From the Golden Zone

Training: The best-kept secret to implementation success

By Susan Rider, Rider & Associates

Some people believe project implementation success depends on project management. Some say it's the interface programming that's crucial. Others believe the design of the implementation plan is the most significant issue.

I agree that all of these things are extremely important, but the best-kept secret in implementation success is training. Unfortunately, many project managers, implementation gurus, and even consultants do not put enough value on training.

To ensure a successful project, consider these critical elements of training: timing, content, delivery, change management, aids, a perfect blend (new program with operational process), and training assessment.

• **Timing.** Some software companies will suggest kicking off the project with training. Good for them — they get the revenue early — but not good for the end user. Who remembers what they had for lunch last week?

In the beginning of the project, the super-users should have an orientation and introduction to the product. But training before a functional design is not a priority — and some may call it a waste. End users rarely remember how to do something for long without experiencing it every day.

Also avoid eight-hour training. Training should be broken into two-hour increments. No matter how interesting the material and how good the trainer, it is very hard for an individual to retain the knowledge or engage for a lengthy time.

Repetition is good! Scheduling repeat classes — at least two — is a good idea.

• **Content.** Keep the content simple and relate it to operational processes so users can understand the cause and effect. Avoid using acronyms unless you give a reference card so the users can easily discern what they mean.

Make sure the content is documented with graphics, such as screen shots, easy-to-find icons, and step-by-step lists. Also, a simple shortcut guide for troubleshooting is helpful. Build exercises and have the trainees execute the exercises after training to reinforce the material.

• **Delivery.** This is an area that is often overlooked. People don't give this a lot of credence, and many times training is assigned to a human resources person.

The delivery of training is almost as important as the content. The trainer should be articulate and understand the learning challenges of different personalities. The trainer must be an entertainer, or at least an interesting person.

The trainer should also understand at least at a high level the operational process; that goes with the new software. If the trainer is from the human resources department, the odds are that person doesn't understand the operational process, therefore, when a trainee has a question, the trainer cannot answer.

• **Change management.** Human beings are traditionally resistant to change. Just the threat of a new system can instill fear.

It's extremely important to make sure you focus on change management and have a plan in place to ease the users' fears and urge acceptance of the new system. After a new system is installed, change management remains an issue and should remain as a focus.

Users will tend to return to what they're comfortable doing — and that includes pulling out the Excel spreadsheets and reverting to bad habits.

• **Training aids.** Training aids are very helpful for reinforcing training. These "cheat sheets" of commonly used features will assist in memory retention and increased productivity.

For distribution center floor workers, use laminated signs on the end of aisle or laminated cheat sheets on binder rings to be clipped on the belt or work station.

• **Perfect blend.** Most software companies have a generic training program that they provide.

This should be customized to add your operational processes. Once the operational process is added to the new system functionality, it brings clarity to the users so they can better relate to the new system.

• **Training assessment.** People learn in different ways, and it is always a challenge to create clarity and understanding.

To make sure the users being trained are comprehending the material, develop a training assessment or quiz. Use the review of the assessment as another way of reinforcing the training by going over every question and letting the trainees self grade.

Training is one of the best-kept secrets of implementation success. Project managers and project owners who understand the importance of a good training/change management program have taken several steps toward a successful implementation.

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