Hidden Value of Technical Training

What’s the most important part of your infrastructure? Look past your servers, storage, software, and networks. The most critical component disappears down the elevator or walks out the door each night.

It’s you and your team. Your collective vision, knowledge, and skill sets have a wider impact than any technology.

So why is IT education and training among the first items in the budget likely to be cut? The answer is, quite probably, that the fewest employees scream. Maybe you should be one of them.

Several IT decision makers recently discussed the difference IT education and training makes to their organizations, how they measure benefits, and how they sell those benefits to CFOs. What they hear from their CFOs is probably similar to what you hear from yours: “Do we really need this training expense? What’s the return?”

By Alan Drummer
“Show me the numbers”
Measuring the value of training is difficult, and both buyers and vendors of technical training services need to meet that challenge better. That’s the conclusion of a recent research report from The Alchemy Solutions Group. It reached out globally to buyers of technical training services through an online survey, supplemented by one-on-one interviews.

“IT organizations need clear metrics for valuing technical training,” the report concludes.1 “The ability to generate business value proof points is critical for continued funding; yet fewer than half of all IT organizations validate the original economic assumptions around technical training.”

Although 67 percent of respondents need financial justification for training, the report explains, only 42 percent have the opportunity to come back and validate that benefits have been received. Stanley King, president and chief executive officer of The Alchemy Solutions Group, elaborates: “The problem is that the next time those organizations go back and attempt to justify additional training, they lose the credibility of having a business case. Few organizations have the metrics to measure the effectiveness of training on staff utilization and productivity gains.”

Ready, set, change
One organization that is demonstrating the value of training—in the midst of rapid business change—is Meredith Corporation. It’s a leading United States marketing and media company with a portfolio that includes 23 subscription magazines, 12 television stations, 150 special-interest publications, approximately 400 books, 32 websites, and an 85 million-record consumer-marketing database.

When Brad Wyckoff joined Meredith as chief information officer, the digital push was focused on branded websites. “Now, we look to push our creative content across a wide variety of digital platforms, challenging the IT innovation and infrastructure to keep pace.”

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– Brad Wyckoff, CIO, Meredith Corporation
Prepare for change and save millions

Wyckoff and his team began preparing for change in 2002, by consolidating and standardizing key enterprise systems across the Enterprise. The IT team standardized on several Symantec technology-based solutions to maintain optimal operations—ranging from email archiving and e-discovery to high availability; storage management to data protection.

Training has played a key part in the transformation. In order to develop and standardize IT team skill sets, Wyckoff uses education services from Symantec and sends four to five staff a year to Symantec classes. A Business Value Analysis Study pinpoints operational efficiencies and staff productivity gains from the overall IT transformation at Meredith, as well as millions of dollars in cost avoidance and savings in 10 different areas.

“How do I sell on the value of IT training?” Wyckoff considers. “I point out that without investments in education it would be very difficult to execute our strategies because the technology landscape is demanding and continually shifting. The rationale is the same for IT as it is for our financial team to stay current with changes in GAAP (Generally Accepted Accounting Principles). If we don’t keep our people current, our overall ability to execute and contribute to the organization will rapidly diminish.”

Analyst Martin Hingley, chief executive officer at ITCandor Limited, observes that, “During a downturn, some companies can forget the value of training. There’s been an ‘automatization’ of human resources that implies headcount is headcount, and denies the expertise or experience of their workforces. This is a mechanistic view of things. Better training is a proven way of getting value out of people, and those companies with higher levels of education in their workforces tend to be much more successful.”

Train proactively—and save significantly in remediation costs

One challenge Meredith uses training to address is compliance. As regulations such as Sarbanes Oxley (SOX) and Payment Card Industry (PCI) proliferate, Meredith executives wanted to increase security awareness to help employees be sensitive to compliance issues.

“We determined that online training was the most efficient way to do this,” Wyckoff notes. “We approached Symantec because they are a strategic and valued partner in this area, and asked them to come in and help us create the online content and evaluation questionnaires for our employees.”

The result is a 25-minute Security Awareness online training course ending in a brief review of the material. It’s hosted on Meredith servers and required for employees. “Over 75 percent of our employees have completed the course, and we are in the process of updating relevant material,” Wyckoff observes.

Benefits have been immediate. “We’re seeing a heightened awareness across key business groups,” Wyckoff reports. “I am seeing my security and compliance team involved much earlier in the contract evaluation process. We’re able to work more proactively as we’re seeing clients and vendors incorporate more specific contract language around security and data compliance requirements than we have in recent years.”

This kind of proactive training, Wyckoff observes, can prevent what could easily turn into costly remediation projects around data security and/or privacy compliance. “The cost of developing the training with Symantec was nominal,” Wyckoff sums up, “considering that the value we’re deriving is significant.”

Stretch training dollars online

IT training also has substantial value at the City of Miami Beach. For a number of jobs, IT certification in relevant areas is the price of entry onto the team.

