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Introduction

This case study aims to share the success story of creating an internal training academy at an IT service provider company, specialized in developing innovative solutions and operating complex infrastructure and application systems for the transportation industry.

The story covers 3 years, which from the perspective of a multinational company does not seem to be a long run, but as we arrive in the present and look back, the company's human resource processes, learning and development philosophies changed significantly. It all started with a 2 day long training with Kirsten Dierolf, followed by a strategic project and resulted in a sustainable internal training framework, which inspired strategic knowledge and change management within the company.

This study is discussing the story from the two different perspectives of the authors: Kirsten Dierolf as a consultant who was invited to the project as an external to bring her expertise in training trainers using a solution focused approach, and Peter Rendes, Learning and Development specialist who was responsible for building up the internal training System to organically fit into the company's daily life.

Situation and Goals

In 2009, the subject of our case study, a Hungarian IT service provider company, like most of the companies around the globe, was under pressure to reduce costs to successfully adapt to the difficult economic situation. Usually, when a company needs to cut costs, people start to feel that their jobs might be in danger. In a situation like this, people often start feeling unappreciated - especially highly qualified people who stand a chance of getting a good job elsewhere start looking for new positions in other companies. The situation is exasperated by the fact that talent development programs are generaily the first investments that are cut.

This results in people feeling even more stuck and unappreciated: there is not a lot of rewarding work and on top of it they're not given a chance for professional development.

The company didn't want to fall into that trap when they had to reduce costs in 2009. Their CEO and the Human Resource Department saw the great potential of their people. They had a number of highly qualified specialists in many fields and they weren't at the time inundated with a lot of project work. This combination offered a wonderful opportunity for reclaiming appreciation, saving costs, offering professional development and ensuring the retention of qualified people and their know-how.

Idea

The company created the idea of a self-staffed Training Academy for technical trainings, soft-skill trainings and even train-the-trainer sessions. The main goals were to create professional development possibilities for senior experts, increase knowledge flow between different projects

which might lead to decreasing costs in long term and to create a substitute alternative for external trainings with high costs, while keeping the quality of the trainings on the highest possible level.

However, there were a few obstacles. People were subject matter experts, not training experts. Many software engineers were great at what they were doing, hut introvert personalities with reluctance to stand in front of a group and be the center of attention. The project management and HR people had fewer difficulties in this arena; however most of them were also not trainers or teachers.

Process

None of the participating organizers had experience in setting up an internal training academy staffed exclusively by internal people. So they met and discussed several questions:

• identifying training needs

• finding the people who could give those trainings

• how to administrate matches between potential participants and potential trainers

• how to enable the subject matter experts to run a successful training

• how to market the internal academy as a competent tool for professional development and a sign of appreciation for both the expertise of the trainers and the desire of participants to develop.

Already in this phase, the team contacted Kirsten Dierolf who had worked as a consultant for the company in several strategy meetings and other trainings before. She also had experience in setting up training academies especially in leadership and talent development at multinational corporations. She had also taught "Train-the-Trainer" workshops for people who wanted to learn to facilitate trainings in solution focused way. This also fit very well with the overall philosophy at the company. Kirsten's philosophy of trying to make herself superfluous as quickly as possible also fit well with the costing restraints of this project. From the beginning, the train-the-trainer was designed in such a way, that it could easily be taken over by Peter Rendes. He participated in the first train-the-trainer session, co-facilitated the second session and was then able to lead the following sessions himself.

Kirsten provided all necessary documentation: the PowerPoint slides, the trainer guide, the training preparation guide etc., while the HR team started to explore the company for potential trainers.

Train-the-trainer

The HR department and Kirsten organized the first train-the-trainer session at the end of 2009. We had 9 participants and a wide array of subjects that they want to teach: stress management, project management, the program language Java, passing exams for qualifying as Java programmer, etc. The participants also had differing degrees of experience in teaching or leading workshops. Some bad no experience and were reluctant to present something in front of the group; others had already given courses at university level.

The goal of the two day training session was to enable the participants to plan and carry out their training sessions successfully. Our most important idea was that in order to be a good trainer, you mainly have to "be a good person with something to say" (Dale Carnegie).

Solution focus has provided us with the firm belief, that anybody who knows something well and is able to plan and structure their material in a participant-oriented way, can lead successful trainings. You don't have to be an extrovert, to enjoy the attention of the group, to be funny or to do anything that you wouldn't naturally do - you just have to know what you're talking about, need have a good plan and should concentrate on not losing good contact with the participants.

The workshop was designed to accomplish many things:

• the participants could get an overview of what is involved in training design and delivery (assess participant training needs and wishes, design a training, write training documentation, deliver a good training, evaluate trainings)

• give experience of different types of exercises and group formats

• provide a role model for an effective training

• help participants take time to prepare the training that they were actually going to hold.

