Legal Information Management, 7 (2007), pp. 20–22
 Printed in the United Kingdom doi:10.1017/S1472669606001071

Training the Trainer

Abstract: The authors, Karen Gray, Diane Miller, Karen Scott and Kate Stanfield, are experienced legal information professionals who are responsible both for designing and delivering in-house training sessions, and for running the BIALL Training the Trainer seminar for the last three years. The aim of this article is threefold: to explore the rationale for providing training; to examine the groundwork and preparation necessary to create the right training culture; and to offer practical guidance on how to deliver successful training activities.
Keywords: law firms; in-house training

What's in it for the lawyers?

Obviously there is no point in running training courses if no one attends them. Therefore, it is worth taking a minute or two to consider why lawyers and law firm staff might be interested in attending training sessions.

Over the last few years, lawyers have been slow to catch on to electronic resources, preferring to consult their traditional hard copy materials. With the plethora of online resources now available, lawyers can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to them, particularly as some information is now *only* available online. It is not unusual in many firms to subscribe to a wide range of information resources, and lawyers are coming to realise that they need to know how to use at least some of them. The *Tesco effect* has also come into play – doing online shopping at home has made many lawyers feel more comfortable with technology.

Clients' expectations are also persuading lawyers to seek out training, as they expect lawyers to give them instant answers, sometimes at any time during the day or night. Access to online resources gives lawyers the opportunity to fulfil clients' expectations by replying speedily with up-to-date information. Some lawyers take great delight in being able to say that they were accessing an online service at 2.00am to give a client some urgent advice! It is possible that some clients and potential clients may find it difficult to differentiate between the services offered by similar sized law firms. Therefore, clients' awareness of the information resources to which the lawyers have access, and the training support they receive, may influence their choice of law firm.

New joiners can be particularly needy when it comes to training. They are probably used to accessing resources at their previous law firm and need to get up to speed as quickly as possible by acquainting themselves with those available in their new firm. They are likely to find the resources are not exactly the same as those they have been used to, and will need to familiarise themselves with new ones.

Trainees are accustomed to accessing a variety of online resources at law school and arrive at their new firm with high expectations. The training provided to this group needs to include some expectation setting. We don't always subscribe to the same services that they have been using at college and a reminder that services now have to be paid for is necessary to curb the wild abandon with which they have approached searching databases with a free educational tariff!

What's in it for us?

It's clear that there are many reasons why lawyers should be interested in training, which reassures us that we will have a receptive audience, but what can providing training do for information professionals? Obviously, training is a way of encouraging the efficient use of resources, and to justify expenditure on these expensive materials. It also ensures that lawyers are accessing accurate, up-to-date and authoritative information, and are not just resorting to Google – heaven forbid. In addition, it gives us the opportunity to ensure that lawyers know where to find the information they need, whether it is on the firm's intranet or on the library shelves.

However, our involvement in the provision of training not only benefits the lawyers, but can also do us, as information professionals, a lot of good too. Here is where we can show that the information services department is aware of the bigger picture: the business strategy of the firm. By making sure that our lawyers are properly trained and know how to access a variety of information resources, we can help to ensure that the service they provide to clients and potential clients is a cut above that of the competition (present company excepted, of course!) Providing training also gives information professionals an excellent opportunity to raise the profile of the information service. It allows us to meet the lawyers face to face and, at the same time as teaching them something that is going to help them do their jobs more efficiently, we can get to know them better, and tell them what else our department can do for them. A training session could be the start of a beautiful friendship if we use the opportunity effectively. The provision of training can also give information staff the chance to enhance their roles within their team, and within the firm. Communication skills can be used in all sorts of client-facing activities. The responsibility for setting up and developing training sessions and programmes will strengthen project management skills. Supervisory skills come into play when co-ordinating the efforts of training colleagues or vendor trainers. Getting staff to think about what training the information team should be providing can also be a great motivator and cultivate team spirit, e.g. working together to co-ordinate a trainee induction programme. Teaching people something new, and getting some positive feedback, can be a very enjoyable and satisfying experience and is also an excellent motivator.