“Certification shows me someone has the foundation to
get the job done,” says Nelson Martinez, IT division director for the city. “If you don’t have what we’re looking for, you just won’t get hired. Once people are in the door, and show they can take the job the rest of the way, we help them keep certifications current.”

Challenging times have reduced training funds for the city's IT team to about 0.6 percent of the IT budget, or $30,000 a year. Martinez stretches this amount by having his field techs keep current through online training instead of attending in-person classes. His team will be evaluating online options such as Symantec Virtual Academy and the Symantec eLibrary.

“I do believe in in-class training for complicated topics or senior-level jobs,” Martinez states. “It’s important to have interaction, the ability to ask questions, and be in a face-to-face with the teacher outside the work environment. Sometimes it’s good to step away from work. You’re able to absorb better.”

As he surveys training options, analyst Hingley agrees. “The highest value in education is face-to-face discussions with someone who is an expert,” he observes. “A lot of learning is involved in being able to ask a question, and as you do that the instructor can check your knowledge. But because the cost of in-person learning is high, IT professionals would rather have an online video to watch than no training at all. Online technology lends itself to teaching technology subjects.”

**Trim six figures off outside services**

At the City of Miami Beach, Martinez can get a better idea of the impact of his training budget through Métier WorkLenz software, which his team uses to track time against specific projects and Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) best practices. “The only way I think IT organizations can be successful today is if you measure what you are doing,” he notes.

Enhancing skills and knowledge through training has enabled his IT team to execute several enterprise financial and public safety projects on their own, working directly with the vendor. “A big enterprise project could take 18 months,” Martinez says. “Outside services for this kind of project could easily run into the mid-six figures—and most government organizations traditionally leverage professional services dollars for pretty much everything. Keeping current on training has helped us avoid this kind of expense and has enabled me to limit my professional services budget to two weeks a year.”

In the area of data protection, Martinez sent team members to Symantec NetBackup architectural classes, which enabled them to design their own new NetBackup environment. “We’re taking advantage of new NetBackup 7 features such as OpenStorage, NetBackup Realtime, and deduplication,” Martinez explains. “If I had to pay for a consultant to come out and develop this type of design document, it could cost $35,000 to $40,000.”

However, Martinez does like to use professional vendor services for health checks. “We’re always going to want another set of eyes on our operation and to get a score card,” he says. “And then we remediate—all on our own. With the skill sets we’ve developed in-house through training, I’ve been able to offset the cost of remediations I might have had to pay vendors for.”

**Gain more time**

Training also helps the team have more time for new projects. “ITIL tells me that the typical IT organization, if it’s running correctly, will spend 70 to 75 percent of their time maintaining day-to-day operational functions,” Martinez notes. “But as a result of keeping our folks trained, we can show that we’re spending less than that—about 65 to 70 percent, 

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– Nelson Martinez, IT Division Director, City of Miami Beach

**Training Options Become More Flexible**

Explore Symantec Virtual Academy and Symantec eLibrary

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Source: Compiled from “Training Methods” discussed at go.symantec.com/training-methods.
on the daily grind. That means we have more time for new projects and new applications, and we're able to show that we're operating better than best practice standards."

An IDC study on the value of training verified the link between training and greater staff productivity. It concluded that "high-performing teams spend a greater portion of their time adding value to their enterprises by maintaining and improving systems, and less time fixing or deploying technology solutions."

Think ahead to get ahead
What training vendors need to provide more of, says Meredith's Wyckoff, is support for critical thinking about what technology can measurably do for the business. "Most IT training is centric to a specific technical product or service offering," he notes. "I'd like to see more educational offerings in the application of future technology, and what that might mean for the business operation, as well as competitive positioning—with much more emphasis on the strategic thought processes."

Sharpen your saw
How does Wyckoff develop this capability within himself? ("Sharpening the Saw," or self-renewal and self-development, is the seventh habit in Stephen Covey's The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People.) "I try and find opportunities to interact and learn from people who have tremendous exposure to what's happening in technology and business—like John Thompson, the chairman of the board at Symantec," Wyckoff says.

Most IT executives recognize that it's useful to step back from day-to-day operations, question basic assumptions, and evaluate the IT landscape from a broader perspective. Most would like to find more time to do this. Unfortunately, it's difficult to quantify or justify in advance the possible return of pulling away from day-to-day operations and taking a step like enrolling in an executive education program.

This same challenge of preselling and justifying time away is also true for training, concludes The Alchemy Solution Group's King. What all providers of IT education and training need to do is develop "professional services and online tools that will work with the customer to come up with credible financial arguments as to the benefit of technical training. Training providers should supply these services and tools in the pre-sales environment to help the customer secure training funds, and also after the training, to help validate the training's economic benefit."

Project the benefits—and measure them afterwards. It's a prerequisite everywhere to make training effective."

2 "Business Value Analysis Study: Meredith Corporation," Symantec Corporation, July 2009
4 Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People (Detroit: Free Press, 1989).

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