



To CENTRALIZE



or NOT

For years, companies have struggled with the age-old question: Should our training structure be centralized or decentralized? Here, case studies of Training Top 125 winners demonstrate the pros and cons of both, plus those of a blended approach. BY MARGERY WEINSTEIN

YOU, A CONTROL FREAK? NEVER! ON THE OTHER HAND, you're not one to shuck responsibility off on others, feigning a love of delegation. When it comes to the training structure that works best for your company, a balancing act is required. Whether you decide to go all the way in one direction or the other—becoming entirely centralized, with training authority based at corporate headquarters, or decentralized, with each business function aided by its own autonomous team of trainers, or use a combination of the two—you need an organization that suits both the unique needs of your company and the learners you serve.



TWO-WAY STREET

At Farmer's Insurance, a federated model the company refers to as "Shared Learning" is adhered to, says Senior Vice President and Chief Learning Officer Annette Thompson. In this structure, in which multiple training functions are aligned and housed within various business units, all trainers report via matrix to Thompson. For example, she explains, technical business units partner with Shared Learning to identify and prioritize learning needs, as well as provide needed subject matter expertise. "Generally, the technical business unit owns training execution," says Thompson. "This structure creates efficiencies by standardizing and sharing common learning needs

Your strategy is over here.

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while simultaneously addressing the need for flexibility and accountability of specific business units.”

The Shared Learning approach at Farmer’s Insurance was first implemented last year, driven by a need for change from a purely decentralized structure. “As recently as 2007, there was little correlation between each disparate learning unit’s training complement, expertise, audience size, and impact on business results,” Thompson says. “Budget levels for each learning unit often were dramatically different without justification. Some training units were recognized as industry leaders in best practice instructional design, delivery, and evaluation, while others were operating with little direction or accountability for business results.” Equally lacking under the old system was consistent accountability for dollars spent on learning. On top of that, Thompson and her team confronted inefficient duplication of resources in the disparate training structures, when, under a centralized system, she knew they would be able to optimize resources, such as e-learning infrastructure, across more than one training group.

The new and improved structure allows Farmer’s Insurance trainers to leverage efficiencies in shared activities and learning in areas such as onboarding, enterprise-wide software deployment training, best practices sharing, and vendor management. The company’s implementation of new customer relationship management software benefits from shared curriculum design, thanks to the revamped training structure. “There are three independent business units reporting up to me that have an audience they have to service around it,” says Thompson. “Instead of independently building that curriculum, we’re building it in a co-shared environment. We’re getting great efficiencies by being able to use the same online content and some of the same instructional design content.”

Lancaster General (LG) also uses a blended training structure. Self-governing training arms support its centralized component, says Vice President, Institute for Professional Development Bonnie K. Knox. “Our corporate university, the Institute for Professional Development (IPD), provides centralized training to more than 7,500 employees of our health system,” Knox explains. “Self-governing nursing councils drive decentralized educational initiatives based on needs assessments and the review of both hospital-wide and unit-specific performance improvement data.” Its Wellness Department, meanwhile, develops and implements centralized wellness education both for LG staff and the community of Lancaster, PA.

Lancaster’s IPD manages system-wide training initiatives that include core curriculum that aligns with the vision and mission of the organization, says Knox. The nursing councils focus on unit-specific needs that may not impact all departments. “This supports our efforts toward just-in-time training (unit-specific),”



she says, “as well as training related to our short- and long-term strategic goals (IPD).” Recent updates to the hospital’s training structure include IPD’s development of three Centers for Excellence: Clinical Education, Continuing Education and Leadership, and Management and Innovation. “Each center concentrates on its relevant training initiatives,” Knox points out.

The complex nature of health care demands a blended approach, Knox emphasizes. “Clinical training for nurses is vastly different compared to training for imaging staff, physical therapists, or lab staff, as the required skills for each group is specialized and diverse,” she says. But, at the same time, adds Knox, “other training efforts such as customer service, leadership development, or workplace safety are accomplished more effectively through a system-wide training effort.”

An assessment of the target audience drives the nature and extent of the training (centralized system-wide vs. decentralized unit-specific), says Knox, “along with a consideration of how well that training transfers into each work group.”

CENTRAL CONTROL

VSP Vision Care has what Shauna Harrington, director, workforce development, describes as a centralized training structure that is applied to human resources, leadership, and change management-related training development. This allows the company to offer “aligned, consistent messaging, and reinforcement” of its learning and strategic initiatives, and to “continuously develop and leverage the skills of trainers.”

Last year, Harrington’s team created a program to increase its trainers’ e-learning skills for the purpose of developing and implementing a new e-learning strategy. The goal was to create a multimedia infrastructure that would allow employees to access additional training in multiple locations and in different time zones. Central organization was key to rolling out the program, says Harrington. “We kicked it off with a ‘train-the-trainer’ offsite that included HR trainers and business trainers in all locations,” she says. “We assessed our current and future state and shared several internal and external best practices and demos.” Train-the-trainer participants then created e-learning story boards to use as the basis for the e-learning eventually rolled out company-wide. In addition, a trainer wiki with e-learning guidance, templates, and samples were created,” says Harrington, and now can be used throughout the company as a resource for future e-learning programs. By centralizing, VSP is able to leverage free external e-learning skills training to its trainers by partnering with an external vendor.

