

Training Program Growth...From Flat Line to Pulsating

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ABSTRACT

IT Training and Communications is a division of Information Technology Services (ITS), which provides computer application training for the faculty and staff at Saint Louis University. In the beginning, IT Training and Communications provided training in word processing, database and spreadsheet programs. However, the University community needs were growing in the areas of spreadsheet/database management, database design, and web base applications, as well as in fundamental computer skills.

In response to requests from the Saint Louis University's community, we began the process of redeveloping our computer application training program. We decided that all of the courses that we offered should be redesigned into "level" classes, allowing users to build their skills received from training as they applied them in their work environment. A complete course description for each level would be provided so that participants would be able to determine which level of class they should attend, based on the course content and skills taught. In addition, IT Training and Communications wanted to maintain a record of participant's attendance to provide recognition for the time and effort participants spent enhancing their computer knowledge as well as personal and professional growth. Each participant would receive a bound course book, diskette, and a certificate of completion for each level completed.

Although we had developed a great program on paper, our resources (people and time primarily) were very limited. Several questions raised their ugly heads:

- How can we develop 30 different levels of classes?
- Who will write and design the training materials?
- How can we accomplish this with a staff of two and no designated budget?
- How are we going to offset the cost of providing new training materials?
- How can we provide a fast-turn around?

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The ultimate solution was to seek out a resource that could provide materials for us that we could customize to meet our growing needs. We wanted to be sure to meet our customer's needs of providing training that is pertinent to our academic environment, while maintaining the flexibility to apply the training in a variety of academic settings (faculty needs, staff needs, researcher needs, etc.). Not only did we find such a resource, but we were also successful in meeting the challenges of getting this "just in time" learning quickly to our customers!

This paper discusses the challenges IT Training and Communications faced in redeveloping the computer application training program, the solutions we found, and the successes that continue as a result of our effort.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.1 [Application Packages]: Language Constructs and Features
– *data communications, database processing, freeware/shareware, graphics, spreadsheets, word processing.*

General Terms

Documentation, Performance, Design, Human Factors.

Keywords

Training, Training Program, Management, Documentation, Customize Material, Redeveloping, Needs Assessment, Performance, Partnering, Learning Styles, Survey, Manual, Faculty, Staff, Computer Skills, Trainer.

1. INTRODUCTION

As computer software applications are integrated into an academic environment, there is a growing demand for faculty and staff to increase their computer skills. However, training departments must recognize that faculty and staff will have more to learn even after they have been trained. As faculty and staff become more computer savvy, their questions will become more technical. Training departments must acknowledge the shift in their customer's attitudes and the request for more knowledge and make every effort to see that appropriate resources are available.

In the academic environment at Saint Louis University, IT Training and Communications is committed to customer service, which consists of promoting and developing the use of IT resources to enhance teaching and learning, developing new computer based training materials, and providing consistent support services for faculty and staff.

2. OVERVIEW

Within the last few years, Saint Louis University's community needs have continued to grow in the areas of spreadsheet/database management, database design, and web base applications, as well as in fundamental computer skills. In response to requests from faculty and staff, we began the process of redeveloping our computer application training program.

3. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Before we could accomplish our goal of redeveloping our computer application training program, we needed information about the faculty and staff and their jobs. We also wanted to take a thorough look at the software applications we were teaching and examine our *own* attitude and knowledge toward training. We decided to develop several *needs assessments* and focus our attention in the following areas: end-user, system/software, classroom environment, work context, and trainer's needs.

3.1 Assessing the End-User Needs

- Attitude toward computers
 - Novice or new user
 - Attitude toward computers, friend or foe
 - Typing skills
- Learning style
 - Verbal
 - Visual
 - Hand-on
 - Note-taker
 - Self-aware of learning style
 - One-on-one training
 - Group setting
 - Lecture
- Nature of job (administration, management, clinical/medical)
- Demographic (south, north campus)
- Last training experience
- Management attitude toward training

3.2 Assessing the System or Software

- How many systems/software are supported?
- Are system/software upgrades necessary?
- Should certain software not be supported?
- Are the features/commands of the software easy to organize into a manual?
- Documentation
 - Are the materials detailed, illustrated, and easy to use?
 - Are the materials teaching the skills the end-user need?
 - Are there enough practice sessions within the manuals?
- Are end-users utilizing the on-line help and help desk?
- What are the errors messages end-users are encountering?

