



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Trainer Savvy

How to select the right software trainer

While some organizations assume that freshly hired employees come trained in current applications, others believe that the more the employee is exposed to an application system on-the-job, the better his or her chances of learning it. Both of these assumptions are incorrect.

Fully trained employees are a rarity. In addition, software applications and systems are changing so rapidly that it is difficult for employees to update their software skills frequently. Besides that, one study established that software expertise is most effectively transferred through formal training. There is therefore an urgent requirement for software application trainers.

The bad news is that hiring software trainers is not easy; the good news is that it is not impossible! The first step in hiring the appropriate individual is to identify certain pre-requisite skills. The next step is to fit the individual into the existing training mechanism.

The skills list

In addition to being software savvy, a prospective software trainer should exhibit the following skills.

Interpersonal skills. A trainer has to deal with a variety of learning styles and learners. The ability to make a smooth transition from a one-on-one training session to an instructor-led classroom session is necessary. Good interpersonal skills also include a pleasant disposition.

Presentation skills. Presentations are often part of formal training sessions. For instance, a trainer might have to address departmental heads to inform them of a new training program. While most trainers are comfortable with one-on-one communication, some lack the confidence to speak in front of a large group. Organizations must insist on good platform training skills.

Multitasking: A good software trainer should have the ability to multitask. For instance, during a classroom session he or she should handle the overhead projector, answer questions, and address individual learner issues, all the while speaking to the class in a calm and unhurried manner.

Speaking and writing skills. Most software trainers lack the effective speaking and writing skills that are so crucial to training success. Trainers who make grammatical or pronunciation errors while speaking lose their credibility instantly. In addition to proper diction, trainers must develop the art of speaking to a variety of learners. Excessive use of jargon could be jarring to the novice while the use of basic terms could bore advanced learners.



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A trainer should also have the ability to develop training related documents such as technical handouts and facilitator guides.

Listening skills. Even the best trainers view feedback with suspicion. Only ineffective trainers fail to gauge the pulse of the audience.

Prior experience. A good trainer is one who can empathize with the audience. Regular use of the software will help the trainer understand user issues.

Learning eagerness. A software trainer should be willing to update his or her existing knowledge level each time new operating systems, products or applications hit the market.

The next step is for hiring managers to answer the following questions. First, is the organization looking for someone who has technical skills and can be taught to be a trainer? Or is the organization looking for a trainer who can be taught the software?

Answering these questions helps the manager create the right job description. For instance, if the organization wants to hire a technical person, it should ideally seek candidates with degrees in computer science, information systems, information technology or vast software experience.

Unfortunately, the choice of an effective software trainer is based on a trade-off between degrees in software or information technology and instructional experience. It would help enormously if universities offered degrees in software training.

In or out

Large organizations could hire interested and qualified candidates from within; however, this is a time-consuming process. To shortlist the right candidate, hiring managers should begin their search by speaking to departmental heads about the software skills of their employees. In addition to adequate software knowledge, a prospective in-house trainer must evince a strong desire to learn and teach.

For external hiring, organizations must draft and post specific job requirements. At the same time, stringent requirements may deter the not-too-qualified-yet-talented lot. For instance, an over-emphasis on degrees may sideline subject matter experts.

And finally...

An interview helps identify prospective trainers and, more importantly, determine a "good fit." However, the process of identifying a "good fit" is incomplete if the above-mentioned skills sets are not addressed during the interview or teaching demonstration.

A few favorite interview questions are "How will you modify your instructions to address different learning styles?" (the answer to this question helps determine whether the candidate is familiar with the different learning styles), "How do you handle a class that has both advanced learners and beginners?" (this decides whether a trainer is partial to any group or not; the ideal solution is to get the advanced lot to help the beginners), and "How do you learn new software applications?" (candidates who learn by a hands-on



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experience can relate to learner issues better than those who learn by reading a book or attending brief demonstrations).

A few other areas that can be added to the selection process are:

Teaching demonstrations. Ask the candidate to present a ten-minute talk on any subject other than his or her area of expertise. This helps identify his or her instructional abilities, teaching style, personality and ability to be sequential and logical.

Role-play. Creating different situations and asking a candidate how he or she would react to them helps determine his or her flexibility and levels of interactivity.

An effective software trainer must possess the minimum skill sets. Based on their training requirements and learning styles organizations are then free to select the best fit for their training needs.