

The Challenges & Rewards of Continuing Education

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Canadian organizations that prevail in today's competitive economy will be the ones that take bold steps to increase their commitment to learning and focus their energies on building a learning culture that fuels innovation (Conference Board of Canada, 2003).

Challenges For the Organization:

Today's vision of corporate success increases pressure on organizations to become more strategic about addressing employee training and professional development. A 'learning organization' embraces four key dimensions: vision, culture, learning systems and knowledge management. Continuous learning is the driving force behind the organization's success in all four dimensions. Organizations that only pay lip service to continuous learning will not achieve this vision.

Engineering firms have traditionally had an 'ad hoc' approach to continuous learning, with most of the emphasis being on technical training. This approach reinforces the cultural message that 'soft skills' have less value in the technical world. Numerous studies, however, have shown that **effective 'people practices' are as vital to a company's success as cutting-edge technology.**

Investment in a corporate 'learning culture' goes beyond technical training programs. It requires a strong commitment from senior management to integrate continuous learning throughout the organization. A key component is the drive towards more interpersonal skills development for technical personnel.

The challenge for organizations today is to recognize that 'continuous learning' is not simply a cost, but a strategic investment that can act as a recruitment tool, improve employee retention and provide a competitive advantage.

The Rewards

The Conference Board of Canada's 2000 survey of all major industries, as well as private and public organizations, found those that defined themselves as a 'learning organization' are almost 50% more likely to report better overall levels of profitability. This included greater success with employee satisfaction and retention, product quality and customer satisfaction.

Similarly, a North American study by Watson Wyatt Worldwide indicated improved 'people practices' raised shareholder value creation up to 30%.

Investment in a true "learning culture" positively impacts an organization's recruitment and retention rates, performance outcomes, and executive development; as well as the bottom line.

Challenges for the Practicing Professional

Provincial regulatory bodies require engineers and other professionals in the engineering sciences to engage in a variety of developmental activities, in order to maintain registration.

(Engineering Institute of Canada)

With the shift to corporate 'learning cultures', career advancement in today's professional organizations demands a level of interpersonal skill (i.e. communication, team development, conflict resolution, problem-solving, etc) at least equal to technical expertise.

For professionals in the engineering field, technical skills training is paramount, and often viewed as the only developmental focus. Choosing programs that are accessible, address in-depth technical training needs, and accommodate application of the concepts and skills offered, is a big challenge. The emerging emphasis on interpersonal skill development adds another demand to their overloaded work /training schedules.

When pursuing continuing education, most practicing professionals know what technical knowledge they require, but have little experience with interpersonal or



'professional' development programs.

Finding interpersonal skills training that fits the particular culture and dynamics of the engineering world can

be a frustrating task. Continuing education programs that include both technical and interpersonal skill development would be an effective solution, but do they exist?

It is possible for a learning event to include both technical knowledge exchange and the opportunity to acquire interpersonal skill development. The key is the program's instructional design.

Technical professionals bring knowledge, skills and experiences to the learning event. A learning design that involves interaction with and between the participants, as well as the subject matter expert, creates a collaborative knowledge/skills exchange for both technical and interpersonal learning.

Technical and professional continuing education programs that offer the combination of knowledge-based information, designed specifically to meet the participants' practice needs, and a dynamic, action learning process, grounded in a small group-based experiential learning model, can create a learning environment most conducive to such knowledge/ skill development.

The Rewards:

Pursuing continuing education, as a professional development goal, results in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience that enhances professional status, increases marketability and ensures better work product.

Accomplished technical professionals balance the technical expertise required to understand the job to be done with the interpersonal expertise to communicate, motivate and collaborate effectively with all those involved in doing the job efficiently and cost-effectively.

• *Mary Lou Arsenault is a Senior Education Specialist with CTT-Custom Technical Training, a recently established training company that focuses on the continuing education needs of senior technical professionals in Atlantic Canada.* ☺