

# Training? Oops!

The training cycle as a quality check and lubricant for IT-projects.

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*In this article, it is argued that early interaction with users during the course of a project really pays off when going live. As a project manager, one needs to keep an eye on the quality of the training delivered, not to mention the resistance from the organisation. One constantly needs to keep an eye on the user's side of the project. But how? The training cycle is an old and widespread idea that can help you out. Yet evidence shows that very little of it has been translated into practice.*

## Introduction

No matter how you look at it, when delivering a project, one is always judged on the usability for the end-user. Moreover, just before going live, training is mostly another pain in the neck. Unless one can manage to align and integrate the planning and execution of it into the rest of the project-work. This takes time, people and other resources, but in return there is a bigger chance of buy-in and it reduces the risk of post traumatic experiences.

The alternative is far less bright: more resistance during the implementation and a longer and more intensive after-care phase. Because shrinking training-efforts during the implementation means paying double after go-live (take that as a rule of thumb, or even better, as a law of nature). Prevention is better than cure.

## Theory

As a starting point, let's have a look at what specialists say about the subject. In the literature on training and development, it is mostly depicted as a 'cycle' or a series of logical steps. As an illustration, we take the description of Sisson & Storey (1995).

- The cycle ideally commences at the top with the identification of training needs (1).
- Based on the difference between the current and the desired level of competence, learning objectives can be identified (2).

- The third step, the design and choice of activities, relates to the selection of learning methods that are most appropriate to meet the list of learning objectives (3).
- The delivery of the training (4), is mostly followed by;
- an evaluation (5) in order to check if the learning objectives have been met.



Figure 1: 'The training and development cycle'

## Practice: Oops!

A recent study (Sels, Buyens & Bollens, 2000) shows that only a minority of the companies based in Flanders attach importance to the different steps of this cycle. Moreover, only 21,3% of the surveyed companies dispose of the appropriate tools for analysing the competences and training needs of their employees. This means that almost 80 % of the organisations put people, time and money into training, without knowing why (that is, by skipping steps 1 and 2).

But that's not all. The same study shows that only 19% of the organisations evaluate the reactions of their public (step 5). It gets even worse when we look at the number of companies that actually measure the return on training in the long term: 4,9% (read it out loud: four point nine percent!!). One of the conclusions of the study is that 'more isn't necessarily better', meaning that a high amount of money spent on training does not automatically guarantee quality. But how could you know if you don't have objectives and if you don't measure?

It's no surprise that the use of training plans is nowadays encouraged. They can serve as an instrument for a more planned approach and as an integrator of the training policies into human resource management. For the same reasons, training plans appear more and more as a subject of collective bargaining and as a criterion for certain subsidies (for example, the European Social Fund).

## Quality

This article is not about why more than 80 % of the organisations likes to waste their money. Instead, it's about the benefits of belonging to the other 20 %.

The key to qualitative training, is looking at the project from a user's perspective. It is important to gain some insight into the learning process and the level of knowledge of the users. This will constitute the basic information on which the training program is built. The training cycle forces us to start with measuring their training requirements.

Thorough preparation also means making sure that you can measure the outcome of your efforts afterwards. This requires that you register the parameters that will enable the measurement. In short: decide what you want to measure before you start.

Nevertheless, qualitative planning of training is pretty straightforward if you manage to keep an overview on the cycle.

## A training plan as a quality check?!

### An example

This example shows how the training cycle was used to build a training and communication policy for the implementation of a logistics software package. With the training cycle in mind, a checklist was identified with subtasks that were specific to the project. The target group was quite large and divided over different locations and departments and the training was completely catered for by the project team.

### Determining the target group and mapping their requirements

- Demarcation of the target group
- Mapping the training requirements
- Mapping the business processes
- Development of training strategy

### Planning and simulation

- Alignment of the working plan with the project plan
- Drawing up an inventory of existing methods and materials
- Drawing up an inventory of communication channels and media
- Aligning communication with the project approach
- Simulation of the detailed planning (depending on room capacity etc...)
- Agreement on enrolment process and logistics
- Planning of materials and rooms
- Validation of enrolments and roles

### Check-up of systems and support

- Setting up the training system
- Preparing exercises in the system

### Making course materials

- Translating business processes into hands-on courses
- Helpful tools/ gadgets
- Reread, reread, reread,...

