

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BIZTRENDS

Q&A BRIEFS AT WORK

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Employees' added value

Finding good professional development programs requires goal-setting, investment

BY NANCY LACEWELL | CORRESPONDENT
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"We identify strengths and interests of employees that they may not even be aware of themselves."

DEBBIE GRAY
Appriss Inc.

As manager of human resources for Appriss Inc., a technology solutions company established in Louisville in 1994, Debbie Gray knows firsthand the value of quality professional development. "To continue to be competitive, our employees have to be educated in the most up-to-date processes and procedures," Gray said.

Appriss provides computer-based notification systems for victims of crime and criminal justice professionals across the United States. The company's primary product is VINE, Victim Information and Notification Everyday, and accounts for more than 50 percent of the company's revenue.

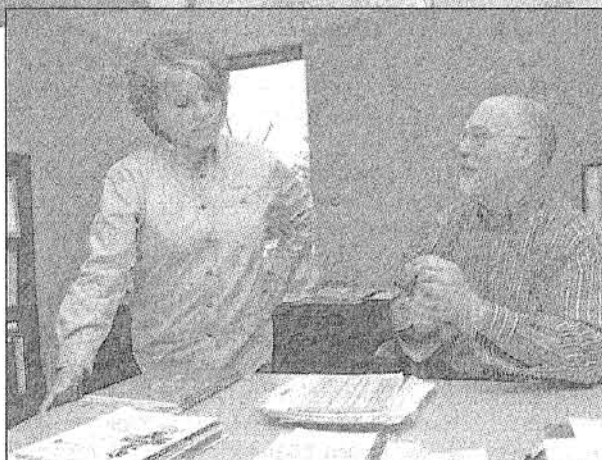
Appriss, with 207 employees at its Linn Station Road headquarters, allocates as much as 25 percent of its annual operating budget to employee training.

"We provide a lot of training in technology — the foundation of our business — because it's constantly growing and changing. We also believe it's important to give employees opportunities to develop their own personal and professional skills — such as leadership, communication and team building," Gray said.

Companies seek to improve their employees' skills through a variety of methods — off-site seminars, guest presenters and on-the-job training. The biggest challenge is not clarifying specific training goals in advance and then not making sure that the training will address these specific goals, according to local training professionals.

An expense with benefits

U.S. organizations spend \$109.25 billion each year on workplace learning and performance, according to a 2006 report by the American Society for Training and Develop-



PHOTOS BY RON BATH | BUSINESS FIRST
Top: Debbie Gray, manager of human resources for Appriss Inc., is shown with a team meeting in the background. At left: Gray talks with Rick Cartor, vice president of human resources, in his office.

ment. It's a significant cash outlay that indicates employers want improvements and better results from their workers.

"Successful businesses are now learning that training cannot be ignored," said Sherriann Hamilton, a training specialist with ResCare Inc., a human services company based in Louisville that has operations in 36 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico and Canada.

The reason? There are several, she explained.

Technology continues to advance at a rapid pace, affecting all types of companies. Younger employees are more vocal about making career progress and skills improvement, and they prize professional development opportunities as a benefit from their employer.

Another facet that might be surprising to some — the gap between the skills needed in today's workplace and the skills that workers actually have is widening.

Companies that value professional growth "should see a higher quality of work and level of productivity as a result," said Hamilton, who is on the board of the Louisville Society for Human Resource Management and the Kentucky chapter of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD).

"Also, employees are more likely to stay with a company and put more effort into their work when they see that the company is investing in them."

But that doesn't mean selecting training is an easy task. An early step for businesses is realizing when training is appropriate and when it's not, Hamilton said.

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Steps in the process

1. Determine training/development goal and budget.
2. Look in-house for expertise or determine if outside help is needed.
3. Contact industry groups, associations or other employers for referrals.
4. Interview the trainer/program leader and find out about the course content.
5. Call references, such as other clients and employers who used the program.
6. Listen to audio and video tapes of a program, or run through a test module.
7. Check into customizing. Some programs can be personalized or adapted.

Evaluating training results

One difficulty is quantifying a return on the investment. But there are four levels at which training can be assessed, according to Sherriann Hamilton, a training specialist with ResCare Inc. They are:

1. Initial reaction of the participants, such as "I found that program to be very helpful."
2. Post-session tests. Did participants actually learn the material that was covered?
3. Behavioral changes. Did participants take the information from the training and implement it in their job functions?
4. Reaching intended results. Have workers reached the ultimate objective that originally was identified when the training was chosen? For example, new sales goals were reached, a new product was created, etc. |

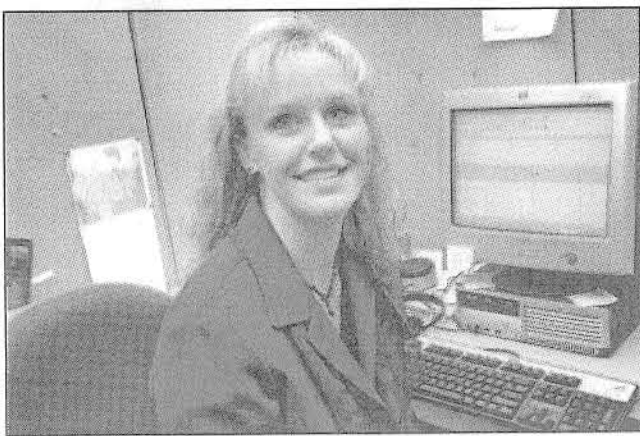
Terminology

- **Hard skills:** Refers to technical abilities or solid factual knowledge required to do a job. Hard skills are based in reading, writing and mathematical skills. Technology training (equipment, software) falls into this category.
- **Soft skills:** Refers to personal, interpersonal and attitudinal capabilities. Topics such as team building, leadership, communication and negotiation are considered soft skills. Training in this area should enhance interpersonal effectiveness, emphasizing "how to" rather than "what to do."

