Taking Time to Train Students

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ABSTRACT
It is very easy to overlook the training needs of our student support staff. Many of us depend more and more on students to provide consultation support to end users. It is more difficult to train students because of varying schedules, turnover, and time constraints. Yet, in many cases they are our first line consultants.

This paper will present some useful techniques that University Technology Services at The Ohio State University has utilized when training students. Below is a brief outline of the major topics to be presented.

I. Determining training needs
   A. Customer Service
   B. Evaluation of technical skills
   C. Scheduling training

II. Training options
   A. Typical Classroom
   B. Independent Training
   C. Self-directed Training
   D. Apprenticeship
   E. Role Playing
   F. No Training

III. Costs & Support
   A. Direct & indirect
   B. Cost of not training
C. Management support

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INTRODUCTION
As we become more dependent on the help of students, we also become more vulnerable to errors that can occur if they do not have adequate training to perform their jobs. Because of limited time and resources, we often hire students and provide only the most basic instruction. Using this technique, there are bound to be errors made when situations arise that they have not been trained to handle. Even if they do try to find the answer, their supervisor is all too often not present.

Consider the following case studies, they are real situations with names removed. I’m sure you have had similar experiences. The key is learning from these experiences to reduce the possibility of them occurring at your facility.

**Case Study 1** - A customer calls the help line for assistance on a problem with his e-mail. Because the consultant was unfamiliar with the type of computer, the entire mailbox was deleted, instead of just one message. When the angry customer called back, he was told the supervisor would be in touch. The supervisor was on vacation for two weeks. You can imagine the result.

**Case Study 2** - The computer center was shutting down a computer system because it’s maintenance contract was very expensive. This decision was not too popular with many users who had become familiar with the system. One user posted a note to a newsgroup expressing his displeasure. An employee of the computer facility posted a message that agreed with the user and added some comments on an uncaring management system.

**Case Study 3** - A customer had to go to a campus office to replace a lost access card. He arrived at the office at the beginning of the working day to find all of the employees grouped in the back of the office drinking coffee. He waited at the desk for several minutes before they finally broke up and retreated further back into the recesses of the office complex. Another 10 minutes passed before one student came out to one of the computer terminals and acknowledged his presence. He was unable to find the customer’s record due to a “new computer system” and had to return to the recesses to find someone to help. The customer then had to provide his ID and had to fill out three forms with name, address, city, state, the make, year, model and license plate of his car, etc. The customer was given the incorrect change in the transaction and his ID was not returned until he asked for it. It is not difficult to understand why the office has such a poor reputation on campus.

I suspect all of you have had similar experiences. The damage to the image of the department is difficult to measure, but the outcome is not desirable. We know the need for training, but where do you find the time,
resources, and money to conduct the necessary training? Inadequate or no training can be very costly as well. In this age of change, downsizing, resizing and decentralization we need to concentrate on providing the best service possible. Our very survival may depend on how well we perform. Contrast this with businesses who are competing for your customers. Your local pizza shop knows your name and your usual order. Bank clerks have been trained to use customer’s names and ask if there is anything else they can do for you.

Training students in good customer service techniques will pay dividends in multiple ways. The cost of training in the basics can be kept within reasonable limits. The following are some things you can do to keep the cost of training as low as possible.

Distribute the training responsibility across the department. This reduces the time required by any one person or group within the department. This can be made easier by conducting some train the trainer courses. This allows you to use some of your more advanced students to do the more routine training tasks.

Utilize existing courses. For standard courses there are a number of books, video, and computer based training courses available. You can also look at other colleges and university courses and see if they offer similar training. If so, ask to borrow materials and modify them to your particular needs. Browse the Web and Gopher systems of those institutions and see what is available on-line. OSU, for example, has all of our documentation on our gopher system. All of Ohio State University’s publications are available at the following URL: gopher://gopherjr.acs.ohio-state.edu:6051/11/DOCSGopher

Another example of using others work on Internet training is this URL: http://www.yahoo.com/Computers_and_Internet/Internet/Guides_and_Publications/

In short, spend a little time to find what others have done and use whatever material possible. Of course ask permission and give credit to your sources.

Develop training in short modules and reuse the modules in multiple training courses. Use standard software for training presentations. This allows multiple instructors to utilize each others work. I will be “recycling” some of our train the trainer materials in this presentation. I also utilized material contained in “How to be a Better Trainer”, a video course available from CareerTrack Publications.
DETERMINING TRAINING NEEDS

The most important need is to determine your specific training requirements. As the above examples illustrate, you may have both technical and customer service needs. We often concentrate on the technical side of training, forgetting that the customer service component may be the most critical.

Before you start you need to write down the objective for your training, answering the questions below.²

- Why are you conducting this training?
- What specific skill or knowledge do you want your students to have when your training is completed? Be sure to target gaps in knowledge or skills, not attitudes or morale.
- Who will be attending this training? How can you tailor the training to fit the schedules of the students?
- Logistics - How long will it last (number of hours) and where can are you going to conduct the training?
- How do the individuals feel about attending the training?
  - Survey the needs of the group
  - Give a pretraining questionnaire
  - Speak with a few of the participants
  - Provide outline of training prior to workshop
- Is the training going to be formal or informal?
- Do you have specific tasks or behavior you wish the participants to perform after the training?

