



## SST Blogs

### The End of Training

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#### **Alleged trends.**

A recent gathering of some old friends, educators all, who worked together at a successful training start-up in the 90's, turned into an informal symposium on the state of corporate training. The group identified some real and sometimes disturbing trends in the training industry. We ended up making a list of the alleged trends, and I subsequently did some research on them. Working from the group's ideas, and after editing out unsupportable, unprovable and incorrect theories, I ended up with the following list of trends and thoughts about them. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of trends, just the things we chatted about, but it is still interesting stuff. Note: while these trends apply to the entire corporate training market, many of my comments and observations are specifically about the IT technical training market in which I work.

#### **No surprise: we really are shifting from live training to self-paced training.**

All the surveys and all the data support the notion that enterprises are moving away from involving actual human beings in the presentation of training. In fact, except for training in subject areas for which there are massive markets, it's all but impossible to sign up for an instructor-led course in which the instructor is actually in the same room as the students. For technical and/or esoteric training, we usually have the choice of either traditional elearning or videotaped classroom presentations, neither of which involve actual instructors.

*Comment:* To be clear, *I am an ardent supporter of self-paced training*, so don't think I am attacking it with some religious fervor.

However, there are at least two problems with the movement away from the involvement of instructors in training. One is that our species is evolutionarily predisposed, or hard-wired, towards learning from teachers. All the disinterested research supports the notion that we learn better from humans than via other methods, such as reading or watching cartoon characters on a computer screen. So we need to understand that teachers, mentors and facilitators are not some luxury in the business of training our workforce, they are a critical element to success.

Another effect of this trend is that in order just to survive, some training providers have been forced to cobble together rather crude and nasty self-paced offerings that are poorly taught,

crudely recorded, and are little more than home-video quality. Obviously, this is not good for anyone.

### **There is a shift from large training events to small training events.**

More and more of the companies who offer what they boldly call "training" are moving towards the notion of "micro-lessons," each of which consist of 1 to 5 minutes of elearning presentation and, if you're lucky, some quick multiple-choice Q&A. This sort of thing is wonderful reinforcement, and valuable on-the-job training for certain job functions.

*Comment:* However, the idea that such offerings can completely replace real training is, on its face, stupid. Your employees are no more likely to become fluent in Mandarin than they are to become technically proficient in a new programming language by looking at 4-minute courselets three times a week. For large, complex topics, micro-lessons are clearly no replacement for serious study.

### **Folks love the idea of JIT (Just In Time) training.**

What with the widespread availability of free training, as well as code snippets and examples on the WWW, there is a tendency for enterprises to steer away from comprehensive training of the sort that requires commitments in actual time and money and towards what some boldly call Just-In-Time Training. Why take a software engineer out of the rotation for a week-long course when you can solve many tough programming problems by asking folks in one of the online technical communities (Stack Overflow, Quora, etc.) for help?

*Comment:* As a rule, JIT training is not training. Like micro-lessons, JIT training almost always lacks the rigor that makes training effective; actually, this sort of thing is often not training at all, just the conveyance of information. Training involves clear objectives, the performance of tasks, reinforcement, the opportunity for the learner to question and interact with an instructor/mentor, and assessment. An answer to a particular question is a wonderful thing, but it is not training.

### **People really believe the "old skills become outdated" myth.**

I Googled the phrase "old skills become outdated" and got 29,300,000 results; lots and lots of people are selling something based on ideas like "Your skills will become obsolete in 18 months." The world seems to be convinced -- or at least lots of people keep repeating -- that either there is no point in training, since whatever you learn will be instantly obsolete, or that we have to find a more effective and less expensive way to train, since you have to learn new stuff, but whatever you learn will be instantly obsolete.

*Comment:* I call SHENANIGANS. A programmer who learned from a FORTRAN course taken in 1982 why we use different storage types to store different kinds of data still benefits from that knowledge, and that sort of knowledge is no more outdated than the idea that we ought to look both ways before crossing the street. True, that programmer is probably using Java or Python today instead of FORTRAN, but the syntax of the languages is the easy part. In fact, because programmers may need to learn new languages throughout their careers, it is more important than ever that training be effective and comprehensive rather than haphazard and piecemeal.

### **Big guys are winning and pushing out small guys.**

A combination of anecdotes, data and extrapolation present a compelling case that relatively few large training enterprises are winning the market and quashing smaller enterprises. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, as long as the overall market is well served, but there is

every reason to believe that this situation has lessened the overall quality and effectiveness of training, especially complex, technical training.

*Comment:* I'll have to write an entire paper on this topic at some point, but the crux of the matter is that as the big guys gain market share, the trend in product quality and effectiveness is inexorably and inevitably towards mediocrity. As owners grow a business, their goal is for the business to become a large, usually public, enterprise. Such large enterprises are controlled by financial interests instead of moral interests, and the fiduciary responsibility of all parties in such enterprises is to maximize profits, not quality. Therefore, odds are that industry consolidation hurts overall product quality.

### **Smaller companies are almost paralyzed with regard to training.**

Smaller companies seem to be ever more hesitant to commit to a single instance of training -- a one week course -- which threatens to deliver the perfect storm of:

1. Costing a lot of money.
2. Taking their talent out of circulation for a week for training.
3. Delivering questionable value, since it is widely perceived that (a) there is free training available on the web, (b) much of what is taught in formal training is quickly forgotten, and (c) that's not the way people learn anymore.

*Comment:* One sympathizes with the owner of a small software company. Their expertise is probably in computer science and/or the vertical industry they serve, rather than in training, and they are deluged with "news" that suggests they should be focusing on micro-learning, JIT training, and self-paced training, and that money spent on comprehensive IT training is money poorly spent. They are being told that human beings have suddenly reached an evolutionary fork in the road and no longer learn best from their teachers, as they have for the past 200,000 years. They are led to hope against all logic that their employees are miraculously going to become competent through some ill-defined combination of hard work and snippets from the WWW.

### **The end of training?**

After a vigorous and raucous discussion of these trends (some alcohol may have been involved), one of the folks at our accidental seminar was extremely discouraged, and bemoaned "the end of training" as we know it. "People think they don't need instructors or courses. They think that comments on Quora and snippets from GitHub are as effective as a training. They think that everything that isn't free is just some sort of racket."

I am not so pessimistic. To me, the trends are all fine and healthy, as long as they are kept in perspective. Managers have to keep a few things in mind:

- In smaller enterprises, owners and managers need to remember that a skilled, well-trained workforce comes from skill and training, not from the ether.
- In larger enterprises, those with large training budgets need to keep in mind that the easy solutions -- massive, enterprise-wide, one-size-fits-all solutions -- are, as rule, good at many things, bad at some things, and great at nothing.
- Regardless of the size of the enterprise, all managers, not just training managers or those with explicit training budgets, must take responsibility for seeing to it that their team has the training support it needs.

That means that managers cannot believe in solutions that cannot possibly work, or trends that may or may not be applicable to those in their departments. Seriously -- would you expect a

translator who speaks excellent Japanese and has taken 22 4-minute micro-courses in Mandarin to translate effectively to and from Mandarin? I wouldn't.

Best Regards,

*Phineas Longstaff*  
Software Skills Training, Inc.

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Phineas Longstaff, the CEEdO (Chief Education Officer) at Software Skills Training.com, has worked in the field of technical education for almost 40 years as a technical trainer, programmer, course developer, media developer, manager, executive, entrepreneur, writer, editor, and author. He welcomes your comments, criticism and input. Please contact him at [Phineas.Longstaff@software-skills-training.com](mailto:Phineas.Longstaff@software-skills-training.com).