

SCTE CABLE-TEC EXPO 2003 WORKSHOPS

Prepare Your Team for New Product Deployment

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The plethora of new products over the last few years has been a win-win situation for our customers and our industry. That's not to say that the rollout of these new products has been flawless. As an industry, we can definitely improve the new product development process from a customer and business perspective. Most improvements simply boil down to communication and education. By involving the right people at the right time in the new product development process and communicating effectively throughout, our teams will be better prepared and more effective in expanding the product base within the industry.

The first step to preparing your team for any new product is to include training in the product development process. Ideally, the training or learning & development team gets involved very early. The level of involvement at this point should be relatively small, but is very important for planning purposes. A considerable amount of planning is necessary by the training team to ensure all bases are covered and resources are available. As the product nears deployment, training involvement grows. Involved every step of the way, the training team can ensure that every element of a quality training solution is considered and implemented at the right time.

Additionally, thinking beyond the initial development process, the training team will be continually running the feedback loop to ensure the on-going training continues to stay on target. New hires and personnel reassigned to accomplish these tasks in the future will benefit greatly from a healthy curriculum development process.

Whether you have an internal training department or not, it's always best to take a look at a number of factors related to the training development process. Depending on your available resources, it may be necessary to bring in external support for either parts of the training project or for the entire duration. Factors to consider include the following:

- Time to market – Many times with new products, internal resources have already been dedicated for on-going projects, so if the time to market is accelerated, external support may be needed.
- Resources
 - Personnel – Do internal personnel have the time, expertise and curriculum development skills to put together a finished training product?
 - Financial – Define the scope of the project (as best as possible) and compare the costs of developing the training yourself or outsourcing it.
- Deliverables – What is the final product? Is it web-based, classroom-based, a combination or something else all together? Different skill sets and resources are needed for different training solutions.

Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) are a vital part of the training development process. They are the folks that enable the final training product to be relevant, accurate and complete. The SME can help in many different ways, including:

- Identify the knowledge or skills gap
- Organize the content in a logical sequence
- Verify the accuracy of the material
- Ensure terminology is used in the right context
- Edit deliverables

SMEs can be anyone from vendors to project managers. Field engineers, trainers and field technicians are also typical SMEs, depending on their experience with the particular product. Sometimes, the SMEs are obvious and other times you may have to search them out. Find them and use them. They can save a lot time, research and money.

Many common mistakes made in new products training are related to misjudging the audience. First, ensure you have the right training. This is accomplished by defining the desired outcomes. Ask the following questions:

- What are the prerequisites for the class?
- What are the desired skills or competencies?
- Does the training completely prepare the trainee for the desired tasks?

Another frequent mistake is timing. Training too early can be a tremendous waste of resources. You can't expect a technician to learn a new piece of equipment in the classroom and then expect him to use it effectively three months later when he sees it again for the first time since training. On the flip side, training too late has a more obvious result: frustrated employees and frustrated customers. These issues can be simply avoided with proper planning.

Take the time to understand the scope of the new product. If the rollout and market response is expected to be controlled and manageable, it doesn't make sense to train 100% of your workforce to do a task that only 5% of them will actually do. Getting your employees the right information at the right time will get them excited and behind the product. If the product hits the street too far after the training, you'll lose that excitement.

Keep in mind, "new" products are called "new" products for a reason: they haven't been around very long! That may be a pretty straightforward concept, but it's easy to forget when you've laid out a solid plan, and the new products team changes everything and now you've wasted valuable time and money. Expect the unexpected and put flexibility into your plan and project deadlines. The final product will likely change throughout the development, certification and trial phases. With this in mind, plan your training development resources accordingly. Work closely with the new products team and learn which aspects of the new product are jelly and which ones are concrete. Identifying these variables will save a lot of heartache.

Design the training to be as flexible as possible. Ask yourself, is it scalable? If the product is extremely successful and 100% of the workforce needs to be trained at the last second, can you do it? If you planned for 100% and the launch is scaled back, are you going to waste a lot of resources? Can you make minor content changes on the fly without throwing away volumes of printed materials? Flexibility is as much of a mind

set, as it is a benefit built into the training. Expect changes throughout the process and be ready for them!

Rolling out new products can be an exciting, fast-paced and most likely stressful time. Effective communication and education throughout the process will make life significantly easier for everyone involved, all the way to your customers. A good training team will want to be involved. Help them help you. A solid partnership with your training team is a vital step in preparing your team for new product deployments.