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Client Services: A Qualitative Inquiry of IT Training Sessions



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Background

The importance of keeping postsecondary faculty and staff up to date with IT training has been well documented by scholars (Eley & Eley, 1995; Hammond, Gardner, Heath, Kibby, Mayes, McAleese, Mullings, & Trapp, 1992; Jackson, Bartle, & Walton, 1999; Plewes & Isseroff, 2002). Eley and Eley (1995) emphasize that faculty and staff may feel pressured to acquire the skills necessary to use certain technology. South Texas College's (STC) Information and Planning Services Division has assigned the task of ensuring that the technological learning needs of faculty and staff are met by having the Client Services Department offer various training courses throughout the year.

The mission statement of the Client Services Department emphasizes the "effectiveness of training" (South Texas College, n.d.). Self training is offered through the department's website as well as through voluntary group training sessions that are set up throughout the year. This particular study involved gathering the opinions and suggestions for improvement given by individuals who have participated in previous Client Services training sessions.

Methodology

Participants for this study were randomly selected from a list of all participants who attended at least one training session during the Fall 2010 semester. As an incentive, all participants received a ten-dollar voucher good for a meal at the STC cafeteria. A total of nine individuals participated. During the focus group participants were asked various questions regarding their expectations, likes, dislikes and general experiences with the training sessions. Follow-up questions were asked when appropriate and suggestions for future training sessions were also elicited.

Findings:

Overall all participants were very pleased with the training sessions, the material covered, and the materials that were distributed during the course of their training sessions (hand-outs). Participants were also satisfied with the set-up of the class; they felt that having the trainer demonstrate class material on the big screen made it easy for them to follow along on their individual computers.

Trainer

All participants were overwhelmingly pleased with the instructional style and demeanor of the trainer. As one participant pointed out, “in my experience and what I heard from my staff was that first of all, the trainer was very knowledgeable.” They also felt that the trainer was personal and provided encouragement to all trainees. “Trying to relate to the audience has a lot to do in whether you want to learn in that specific class,” said one participant when describing the level of interaction and engagement the trainer had with the class. Participants also appreciated the fact that the trainer was very patient and took time to thoroughly answer all questions asked. However, participants also stated that they would like to see more trainers that could be assigned to specific departments to carry out specific types of trainings tailored specifically to departmental needs.

Information

All participants also agreed that they enjoyed the vast amount of material that was covered during the sessions. However, they also agreed that in some sessions there was too much material covered and as a result they experienced difficulty in grasping and/or retaining as much of the material as they would have liked. As one participant pointed out, “the retention of my

knowledge was not as good as the fast pace of learning because there was so much to cover.”

Some participants felt that due to the large amount of information covered, sessions felt too “rushed” and “fast-paced”. They did state that the hand-outs that were provided helped in this regard by giving them a reference they could refer to at a later time. Participants provided several other suggestions that could be incorporated into the sessions that might facilitate the learning and retention of the material. Some of these suggestions include:

- Breaking up the sessions: Rather than trying to cover so much information in such a short amount of time, participants thought it would be better to break up the sessions into smaller sessions devoted to less material. This would allow for more time to be devoted to thorough exploration and review of the topics that were discussed during the course of the training.
- Providing mini-reviews: Participants recommended that it would have been helpful if the sessions had small breaks in between segments of material covered so that trainees could review and get more hands-on practice with the skills being taught.
- Dedicating more time for “Q&A”: Although participants stated that the trainer did well in answering questions raised by attendees, they also felt that in many cases the trainees were either unable or uncomfortable asking all the questions they would have liked. One participant stated, “When you are going that fast, you just kind of want to keep going and then you forget what you were going to ask.” To remedy this issue participants suggested that time should be set aside in the session specifically for questions and discussion. It was agreed that doing this would eliminate the hesitation some participants felt in breaking up the flow of the lecture by asking questions.

