

What to Look for When You Buy Training

Here are seven criteria that can help you make an educated choice.

By ROSS TARTELL

You have just finished your needs analysis. You have a good idea of your training strategy. Given the size of the target population, you decide to buy some training. The results of your training needs analysis and your training strategy determine the type of training you will purchase. The next step in the process is deciding what to buy. [For more on the process of deciding whether to purchase training and making it work if you do, see "To Make

Faced with this type of competition for your dollar, how can you be sure that you have made the best possible choice? It's not enough to say "Be choosy!" You must not only have a clear understanding of your training needs but also have a clearly developed and defined set of evaluation criteria.

Buying training is like any other major purchase. You must be very clear about what you want it to do, what features you

Although this process sounds complex, it is not difficult. However, it does take time and research to transform the results of your needs analysis into reality.

Seven critical selection criteria follow. They may vary in importance, within certain limits, depending on your organization's particular training needs and available resources. These criteria will enable you to objectively evaluate all of the vendors uncovered in your search. One explicit assumption underlies the selection criteria: The product you are evaluating is designed to meet the specific training needs you are attempting to meet.

It's not enough to say "Be choosy!"

or Buy," on page 24 in this issue.—Editor]

There are literally hundreds of off-the-shelf programs and customizing vendors available. And more become available every day. Each promises to cost-effectively train your employees and increase your organization's productivity beyond your wildest dreams. Each survives by selling their product. Some use a hard sell, others are softer. It is up to you to evaluate and choose the training product that will provide the best results.

need and the current market rates for the product. Furthermore, because most training programs are composed of complex packages made up of materials, support services, and possibly consulting and future purchases, they are subject to bargaining and negotiation. Consequently, to be successful in the negotiation process and sign a mutually favorable contract, you must know the market rates, how much you are willing to pay, your basic performance requirements, and any secondary components you would like to have as part of the final package. In short, you must have the information necessary to formulate an initial negotiation position.

Cost

Cost is not necessarily an "on or off" criterion. In some organizations, there are rigid budget restrictions. Other companies have more flexibility. Obviously, there is a range of importance levels that can be attached to cost. But you must know your budget constraints because the upper limit of your budget outlines one of the key factors affecting your negotiation position.

Program materials

This criterion evaluates the leader's guide and the participant materials. It, like cost, also varies in importance. Outside consultants act as the program leaders for

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some programs. Consequently, the necessary participant materials may be minimal. For example, a presentation skills seminar led by an outside consultant will not require extensive leader's guides or participant materials. However, a technical training program led by in-house staff may require extensive documentation.

Furthermore, the competence of the in-house training staff can dictate the importance of the quality of the program materials. Uneven trainer competence is a reality in many in-house programs, especially those led by line management. The quality of the leader's guide, program, and participant material helps control uneven levels of trainer expertise.

Program design and presentation

The effectiveness of program design and presentation is a criterion that varies little from company to company. This selection criterion answers these questions: Does the product effectively deliver what it claims? Does the design make sense? Is there logic or rationale to the design and method of information presentation?

The evaluation of this criterion requires careful consideration on your part. There are many designs that are professional and effective. However, there are others that will not measure up.

For example, if each component of the program does not build upon and reinforce the previous components, the program will not have a smooth flow. Another example may be that the teaching method is too simple or complex for the target audience. Overall, the effective evaluation of this criterion relies heavily on your expertise and, more importantly, on your common sense.

Appropriateness to the organization

The theoretical and learning frameworks must be appropriate and fit with the organization's culture. There are organizations where there is a well-designed procedure or supervisory norm. To introduce training that, without good reason and supporting interventions, runs counter to the procedure or the norm is to invite, at the very least, a serious loss of credibility. Similarly, the learning framework must be consistent with the organization's culture.

For example, the members of certain organizations don't appreciate the training

unless they put in a 10-hour day and then have either an evening session or several hours of homework. Other organizations require "time off" for recreation. Similarly, an instrumented participant format may be appropriate to teach interpersonal skills in one setting, while a behavior modeling approach may be appropriate in another.

There are two keys to gauging the appropriateness of the training for the organization. First, find out what was successful in the past. And second, identify the work and play norms. In every organization there are basic expectations about effort, dress, motivation, and behavior. It is important to differentiate the training from the regular ongoing work norms. But the difference should not be so broad as to be counter to the organization's culture. Training that radically differs from organizational culture runs a very high risk of failure.

Learning transfer

One of the critical problems with many training programs is the lack of procedures or processes designed to facilitate the transfer of learning back to the work place. This may not be a problem with specific

technical training, but it is a major issue in supervisory training and management education. The following questions must be answered:

■ Can adequate postprogram follow up be built into the program to reinforce on-the-job application?

■ Are "back home" problem-solving application modules built into the design?

■ Are the objectives of the course compatible within the context of the job, or will the response back on the job be "I hope you enjoyed your vacation; now let's get some work done!?"

Evaluation procedures

Evaluation is frequently the forgotten step in program design and implementation. A good program will have built-in evaluation steps. Frequently, you will have to add evaluation procedures based on the results of the needs analysis and course objectives.

Again, the importance of this factor in program evaluation is based on whether you want to build it in or it is already built into the program. In any case, the evaluation tells you if the program has succeeded and how to better service the target audience.

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Figure 1—Selection matrix

Importance 1	Selection Criteria 2	Vendor 1		Vendor 2		Vendor 3	
		Raw Evaluation Score 3	Criteria Score 1x3	Raw Evaluation Score 4	Criteria Score 1x4	Raw Evaluation Score 5	Criteria Score 1x5
	Cost						
	Program Materials						
	Program Design and Presentation						
	Appropriateness to the Organization						
	Learning Transfer						
	Evaluation Procedures						
	Consumer Recommendations						
Total Selection Score							

Consumer recommendations

This last factor is often forgotten, but can tell you a lot about the vendor. Consumer recommendations give you an indication of problems in the program, the level of vendor support and, possibly, the effectiveness of the program. Questions about what did and didn't work well and what effects the program had back on the

ratings should range from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (absolutely critical).

- Give each vendor or program a raw evaluation score for selection criterion. Use ratings from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).
- Compute a criteria score by multiplying the raw evaluation score by the importance rating. This multiplication procedure weights the importance of the selection criteria to provide the criteria score.

you consider most critical?

Your training needs analysis is useless without the right program. More important, the purchase of a training program, whether an off-the-shelf or a customized program, is a major investment. The quality of your investment decision is very important in today's environment. Often, what program to buy or which vendor to use can also be a difficult choice. But, the use of a set of clearly defined evaluation criteria can provide direction and objectivity to an increasingly difficult and complex decision.

The learning framework must be consistent with the organization's culture

job (i.e., productivity, cost reduction, morale, turnover) can provide a good idea of program effectiveness and vendor responsiveness. The quality of vendor support can make your job very easy or very difficult.

Collecting information about the training program is the time-consuming part of the choice process. Actually making the selection can be greatly simplified by using the selection matrix outlined in Figure 1, explained as follows:

- Assign an importance rating to each selection criterion. The importance

ratings should range from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (absolutely critical).

- To find the total selection score, total the criteria scores for each vendor.
- The vendor with the highest total selection score should be your choice.

Occasionally, two programs or vendors will have very similar total selection scores. When this situation occurs, there are two possible courses of action. First, evaluate the relationship you have with the vendor. The better the relationship—and all other things equal—the higher the probability of success. Second, review the selection criteria with 5 (absolutely critical) ratings. Which choice is better for those criteria