The first day focused on training design and planning; the second day enabled the participants to plan and deliver a part of their training and get feedback on how it worked out, so that when they met "real life" participants the first time, they already had a head start. Between each of the modules, participants had the opportunity to write down their individual learnings in a learning log.

Day 1	Day 2
Welcome, Introduction, Goal-Setting	Effective Facilitation
Training Fundamentals	Dealing with difficulties (participants, heterogeneous groups, myseif)
Training Design	Design a part of your own training
Training Documentation	Deliver and get feedback
Beginnings and Ends	One small step: ending with the beginning in mind

THe first small steps of the trainers

After the train-the-trainer sessions, all the participants had a clear picture of what they want to teach and how they were going to make the first steps. The company was richer with a bit less than a dozen of motivated, enabled, "teaching-hungry" experts. One participant, now a senior internal trainer mentioned:

"The most important thing that I've learned about teaching is that I should always start from the end: imagining that after a successful training, participants are actually able to do something new. What is it? What will help them to achieve it? Previously I imagined that I need to put all my theoretical knowledge into a training, now I have a completely clear picture on what needs to be told to achieve results. This saves lots of time for everybody."

The first so called "pilot-trainings" were held in the beginning of 2010, in the area of the popular programming language, Java. Based on the participants' feedback, they were very successful, as some of its participants mentioned:

"I already participated in some courses in my area of expertise, which is Java development, but this session was extremely useful for me: a senior architect from my project gathered all the relevant material about the specific technologies we use, to prepare us for the future challenges of the project we are working in. I felt I can utilize every module instantly in my daily work."

"I always thought that our software architect is a silent and reserved guy. I was amazed how enthusiastic and energetic he was on the training! I even thought that I could do this as well?"

Soft-skill trainings also started quickly after the train-the-trainer workshop, aiming to give colleagues a kick-start in their personal development on how to communicate in a project environment, how to deal with workplace conflicts or how to deliver effective presentations. One of the trainers (A senior project manager who at that time was leading the PMO of the company) said:

"This workshop was very helpful for my self-improvement. Previously I was a teacher, but this transformed me from a teacher to a trainer: now I work with my participants on my trainings together to achieve their learning goals. This has helped me in my first trainings, since my topic - project communication - is always challenging to moderate. Participants have a hard time when it comes to talking about their difficulties at work. The shift in my attitude from telling them best practice to facilitating discussions helped a lot."

As the company consists of different business units, which have a limited awareness of each other, another additional benefit showed up very quickly:

"Previously I had no idea that also our colleagues are working in the neighboring building. I managed to make some new connections, and now it's much easier to grab the phone and ask something from them."

"On the Project Essentials training I've met a colleague, who is operating an application which I am developing. - After the training we had a long discussion that resulted in fixing some issues in our product that I was not aware of! Now the customers have a more stable system, they have fewer issues to react on, which is pure benefit for everybody."

Creating a sustainable framework

In the first year of the training academy it had nearly 60 participants, which was beyond the management's expectations, especially since in the first year most of the colleagues knew only a little about the Academy and what it could offer. The news of having new learning opportunities spread quickly and more and more colleagues wanted to participate in the trainings. As most of the new trainers were software engineers working ön demanding projects with tight deadlines, we really soon met the challenge of creating a framework for the internal trainings, which allowed us to "book" these senior experts for out-of-project activities.

The question was very pragmatic: is it worth pulling them out of projects? What is more beneficial for the company: to go further on the way of creating a "knowledge boom" by utilizing the already existing knowledge better with the cost of losing some efficiency in short term; or we keep

everything as it is: we let our senior experts sometimes share their knowledge, hut give project work a higher priority in order to keep efficiency on the same level.

This required special attention from the management team of the company. A project team was set up, consisting of HR experts and business representatives to create a sustainable framework.

As a first step, rough estimations started on what is an average preparation time for trainers for introducing a new course to the company. The debate about this ratio has a long story in the training business (preparation / training time), for the first year we planned that an expert will be able to prepare for a 1 day long training with 4 days of invested work time. Also the external market prices for similar trainings were gathered.

The decision criteria was: if we can provide the internal trainings at a cost level which is 70% of the price of trainings on the external market, then the System will be financially sustainable and profitable for the company. If the project team can prove that the trainings are financially sustainable in long term, then management support will be easy to win to integrate internal trainings as a function in the company.

When calculating the cost of preparation, lots of dimensions were taken into account, like the expected cost of decreasing efficiency in projects, the customer billing rate of the department concerned and also a small amount of bonus that we planned to pay our trainers for their extra effort. To increase our possibilities, we decided to offer a greater bonus to those who sacrifice some of their free time for preparing, which altogether enabled volunteering trainers to gain a reasonable amount of money. On the "income" side based on our costs, we calculated a virtual price for our trainings, which for the first year was actually billed to the participant's team's budget - this was based on the general perception of value which you get for free or for a fee. From the company's perspective, it was similar to putting money from one pocket into another, but from the users perspective this increased the overall perceived value of the internal education.