Writing a lesson plan for training.³

- What is the content of the training in outline form?
- What materials do you need to present?
- How will you evaluate the competence of trainees?
- How will the training enhance their job performance?
- How will you evaluate the trainers performance?
- How will the students evaluate the trainers performance?

As I have mentioned before, one area of training that is easily overlooked is that of Customer Service. This is one area in which most students will not have had any formal experience. This is a critical issue since many times the students are the first contact callers may have with your department. Sandy Li, who spent many years in our Customer Service, area presented a paper on this subject several years ago.⁴ In that paper she quotes the seven sins of customer service.⁵

  Apathy
  Brush-Off
Coldness
Condescension
Robotism
Rule Book
Run-around

While these may seem obvious, they are sometimes difficult to prevent, especially if your students are not aware of how to avoid them.

Technical skills are something that you must always be working on in the training area. In the computer world, it seems like major changes occur every day. At The Ohio State University we hold small “mini” training sessions of 1 hour duration on a regular basis to keep our consultants updated. Recently we held several on Windows 95, and how to modify our client server software. We also make the documentation on-line so that anyone can access up to date information.

**TRAINING OPTIONS**

Once you have answered the basic questions determining training needs, you must decide on the best delivery techniques. Some of this will be determined by your logistics, and whether the training is to be formal or informal.

When doing the design of the course, start with the key points and objectives you want to communicate to your audience and focus the training on those points. This is one of the main points made on certification courses designed for computer support professionals at the University of Indiana.6

Next you need to select the appropriate training methods, the most common is the old tried and true Classroom/Lecture. It is well suited for large groups, when you have factual material, and you want focus on the trainer. It is very economical in time and resources, which is why it is used so often. The disadvantage is it is not interactive. There are several ways to improve the standard lecture format. One technique is to call on volunteers to come up and do the computer demonstrations, or perform a similar task just demonstrated. This tends to prolong the demonstration, since the volunteer will make mistakes, but showing how to correct the errors is important as well. I also try to tell stories that relate to the specific area I am trying to teach, to bridge between the theory and the performance of a task.

Some individuals like the independent training method. Given a problem, they will go off and find the resources needed, and solve the problem. This type of training is very attractive to management, but it may not be
the most efficient. Some individuals may not seek “experts” when they are stuck on a point and waste time trying to find answers.

Self-directed training is similar to independent, the individual is directed to books, video courses, self-paced computer based training. The Ohio State University has pulled together several of these types of materials and make them available through “learning centers”, where individuals can make an appointment or check out materials. These include topics such as WordPerfect, DOS, Windows, Lotus 1-2-3, Excel and other popular topics.

Another technique, is the apprenticeship. This is normally used when you hire a new person and assign them a mentor who is located in the same office or very near. In this age of electronic communication you can do similar things by having an individual follow another’s posting to newsgroups or mailing lists.

A technique which I have found to be useful when training consultants is through the use of role-playing. I will break a machine in some way and have one person act as the person calling in with the problem. The other trainees will place chairs facing away from the person sitting at the computer and try to resolve the problem. We do a round robin with each trainee spending five to ten minutes trying to discover the problem. Since everyone can hear what questions are being asked they can build on previous questions. The consultants have found this very valuable, since they see how other consultants diagnose problems.

Of course you have the option of not providing training, but this will cause frustration and dissatisfaction among employees. In the long run it will be more costly for your department. If you see the need I feel it is worth it to do all in your power to see the training is provided.

COSTS AND SUPPORT
The cost for training is sometimes difficult to quantify. Employee satisfaction, lower turnover rate, better customer relations, and other benefits are a direct result of good training. There are many other direct and indirect benefits of well trained student staff members. In many customer service and consultation areas, it is possible to appoint an experienced staff member as a mentor to the students. Students can then observe the staff member, who can make them aware of the reason they deal with customers in a certain way. They can emulate the techniques of the mentor and provide good customer service.

It is helpful to have management support for training but there are many ways you can build training into your everyday working life. If nothing else, provide materials of various types and suggest projects that would
involve the use of the materials. Encourage the active participation in conferences as presenters or session chairs. When returning from conferences, share with others in your facility the things you learned. Implement at least one idea that you found helpful in a conference section. I recently returned from a training session on improving presentations. I took the highlights of those items I learned and worked with Gail Peters, the person in charge of Education and training at UTS, and turned it into a short one hour train the trainer session for our department. In this session I have included a mini-session on how to use Netscape for searching. I intend to use this same mini-session on Netscape, in some form, in several presentations throughout this year. The more you can reuse these small modules of training, the less “cost” you incur for the training.

SUMMARY

In this paper I have provided some general guidelines to determine your training needs. Once you have determined the needs, you can design the course based on the results you wish to obtain. Finally, decide on the best delivery system, keeping in mind that you can design the training to be most useful for a number of different training needs.

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