

CENTRAL NEW YORK

BUSINESS JOURNAL

Informal learning emerges as trend in corporate training

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For the Welch Allyn employees C. Paul Liberatore trains, time away from work is especially challenging.

Liberatore is senior manager of sales training at Skaneateles Falls-based Welch Allyn and if the sales representatives he works with are not out selling, the company isn't making money. That's one reason he says training has been migrating toward less time-intensive classroom sessions in recent years.

Although such sessions will never disappear completely, because they are valuable, Liberatore says the trend is toward more informal learning experiences. They could include specific work assignments meant to stretch someone's skills, ongoing coaching and mentoring, training through social media, and online courses.

Other area learning executives noted a similar trend as well.

"People have less bandwidth," Liberatore says. "We're very mindful of the time pressures. Certainly, all organizations have been touched in some way by the economic downturn."

Technology is also making more such informal techniques possible. Of course, Liberatore adds, the new technology in learning could be equally driven by the time pressures employees now face.

It's a chicken and egg question, but there is no doubt new technology is helping employees learn in ways they couldn't five or 10 years ago, he says.

Working closely with a coach or mentor in person or having a dialogue online makes learning an intrinsic part of the day, Liberatore adds.

"The feedback is timely," he says. "The learning experience is very relevant to what's going on."

Denise McGraw, senior director for learning and development at Time Warner Cable in Central New York, has seen a similar move in employee learning. She agrees that such techniques make learning a constant part of the work experience.

"That's where that self-directed training or learning is coming in," she says. "It's not only up to your supervisors and your leaders to necessarily say to you 'OK, you need to do this,' she says. "But how can the employee also help self-direct?"

Time Warner actually increased its total training hours in 2010, McGraw adds. Employees there spent 48,000 hours in training so far this year, up 53 percent from 2009.

The increase has been driven by new products and services. The company has also made leadership training for supervisors a priority, Warner says.

She adds that the company's training time could increase again in 2011.

At least one other Central New York organization is also undertaking a major new training initiative.

Loretto, the large nonprofit eldercare network, is in the midst of implementing a major new learning strategy. The effort grew from a new strategic plan the organization recently completed.



Tom Schattinger, director of food services for the Loretto Health and Rehabilitation Center, addresses the crowd at an Oct. 2010 Eden Alternative staff training session.

Loretto leaders are trying to ensure a consistent training program across the entire organization. Naturally, some positions require specialized or unique instruction, but the network wants employees schooled in a broadly similar approach to its work.

"The philosophy is that everyone gets the same training so everyone can work toward the same common goal," says Karen Carroll, director of green community and person-centered care transitions.

Like Time Warner, Loretto is prioritizing a detailed leadership course, adds Gregg Lawson, director of learning and development. And some of that will certainly be delivered in nontraditional formats such as online courses.

Some may even come from relationships Loretto has with area colleges.

The organization knows it wants certain competencies in all its leaders, Lawson says.

"The demands on management are much different now," he says. "It's not as easy to throw someone in there and say run the place."

Nationwide, companies spent nearly \$126 billion on training in 2009, according to the 2010 State of the Industry Report from the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD). That's down 6.1 percent from 2008.

The ASTD report reflects activity during 2009.

Learning spending per employee rose 1.2 percent from 2008 to \$1,081 per worker. And, direct-learning expenditures nationwide increased from 0.59 percent of revenue to 0.71 percent. □

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