3.3 Classroom Environment

- Seating
- Lighting
- Temperature
- Ventilation
- Noise/Distractions

3.4 Work Context

- Which programs are end-users utilizing in their work environment?
- How frequently does the end-user utilize the software?
- Which feature of a particular program is used frequently?
- Does the software continue to meet the growing needs of the end-user?
- How are end-users organizing their files?
- What are some of the job assignments for which the software will be used?

3.5 The Trainer Needs

- How familiar is the trainer with the material being considered?
- How much time is used for preparation, teaching and follow-up?
- What is the current training schedule, and can it be revised?
- Who will write and design the training material?
- How much time is needed to write a training manual?
- Besides the training manual, should additional material be provided?
- What is the trainer's teaching style?
- Should we provide one-on-one training?

Once the materials for the surveys were gathered and developed, we had to decide how we were going to distribute the surveys. We decided to use several avenues:

- Utilize the inter-office mailing system.
- Meet with the secretaries, supervisor and managers.
- Collaborate with the Human Resource department.
- Have the trainer arrive early at the training site to informally get feed back from the attendees.
- Provide evaluations at the end of class.

4. UTILIZING THE DATA RECEIVED FROM THE SURVEYS

After reviewing the information from the various surveys, we felt even more strongly that we should redevelop our computer application training program. First on our list of things to do was to redesign all of the courses that we offered into "level" classes, allowing users to build their skills received from training as they applied them in their work environment. A complete course description for each level was provided so that participants would be able to determine which level of class they should attend, based on the course content and skills taught.

In addition, IT Training and Communications maintained a record of participant's attendance to provide recognition for the time and effort participants spent enhancing their computer knowledge as well as personal and professional growth. Each participant received a bound course book, diskette, and a certificate of completion for each level completed.

Certainly, our pulse was beating and we were excited about implementing these new changes but suddenly our pressure dropped and we were flat line. Although we had developed a great program on paper, our resources (people and time primarily) were very limited. Several questions raised their ugly heads:

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- Who will write and design the training materials?
- How can we accomplish this with a staff of two and no designated budget?
- How are we going to offset the cost of providing new training materials?
- How can we provide a fast-turn around?

The ultimate solution was to seek a resource that could provide materials for us that we could customize to meet our growing needs. We wanted to be sure to meet our customer's needs of providing training that is pertinent to our academic environment while maintaining the flexibility to apply the training in a variety of academic settings (faculty needs, staff needs, researcher needs, etc.) Not only did we find such a resource, but we were also successful in meeting the challenges of getting this "just in time" learning quickly to our customers!

How did we accomplish this with "no designated budget?" The research we received from the surveys convinced the CIO of Information Technology Services to invest in materials provided by a vendor, yet customizable to our needs. Since each participant would receive a bound course book, diskette, and a certificate of completion for each level completed, we also decided to charge faculty and staff a minimum fee. Very few individuals object to this fee because of the numerous benefits. In fact, our enrollment doubled as a result of our changes.

In addition, we learned from our *Assessing the End-User Needs* survey that many individuals did not like the traditional classroom setting for learning new technology. Many end-users stated that they preferred we simply show them how to use "one" specific feature within a program and let them get back to doing what they do. To meet our customer's need, we developed two different styles of lecture sessions: Lunch Time Tech Tip and Breakfast Byte.

During the Lunch Time Tech Tip session, attendees are given handouts, lunch, an intense 45 presentation on a specific technical topic, and a chance to ask the presenter questions about the subject matter. In a Breakfast Byte session, attendees are given a very specific training topic that is pertinent to their office environment. The trainer demonstrates the "how to's" in the first 25 minutes of the Byte, and then the attendees have the next 45 minutes to actually put the training to work for them. Attendees are required to bring the disk, CD, zip disk, file, papers, etc., that they will need help with to the session. The participants will have the attention of the ITS trainers to assist them with their specific office task. Not only do the attendees receive individual attention,

but they are also given handouts of the presentation and a continental breakfast.

