As trainers, our heads are constantly turned by new technology and progressive ideas. But we shouldn't disregard "old-fashioned" training methods.

Thinking Inside the Box

BY BRIAN WASHBURN AND MICHELLE BAKER

If you can dream it, chances are you can do it in today's training environment. Innovative thinking, brought to fruition through technology, has transformed the talent development landscape.



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Thousands of new suppliers offer simulation-building services, online learning marketplaces, and social learning platforms. Trainers are awash in a sea of new presentation tools, unconventional learning management systems, and web-based collaboration apps. Presentations whirl around the screen with Prezi. People from around the world come together to learn through massive open online courses. Work teams share content and best practices with Slack and HipChat. These technologies provide endless alternatives to the classroom-based training to which we are all accustomed.

Innovation is good; there always will be a need for innovation. But sometimes talent development professionals spend too much time trying to find a creative solution when a more traditional approach will do. Here are some situations where old-fashioned training and development methods might just be the best solution.

Take your orders

It's a scenario everyone in this line of work faces: A business leader approaches your team and tells you his team needs training. You set about designing a course to get those employees up to par—much to the chagrin of your peers who insist that trainers are not "order takers." The anti-order taker crowd emphasizes the importance of needs assessments, and suggests that a traditional training initiative is not always—or even frequently—necessary to solve the problems at the root of performance issues.

Sometimes they're right. A traditional training program is not always the best or even a good solution. However, we should not discount the business leader's insights. She is closer to that department's needs, more in tune with its performance gaps, and aware of upcoming changes to systems or processes.

> SOMETIMES THE BENEFITS OF A MORE INNOVATIVE APPROACH JUST DON'T OUTWEIGH THE EASE AND SIMPLICITY OF DELIVERING A LECTURE.

We're not suggesting you skip the needs assessment and move forward with whatever the business unit requests. But after performing your due diligence with a needs assessment, you may find that serving as an order taker actually is the best strategy, when coupled with open dialogue about how formal training will address the learning need. Such situations where formal training is appropriate might include when:

- employees need to demonstrate mastery of new organizational or department-level processes
- a compliance or regulatory update mandates employee training
- a software implementation will affect employees' work.

Get behind the podium

Can you think of anything less innovative than a lecture? Yet sometimes the benefits of a more innovative approach just don't outweigh the ease and simplicity of delivering a lecture. Yes, even lecture is an inside-the-box strategy that can deliver the results you're looking for—if it's done well.

John Medina, author of *Brain Rules*, writes, "After 9 minutes and 59 seconds, the audience's attention is getting ready to plummet to near zero." If you're planning to lecture, Medina suggests adding "hooks" to your presentation every 10 minutes. (Wait 11 minutes to insert a hook at your peril.) These hooks should be relevant to the content, serve as a bridge to the next 10 minutes of your presentation, and ideally trigger some kind of emotion in your audience members. Just as a television journalist teases her audience with a sound bite, a well-executed hook can ensure your audience remains attentive and interested throughout your entire lecture.

Lecture may be appropriate in situations when you are:

- delivering presentations in which discussion is not an option
- facing time constraints that prevent a free flow of ideas or group participation
- working with meeting organizers who insist that you stand behind a podium to deliver content.

Return to PowerPoint

Sure, many younger, hipper alternatives to PowerPoint have come along that promise to make all your presentations beautiful and inspiring, from PowToon to Prezi, Canva to Haiku Deck. But the truth is that PowerPoint doesn't bore people; people bore people. Regardless of the technology, poorly designed (and delivered) presentations can still put an audience to sleep.

If PowerPoint is the platform you're most familiar with, then you have a powerful tool at your disposal. The program has many features and capabilities that go unnoticed. Use them wisely, and keep these principles in mind:

- Begin building your slide deck only after you decide what story you want your facts and figures to tell.
- Limit the amount of text on each slide. The human brain cannot process what you're saying while

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simultaneously reading 15 lines of text on a slide.
- If you can't limit the amount of information, at least animate your text so only one key point is revealed at a time. Otherwise your audience will be reading your slides instead of listening to what you have to say.
- Take advantage of vivid, ethically sourced imagery, giving attribution where appropriate. And, please, eliminate clip art.

A reliable, go-to tool in every facilitator's toolkit, PowerPoint can be valuable when you're delivering content in a large room (and a flipchart just won't do), you need to highlight key information, or you're providing written instructions for activities.

Break out the smile sheets

Kirkpatrick's four levels of training evaluation are under fire from some in the talent development field, particularly the Level 1 evaluations, also known as "smile sheets." Problems with these so-called smile sheets range from asking questions unrelated to learning ("How was the room temperature?") to incorrect assumptions that high evaluation scores mean participants actually learned something. (There is no research-based correlation.)

But sometimes Level 1 evaluation is the only form of measurement that trainers can realistically implement. Will Thalheimer, author of *Performance-Focused Smile Sheets: A Radical Rethinking of a Dangerous Art Form*, has spent more than a decade studying how to make Level 1 evaluations more useful.

Instead of asking questions about the speaker's knowledge of her content or whether the venue's food was good, Thalheimer suggests developing questions to assess whether learners will remember what they learned, whether they intend to apply what they learned to their work, and even whether learners feel motivated to apply what they've learned. Capturing these initial reactions to the learning event can give you great insights to the training program's impact.

Use Level 1 evaluations in situations when you are:
- running pilot programs and identifying adjustments that need to be made before releasing the program to the masses
- predicting whether learning could transfer to the job
- tracking "learner motivation" as a key talent metric.

Innovative technology and tools have never been more accessible for talent development practitioners. However, not every course or project needs to be on the bleeding edge of industry trends. Sometimes all that is needed is an inside-the-box solution to meet learners' needs.

Brian Washburn is the global learning and development manager for SightLife, a global health organization dedicated to eliminating corneal blindness. He also is the author of the Train Like a Champion blog; bpwashburn@gmail.com.

Michelle Baker is a talent development manager; the founder of phase(two)learning, a boutique talent development consultancy; and the voice of the phase(two)learning blog; phasetwolearning@gmail.com.



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