SOURCE | TY DAYOC, TANDEM SOLUTION LLC

Resources

- **American Society for Training and Development, Kentucky chapter.** Web site: www.astd-ky.com. Contact: Carrie Burton, vice president of marketing, (812) 989-0906.
- **Louisville Society for Human Resource Management.** Web site: www.lshrm.org. President: Natalie Alonso, 627-4587 |



“Successful businesses are now learning that training cannot be ignored.”

**SHERRIANN
HAMILTON**
ResCare Inc.

RON BATH | BUSINESS FIRST

Getting high quality training depends on one thing — thorough research

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“Sometimes managers turn to training to address issues related to resources or processes within the company, and training generally will not help in these areas,” she said. “If the business concern or situation relates to knowledge, skills or attitude, then the appropriate training can be a huge help.”

Beginning with the end in mind

Most companies use a combination of both in-house and outside expertise, depending upon the issue to be addressed, said Ty Dayoc, vice president of Tandem Solution LLC, a local information technology training firm that works with Appriss and other firms.

“There is a tremendous amount of effort required to create the ideal training course,” Dayoc said. “It’s often easier and more affordable for companies to use outside professionals that specialize in training than to learn the skills and develop the courses internally.

The key to getting desired results is to clearly determine what the employee needs to accomplish through the training, Hamilton said.

Joe Bonura, another consultant, agreed. “Always ‘begin with the end in mind,’” he said, quoting bestselling author Stephen Covey.

“You have to know exactly what the purpose of the training is and what you want employees to get out of it,” said Bonura, who is a professional speaker and principal with Joe Bonura and Associates Inc. in Prospect. He provides customized training designed to increase sales and improve services, primarily in marketing and advertising.

The supervisor, employee or a combination of workers should determine the results they want — then the legwork can begin. Considerable research needs to be done to find the right combination of program and trainer.

Taking the next steps

Bonura and others highly recommend networking with business colleagues or others in the industry and asking for referrals to find good training.

But that’s only the first step. Next, check credentials, get references, read testimonial letters and call former clients to determine if they met their goals or achieved the results they were seeking.

Hamilton recommended contacting the Louisville Society for Human Resource Management (www.lshrm.org) and the Kentucky chapter of ASTD (www.astd-ky.com).

“The professionals associated with these national organizations know the training industry well and can help link companies with the best professional development opportunities available,” she said.

The intensity of the search should reflect the quality of training a company is seeking, sources said.

“I generally work ahead by about three months and spend a lot of time interview-

ing trainers over the phone — and attending sessions conducted by the trainers I’m interested in, if that’s possible,” Gray said.

Costs to consider

Costs for training are going to vary, and they can vary significantly depending on several factors such as the training provider (consultant or university), type of training (Internet-based or one-on-one coaching) and the materials (a manual or software).

To get an idea, though, the ASTD reported that average annual learning expenditures for a full-time employee is about \$1,435 in 2006. And the average annual learning time per employee was 45.22 hours. These results came from a report with data on Fortune 500 companies in the United States.

Dayoc said that Tandem Solution’s customized training sessions can range from \$200 per person for a one-day session to \$2,500 per person for a five-day session.

Customizing the program

Finding the right trainer and presentation style is as important as finding the right content, advised Dayoc.

“Trainers should be experts in the field and have a passion for teaching. The trainer’s style should also fit the employees and corporate culture,” he said. “For example, if your workplace is casual and conversational, hiring someone in a suit to deliver a lecture will probably not be effective.”

Another thing to keep in mind is that professional development can be delivered in a wide variety of media today, including individual self-study and online courses, Web-based classrooms and one-on-one coaching programs.

“Matching program content with appropriate media is also critical,” Dayoc said.

For example, most of Tandem Solution’s Internet technology courses are conducted by instructors in classrooms with a computer for each participant. Interaction is important, he said, and so is the ability to ask questions immediately and get instant feedback.

Other media, such as webcasts, can be used with very large groups across different regions. Web training also can be self-paced and time sensitive.

Some training can be custom-designed for employers. Trainers and educators can “even help companies clarify their training goals and sometimes advise against training if they don’t think it will produce the changes intended,” Dayoc said.

Gray said that one aim for Appriss is to advance existing employees’ skills so they can promote within their company, rather than hiring from outside.

“We identify strengths and interests of employees that they may not even be aware of themselves,” said Gray. “Then we help them build their management skills. It’s very cost-effective to ‘build our own managers’ since they already know the company and love working here.” |