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# Why user focused training works best

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## ***An assessment of investment in business systems training and why focusing on end users leads to long term gain***

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Possibly the simplest measure of whether an organisation has successfully implemented a new business system is whether its employees could still do their jobs on go live. To achieve that requires some level of user training and that is where the debate starts on what works best.

Organisations typically invest in new business systems as a way of improving the effectiveness of their operation in order to increase cost efficiency. However, it isn't the system in itself that will bring the efficiencies but how it is used. So, logically, training should be focused on the users.

### Getting the Balance Right

The amount, type, content and timing are all critical factors in successful user IT training, as are the audience, the delivery and the supporting documentation.

Research suggests that the old adage 'you reap what you sow' applies or, put another way, you get out what you put in. The analysts Gartner have identified that companies spending less than 13% of their ERP project costs on training are three times more likely to fall short of their business and project goals than organisations spending 17% or more<sup>1</sup>.

In addition, Gartner estimates that each hour of effective training is worth five hours to the employing organisation. This is attributed to well-trained users reaching the required skill level in a quarter of the time, needing less support from peers and helpdesks and spending less time correcting errors.<sup>2</sup>

But, in the real world, the ideal has to be balanced against time and resource constraints. Training is consistently under-budgeted, which makes it even more imperative to identify the most effective programme for your system and organisation. A variety of elements come into play but the choices are very broadly: get your super users to do the training; rely on the training provided by your IT vendor; hand over the project to a professional training consultancy; or a combination.

### Software

Experience shows that users who don't 'buy-in' to a new system at the beginning are unlikely to use it as it was intended, potentially diluting the business benefits it was supposed to deliver.

Feedback from users has shown that they find IT training less effective if it is too software specific and is centred around the system's functionality. The vast majority of users need to understand how a system works only in the context of how it affects them in their own role. The standard training offered by most software providers therefore is likely to be too wide-ranging.

### Super Users

Similarly an organisation's super users, who are at the heart of the implementation, can be too focused on the system itself rather than delivering training that is appropriate for individual users.

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<sup>1</sup> Aldrich, C. (2000). *The Justification of IT Training*. Gartner Research Note DF-11-3614.

<sup>2</sup> Aldrich, C. (2000). *The Justification of IT Training*. Gartner Research Note DF-11-3614.

Where an organisation wants its super users and / or training departments to play either a lead or a supporting role, a professional, external view can bring an extra dimension and help to ensure the right balance is struck. Since super users are just that – extremely proficient at understanding the system and its capabilities - information overload and being too technical can be a risk if they design and deliver the user training in isolation.

Private bank Kleinwort Benson wanted to retain ownership of the training for a core banking system introduced this year but called in a professional consultancy for support as its super users were under pressure. Chris Ollieuz, an implementation consultant on the project, acknowledged: “The super users knew the system very well but they didn’t necessarily know the best way to communicate the role-based knowledge that the users needed.”

External support can also be invaluable in developing courses and materials and handling the complex logistics and administration behind running multiple training courses, at a time when in-house resources are likely to be under pressure.

### Tailored Training

IT training has been found to be most effective when it is tailored to the individual organisation’s specific requirements, is role-based and delivered in the most appropriate way for the users. Ian Sibbald, financial controller at Cranfield University, observes: “It makes sense to tackle training from the point of view of exactly what knowledge it is that you need to impart.”

Providing timely, user focused training though is only part of the story. Success also depends on having a range of high quality, well-targeted supporting documentation, which is written in a way the user finds easy to understand and to navigate. Designing and developing effective courses and materials, then keeping them up to date to reflect feedback or organisational and business process changes, is both specialised and time consuming.

Business system implementation consultant, Jeremy Nicholls, believes: “Continuously updating training documentation is very hard to do in-house. Using an external company means you can future-proof your documentation and protect the original investment in the system by making sure it’s always used as effectively as possible.”

### The Emotional Aspect of Change

An often overlooked element of IT training is the emotional effect of implementing a major new business system. Maximising potential efficiency gains almost always requires business processes to be rewritten. That inevitably means staff are faced with learning new ways of working as well as the new system, plus dealing with the uncertainties brought about by change.

User focused training can help address specific concerns and issues, particularly when it’s delivered by people from outside the organisation. Andrea Williams, IT project manager and implementation consultant, says she found that: “Professional trainers added enormous value through the delivery of a structured training programme and clear, consistent change messages that set expectations correctly.”

### Feeling Valued

Using professional trainers at some level has also been found to add credibility to IT training programmes. Tim Reardon, assistant director of finance at NHS Institute for Innovation and

Improvement notes: “We had trained our own staff internally to use the previous system but their feedback was that accountants aren’t trainers and that if we wanted to get the most out of the new system, users needed professional training on it.”

In addition, users have reported feeling more valued as individuals because their employer has invested in them. Training which is focused on meeting their specific needs is also likely to give them more confidence.

### Upgrades

The argument, that user focused IT training is most effective, applies just as much to system upgrades. Keeping a core business system up to date gives organisations the functionality to meet their evolving needs but users will need training on the new version if they are to continue to use it as effectively as possible.

Ipswich Borough Council had done its own training at the original implementation of a new finance system but called in a professional consultancy when it upgraded. Adrian Powell, the council’s project manager, saw a significant difference: “The consultants added a lot of value. They gave us some excellent advice and guidance at the beginning and the users rated them very highly on the content and quality of the training.”

Steve Vasey, system and business development manager at Xentrall Shared Services, a partnership set up by Stockton and Darlington councils, has found that using a professional consultancy: “provided very good value for money and freed up resources within our finance system development team so that we could concentrate on improving it, safe in the knowledge that users are well trained.”

### Budget

Whichever training route is followed, every pound must be spent as effectively as possible. Carrying out a detailed analysis of the precise project training needs, including evaluating the available resources, is the first step in determining the optimum programme for an organisation.

The key to the decision is bearing in mind that the new system, however complex and powerful, is simply a tool. It is the way that it is used that makes it valuable. Focusing training on the user, both at the initial implementation and subsequent upgrades, is the best way to realise those business benefits that justified the investment in the system in the first place.