



Training Without Borders

Curricula and lesson plans hatched at the home office can succeed with overseas audiences—provided the right strategy and cultural adjustments are made. **BY MARGERY WEINSTEIN**



Like many companies, your organization likely is expanding to international markets with overseas employees or affiliated workers who need training. Before you worry about developing learning plans and content for each market from scratch, consider what three 2012 Training Top 125 winners do to make their training materials ready for overseas learners. With the right plan and enough flexibility and cultural understanding, your core training messages can cross oceans and continents.

CONSISTENT LESSONS, CULTURALLY RELEVANT DELIVERY

“At Cerner, our technical training curriculum transcends many different cultures and geographies, but when it comes to soft skills or professional development courses, the content may need to be tailored to meet different cultural needs,” says Amy Moll, program manager, Catalyst Leadership Development, Cerner. “As a global company, we strive to create content that meets the needs of our associates in all geographies, but we also have an understanding that the content must be consistent to ensure all Cerner associates receive the same message and acquire the same knowledge, even if that means the training may look or feel different.”

For example, Moll notes that based on previous experience, the company has found that its global Cerner associates are more willing to get involved in training events and participate in the activities when they are more relevant to their geography. “It is important to use culturally relevant scenarios, case studies, and activities to show our associates that we are willing to tailor our training based on their location and not force the same scenarios or case studies used in the U.S.,” Moll explains.

Lindsey Whittaker, senior manager, Catalyst Business Relationships, Cerner, says that in addition to cultural and language differences, local law must be considered. “Our learning partners and facilitators always need to take into account local employment laws, which can be different in each country. Different countries have different expectations of the length of a working day with local laws, such as the European Union’s Working Time Directive, regulating the number of hours associates can be expected to work in a day or week. Our managers in all different geographies need to be aware of the differences that are specific to their regions, and this information can be tailored in our management training offerings.”

To ensure the content is relevant to the overseas audience of learners, Moll and Whittaker recommend getting non-U.S. associates involved in the process of developing the content. “The best way is to involve learning partners from other countries in the design and

development of the learning events—and get them involved early in the process. That way, you can design a course to meet the needs of all markets rather than having to adapt later.”

The issues may not just be cultural, they may be practical, adds Whittaker. “In our global locations, courses may need to run effectively with much smaller audiences, in smaller spaces, without the benefit of break-out rooms, and virtually where associates are spread out over a wide geography. If you start the design process with a global mindset, the programs or courses will be easier to implement outside of the U.S. and ‘testing’ the materials will be less cumbersome.”

Whittaker recommends having a big-picture strategy in place before giving the final approval for an overseas rollout. “Prior to finalizing the course or program, create a rollout plan that includes how you plan to ramp up facilitators in each global location. It is also a good idea to offer a global pilot to obtain feedback from local associates. This gives you the opportunity to make necessary changes before the course is rolled out in the U.S. and globally.”

MAKE THE MESSAGE TRANSLATE—LITERALLY

Learners outside of headquarters often require translation of the material, but companies can fail to recognize the importance of more “subtle” language differences, says Carolyn Ryffel, director, Global Training Consultant Network & Curriculum Design, Intercultural and Language Solutions, Cartus. “Be sure

CONTENT FOR OVERSEAS LEARNERS 101

Getting started on developing content for learners in countries where your company is expanding can be intimidating. Here are key tips from Mara Swan, EVP of Global Strategy & Talent, international training services provider ManpowerGroup:

- Adopt a fixed and flexible training framework. Make sure you know what has to be done the same to drive business performance versus what is the same because it feels comfortable to U.S.-based learning and development professionals. This will allow other cultures to see we have a shared culture.
- Ensure that training tone and content aligns with company culture, values and vision, and mission—all of which will help you be more globally correct since many times company culture trumps local culture.
- Ensure up front that you involve people who know the country either in the design phase or review of the design. Pilot if you are unsure and then adapt it prior to full rollout.
- Acknowledge that you have cultural biases and continually test them to ensure you don’t do something that negates the training.
- Test the boundaries—people are changing, and sometimes what was once a cultural norm no longer is. This will allow you to create more innovative training techniques and keep learning interesting and fun.

