
HOW TO PICK A TRAINING ORGANIZATION

There are times when you need to turn to professionals to provide training in your workplace. But where do you find them? And how do you choose a good one?

It's been said that the man who defends himself in court has a fool for a lawyer. While this witty observation was no doubt made by a lawyer (who may have resented the competition), there is an important core of truth to the remark: When you need professional results and the stakes are high, it's best to call in a professional -- and make sure you get a good one.

New legislation, new standards, new procedures and old hazards generate continuing requirements for health and safety training. So what do you do if nobody in your organization is qualified to develop or deliver the training? The fact is that many organizations often rely on external training providers to get them out of tight spots.

But what should a productivity-minded manager or a sensible safety specialist do when outsourcing training? What is available? Where do you look for training providers? How do you know if you've found a good one? How do you get the most for your money? Here are a few guidelines that will simplify your decision making -- and make life a little less stressful.

What is an external training provider? We are talking about any individual or group outside of your organization that helps you with your training requirements. There are private sector firms that specialize in developing and delivering training, and firms that offer packaged courses and seminars on every subject under the sun. There are professional associations that offer or arrange training in their specialty areas. And there are safety associations and organized labour groups that give a variety of courses and training options. Community colleges offer training programs, and there are even continuing education programs through your local high school that might meet some of your needs.

Why use a training provider? There are basically two reasons: First, training providers are -- presumably -- professionals who have the specialized resources, skills and knowledge required to do the job, ensure you have up-to-date information and possibly bring fresh approaches to your training; second, external training providers can help you avoid the often substantial hidden costs of starting from scratch to design and deliver your own training. With the bottom line in mind, bringing in outsiders may be the best way to ensure a quality product and avoid the costs associated with hiring or diverting staff for your training needs.

Where do you look? You can start by looking in the yellow pages of your local phone book under training, management consulting and environmental services. When you attend conferences, keep an eye out for presenters whose approach appeals to you and sounds like it would fit your organization's needs. Check with colleagues in your industry and in professional organizations for advice and referrals. Call your industry safety association, department of labour or workers' compensation board. Consider the ads in safety, training and professional magazines. For 'cybernetic' safety professionals and operational managers, Internet search engines will turn up hot links to related web sites and discussion groups that offer leads and opportunities to pose questions about training providers.

What do they offer? Training providers offer an alphabet soup of services including training needs identification, introduction of new training technology, training delivery, and evaluation of training (see box on page xx). Most training needs are not unique to one organization -- so there's a good chance that someone, somewhere, has developed training for almost any requirement. And when your situation or needs are unique, there are training providers who specialize in working with clients to develop customized courses.

What do you ask for? Buying training is like making any purchase: If you have a clear shopping list, chances are you will find what you are looking for and only buy what you need. George Pappas, of the Industrial Accident Prevention Association says "It is up to the customer to tell the training provider what they want included in the training." Discuss your ideas with all stakeholders. Put them in writing. Build a consensus and ensure everyone agrees on what you require

before you approach prospective consulting organizations. When considering consultants, ask to see examples of similar work. Interview the individuals who will work on the project.

How do you negotiate? In a word -- carefully. Spell out what you need in a clearly written document. Demand a written response. Nail down things like effort, duration, completion dates, and your right to review the appointment of replacement consultants. When you accept a proposal, reply in writing with a clear statement of your expectations, timeframes, costs and other key elements of how the work will be performed.

What indicators should give you a warm feeling? Good training providers ask pertinent questions about your training needs and they don't stop until they get clear answers. "Clients indicate what they want, but a good consultant will help convert the wants to training needs," explains George Pappas. For instance, a safety specialist or production manager might identify a need for an accident investigation course. A good training provider will help you determine what the exact need is, whether it is for the underlying principles, investigation skills, reporting procedures, analysis, follow-up -- or all of the above. A good training provider will customize the training by addressing your identified needs, using your accident investigation forms, tailoring examples and case-studies to your workplace, and making sure the course achieves your objective.

When should you back off? It is hard to say. Remember, sometimes prices that seem too good to be true are just that. Also, be wary when training providers say they can do everything. And you might want to do an extra-thorough reference check if the provider has no special training in adult education.

What's your end of the deal? The best advice is to know what you want. Go after it in a systematic manner. Document everything. Keep your expectations reasonable. Remember, consultants are human, and they don't know everything. They need direction, as well as specific, immediate and constructive feedback when they go off the tracks.

Your role might vary from simply administering the contract to ensuring that the training provider has access to the people, including yourself, he or she needs to

talk to in order to develop a custom-designed program. Whatever role you play, it will probably consume more time than you planned. A consultant may need to meet with experienced staff in your workplace, discuss drafts of designs and bounce ideas off people. To get the best product, you need to work closely with training providers to give them pertinent data about your workplace.

The following checklist, modified to the specific needs of your workplace, can help you decide who to engage to help you with your training needs. Look for and assess each of the following when considering a training provider:

- * general training knowledge and experience;*
- * oh&s experience;*
- * experience in your industry and jurisdiction;*
- * good references (that you have checked);*
- * availability to give the training at a convenient time for you;*
- * good chemistry between your organization and the training provider;*
- * willingness to customize material for your organization;*
- * ability to grasp your needs;*
- * thoroughness; and*
- * the relative value for the expenditure.*

When the word "training" evokes images of cold classrooms, nervous instructors, illegible flip charts and gimpy overhead projectors, maybe we need to refocus. An experienced training provider can help you understand the strengths and weaknesses of new approaches like self-paced workbooks, computer-based learning and even the Internet; assist you in deciding if they are appropriate in

your workplace; and provide information to help you build a business case for alternative, creative approaches to training.

In the current context of cost-cutting, innovation and new training technology, it might make good sense to hire outsiders. They could start the ball rolling. They might light a spark that makes your workplace safer. But there is no magic rule. Selecting the right external training provider requires that you plan your work and work your plan -- patiently and systematically.

Training options

Training consultants, like safety professionals, have a language of their own. Here are explanations of a few of the key terms.

Custom-designed training: The training provider designs a program for your specific needs; design ratios start at five days of design for one day of training and may exceed a hundred days for certain types of computer-based training. Costs will be higher than for "packaged" courses, but the cost-effectiveness should be the determining factor. You should end up with a program squarely targeted at your specific needs.

Deliverable: A step in the designing of training programs when the consultant provides output to the client; it may include a report, a prototype, course materials like participant reference books, the delivery of a course or a post-training evaluation report.

Duration: The number of days from the beginning of the contract to the end; the number of hours or days the course takes.

Effort: The number of days a consultant or consultants will work on a project.

Fixed price contract: An arrangement in which the training provider guarantees to provide the stipulated services, such as program design, for an agreed price irrespective of how much effort it takes him or her.

In-house training: The training provider comes to your workplace and provides the training.

Per diem contract: You hire the training provider's services for a specified cost for every day the consultant works in your organization.

Public workshop: Training that is open to anyone and often advertised as such. This tends to be off-site and less expensive -- especially if people outside your workplace attend and share the cost. (Arranging with other employers in your area -- and in your industry -- to bring in a training provider for such training can often be both cost-effective and enriched in terms of the varying experiences other participants will bring to the session.)

SME: Subject matter expert -- a person who provides technical information about tasks performed and other matters so that an instructional designer can shape training to the real needs of a workplace. In the case of custom-designed training, you might provide this person to work with the developer.

Train-the-trainer: A process whereby designated members of your staff are taught not only specific subject matter (WHMIS is a common example), but also the training techniques required to convey it to

others. This is often used in organizations that need to train many employees at different times.