As VSP continues to grow, Harrington says its central structure will evolve to keep pace. “We are developing and transferring knowledge to a greater number of trainers in support of enterprise growth,” she points out. “In addition, we have the

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Workforce Development Leadership Group, made up of training managers in HR and the business areas, that sets and develops strategies, shares best practices and resources, and addresses competency gaps for trainers across the company.”

The centralized structure at Gables Residential originated 12 years ago, say Vice President, Learning and Development Jana Muma and Learning and Development Director Rob Rector. The change was made, they explain, “in an effort to improve [training] consistency and operate nationally as one organization as opposed to regionally.”

Muma and Rector believe the centralized function allows the ability to cross train and provide the same frequency [of programming] in every region. A training frequency chart provides Learning & Development associates with a basic schedule in which they are to post classes consistently in each region, Muma and Rector explain. “This ensures classes are offered on a standard basis, allows training associates to plan better and further in advance, and allows us to double-check that trainers have been assigned to each scheduled course.”

Gables Residential is keeping tabs on its centralized structure to keep it relevant to the company’s needs. “We conduct an annual survey,” Muma and Rector point out, “to ensure we are meeting the learners’ needs and delivering the appropriate methods of training.”

U.S. Security Associates, Inc., has a centralized training structure known as The USA Security Academy, says Jim Flowers, director, Management and Organizational Development. The structure, in existence since October 2003, operates out of its corporate headquarters in Roswell, GA. “There, certified trainers deliver live ‘real-time’ training to employees throughout the United States utilizing an online Web conferencing program,” says Flowers. “Through the use of IP cameras and voice-over IP, trainers and trainees see each other ‘face to face,’ ask questions, and engage in group discussion just as in a live classroom. The advantage of this centralized, interactive program is that all trainees are receiving the same standardized training regardless of their location.” Other benefits of The USA Security Academy are centralized test scoring and quality control. Before getting hired by the company, applicants must complete eight hours of live, online pre-assignment training, and must pass a 240-question exam, says Flowers. The tests are scored using a computerized verification system and recorded into a company-wide master database. Applicants who aren’t able to pass after two attempts automatically are blocked from being hired.

USA Security Academy is used to train all levels of management and administrative personnel, says Flowers, “which has resulted in an improvement in productivity and efficiency due to its dramatic reduction in travel time, as well as expense.”

DOING IT DECENTRALIZED

At CHG Healthcare Services, Inc., a decentralized training structure is used. “We have corporate trainers in addition to divisional

QUICK TIPS

- Consider a combination, or federated (what one company calls “Shared Learning”), approach to training structure. There is centralized guidance and resources under this system, but departmental authority, too.
- If you choose a federated model, be sure it’s at least centralized in providing consistent accountability for the dollars attached to your training programs, and the results you’re trying to achieve.
- It also makes sense to ensure your training structure realizes efficiencies by using the same online training content and instructional design whenever possible across the company.
- Use self-governing learning councils to drive decentralized educational initiatives based on needs assessments and the review of both organization-wide and unit-specific performance improvement data.
- Launch a Workforce Development Leadership Group, made up of training managers in HR and your business areas, to set and develop strategies, share best practices and resources, and address competency gaps for trainers across the company.
- Implement a training frequency chart that provides learning professionals with a basic schedule in which they post classes consistently in each of your regions.
- Review the efficiency of your training program annually to double-check it’s continuing to meet the needs of your company, and that it keeps your trainers on track.

trainers who report to their own leaders within the different divisions,” explains Manager, Training Julyn Terry. It wasn’t always this way at CHG, she points out. Its training organization originally was centralized, but divisional leaders were added as the company began to grow.

A key strength of CHG’s decentralized approach is its ability to focus on a variety of learning areas all at once, Terry observes. “We have trainers embedded within several different divisions, which enables them to provide division-specific training based on their particular set of objectives,” she says. “This allows our corporate trainers to maintain a broad perspective to cover curriculum that applies to large groups in the company, such as new hire training and leadership development courses.”

Before the change to a decentralized structure was enacted, Terry says she and her team knew that something wasn’t working. “When our training was centralized, we noticed that some of our employees were having a difficult time getting up to speed with information specific to their division; we were only providing them with general information,” she says. “The decentralized method gives division trainers the ability to teach more specifically to job roles and divisional goals. Since we decentralized, we’ve seen huge improvements in the ramp up of employee knowledge and competencies.”

To maintain the decentralized system, “we hold meetings on a monthly basis for all of our trainers to encourage information sharing and collaboration,” says Terry. “Our annual training summit is designed to increase our department growth and development.” So far so good, she says. “We review the efficiency and effectiveness of our training program every year and at this point, we have no plans to make any changes.” **T**