the proper version/form of the language is being used,” she says, noting the following:

- Chinese—for People’s Republic of China—simplified characters of Putongwa; Taiwan is OK with Putongwa, but they have their own, which uses the older versions of the characters.
- Portuguese—Brazilian Portuguese is different from what’s used in Portugal.
- Spanish—for Latin America, there is a “middle ground” American Spanish (using vocabulary understood by all countries),

TIPS FOR TRAINERS

By *Ancella Livers, Creative Leadership Center*

Taking U.S.-based training methods to a global audience can be a tricky business. Techniques you’ve honed may not work. Your best jokes may fall flat and your conversations may take turns you had never considered. So what do you do? When you’re facilitating development to a global audience, it’s best to get into learning mode and stay there. Taking U.S. training to other parts of the world isn’t for the faint of heart, but it can be fun and rewarding. Just remember a few tips:

1. **DO RESEARCH ON THE COUNTRY’S CULTURAL NORMS.** Having an understanding of the culture will help you recognize which of your techniques might work and which might not.
2. **MAKE A FRIEND.** If possible, cultivate an internal confidante who can help you navigate the cultural dynamics.
3. **READ YOUR ENVIRONMENT.** Be conscious of your environment when you suggest an activity or bring up a point. You won’t always know in advance how your methods will be understood, so be aware as you present so you can modify your behaviors in the moment.
4. **BE WILLING TO INCORPORATE LOCAL ELEMENTS AND/OR PERSPECTIVES INTO YOUR TRAINING METHODS.** While you may be the expert, be open to trying a different technique to get the larger message across.
5. **HOLD YOUR TRUTHS LIGHTLY.** Ideas, concepts, even methodologies you utilize may not resonate when you are out of the

country. Be prepared if practices need to be tweaked or changed to fit your participants’ perspectives or circumstances.

6. **FLOW WITH YOUR AUDIENCE.** Your participants may not take conversations down the paths you’re expecting. Before guiding them in the direction you wish to go, make sure you understand the cultural and organizational context in which you’re training. It may be you who needs to change.
7. **BE CAREFUL WITH HUMOR.** Humor can easily backfire.
8. **DON’T DOWNPLAY YOUR EXPERTISE.** Many times, those of us in the U.S. want to back away from our expertise and take on an “aw, shucks” approach. However, some cultures want an expert and if you don’t claim your expertise, you have reduced your value.
9. **TIME MAY BE FLUID.** Just because you think an activity should take a certain amount of time doesn’t mean it will. Depending upon where you are, time can be a fairly fluid component. Some places are succinct, while in others, you may not begin your presentation until an hour after you were to have finished—and no one but you seems bothered. So simply relax and adjust to those around you.
10. **BE RESPECTFUL.** More than anything, be respectful of the culture of your participants. If there is something in your presentation you know has the potential of being offensive—certain kinds of images, expressions, activities—ask someone about it first and be willing to excise the problem.

and it is different from the Spanish in Spain.

- English—British or American? It makes a difference and, for printed materials, also affects the paper size.

“Some concepts are so specific that they need to stay in the original language (often, English),” says Ryffel. “Also, for a language such as Chinese, there can be endless debates of what the correct translation is; one company I know of decided not to translate anything just to avoid such discussions. And be sure to use the name of the country in the way that is that country’s preference—or if it’s a political minefield, avoid putting it in writing.”

Along with the language and learning content, the training environment and set-up must be culturally sensitive. Ryffel says to research how those you are developing content for are comfortable receiving training. “Be mindful of the hierarchy; it affects how training groups are organized and the timing of related events,” she advises. “Maintain a ‘safe’ environment—in many cultures, making mistakes is not viewed as a learning opportunity but rather an opportunity to lose face; check understanding in multiple ways. Asking ‘Do you understand?’ can result in loss of face—not for the one who didn’t understand something, but for the trainer who didn’t explain it adequately.”

