BUSINESS ACUMEN

Aligning Training to Business Results

Seven routes to explore with your CEO.

By Ruth Clark and Ann Kwinn

DID YOU KNOW that U.S. corporations invested more than 50 billion dollars in training in 2004? Fifty billion. That's equivalent to Bill Gates's net worth and about 40 percent greater than the $30 billion spent annually on pet care in the United States. Big investments warrant big returns. But what kind of return are organizations getting for their training dollars? Unless you align corporate training to organizational goals, any returns you realize from the training investment will be by chance alone.

Drawing from our experience and that of several corporate colleagues, we've laid out seven paths that can help you align training programs to business goals successfully. To apply these guidelines, you need to ask your CEO and management team the right questions. We've provided a number of suggestions you can adapt to your situation.

Route 1
Become the organization's GPS.
A global positioning system has saved many geographically challenged drivers from getting lost. Of course, to be of any value, the driver has to know the destination. Similarly, once you know your management's destinations, you can help your organization get there by steering training initiatives in complementary directions.

Here's what to ask your CEO first: Where are we going, and how will we know when we are there?

The purpose of that question is to determine the organization's goals—which must be bottom-line and specific—as well as to define how the CEO measures progress toward those goals. Increasing market share, reducing production costs, improving the customer's experience, reducing errors, and minimizing accident rates are some common examples of bottom-line, strategic goals.

When approaching the CEO, you can ask the "direction question" in a variety of ways:
- In the ideal world, what would this organization look like?
- What kinds of indicators would tell you that you've realized your vision?
- What are the organization's major priorities for the next one to three years?
- What would you like to see next year that you don't see now?
- Do you have some executive management targets for next year?
- Which business units will be most instrumental in achieving those targets?

Frank Nguyen, senior learning technologist with Intel Corporation, recommends placing the training function within specific business units to closely align with the bottom line. Nguyen says, "My previous training organization was a cost center: It was an organization that supported another support organization and was not directly aligned with a business unit that generated revenue for the company, such as manufacturing or sales. The current organization I work for is aligned directly with manufacturing."

By associating with important functional business units, you'll find it easier to promote important operational objectives.

Joey Connelly, manager of employee effectiveness at RadioShack, concurs. He

recommends that all trainers "get the heck out of your office. You cannot figure out the answers to the questions that you have, that you're asking yourself, sitting in your own cubicle. If you want to know how to better align yourself to the business, you have to go out into some part of the business. I like to say, 'The closer you are to the batteries in one of our stores, the better your decisions become.' I don't care who you are in the organization or who you support; you've got to get close to your customers. Those people who are closest to the customers have the clarity necessary to understand how the business operates."

Tom Eucker, knowledge strategist for Intel, takes a more drastic approach to focusing on business results. He recommends "moving out of traditional training roles and focusing instead on improving the business itself and the critical learning processes that are more naturally integrated with doing the job." Eucker says that he has "added value by developing more effective teams and staff, addressing challenging cross-organizational issues, and enabling business processes to better leverage the knowledge—both documented and 'undocumentable'—that exists in the organization."

Route 2
Alleviate the pain points.

You need to identify management's greatest areas of pain. Ask them,
- What keeps you awake at night?
- What business issues have given you the biggest headaches recently?
- What do you see as your biggest source of frustration or concern over the next year or so?

Katheryn Seiders, a business operations manager for Bristol-Myers Squibb Company's global clinical development, study strategy, and planning group, reports that one of the operational concerns in drug development is the time it takes to get a new drug to market. One solution is to move from a functional to a matrixed team structure and get cross-functional global teams to work together efficiently.

During a drug study, protocol managers must align and engage as many as 40 different technical specialists globally, including bio-statisticians, drug supply managers, site managers, and physicians. Project management training with follow-on coaching has helped by guiding teams to develop a team charter in which they define their roles and clarify objectives, deliverables, team norms, and processes. That effort has allowed the organization to become more flexible, accountable, resource efficient, and risk adverse, and has increased the number of drug applications in a year—ultimately reducing overall time to market from eight to 10 years to five years or less.