### Enrolment and communication

- Enrolments based on a validated procedure
- Extra communication concerning the event

### Deliver training

- Conducting the training sessions
- Taking stock of suggestions and feedback

### Evaluate training

- Process suggestions and feedback

### After-care and support

- Helpdesk
- Coaching
- Training system

But there is more at stake than just the learning new things. We mostly expect the users to let go of their old habits at the same time.

## Lubricant

The training cycle can also be used to guide resistance. When nearing the delivery date of a project, one can feel the tension rising day by day. Project members get less sleep and they easily get nervous. The organisation as well, is whipped up with myths, stories and fears (sometimes justifiably, but sometimes not). It's normal; fear and resistance are characteristic of change.

The good news is that it can be forecasted quite well and appropriately steered. One way to do this is by focussing on the complete integration of the training cycle into the project plan and the day-to-day work.

## A closer look at resistance

What is resistance? What is causing opposite behaviour of people?

Let's suppose that you are being forced to move to another place where you have never been before, but heard the wildest stories about. Nobody tells you why you must move; you only heard some phoney commercials about a healthier environment, better buildings and new household appliances. The only thing you're sure of is that the place where you will stay in the future is a remote village, away from your family, friends and work. How will you react? Chances are that you will resist (to say the least).

But suppose now that you have been informed way in advance about the real reasons you have to move (expropriation, ground pollution,...). Suppose that your requirements have been taken into account (maybe you depend on public transport or maybe you need a wheelchair,...) and that the moving company allowed you to visit your future home. Next to the commercials, you are also informed about the disadvantages. As much as possible, your personal requirements are being catered for (for example a reduced rate on public transport, buildings accommodated to wheelchairs,...). In short, your involvement has been encouraged and you feel concerned.

But even when you are involved in the changes and when you have been informed correctly, you are still likely to resist. And that's normal. Human beings are certainty seekers (there is a quote that says "the only one who likes to change is a baby in a wet diaper"). Nevertheless, in the second situation, your protest will be more moderate than in the first. This time you know the persons and institutions

where you can go with questions and complaints.

## Resistance = Stress


In order to know exactly what is going on here, let's have a look at a definition of 'stress'.

A person experiences stress when he/she loses the illusion of control. You think you've lost the grip on things. As soon as you think that you have things under control again, the feeling of stress is gone, because you are in charge again. In the second situation of the example above, you have a say in the matter; in other words, you think you have more control. As a consequence, you will experience less stress than in the first situation.

## What can training do about that?

Learning how to use systems and software for a user is like learning how to ride a bicycle or learning how to swim for a four-year-old. You're stressed and you need a grip; something to hold on to. Training 'as such' will not moderate resistance. But the integration of the training and development cycle into the project work, significantly will. Each phase in that cycle can be seen as an opportunity to contact the target group. Each time you get in touch with users, you can offer them the possibility of involvement in the decision process. In other words, each contact with a user is an opportunity to give them 'the illusion of control'.

So, a layer of communication around the training program serves as a grip on different moments during the course of a proj-



ect. In order to implement training successfully, it is important to communicate the 'why's' of the project clearly, repeatedly and beforehand. Communication must be open, honest and should be treating negative aspects of the change as well. But most of all, communication is a two-way process. This means that users are more than just a resource for input during the development process; they become a 'customer' of the project. We all know that satisfied customers require two-way communication. So the moments of contact need to be carefully prepared and should enable two-way communication.



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## Conclusion

When delivering an IT project, technical perfection is not enough. At a certain moment, the knowledge that has been built up throughout a project needs to be filtered and translated into hands-on training. This is a complex task that requires a systematic approach. The training cycle offers insights in the ideal project-course from a user's perspective. Training and resistance can be planned and steered if they are not limited to simply delivering the training courses. In short, make sure you treat each user as a customer.

## Sources

- Sels L., Bollens, J. & Buyens D. (October 2000), Twintig lessen over het bedrijfsopleidingsbeleid in Vlaanderen.
  - Sisson K., Storey J. (1995) Managing Human Resources and Industrial Relations , chapter 7: Training and development.
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