Also, she says, make sure you know how to establish credibility for yourself and for the program; sometimes, experience is most important, while other times, it’s degrees, credentials, etc. “Finally, learn how the education system operates. Often, your participants’ schooling was rigid; the teacher was the authority, and the students’ responsibility was to learn the one correct answer—usually through rote learning. This might inform someone’s educational expectations. Remember, your goal is to inspire confidence as a credible authority and let people work in their own language, even if you don’t understand it. If necessary or helpful, occasionally organize small group discussions around a common language.”

TAKE CARE WHEN OUTSOURCING

Some companies find the demands of creating or delivering content for overseas learners so daunting that they need third-party help. But organizations going that route should proceed with caution, says Michael F. Sunderman, executive director, Verizon Training and Development. “Having a consistent practice where a U.S.-based company develops and delivers content for U.S. locations but outsources delivery in other countries has both learning and corporate culture implications,” Sunderman points out. “From a learning standpoint, the outsourcer needs to be well versed in the culture of the company and its learning programs to operate as an extension of the company’s learning resources. Otherwise, you are left with in-language content and out-of-sync context.”

When you work with an overseas outsource partner, you still face cultural sensitivity challenges. “Perhaps the more significant factor is the cultural qualities the company is trying to convey. Using employees in the U.S. and contractors elsewhere says we are a U.S. company that does business in other countries,” says

QUICK TIPS

Cerner, Cartus, and Verizon are international companies that know what it takes to develop effective curricula for overseas learners. Here are their top tips:

- Use culturally relevant scenarios, case studies, and activities to show employees you are willing to tailor your training based on their location and not force the same scenarios or case studies used in the U.S.
- Take into account local employment laws, which can be different in each country. For example, legal lengths of workdays vary by country.
- Remember the finer points of language translations, such as the difference between British and American English and the difference between the written characters used in the People’s Republic of China and in Taiwan.
- Consider that learners in other countries may not be comfortable with the same format of discussion practiced in the U.S. For example, it may make some learners uncomfortable to admit a point the trainer made did not make sense to them because they know it will cause the trainer to lose face with the rest of the class.
- Get broad participation from the overseas organization for which you are developing the content. Find out directly from those learners their needs and then test out the material with some of those learners and local trainers. Doing so will help create the global mindset that is key to success.

Sunderman. “When the approach is a company-wide balance of internal and external training resources driven by the demands of the content, the company sends the message that it is a global company based in the U.S. That is a much more engaging stance.”

Verizon is careful to check back to see if the overseas programs are delivering on company expectations. The process of assessing the success of an overseas course and then making adjustments is not so different from assessing U.S.-based courses. “Today, the time it takes to determine if a learning program is working knows no geographic boundaries. If business impact, measurement approach, and data sources have been identified as part of the development process, then geography is not in play. Distance and language will complicate post-hoc ‘save-the-day’ measurement of learning programs,” Sunderman notes. “Whether going around the corner or around the world, it is hard to make up for poor business impact assessment planning. Likewise, the problem driving the need for adjustments to training once delivery has begun can be traced back to analysis, and to a lesser degree, design. If a product has 30 features in one country, but only 29 when sold in another country, don’t expect the learners to simply figure out what doesn’t apply to them. Localization says that all aspects of the training have to be prepared to provide the best learning experience in the location it is delivered. This means language, content scope, cultural linkage, and delivery mode.”

Sunderman recommends embracing the global mindset or attitude, and then communicating that attitude to overseas learners. “Money can be spent up front on making training relevant and accessible to each learning community, or the money can be spent over time on lost productivity and correcting errors from miscommunications,” he says. “Perhaps more important are the intangible returns on localization investments. Having employees and customers who believe your company is focused on their success...priceless.” 