
Distance learning – bringing out the best in training

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Abstract

The traditional view is that live training is the only suitable means of delivering sales and management training. Companies fail to consider distance learning as an alternative – or addition – to make management and staff development programmes even more effective. Principal advantages of distance learning are flexibility, cost savings, more efficient use of time and staff motivation. It can be more effective – people learn at their own pace and retain more information, staff are far more likely to accept ownership and learners are more proactive. For the company, acceptance of the merits of the training and development message at all levels brings positive changes to company culture and philosophy, introducing the concept of being “a learning organisation” and providing a knock-on advantage of boosting staff morale and motivation.

Size does matter to any company considering how to set up and implement an effective training programme. Equally, the location of the personnel and the distance they may have to travel to attend training sessions is a prime consideration for those responsible for designing how the programme is structured and delivered.

All too often, the numbers of staff involved or the spread of employees mean that costs become prohibitive and result in a decision to abandon good intentions altogether – or lead to a watered down training programme which falls hopelessly short of initial expectations and fails to achieve significant benefits for business or staff morale.

The answer to these problems – and many other issues that arise in training programmes for whatever purpose – is distance learning.

Distance learning has taken a back seat for too long but its full potential is at last beginning to be recognised. The traditional view is that live training is the only suitable means of delivering sales and management training and many companies fail to consider distance learning as an alternative or addition to drive home the message to full effect.

An ideal solution for all training needs – from management development to sales training – is a well-structured programme that combines a carefully planned and detailed distance learning course supported or supplemented by elements of live training to deliver specific messages and re-inforce key areas.

In the business and commercial environment, quite apart from the prospect of huge cost savings, distance learning offers many other advantages – the principal benefit being that staff undergoing the training programmes are far more likely to accept ownership and take closer interest and personal responsibility in their career development.

People can learn at their own pace, information is more easily retained, there is a more effective use of time if people do not have to travel and the entire process offers more flexibility. It also encourages learners to be far more proactive in their approach.

However attentive the personnel involved in the training programme may be, the amount of information which they take in during a live training or coaching session, is limited.

The effect of the training message also varies according to the individual and people attending the same seminar or undergoing an

identical course, give importance to different aspects of the course being delivered. And everyone is apt to forget!

In addition to its total flexibility and cost-effectiveness, distance learning has another distinct advantage in that once it has been designed and prepared, it remains as a valuable resource within the company for permanent use.

How does a company decide whether distance learning may be the viable solution for them and what does distance learning involve?

Back to basics! Staff training and development costs UK companies millions of pounds every year but many businesses are not reaping the full benefits of their investment because training methods fall short of their real potential or set out with unclear objectives.

There are three key stages to identifying the requirements of an organisation and achieving a successful solution – assessment, implementation and evaluation.

As a preliminary to any training programme, it is important that the entire company undergoes a top-to-toe *assessment* to identify their precise needs. There are few businesses that would not benefit from some form of training and development in one area or another.

In some instances distance learning offers the only real option for staff training and development and it has to be mutually exclusive. Wherever possible and practical, real benefits can be appreciated when live training and distance learning work alongside to complement each other.

Whoever designs the programme first needs to spend time thoroughly understanding the company structure and, more importantly, its culture. This may be best performed by someone from outside the company, or someone not directly involved in the day-to-day running of the business, because it requires a degree of independent judgment and objectivity – and confidentiality – that is not influenced by seniority or rank or perhaps clouded by too insular a view.

This period of assessment should involve interviews with every level of employee from the boardroom down and, to be truly effective, requires a frank and candid approach from those taking part.

It should focus on the participant's own perception of the company's aims and

objectives and its training needs. It should ascertain individual views on the role of management superiors, colleagues working alongside and other staff reporting to the interviewee, in order to gauge an overall view. It should also identify clear accountability throughout the company.

The process will allow the person charged with implementing the training and development programme to define the exact nature of the course structure, the precise areas within the organisation where it should be delivered and the itinerary and timetable for delivery with maximum effect.

It will also serve another vital function in the eventual success of the training programme by helping to influence a positive change in company philosophy by introducing the concept of being “a learning organisation”.

There is also a knock-on advantage of this “holistic” approach in that it can provide a considerable boost to staff morale and motivation generally.

The next stage in the training programme development is to decide on the most effective means of its *implementation*. Who, what, where and how? are the key questions that need to be answered for the training to be delivered effectively.

Who? The individuals or group who will benefit most from the training will have been identified during the assessment process and whoever is responsible for steering the training programme will obviously monitor its progress and be involved at every stage.

However, line managers have a key role to play in ensuring the success of the programme and it is important that they understand the benefits of distance learning.

After all, distance learning does not mean “isolated” learning. It works best when individuals are able to develop their knowledge and skills from the learning material and apply them practically in the workplace. The process is reinforced through continual support and coaching provided by managers at work.

What? The distance learning programme has to be divided into manageable “chunks” to enable the trainees to build up their knowledge and skills over a period.

The precise aims and objectives of the programme determined during the assessment procedure will lay down the course schedule and development stages, and the

whole programme should be designed to flow smoothly towards the identified goals.

As a preliminary, the training material needs to be determined. Whether it is entirely text-based in the form of manuals and worksheets, recorded in the form of audio tapes or visually presented on video – or a combination of two or three – will be affected by participant numbers, programme content, the duration of the course and cost.

All training material must be easy-to-follow, clearly presented and be accompanied by comprehensive guidance notes. The aims and objectives of the programme should be set out prominently at the beginning and all resources required for the completion of the programme should be readily available.

Where and how? Distance learning programmes should be designed to be carried out during work hours although employees should feel free to take material home with them to continue studies if they wish. Participants should be allowed to study at home or given a quiet area at work where they can concentrate and give proper attention to the learning material.

Although the majority of distance learning material is designed to be studied and followed by an individual working on their own and at their own pace, the training programme is best supported by group workshops or personal coaching at stages throughout the course. The sessions and venues – either the workplace or another location convenient for all participants – should be built into the course timetable.

During the training period/study periods employees should not be distracted or disturbed to do other jobs.

Throughout the training programme the help and encouragement of line management is an integral part of a successful outcome. In order to ensure that managers fully understand their coaching role, distance learning programmes should feature a manager's guide which summarises the aims and objectives of the programme, provides an insight into the material that the participants will be studying, and set out the duties that managers are expected to undertake.

Frequently, distance learning programmes are prefaced by a workshop held specifically for managers and trainers to make them aware of their importance in the training process.

Finally, *evaluation* is an essential component of any distance learning programme as a means of monitoring results and assessing its success.

During the training programme, opportunities for self-assessment should be built into the material so that participants can check their progress and satisfy themselves that they fully understand the information they have studied before moving on to the next stage of the course. Managers also need to make themselves aware of the employee's progress in order to provide any additional coaching that may be required.

Depending upon the type of training programme, the assessment procedure should be split into two processes – theory and practice. Theory tests the knowledge the employee has gained and ensures specific objectives have been met while the practice assessment is designed to test the skills and attitudes of employees in their job.

Attainments records should be maintained throughout the distance learning programme so that employee, manager and trainer can monitor progress.

The method of evaluating the overall benefits to the company provided by the distance learning programme will have been determined during the initial assessment of the organisation's needs and requirements.

With sales training the success of the distance learning programme can be measured in increased sales volumes, and in other forms of management or staff development the impact of the training will be evident through improved business results, system effectiveness and staff performance.

Whether for blue-chip corporations or the smaller business, industrial, commercial, retail or service organisation, distance learning offers a powerful, highly flexible, cost-effective solution that can provide an answer to all training and development needs.