

Chapter 4

Corporate Trainers: Practitioner–Scholars in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Corporate training programs are widely prevalent, even ubiquitous. This situation is likely to continue: some management experts predict that training will become a continual process and include employees at all levels of the organization. Organizations, especially large ones, typically have dedicated staff (trainers) who manage and deliver training programs. In order to be effective, trainers must be knowledgeable about available and appropriate education delivery methods. Programs are often tightly linked to content - thus, trainers need to have some technical knowledge. Corporate trainers can utilize knowledge about advances in the fields of both content and delivery for organizational benefit. In turn, as possessors of knowledge from practical implementation they can make contributions to the fields. Thus, corporate trainers are ideally positioned as practitioner scholars in the workplace. Frameworks proposed in this chapter indicate how trainers can bridge the practitioner-scholar gap.

INTRODUCTION

It is now widely acknowledged that current conditions, particularly in the U.S., pertain to a knowledge economy, and that employees have become “knowledge workers.” This is the case across various sectors, industries and segments of the economy. A knowledge economy is subject to rapid changes. An organization’s ability to adapt equally rapidly to these changing realities is critical to its success (Bahlis, 2008, p. 64). In contrast to manufacturing environments where equipment plays a critical role, a knowledge economy is characterized by organizations’ extreme reliance on employees for success (Hughes, 2010, 2012, 2014). As noted by Drucker (2008, p. 195), under these conditions, rather than improvements to machine efficiency and productivity, the central challenge “will be to make knowledge workers productive.”

Training, as present in most organizations now, can be broadly defined as a planned way to “modify attitude, knowledge, skill or behavior”, through learning experiences with the aim of effecting change in performance (Milhem et. al, 2014). Training activities address means by which employees obtain and

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develop knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) to perform their roles and functions. The more traditional role of training was to implement programs to help participants, in most instances lower level employees, develop skills. There has been something of a paradigm shift in how training is viewed and used in many organizations: the emphasis has moved from skills-acquisition and efficiencies to learning and effectiveness. Training is increasingly understood to mean not only specific programs that specific individuals participate in periodically or sporadically, but a broader, continual education process. Environmental changes, driven mainly by technological advances and globalization, have been pushing the scope of training beyond traditional parameters. Thus, trainers appear poised to play a key role in ensuring organizational ability to meet, and thrive in, the challenges of the knowledge economy.

From being support staff, trainers are now likely to become more tightly integrated into organizational planning at all levels, even strategic. This means that trainers, themselves knowledge workers, will need to have deeper knowledge, skills, and competencies. The shift in training's emphasis to education implies that trainers must be well-informed on pedagogy. With the attendant shift to a deeper role, trainers will need to be better informed about content areas. Trainers who have a better handle on advances in both arenas will be better equipped to meet changing organizational demands.

Scholarly publications provide a rich trove of knowledge resources for trainers to tap into. As practitioners, trainers can take advantage of this shared knowledge and information to meet their organization's special challenges. The flow of information from shared, generalized knowledge to specifics is beneficial to both trainers and their organizations. However, there is a need for flow in the other direction as well. Sadler-Smith (2014) notes that several scholars in the Human Resource Development field have lamented the lack of relevant new theories, urged that there be focus on "real" problems and recommended that cross-disciplinary groups including both practitioners and scholars work on these problems. The term scholar-practitioner usually refers to the individuals combining the two aspects related to knowledge. However, in the case of trainers, a more apt term might be "practitioner-scholars" since the starting point of their theoretical contributions is in practical application. The notion of practitioner-scholars has been discussed in varied fields, for example, in the context of PhD and professional (health care related) programs (Salipante & Aram, 2003).

The contention of this chapter is that trainers are uniquely situated to engineer a flow of scholarly work from specific, practitioner experiences to general theories. Rather than being just consumers and users of knowledge and information (Salipante & Aram, 2003, Russ-Eft et. al, 2014), they can be producers as well. The ideas stressed in this chapter are that role enhancement of trainers makes them better prepared to make scholarly contributions, and that there is a process to be followed for a trainer to become a scholar as well as a practitioner. Two conceptual frameworks related to these ideas are proposed in this chapter. Framework 1- "Role Enhancement", is a tool that illustrates the implications and impacts of trainers' roles in the organization. Framework 2 - "Scholar to Practitioner and Back", traces action paths of knowledge development. The chapter is relevant to those individuals who "see their primary contribution as practitioners, but who are also attracted to academic scholarship" (Bartunek, 2008, p. 7).

ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS OF TRAINING

Training, in one form or another, is part of every organization. In the past, decisions about training were passed down from upper management. Increasingly, training is requested and sometimes demanded by employees themselves. Changes in the business environment, such as the loosening of the social

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