Route 3
Work in the squeeze zone.

Facing such constraints as downsizing and tight deadlines, most training professionals need to work in "the squeeze zone." That place is characterized by reduced budgets, faster turn-arounds, and a shortage of subject matter expertise. Nguyen, of Intel, says that "the last five years have been an exercise of delivering increased scope and product with reduced headcount due to the economic downturn. Training organizations have had to find ways to use their limited resources to deliver highly repeatable, scalable interventions in a short period of time."

But, forewarned is forearmed. To ensure that you factor in project constraints, identify them early in the process. Here are some questions to ask:
- What kinds of constraints do you see affecting organizational operations in the next year or two?

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- What are the biggest corporate resource limits, and how do you see them affecting departments, such as training?
- What kinds of actions do you anticipate taking to address the following: economic downturns, increased retirements, rising benefits costs, and increased competition?

Route 4
Make lemonade.

Take a lesson from Martha Stewart, who has turned around a dismal experience into better business results. Making

KATHERYN SEIDERS **Business Operations Manager, Bristol-Myers Squibb Company**

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lemonade means turning problems into opportunities. Once you've defined the squeeze zone, it's time to think of ways to turn those constraints into opportunities. **Be innovative.** Consider how to take a shrinking training budget for development and transform it into a more cost-effective blended learning approach. For example, you could convert some elements of a training program into written or electronic prework.

Graduates of Clark Training's How to Use the Virtual Classroom program have many ideas for creatively accomplishing goals previously reserved for face-to-face training events. For example, application sharing in the virtual classroom environment has provided trainers the opportunity to migrate software training from physical classrooms to synchronous e-learning, thus reducing travel costs.

Edith Logue, manager of curriculum development at FileNet Corporation, has parlayed constraints into opportunities by turning increased requests for nonclassroom delivery of technical training into a series of virtual lab classes for partners and customers. Students receive a kit that includes a student guide and lab workbook, and watch recorded lectures on their own time, with two weeks to complete all labs using a virtual environment accessible via the web.

Be fast. Another common barrier trainers face is short delivery timeframes. If you're faced with decreased training time, consider evidence-based methods to acceler-

ate learning. For example, in their forthcoming book, *Efficiency in Learning,* authors Ruth Clark, Frank Nguyen, and John Sweller summarize research showing that learning comprehension is six times faster when some practice exercises are replaced with worked examples. Alternatively, simulations run in classrooms or via e-learning have been proven to accelerate expertise. For example, in *E-Learning and the Science of Instruction,* Clark and Richard Mayer summarize research that shows that 25 hours of work in a simulated troubleshooting computer tutorial resulted in three-year Air Force technicians able to perform at the level of 10-year veterans.

If organizational constraints require you to make lemonade, you might ask your management team what flavor of lemonade appeals the most to them. Consider the following scenarios:

Scenario 1. Explain to your CEO that "many organizations are providing training faster and saving travel costs through virtual classrooms delivered to workers' desktops. We will need to make a small start-up investment of around $100,000. But, in the next year, we could migrate 50 percent of our training from the physical to the virtual classroom. We would make up the costs within a year."

Schedule a demonstration of the virtual classroom and invite management to sit in for part of it—from their offices—to see firsthand what the virtual classroom can do.

Scenario 2. If you think some form of electronic performance support system is a better solution, start your conversation with the following: "We can save a lot of training time by developing automated job aids for the new system. This project would require some up-front investment, but the savings on the backend training would more than make up for it. Would you like for me to work with the systems folks to create a small demonstration of what I have in mind?"

Your goal is to offer some solutions that will improve worker performance and, at the same time, reduce costs using new technologies that can be more efficient than traditional classroom training.

Route 5
Mine and distribute the best.

If your company regularly recognizes projects or processes that are well done, or people who are able to get better results than others, why not replicate that success across the organization? Taking the time to identify and document effective processes and procedures can leverage best practices throughout the organization.

