

Initiating an In-House Topical Training Program

Excerpted and adapted from "Turning Staff Training Inside Out" by Laura L. Viehmyer, SPHR, CEBS, CAE
Revised December 2006

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SUMMARY

Laura Viehmyer, former chief human resources officer for AIA National, discusses the 2002 launch of a topical training program at the AIA national component and how the program has grown since its inception. She addresses the necessary steps to identify presenters and topics as well as the importance of assessment and improvement.

HOW AIA TOPICAL TRAINING BEGAN

Several years ago, as the AIA National staff grew to more than 180, the human resources (HR) team struggled to create an orientation program for new staff and a training strategy for existing staff. At that time, the program included a first-day orientation with the HR department and a quarterly, day-long program that began with a breakfast presentation by the executive vice president and CEO about the power of architecture to uplift and energize the human spirit. Beyond this, ongoing group training was sporadic, based on individual development needs.

ASSESS EMPLOYEE INTEREST LEVEL

The HR staff collected information on training needs through an informal poll of selected short-service and longtime employees in each department. The training needs assessment identified a common thread: Regardless of position, tenure, department, or skill set, AIA employees often worked in intellectual, task-oriented isolation without understanding what other departments do and how functions interrelate.

Many organizations face a similar dilemma with modest-to-scarce resources for staff orientation and training, despite myriad companies eager for such outsourced projects. In the AIA's case, with limited resources, the best approach appeared to be internal—asking talented staff and professional experts to share their knowledge. But how would their colleagues react? Would such training be enough to truly raise the level of overall professional knowledge on staff? The AIA decided to find out.

IDENTIFY IN-HOUSE EXPERTS

In the spring of 2002, the HR department held a kickoff meeting with 13 in-house subject matter experts to describe the identified need, encourage participation, and ask each expert to develop a title and content for a one-hour workshop.

As a new program initiative, the revised staff-training approach required tremendous support of staff experts as well as considerable time to prepare training materials. Some experts needed coaching to improve their public-speaking ability; others needed help selecting the relevant information or most effective medium. Nonetheless, all experts had one thing in common: They knew the material well.

SELECT THE TOPICS

Selecting the first 13 topics and presenters of the newly coined "Topical Training Workshops" was easy. The subjects included "Associations 101," "The Design Process," "Budgeting Basics," "The Architectural Licensure Process," "AIA Membership Categories," "Telephones and Service," and "Print/Web Communications." A walking tour as part of "The Shape and Shaping of a World Capital" workshop and a half-day field trip to a state or local AIA component and nearby architecture firm also made the training list.

To select topics, the AIA HR staff simply imagined themselves as new employees in the organization or longtime staffers who have been in the same job for years. Which strategies, departments, programs, and organizational goals would those individuals want to learn more about? The problem quickly evolved from "How do we develop these workshops from scratch?" to "How do we narrow the topics to a reasonable number?"

Meanwhile, the presenters were obvious. Who best to discuss architecture licensing than an AIA Fellow? Why not ask an attorney the principles of copyrights and trademarks? Who is a better candidate to talk about the AIA budgeting process than the CFO?

With topic selection completed, presenters prepared, and staff registration accomplished, the Topical Training Workshops began in late 2002. Each topic was offered once in 2002 and three times during 2003, with an average workshop attendance of 30 staff members.

Although employees seemed to genuinely want to learn more about the AIA, additional incentives made the learning more rewarding.

EVALUATE THE PROGRAM

To gather feedback and continually improve the workshops, the evaluation form became a key document. Each attendee rated the workshop content on a five-point scale for thoroughness, relevance, and appropriateness. Participants also rated the presenters on their knowledge, clarity, conciseness, communication ability, and responsiveness to questions. Overall presentation ratings and narrative comments revealed the general effectiveness of the workshop and ways it could be improved.

MANAGING SUCCESS

AIA HR staff shepherded the overall initiative from inception to launch to assessment. Staff feedback escalated, and employees increasingly requested additional workshops and asked many questions, including, "What about learning to write better? That applies to everyone. Can't we have a workshop about that?" "I don't really know what they do in that department. Can they do a Topical Training Workshop?"

As a result, more presenters volunteered or were enlisted to develop 19 additional Topical Training Workshops. Nine of them debuted in spring 2004, and 10 more rounded out the offerings in spring 2005.

"I have attended all the workshops in both series one and two. I *wanted* to attend them because in my job I needed to learn what different teams do to understand what records should be kept," explains Nancy Hadley, Assoc. AIA, AIA archivist and records manager. "What I get is a real sense of what the AIA offers its members and what is important about what we do. It helps me gain a broader perspective beyond what is involved in my own day-to-day transactions."

"I found that Topical Training Workshops provide a bigger picture of how the AIA functions," says Patricia Lukas, a project manager who started at the AIA in 2000. "It's like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The more workshops you attend, the more complete the

overall picture becomes. The information has helped me handle member calls more effectively, and some speakers have triggered ideas for potential collaboration on new projects. It's really a painless way to learn."

Four years after its inception, the topical training program continues to gain interest. In the third quarter of 2006 12 topical training seminars were offered and each was highly attended.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 03.02.01 Mentoring Interns: A Firm Commitment
- 03.02.04 Mentoring as a Team Sport
- 07.05.04 Types of Training Programs

For More Information on This Topic

See also "Staff Development and Retention" by Laurie Dreyer-Hadley, Kathleen C. Maurel, and Debra Fiori, *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 14th edition, Chapter 7, page 285.



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Keywords

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