The training's quality was measured regularly based on participant feedback to ensure that internal trainings are not only saving money but also delivering high quality services. The measurement was quite a standard evaluation sheet, which is sent to each participant after the training, and the training coordinators prepare its summary within HR. During the 3 years of the Academy, no quality problems have been recognized and the feedback is mostly used to support the trainers' personal development and meet the high quality standards of the company. Maybe one measure tells it all: 99% of the Academy's students recommend that others participate in its sessions.

As an overall result, the costs of creating trainings from inside compared to external training prices varied between 30%-50%. This gave a clear green light even in the head of the most skeptical and financially cautious leader as well.

When the project received the green light, the team started to explore the possibility of building a small, virtual training provider enterprise within the company. The advantage of this concept was that staying in a virtual structure enabled every trainer to still keep his priorities on the business side, while dedicating a certain part of the year for sharing their knowledge with others. This had a positive effect on the level of their intrinsic motivation as well.

Connecting the Academy with the Career and Competence Management Process

After the frame was set, the team started working on gathering training needs from the company and encouraging experts to cover the highest possible number of training topics. As the company was in the phase of building up a new career management system, synergies were possible between different initiatives. As a part of this, the company implemented a new framework for personal development which was based on personal and professional competencies, which were evaluated on a yearly basis in development talks between the colleagues and their superiors.

This structured approach resulted in Individual Development Plans, which contained all the relevant development areas and training needs for each employee of the company. This process gave a great support for the training needs analysis - at the beginning of every year's third quarter, the team had a clear picture of what are the popular topics and what needs special attention. Training topics that had more than 20-30 potential participants were the best potential new internal trainings - the team explored the company with the support of the management to find trainers who possessed those competencies and encouraged them to prepare trainings in that area.

This resulted in a dramatic increase in the ease with which new training topics were fitted into the portfolio of the Academy. In the first year (2010) the trainings were organized with a trainer-centric approach - if somebody had an idea, the tem gave support for him/her to realize it. Newsletters were published and leaders also promoted the trainings in team meetings. But since 2011 the connection between the Academy initiative and a well-established HR process created the possibility of combining top-down and bottom-up approaches. New, creative ideas were supported with the same processes as before, hut also HR was proactively looking for trainers for specific ideas.

As the small training enterprise was quickly growing, more and more new trainers expressed their interest in joining. The method provided by Kirsten has proven to be beneficiaL A new train-the-trainer session was organized, now fully facilitated by internal trainers, and also aspiring new trainers received individual sessions which combined self-learning based on the materials provided by Kirsten, coaching and demo sessions with feedback from more experienced internal trainers. This flexible approach also contributed significantly to the quick growth of the Academy.

Some numbers from the 3 years of the Academy

At the time of writing, the internal training academy has been in existence for 3 years. For those who prefer numbers, let's see how these 3 busy years can be described in numbers and facts.

	Number of participants	Active internal trainers	Cost saving achieved
2010	57	7	8%
2011	254	14	19%
2012	343	19	23%

The project of building up the Academy enjoyed senior management attention as well, therefore it was important to define the most important performance indicators to keep them informed of how the project was performing.

These KPIs were:

• Yearly number of participants (in total, which means if one colleague visits 2 trainings in a year, it counts as 2)

• Number of active internal trainers (those who held at least one session in a year)

• Cost saving achieved (measured in % of training budget)

As it can be seen, in the first year the number of participants was relatively small, compared to the number of trainers. The technical trainings were quite specialized, which led to a situation where one trainer was teaching 3-5 people at a session. From a cost saving perspective, this shows area for improvement, but this gave a great start for those who were anxious about speaking in front of bigger audiences. Later on, as the trainers gained more experience and as the academy became more popular, the audiences grew bigger and the most relevant training sessions became regular. A good reference point for this chart may be that the company had c. 580 FTE-s in 2012.

As we discussed, the train-the-trainer sessions started with 9 participants, of which 7 started to deliver trainings in 2010. Probably three factors resulted in the increase in the numbers of active trainers:

• Increased organizational awareness of the Job enrichment possibility

• Increased support from management in dedicating work-time for preparation

• Introducing additional benefits, bonuses

In 2012 a lead expert program was launched, where some senior engineers took over additional responsibilities, which included holding trainings. This also resulted in growth in the trainer team.

In 2010 as it was planned, the Academy achieved only a minor success in reducing training costs. New trainers needed a longer time and the business was cautious about sending its members on internal trainings.

In 2011 as the connection was built up between the competence management process and the management of training, it became possible to carefully plan the training design process, selecting those optimal topics where external alternatives were more expensive.

In 2012 the slower pace in growth was a result of a change in the training portfolio —previously cost saving was the focus; now, providing high quality company specific trainings became more important.