- Assessment of learning: Another recommendation that was brought up during the focus group was that of conducting an assessment of the materials covered during the course of the training by quizzing the class. One participant stated, “I think it would’ve been nice if after every end of the segment there was a quiz over the material so it was all brought up, so all the information was summarized in set of questions.” Participants stated that providing short quizzes either at the end or throughout the session would have enabled them to assess how much material they were actually learning and to self-correct themselves in cases where there was any misconception or misunderstanding. Participants also brought up the idea of using Classroom Performance System clickers, “with clickers we might be able to see if the people are actually gaining information.” They felt this would be a valuable tool in determining if any points need to be clarified. As one participant pointed out, “if you got that question wrong, then you would know ‘Oh, ok that was a mistake. It was this answer not this answer,’ so our doubts so are actually corrected...”

Level of Material

Some participants felt that the level of the material presented was not well-suited to their particular capability level. Based on participant feedback, it seems that their prior knowledge of the subject matter varied which made the workshop appropriate to some and not to others. “It was so fast that I was lost, I held up the class and that wasn’t fair,” said one participant. Another participant added, “I was totally unfamiliar with all of the Outlook and all of that so I was going with the expectation like basic 101 and of course it wasn’t, so it was way all over my head.” This particular participant went on to state that she wished there was an introductory type of

course that would give basic background information on the software and simple lessons on how to navigate them as a way to get beginners comfortable with the software before the sessions. Still others felt the opposite, “for me I went through the trainings just to get a certification like I already knew how to go through the programs so I felt like I was just sitting there so I was just kind of waiting around.”

Ideas for future trainings

Participants also gave many suggestions as to future trainings that they would like to see Client Services offer. All participants largely agreed that they would like to see trainings that are more specific and customized to certain issues that either individuals or departments need help with. One main example that was discussed at length by all participants was that of help using and managing various aspects of Excel databases such as exporting data from Argos/Banner, creating address labels directly from excel databases and mail merging from excel databases. One participant suggested that such trainings could be offered in a sequential successive type of format where in the first session a database is created and then one could use the that same dataset to create a mail merge and so on. Other trainings that were mentioned were learning how to use the Banner system as most described this system as being “not exactly intuitive.” Participants felt that if such trainings were offered they would be more enthusiastic and motivated to attend such sessions and would also increase their retention of the information presented since they would be using the skills learned on a daily basis. Other types of training that were mentioned were Photoshop, HTML, Publisher and social media (e.g. Twitter & Facebook).

Lastly, all participants agreed that due to the increased time flexibility that summers offer, this is when they would most likely be able to attend such training sessions.

Recommendations:

Since participants were satisfied with the overall set-up and format of the training sessions, it is recommended that Client Services keep this set-up for future sessions. The teaching style of the trainer is also something that should be kept consistent. If new or additional trainers are to be utilized, they should be selected based on their ability to be personal, patient, and engaged with the participants. This is imperative since participants emphasized that these were the characteristics that they liked most about the current trainer and the session in general.

It would be beneficial if the curriculum for the training sessions were reviewed to see if and where it would be possible to reduce the amount of information presented in each session and adding one or two sessions to the series of a particular topic. Doing this would increase the amount of sessions but decrease the amount of material covered in each session. This would allow opportunity for hands-on practices, assessments, reviews, and “Q&A” – all of which would improve the grasping and retention of material.

In order to address matching the expertise level of the training to the individuals’ capability, it is suggested that Client Services develop an assessment test or quiz that interested parties could take before they sign up for training sessions in order to gauge their level of prior knowledge of the subject so that training sessions can be designed at different levels in order to more closely match the client needs.

In addition to conducting general training sessions, Client Services may also consider conducting specific issue-focused trainings. An example of such training (and one which was discussed at length throughout the focus group discussion) is on creating labels and mail merging from Excel databases. The need and demand for such trainings could be explored by sending out surveys and/or informal inquiry with individuals or departmental administrators. After certain issues and trainings are targeted and developed, then such trainings could be promoted via email to other departments or individuals and those who are experiencing the same issues may request such a training as well. Lastly, summer months seem to be the best time to offer such trainings, as all participants stated that it is during this time that they have relatively flexible schedules. This would be most appropriate for non-faculty participants as many faculty are not available during the summer sessions.

In all, it is apparent that the Client Services Department at STC is providing an invaluable service to the college. The implementation of a few of the suggestions made by individuals who have previously utilized their services would only help to improve the training sessions being offered.

Works Cited

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