Copy Exactly!, a program at Intel, is intended to do just that. When setting up a new manufacturing facility, Intel requires everyone to use the Copy Exactly! approach to duplicate the best methods used in existing factories. According to Intel, "Everything at the development plant—the process flow, equipment set, suppliers, plumbing, manufacturing clean room, and training methodologies—is selected to meet high volume needs, recorded, and then copied exactly." Intel reports that Copy Exactly! has helped the company to bring high-volume factories online quickly, decreasing time to market and increasing yields.
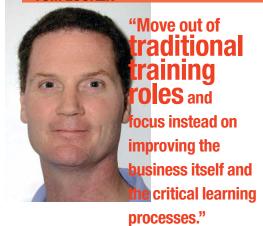
To apply such a methodology, ask your CEO these questions:

● What processes, divisions, or people

What's in a Name? One way to change perceptions is to change your title from trainer to one of these options used by your colleagues: ● Manager of Business Operations—Bristol-Myers Squibb ● Learning Technologist—Intel Corporation ● Knowledge Strategist—Intel Corporation ● Manager of Employee Effectiveness—Radio Shack ● Learning Evangelist—Microsoft

TOM EUCKER Knowledge Strategist, Intel

"Move out of **traditional training roles** and focus instead on improving the business itself and the **critical learning processes.**"

have done the most to achieve our organizational goals of the past few years?
● What success stories have attracted your attention?
● Who has received executive awards in the past year or two?
● If you could magically duplicate any division or process, which would it be?
● What metrics do we have about our current processes, and how might we use those metrics to define and improve processes?

Karen Zwick, CEO of 1st Class Solutions, a training consulting firm, suggests that she adds value for such clients as Eli Lilly by modeling exemplar performance. By mining for best practices in the work site and incorporating those in training programs, reference manuals, working aids, online templates, and process realignment, Zwick and her team are able to distribute expertise residing in a few to many.

Route 6
Plan for the future—today.

As soon as the Enron debacle started to unfold, the handwriting was on the wall for large corporations. Nguyen says, "In response to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and various corporate scandals, our corporate office mandated business ethics training for all employees last year. In fact, Intel now requires refresher training on a yearly basis." Logue, of FileNet, reports that Sarbanes-Oxley and other regulatory legislation resulted in a new product to help its customers meet compliance requirements. As that new prod-

uct rolls out, FileNet needs to educate its customers about the product, which is based on government regulations that prompted its features.

The future is shaped not only by far-reaching events like Enron but also by industry-specific external forces as well. For example, many industries are regulated by government agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration. You should be aware of industry-specific events outside of your organization that impact how your organization does business. And, you should ask these questions:
● What kinds of events does the management team see outside our company that will influence our goals and directions?
● Are there new regulations on the horizon?
● What industry-specific journals do you read on a regular basis?
● What has happened in our industry in the past year that you see shaping our future?

Sometimes, the core business objectives are the basis for future planning.

"It is important to anticipate issues, and they can generally be defined in your planning process. For example,

customer retention, the impact of organizational growth, regulatory and financial compliance—these are generally always present," says Shin Lee, learning and development manager with Wells Fargo. "As a result, our objectives focus on those issues. Each year, we identify issues tied to those themes. At times, a new objective may get added, but [objectives] are generally consistent. Through that consistency, our organization can plan for growth to ensure success." By focusing on the core business, a company can best plan for the future and use past experiences to maintain the organization's recognized brand.

Route 7
Partner with management.

These guidelines rely on forming line management partnerships in ways that integrate you, the training professional, into the business. Management executives can inform you about the goals they need to achieve and provide you with access to the resources you need to do your job, including subject matter expertise. As your partnerships grow, you'll be perceived as less of a cost center and more of a critical service provider.

Through that process, you'll come to better understand the business itself. Joey Connelly, of RadioShack, puts it well: "I like to say that I am a business person first; I am an HR professional second; and I am a performance consultant third. In that order. Every hour, every day. I should be just as concerned about top-line and bottom-line growth and know what the drivers are. If [trainers] do that well, we can spend less time trying to educate our internal customers—our businesses owners—what we mean by intervention and performance consulting, and performance technology. By talking in their language, we're better able to help [management] distinguish between knowledge and skills issues and other performance barriers." **TD**

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