if we didn't have someone on staff who knew what they were doing."

Online vs. Onsite

Department heads at the University of Wisconsin-Madison can send their employees to onsite or offsite training, or they can use a third option—online training, says Cathy O'Bryan, assistant director of user services. But O'Bryan says the best courses, in her opinion and based on user feedback, are those completed in person.

"You can teach any course online, but even the best instructors may not be in tune with the entire audience," she says.

Wendy Woodward, director of technology support services at Northwestern University says she prefers instructor-led courses for a more practical reason. "We don't do online courses a lot because it's difficult for employees to focus," she says. "It's too easy to hear the phone ring or [notice] a co-worker walking by."

But there are several strong reasons why online courses might be right for your employees. Cost is a big one: You don't incur any travel expenses, and many online firms charge less than

traditional onsite training companies.

There's also more accountability: You have an online paper trail that proves completion and mastery of a course.

Still, in the end, your choice may come down to what you're trying to impart, says Laurie Orlov, vice president and research director at Forrester Research's IT management team in Cambridge, Mass.

"There's a migration going on so that greater [skills] refreshing is able to happen online," she explains. "But intensive training involving case studies and hands-on work has got to happen face to face."

Karen J. Bannan is a New York-based freelance writer.