7 DEADLY ! sins ! OF IT TRAINING

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THE 7 DEADLY SINS OF IT TRAINING

→ Software implementation projects seldom run smoothly. As reported by renowned analyst Michael Krigsman in ZDNET.COM [1] ...

"It's a sobering statistic: nearly 70% of IT projects fail in some important way, putting the economic impact worldwide at three billion dollars (PA) ... It's a universal problem: setbacks occur in all industries, and often result in substantial economic and productivity losses."

Such failures are seldom the fault of technology; the reasons are more likely to be unrealistic expectations, poor project management, conflicts between suppliers or a failure to sufficiently engage the employees and managers involved.

COULD THIS BECOME YOUR PROBLEM?

→ If you're still reading this article, I assume that I've struck a chord. You're probably in a training leadership or delivery role and recognise that an IT project failure could easily become your problem. Having to deliver a successful training program for an IT project that is running late and on the wobble is like the so-called "hospital pass" in football: you have no choice but to go for the ball but you are likely to get hurt!

Although the causes of IT project failure are predictable, we see the same mistakes time and again. It is similarly predictable that the associated IT training projects are compromised by project over-run and scope-creep. So what are the tripwires you should look out for? And more importantly, how can you avoid them? Here are my Seven Deadly Sins of IT Training. I should add that this is a personal view, you may have other suggestions to add to this short list. Also, apologies to anyone who was hoping for more on lust or gluttony!

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SIN #1 INFLEXIBLE PLANNING

→ It's essential to plan for the unexpected, because the majority of IT projects run into some kind of difficulty. A rigid training plan may become compromised if the IT build phase falls behind schedule or the scope and budget is changed at a late stage. This is the domino effect – training always being the last domino to fall into place.

Plan A may have been "We'll train everybody thoroughly", and plan B becomes "We'll train just on the essentials and do a lot of floor walking". Starting out with a plan that enables you to train anyone in any place at any time is an approach that will make your training more resilient, whatever unexpected changes get imposed on you. This may be an over-simplification, but it is a useful vision or benchmark against which to assess your plan. Clearly this suits an eLearning approach.

Finding tools to eliminate waste from the training content development phase is likely to be essential.

SIN#2 TRAINING TOO SOON

→ It's said that people typically forget 80% of training course content within a month of attendance. This is a real problem in the context of a large scale enterprise software project, as there may be hundreds or perhaps thousands of people to train. A traditional instructor-led training (ILT) approach will result in many people being trained far too long before go-live, giving them ample time to forget.

Minimising the amount of upfront training may sound risky, but if people forget what they learned not only is this equally risky, it is also far more wasteful.

SIN#3 TRAINING TOO MUCH

→ If you set-out to train people on everything they need to know before they need to put it into practice, you'll suffer two consequences. First, as above, the forgetting curve (also known as the "training half-life") means that much of what was delivered will be forgotten. Second, you are building a rod for your own back, as all of the training is front loaded.

This is risky because your training plan may be completely side-swiped by last minute changes to the project scope. For example, in order to meet a required deadline, it's not unusual for entire software modules to be postponed to Phase 2 of a project.

A strategy that minimises formal planned delivery of training and maximises moment-of-need user support and bite-sized learning will be cheaper and more resilient to such changes.

SIN#4 TRAINING WITHOUT CONTEXT

→ Context is what makes learning stick and can also be considered as the "What's in it for me factor". Training becomes contextual through relevance of process, role, task, place and time. A successful trainer (and training content) provides this context, but it comes at a cost. Setting the scene so that people are receptive to new systems and procedures is time consuming and that can add to the training workload when you can least afford it.

By contrast, learning that is supported in the workplace at the moment of need is automatically in context. People are most receptive to learning at the moment that they need it. The more training that is delivered on a just-in-time basis, within the workflow and at the time and place of need, the more will be remembered. It's a more efficient approach, but depends on

ease of access to required guidance and training at the moment of need.

SIN#5 TRAINING THAT IS NOT MAINTAINED

→ All too often, training is seen as a project activity. Beyond go-live you expect to see training consultants leave the business as the peak demand for training development and delivery has passed. The sin here is to allow your ability to maintain and deliver such content to walk out the door with the consultants. (Also see Deadly Sin #7 below.) Staff turnover, role changes, optimisation of processes and changes to systems make it essential to maintain content and knowledge transfer capabilities. If training content falls into disuse, it soon gets out of date. You can reduce this risk if you develop content with a just in time, self-service delivery mind-set, as the materials are useful on a day-to-day basis.

With the right tools it is possible to maintain training, procedure and support content in an easy-to-maintain knowledge repository that can be accessed by all employees on a just-in-time basis.

This lowers the cost of ownership and maximises the likelihood that this important information is kept up to date.

SIN#6 TRAINING HOW, NOT WHY

The seminal paper by Malcolm Wheatley "ERP Training Stinks" (published in CIO Magazine [2] June 2000, but still relevant today) explored the weaknesses of ERP Training and observed:

"You can separate IT training into two parts - education and training. Education is all the why, who and where issues. Training is the how part of the equation. And of the two education is the bigger piece of the puzzle. If people don't go through this education, you won't have their hearts and minds."

The sin here is the (relative) neglect of process education; meaning that you train users on how to operate software screens without fully explaining or getting buy-in to the required process, role and behaviour changes. But over and beyond this, attention to the process dimension can deliver longer term benefits.

SIN#6 TRAINING HOW, NOT WHY

→ *Organisations that effectively integrate their training strategy with their business-process improvement efforts are likely to reap additional rewards.*

Training is less likely to be "playing catch-up" as the organisation evolves, because training, process, systems and compliance materials are likely to be managed as an integrated body of knowledge. If your organisation has a continuous improvement programme, this will be all the more important.

SIN#7 TRAINING THAT IS NOT OWNED

→ Who owns each training document, learning object or work instruction related to your systems training? Who is responsible for the review, update and approval of such content as your organisation and systems evolve? Whilst this may not be much of a concern for static off-the-shelf applications like Microsoft Office, for more dynamic enterprise systems such as ERP / CRM this can be a significant weakness. Training must be efficiently maintained and related to process, as explained above If training materials were developed by outside training consultants or a systems integrator, the question of who owns the materials once the consultants leave the business becomes highly significant.

An effective governance framework is required

so that trainers, process owners and subject matter experts have a clear line of sight between the organisation's business processes and the knowledge assets that equip employees to perform their roles. Then it becomes easier to ensure training, work-aids and standard operating procedures evolve in lock-step with changes to processes and compliance requirements.

FIND OUT MORE ON THIS TOPIC

→ You can learn more about this subject by participating in the TTS sponsored

Performance Support Academy webinar series,

which explores how to apply the 70:20:10 framework to streamline IT training. The free webinar series runs between 1st and 15th October 2013. Registration is required. You will find more details about the webinars and can register:
http://www.tt-s.com/webinarseries

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Bibliography:

(1) ZDNET.com: "Who's accountable for IT failure?" Michael Krigsman.

(2) CIO.COM: "ERP Training Stinks" Malcolm Wheatley.

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