How did we accomplish this with a staff of two? We were able to meet this need by partnering with several of the computer analysts of Information Technology Services. These individuals agreed to develop the theme, manual, handouts for the class, and present the information to the attendees.

5. PREPARING THE TRAINER

Professional development is an integral part of the employee performance appraisal process for Information Technology Services employees. Therefore, the Computer Application Trainer was required to develop a Professional Development Plan and fill-out a Self-Assessment form, which encouraged her to obtain the following goals:

- Attend seminars/conferences that provide the latest strategic and practical information on emerging technologies.
- Attend advanced technical classes, i.e., web editors, database software
- Attend conferences/classes that assist teachers/instructors in refining their own direction, meaning, and style, i.e., SIGUCCS, SALT and ASTD conferences.

The Professional Development Policy benefits managers and employees: the employee benefits by receiving training to improve or enhance current or new skills, and ITS benefits by recruiting and retaining highly skilled professionals.

6. ADVERTISE

To get the message out about our computer application training program, we used several methods. In collaboration with the IT Web Department, we redesign the IT Training and Communications web site. Our web site provides easy access to our quarterly training schedule, complete course descriptions for each level, a monthly newsletter, and a weekly quick technical tip for faculty and staff. We also posted a news release on the Saint Louis University web site, highlighting the various changes that we made in our training department.

In addition, we learned through our survey, for the secretaries and supervisors, that many staff members did not have easy access to a computer or the Internet. To meet these customer's needs, via the inter-office mail, we sent each faculty and staff a quarterly brochure, which listed our classes. Of course, one of our best vehicles for advertisement was through word of mouth from our customers.

7. PARTNERSHIP

When we first began our quest of redeveloping our training program, there were several challenges we had to face. For example, how would we accomplish this with a staff of two and no designated budget? How were we going to offset the cost of providing new training materials? We would not have been successful without the support from the CIO of Information Technology Services, ITS staff, Human Resources and the faculty and staff of Saint Louis University. Following are the assistance our partners provided:

7.1 CIO of Information Technology Services

- Invested in the customized material
- Allowed the ITS main office Senior Secretary to devote 50% of time handling the paperwork for the training department
- Provided the budget to remodel the training room

7.2 Human Resources

- Assisted in preparing the platform to meet with the secretaries and supervisors/managers
- Assisted in developing the surveys for the secretaries and supervisors/managers
- Assisted in gathering the data from the surveys

7.3 Print Services

- Generated the manuals at minimal cost
- Provided fast turnaround of printed product
- Provided the delivery services

7.4 ITS Staff

- Developed and presented 45 minutes technical presentations
- Redesigned training web site
- Found a free resource to get our training room nova stations
- Training room remodeling (network services, telephone services, some served as movers, hardware and software installers, etc.)

7.5 Facilities Services

- Provided the remodeling material at the minimal cost

7.6 Faculty/Staff

- Sharing their expectations/needs
- Supporting the training department

8. NEW TRAINING ROOM

Since seating arrangements, temperature, lighting, and noise level play an important role in the effectiveness of training; we began the process of finding a central location for training. We were currently competing with students to use a lab in the Des Peres Hall at Saint Louis University. The layout of the lab consisted of 23 computers, which the trainer used as an instructor station. The decision was made to change the structural layout of the room, insert 12 Nova Station, a trainer station, and two offices. Once, our request was presented to the CIO of ITS, and was approved; construction began in January 2003 and the training staff moved into their new location February 2003.

9. SUMMARY

As the faculty and staff at Saint Louis University became more computer savvy, the IT Training and Communications department acknowledged the shift in our customer's attitudes and the request for more knowledge, and appropriate resources were made available. The commitment of Information Technology Services to customer's services, the support of faculty and staff and partnering with the various departments at Saint Louis University has contributed to the success of our program, turning it from flat line to pulsating.

10. REFERENCES

[1] "The Computer Training Handbook: How to Teach People to Use Computers," Author: Elliott Masie and Rebekah Wolman