

## Managing External Trainers (Aug 06)

*Peter Davison, CEO and Company Secretary of Arian Associates Ltd, shares his tips, based on his considerable experience of getting it right.*

This is obviously a very subjective and opinionated area, it depends on personal views of whether people see their training as having been 'good' or 'not', and if at the end of the day it has been 'value for money'.

The hard part in all of this is actually getting hold of trainers who do a good job, at a reasonable cost.

Our own slant on this is fairly simple and fairly hard-nosed.

As the provider of, what we consider to be, high quality business training and a recruiter of trainers we get to observe what goes on from both sides.

Firstly as a provider of training, we, like everyone else, endeavour to supply our clients with a 'product' to suit their needs. Secondly, and more importantly in the context of this piece, we tend to manage our external trainers (associates) quite strictly and only recruit to fit in with our quite, lofty standards.

To maintain those standards our associates are recruited using what some would call a pretty mean criteria, which can easily be applied and used by any organisation looking to recruit and manage external trainers.

- 1. *Qualifications*: Professional and training/teaching. Do they have the appropriate credentials?
- 2. *Training/teaching experience*: Do they have any experience of delivering their 'chosen' subject?
- 3. *Occupational competency*: Have the applicants worked in a 'real job' situation that affords them experience that can be referred to as occupational competency?

It's never foolproof, but so far it has allowed us to weed out some applicants who simply 'didn't cut the mustard'. Callous I know yet effective.

Our approach can be applied to the sourcing of training by using the same principles. By asking the same questions in respect of one, two and three above it should be possible to identify if prospective trainers are of the right calibre to meet your needs and deliver the training you require.

After all not just anyone can set themselves up as a 'trainer' can they?

So how else is it possible to manage external trainers?

Gary Platt's comment in Any Answers? is a sound and practical piece of advice, "set clear objectives to be accomplished for the contract to be delivered to an acceptable standard". That way both the client and the training provider know exactly what is expected from the outset. A practice we not only agree with but follow ourselves. The setting of agreed objectives leaves nothing to chance.

One reply to Leslie's question involved visiting the prospective training company. In our case this is our home with our office attached, which gives no indication at all of our ability to provide quality training. Typical, I would suggest, of a large number of training providers up and down the country, because we don't all charge telephone numbers per day and work out of big, posh city-based offices.

Another mentioned visiting and observing a training session being delivered by the external provider. I have to question the feasibility and practicality of this suggestion. I can see the reasoning behind it and I would not refuse if a prospective client requested it, but I don't think I would offer it up front.

Referrals are always a good way forward in finding a suitable trainer. If you talk to your own customers/clients and ask them if they are able to recommend a reputable training outfit that they have used themselves then it is reasonable to assume that they will have had a good experience with any they mention. This in turn would make it reasonable to further assume that the standard and quality of training should be suitable.

After all word of mouth is the best marketing tool there is.

Andie Hemming's comment on walking through the material is quite a sound approach. However, one thing that happened to us a while back was that, at their request during meeting and negotiation stages, we supplied a rather large organisation with a full draft copy of our customer service programme.

We were then left out in the cold as their own training people decided they could deliver the programme 'in-house'.

Is it sour grapes to suggest that they used our material as the basis of their own programme? Of course it is but it happens.

The moral of this little escapade is from a supply perspective; don't give too much away before contracts are sorted out. This is similar to the experience of Mike Morrison – whose comment includes, "not doing too much for free," he did not get a contract after a two hour freebie on the management of change.

So don't expect your prospective trainers to give too much away for free.

We believe that the bottom line of managing external trainers is that they are simply contractors to your organisation. Unless you set the parameters that you expect them to work to, like any other contractor you are asking for trouble.

Set objectives that you hope to have met by the training, request feedback from the delegates, and if the training organisation offers a quality report or something similar then look forward to its arrival on your desk.

Finally and probably the silliest suggestion of all is that if during negotiation you don't particularly like the person you are dealing with look elsewhere.

If you don't particularly like them, will your people?

If they don't like them, then they will not benefit from any training by this person, no matter how dynamic the delivery.

People buy from people - they also respond to people in the training environment, so in the words of Andie Hemming *"...as well as knowing their stuff it's vital that the external consultant is a good 'fit' with the organisation"*.