



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

NET-WORKING & ON-SITE TRAINING

If you are anything like me you will have been looking forward to the IAAF world championships which kick off this weekend. I love all track and field events but for some reason my favourite is the high jump – maybe because I’m marginally vertically challenged and the idea of getting a bit higher off the ground really appeals! . Just like its sister event, the pole vault, high jump participants get to choose the level of competency they want to enter the competition at. So if they want to come in at 2,10m in the case of men or 1,92m in the case of women they can begin jumping at the height they are comfortable with. It prevents boredom and wasted energy – very much in line with the sort of thinking we need to consider when we think about training and development for the new men and women entering our organisations.

I am talking about the group of people, mostly born in the same 20-year time span, who share common life experiences and thus, common attitudes and traits. Think of the university graduates you’ve seen moving through your new-recruit programmes in the past two years. Think also of the segment of your workforce who will comprise the bulk of your front-line workers by 2010. Think of the people who will grab the torch from the third of your employees who are soon going to be eligible for retirement. You are thinking of Generation Y.

Last week we spoke of Generation Y as having other names like echo boomers and millennials but they also referred to as the Internet or Net Generation since from early childhood they were surrounded by digital technologies. PCs, PlayStations and cell phones are as comfortable to this group as the television was to previous groups.

Because of this, the Y Generation’s use of technology is dramatically different from preceding generations. The Pew Foundation studied Internet habits of college students in 2002 and found that they are early adopters and heavy users of technology. All students surveyed began using computers at least by the time they were teens, and a fifth were computer-literate before the age of eight. Around 72 percent checked e-mail daily and 85 percent owned their own computers. On a typical day, 26 percent of college students used instant messenger. Additionally, they routinely used the Internet to help with their coursework and e-mail to communicate with their professors.

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In addition to the many unique traits the emerging group possesses, you can be sure they have three significant expectations:

Expectations for real-time access: The new generation demands instant digital gratification. Previous generations waited a week for a print film to be returned from the photomat; Generation Y snaps digital pictures with camera phones and e-mails them to friends in minutes. Previous generations went to the local library to do research during normal business hours; Generation Y accesses multiple libraries around the world via the Internet 24/7. Previous generations waited until 6 p.m. for the nightly television news, Generation Y gets e-mail headlines as they occur from CNN.com.

Expectations for personalisation: By the time students leave university today they are fully accustomed to shaping their digital world. This is user-centrism (think learner-centrism) to the extreme. They customize their Yahoo home pages to get local headlines and weather. They choose which news stories to read based on topic. They create their own greatest hits collections by downloading favorite songs onto their iPods. And with their laptops, portable DVD players, satellite-linked cellphones and micro-music, their personalised, digital world goes with them wherever they go.

Expectations for community: The 'Net generation is adept at working larger and more diverse social networks than previous generations. When I was a teen my social world consisted of a few friends on my block who could be quickly corralled for a game of hide and seek. But the power of digital communications has muted the importance of geography and magnified the value of common interests. Today's teens use e-mail, instant messenger and cell phones to keep in frequent and immediate contact with dozens of friends. Have you looked at Face Book? It networks hundreds, even thousands of like-minded or inter-linked users simultaneously, providing them all with messages, social invitations, rendezvous details, and diary reminders on a minute-by-minute basis. The old concept of an overseas pen pal is totally, superseded by e-chat rooms, networking sites and real-time phone and video links.

Nervous? You should be! As this new generation begins to flood your organization, how will you give them the job skills they need? How will you transfer knowledge from experienced workers to this new group? How will you continuously give them the knowledge they need in a business environment that changes constantly? Do not underestimate how quickly and how dramatically the changes will occur. By the end of this decade we will have moved from a workforce that often has to be sold on e-learning to one that demands it, along with knowledge management and communities of practice.

Bearing in mind that Gen Y is the nurtured generation they have a high tolerance for diversity, are optimistic, collaborative, open minded and driven and have a high sense of entitlement and indispensability. Remember too that they have a short attention span, due to technological influences, and that they strive for success and want to actively define their career paths.

Gen Y is tech savvy and their love of technology allows them to adapt to technological advances of training design. Gen Y is responsible for the surge in on-line training and discussion forums, instant messaging, blogging and emailing are now assumed to be an integral part of the design. Yet how many companies in Botswana have developed their training programmes in this way – not many. So it is hardly surprising that young graduates feel despondent when they go into training programmes organised with their employers still based on the old bespoke ways of learning.

I am not suggesting that we drop all traditional styles of training but if the course or workshop is to be taught face to face, then create multi-media modes of delivery by storing supplemental exercises, assignments or information on a web site. The design can include pre or post work such as an email writing assignment, on-line quiz or internet research project. Keep lessons and messages short. Repeat key messages – remember their short attention span and need for quickness in almost all that they do. Create modules and sub-modules to ensure that the information is delivered in bites. Allow for review and for modules to be taken out of sequence for best results. Discussions and group projects will appeal to Gen Y. Be careful to design the training so that each group member has an equal role to play. To ensure that the projects are realistic in scope, review the topic description or outline with participants before they begin working. Assigning a senior manager as a mentor and a project guide will also appeal to Gen Y.

So the solution is clear – if you want to get your message across – change your way of communicating it. And just like the high jumper and to prevent boredom allow the students to come in a level that will challenge and test them. Raise the e-bar and see how many clear it easily. It's all a question of staying one jump ahead!

