



Better Service Through Training

By Robert Bogue

The relationship between effective training and fewer, better support center calls is well known, if not very easy to quantify. Sixty-seven percent of support organizations differentiate between incidents (unplanned work required to fix something) and how many are service requests (nothing is broken, but a service is required), but only 43 percent measure those calls separately. It's difficult, though, to predict the effect of better-trained customers on those numbers. Of course, perfect training is an improbability, but certainly there's room for improvement and room for fewer calls.

The Relationship Between the Support Center and Training

In most organizations, the support center is an operational function well disconnected from the training function. While training may sit underneath the HR department, support centers often find themselves situated under IT or another operational group.

The organizational distance between training and the support center creates an artificial chasm between the two organizations, despite their common goal. That is, both groups support the organization's actual producers. The training department's goal is to equip internal customers with the knowledge and tools they need, while the support center's goal is to return those same internal customers to productive work when something has gone wrong, whether that something is a system or the training itself.

The lack of proximity between the two groups and the seemingly disconnected goals on either end of the employee performance spectrum means that few organizations are able to leverage an effective feedback loop where the support center informs and supports training's

development of content and training supports the support center staff with the specialized training that they need.

Adam Stedham, SVP of learning solutions for GP Strategies Corporation, described it this way: "Organizational distance makes it hard to even communicate concerns between the support center and even harder to ensure effective communication for the support center members." It's hard to run a successful support center when you can't adequately train your support center staff.

Classical Training

No small part of this problem is that the classical internal training model has been instructor-led (and often downright boring). One trainer is tasked with delivering sexual harassment training one week and teaching staff "how to sell better" the next week. The materials aren't exciting for them and they aren't experts. They're simply regurgitating materials they bought or cobbled together from online resources. In recent years, this one-dimensional model has shifted to a model that includes other delivery modes, but trainer interest and student engagement have largely remained the same.

You can easily scale your training operation by recording instructor-led training and packaging it in video modules. Then

students can take training at any time, whenever it's convenient for them. However, this delivery mode lacks the vital interactivity between the student and the instructor.

The conversion to computer-based training, or eLearning, has enabled organizations to eliminate the time and scalability constraints associated with instructor-led training, but at the cost of effectiveness. While computer-based training does allow for real-time assessment, and therefore guarantees some level of instructional effectiveness, we've probably all taken computer-based training on, for example, information security, ethics, or sexual harassment, so you know how ineffective these assessments can be.

If your organization still approaches training this way, your support organization likely receives countless calls from customers regarding issues they either weren't trained to handle or weren't trained to handle effectively.

How Learning Happens

Even with good instructors, the old model simply cannot keep up with the demands of today's employees. Malcolm Knowles, in *The Adult Learner* (seventh edition, 2011), writes about andragogy (adult learning) and the key concepts that are necessary for adult learners versus child learners. They are:

- Need to know
- Foundation
- Self-concept
- Readiness
- Orientation
- Motivation

Bringing these concepts together, it's clear that adult learners need to be trained when they need it (readiness), they need to know why they need to know a piece of information (need to know), they need to have the foundational concepts necessary (foundation) to integrate the new information, and they need to understand the problem they are trying to solve (self-concept). Therefore, training must focus on problem solving (orientation) and the external motivation for learning must map to the student's internal motivations (motivation) of the student.

Another important model for adult learning is Bob Mosher and Conrad Gottfredson's "Five Moments of Need." Training is required:

- When learning something for the first time
- When you want to learn more
- When you're trying to remember and/or apply something
- When things change
- When something goes wrong

What's particularly interesting about the five moments of need is how clearly they illustrate the connection between training and the support center. Who do they call when they can't remember, when things change, and particularly when things go wrong?

Training, Remixed

Based on these learning models (and the research that supports them), we know that we need to deliver content to internal customers when they need it. Support center managers have known

for years that using knowledge management systems to capture frequently asked questions and making those solutions available to the customers can reduce support center calls and improve service; however, the results are often mixed, even within an organization.

Knowledge management tools are designed to capture knowledge and allow customers to retrieve it—but what knowledge are they capturing? And who's capturing it? Support center agents are often responsible for capturing their own knowledge. However, while these individuals are skilled at finding information and communicating with the customer, they're not always skilled at creating content. In effect, you've got agents out of position. You're asking them to devote time they don't have to do something they're not good at, to cover a training need that was left unmet.

What happens when, instead of the support center being solely responsible for populating the self-help systems, the training department assumes co-ownership for these knowledge management tools? What happens when you work *together* to create new content? What effect does that have on training?

Marriott has successfully bridged the gap between the support center and training. As Jule Baradi, senior director for learning strategy and governance, puts it, "We treat the support center as both a key stakeholder and a key audience for training." In an organization that cherishes people, their experiences, and their productivity, it's culturally reinforced that different parts of the organization should work together to deliver the best possible experience.

Performance Support

If it feels like shifting the corporate culture to one that facilitates learning and supports working together will be difficult, you're right. However, there are ways to jump start this process. Start by making small changes to the way that assets are organized. Also, when acquiring training—either directly or in partnership with the training department—consider content that can be used for both the initial instruction as well as ongoing educational needs.

This brings us full circle, back to the idea that training and the support center are really working on the same problem—employee productivity—from opposite ends. Working together to create learning solutions upfront and in the moment is a winning model that can be used to reduce call volume, improve satisfaction, and, more importantly, improve employee productivity. And isn't that the point anyway?



About the Author

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