

The Training Game

By Satnam Brar, Maximus

The ERP sector and the IT industry as a whole have come a long way over the past twenty years in their attitudes to formal training. No longer content to rely on the command to ‘RFM’ or ‘read the, ahem, manual’ organisations and individuals alike now spend millions of pounds every year on an increasingly wide range of training packages that cover everything from open ‘boot camps’ to the highly bespoke. But how effective is much of this training and what sort of return on investment does it provide to its purchasers? Does it really make companies and ERP specialists more productive and, if so, is there a ‘best practice’ method of delivering it?

Jason Wilcox, an Oracle trainer who focuses on finance, procurement and HR, argues that the best training comes from a combination of approaches. “I think you need something like 50% classroom based work, supported by 50% follow-up on specific issues with small groups and individuals.” he says. “If you ask anyone who has gone through some form of ERP training they will always tell you that the second element was the most useful, but that’s really only because they have already undergone the first part of the process. In my view it’s vital to have a clear overview of how Oracle works before you get down to the nitty-gritty.”

Another trainer, Tahir Hussain, who specialises in Oracle Financials, takes a similar view. “Let’s face it, Oracle is a complicated product and its users will always need formal training to leverage maximum benefit from it. The classroom is the ideal place to deliver that formal training but, in my view, it’s important to get the numbers of each teaching group right. Ideally you should be looking at a group of somewhere between eight and sixteen, but some organisations, particularly in the public sector, can’t resist the temptation to cram more in to save time or budget. What formal training does very effectively, if you get it right, is to show people where they fit into the Oracle process and why their part of it is important. Done properly it addresses the ‘hearts and minds’ aspect that actually makes Oracle work.”

According to George Harvey, who is both an organisational development trainer with Open Limits and a career management specialist at Amaze Associates, addressing this ‘human element’ is a benefit that often takes second place to pure technical training but is essential if IT specialists are going to accomplish the British Computer Society’s stated aim of recognition alongside more established professions such as

law, accountancy and medicine. “If IT is to deliver on its real promise then it needs to become more and more accessible and relevant to the needs of the businesses it serves,” he says. “And this means that IT specialists need to develop and employ a much more sophisticated range of communication and interpersonal skills.” However, because of the way that people in our industry develop in the early stages of their careers, focusing on the key technical aspects of the profession, teaching these skills is not necessarily easy. “Most IT specialists are brought up in an environment which is very process driven and totally logical – an environment where the first recourse is not to have a conversation. Consequently, the biggest challenge is often to get them out of their usual way of think-

ing, perhaps by running scenarios which focus on experiences away from the IT sector, such as recalling a particularly bad or good piece of customer service and then relating it back to the problem at hand.”

Not surprisingly, therefore, the trainers seem to think that they are definitely adding value to the industry, but what of the organisations which actually have to pay for their work? Phil Wilson, consultancy director at inOApps, an Oracle implementation and training specialist, believes that training has a vital part to play in the development mix, and one which cannot be replaced with simple ‘on the job’

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learning. “There is training being done out there by trainers who understand the subject on a theoretical basis, but who have no real life experience of using these skills in the workplace. Equally, there are highly technical and experienced individuals who struggle to convey the skills in a structured and understandable manner. You also see





a lot of on the job training which can often lead to people picking up bad habits and acquiring a very blinkered view of what the technology is capable of. If you really want to get it done properly, you have to be prepared to pay for someone who has the technical knowledge, hands-on experience and the ability to communicate this in an effective manner. Tailoring or customising the training to meet your current skill levels, working environment and requirements also improves the outcome and benefits of training and provides best value for money.”

Wilson’s view is largely shared by another purchaser of training, Paul Gillott of Oracle HRMS implementers, Symatrix.

“Learning on the job will always be an invaluable part of developing as an ERP specialist but it has to be supplemented by formal training delivered by trainers who truly understand their subject and can draw on solid commercial experience. Without it you continuously run up against the ‘we do it this way, because we’ve always done it this way’ mentality so you never move forward, never really improve. Getting in professionals who have real command of their subject, are completely up-to-date and who know how to teach may look expensive initially, but it can be a very worthwhile investment.”

Organisations are, of course, only one group of purchasers of training. Individual ERP specialists also dig deep into their pockets to join the growing number of open courses on the market. Ramnik Pattni, an experienced Oracle Applications Technical consultant, recently spent a significant amount of his own money on the five day course ‘Extending and Building OA Framework Applications’. “Whilst the core development technology and toolsets have remained more or less the same over the past eight to ten years, in recent ERP versions there has been much more of a shift to Java based end-user self-service applications,” he says. “The technology shift will become more visible in future releases of the Oracle ERP product and I was keen to keep ahead of developments rather than trailing along behind them. At first I thought I’d be able to do this on my own, but it’s just not possible when you have the day-to-day pressures of work so I decided to get some formal training at one of the UK Oracle training centres. It wasn’t cheap, but it was a very good investment of money and time and I learned a lot, both from the trainer and

from other people on the course. After successfully completing the course I’ve been able to put the knowledge gained into action and develop self-service solutions for my current client. Developing real-world solutions gives you greater confidence in what you’ve learned and, I think, makes me immediately more marketable.”

But does formal training really make you more attractive to potential employers? In over ten years as a recruiter in the ERP market, I can think of very few occasions when a client has specifically asked for a particular qualification – hands on experience has always been the key criterion in both permanent and contract roles.

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However what training and qualifications do supply is a valuable ‘icing on the cake’ which can help individuals to stand out from the crowd. And they can also have less predictable but no less valuable benefits. “When it comes down to hiring, I’m less interested in the technical content of a training course, than I am in the fact that the individual has put themselves through it in the first place,” says Paul Gillott. “It shows a degree of organisation, commitment and self-belief that makes a good consultant, but even with all these qualities, no course is going to take the place of good, old fashioned coalface experience.”

Anecdotal evidence and industry surveys both suggest that the appetite for training is growing, but it will be interesting to see if it will be sustained if the much heralded economic downturn really does start to bite as 2008 progresses. As Jason Wilcox puts it, “Training is always one of the things that gets cuts first on over-runs,” whilst Tahir Hussain admits that for many organisations, training is still regarded as a ‘nice to have’ rather than as an essential. However George Harvey believes that we may have entered a new era where IT directors have begun to see training, not

as a rather unfortunate and expensive necessity, but as a tool to boost their own professional credibility. “CIOs and CTOs are very keen these days to demonstrate that their departments are adding real value to the business in order to stop the trend towards outsourcing. And training is playing an increasingly important role in this as it helps IT professionals to plug directly into commercial reality. If organisations come to see IT specialists as valued advisors and implementers rather than ‘back-room techies’ then everyone will benefit, and formal training is one very effective way of making it happen.”

About the Author



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