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Finding the best way to train IT gurus

By: Alan K'necht

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During the revamping of IT departments since the tech bust of 2000 many strategic goals were revamped and many standard, sound practices were pushed to the sidelines. One of the key parts tossed was the annual training budget.

Training budgets got squeezed for a variety of reasons. This included excuses like: "We're just staying with what we know," and "We'll outsource what we don't know." Sometimes when money was tight, companies chose new equipment over training.

There were myriad reasons for the declining emphasis on education, but fortunately this trend in most organizations has turned around in the past year and more and more organizations are once again paying for their IT staff to get the appropriate training.

The exact reasons for this turnaround are not clear, but when considered in combination with the reduced reliance on contract employees, perhaps organizations are once again valuing the importance of maintaining in-house subject matter experts versus the temporary worker or outside organization. Or perhaps it's just the realization that it is less expensive to train existing reliable staff than it is to hire new staff.

Regardless of the reason, organizations now face finding the best way to train their staff on new technologies. There are several tried and true methods available and over the past year, I've helped train staff in different organizations with the three following methods. Each comes with its own set of pros and cons.

Mentoring

If your organization currently has an in-house contract employee as its subject matter expert, assign a shadow to the contract employee. The goal of the shadow is to learn all he can learn by watching and working with the contract employee. To get the most out of this method of training be sure to let the contractor know that he is responsible for training a full-time staff person as a back-up.

Pros of this technique include transfer of specific knowledge related to your organization that only in-house personnel should know and at the end of the training period, you have eliminated your organization's reliance on contract staff.

The cons of shadowing are many; by using this technique full-time staff will need to neglect their regular responsibilities for an extended period of time and the contractor may feel that the termination of his contract is near and he might not transfer as much knowledge as possible.

External Training Courses

External training courses are a proven and traditional way of training staff. In the simplest terms, you send staff away for periods of one to five days for specialized training. The goal of which, of course, is to foster an in-house expert.

The pros of this technique are limited. The two big benefits are that your employee is removed from the organization during their training period and is free from the day-to-day business distractions that get in the way of the other training methods. The second frequently missed benefit is that your employees get to attend training courses with employees from other organizations. This exposure allows them to create a new circle of contacts that can assist them down the line as they start to implement the knowledge they've learned during the course.

Cons of external training courses are: the training courses are rarely long enough and extensive enough to create an expert; the material taught is general and not specific to your organization; and your employees are left to figure out how to apply this new knowledge to your organization.

In-house training

The last of the three common training methods is to bring in a subject matter expert to deliver the training in-house and, where appropriate, modify the training material to meet the specific needs of the organization.

Pros of this training method include lower cost per employee for training. Generally for the cost of sending two to three employees out for training, you can bring an expert in-house and train six to eight staff members. By having the subject matter expert focus her training material on what really matters to your organization, you get personalized training that can be applied immediately.

Cons of in-house training courses are simply the day-to-day distractions that your staff will face. When staff is on-site, others in the organization will consider them available and make specific requests on them throughout the day. At a minimum staff will run to check e-mails and voice mail while on breaks, once again taking their attention away from the course material.

While there may be other training options for your staff, the result is the same. Staff members need effective training. Which method is best for your organization and for your staff depends on numerous factors. Regardless of which one you choose, make sure your staff members attending the training are deemed unreachable during the training period. It's crucial to provide an appropriate training environment free from daily distractions so employees can truly devote themselves to learning new skills.

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-- *K'necht is a regular speaker at Internet conferences and president of K'nechtology Inc., a technology strategy, search engine optimization and Web development company. He can be reached through his Web site, www.knechtology.com.*

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