How do we create the right climate?

It is important that you do not launch your training programme into a vacuum. You may think it is a good idea, but you need to make sure that your target audience thinks it is a good idea too! There should be a variety of interested parties within your firm who would benefit from the training sessions you have to offer – partners, assistants, new qualifiers, trainees, new joiners, practice area groups, individuals, secretaries and even support staff!

Encouraging people to come to training sessions is important, but the cajoling does not always have to be done by you. Tap into peer pressure – upwards, downwards, sideways – whichever way, lawyers don't like to think someone else knows something they don't, especially if they are lawyers at another law firm! Trainees are good at spreading the word if they become proficient at using a useful resource but, equally, senior lawyers will want to make sure that more junior members of their team are proficient in using research resources.

Try not to miss an opportunity to slip 'training' into the conversation. Use those lawyers you know fairly well to get an invite along to their regular practice area meetings. Seek out opportunities to get to know lawyers better and encourage them to see you as part of the fee-earning team and not just the 'support' staff.

As we know, time is money, so be prepared to be adaptable and provide training in a situation that suits the lawyer, even though it may not always suit you. Do a ten-minute training session at a meeting that is already set up, or get a slot on the new joiner induction and partner mentoring programmes. Do demos rather than hands-on sessions to large groups, or one-to-ones and floor walks for individuals. Training also needs to suit the culture of the firm, e.g. in smaller firms, a less formal low-key approach might work better. You may need to seize upon an opportunity to train as it presents itself - e.g. it could be driven by a request to find something specific – why not help them to find it themselves!

What building blocks do we need?

There are several building blocks that you will need in order to construct a successful training session. One crucial question is - who is actually going to do the training? The information services staff may know their resources, but can they all stand up in front of a group of lawyers? Remember, lawyers will have had communication and presentation skills training themselves and will know what makes a good training session, so don't let yourself down by trying to wing it. Do what needs to be done to ensure that the trainer is confident. Look out for courses run by training providers such as CILIP, TFPL, Aslib (and BIALL!), but there may be an opportunity to take advantage of the in-house communication and presentation skills training that your lawyers are undoubtedly attending. Make sure the trainer knows her resource backwards and works on her training and communication skills. Don't put someone in an uncomfortable position – a poor training session will knock the trainer's confidence further and it won't do your department's image any good either. Make use of vendor trainers if they are good, but talk through your aims and objectives for the training session with them, and make sure they understand the dynamics of the group that you want them to train.

Getting your training environment right is important too. Your choice of venue should reflect the kind of training session you want to provide. Perhaps a relaxed session in the library would work well. It is less formal, information services trainers may feel more comfortable in their own environment, and hopefully, if the lawyer has found where you are for the training session, chances are he will find you again! Demonstrations may require a large training room with projector and screen, and hands-on sessions could require several PCs. If you have any control over temperature, lighting and possible distractions, then adjustments may need to be made. Obviously, the facilities available will vary greatly depending on the size of the firm, so you will need to make the most of what you have.

Training materials such as handouts can be useful to reinforce points covered during the training session, but they need to be accurate and they should be brief and targeted to those attending the session. Something eye-catching will encourage people to read them, but it is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669606001071 Published online by Cambridge University Press

important to make them easy to update, otherwise they could become a burden and a drain on resources. E-learning might be a useful way of providing 'anytime' training and, along with online guides and manuals, might allow people to teach themselves at a time which suits them, if they are not able to attend more formal sessions. Make them easy to find by placing them strategically on your intranet, such as practice area pages, to encourage use.

Are we there yet?

Continuing with the 'building blocks' analogy, ultimately you may be able to construct your training sessions into a programme that can be repeated periodically. This would get lawyers used to the idea that training is part of what the information services team does, and something that they will look to you to provide. Offering CPD points as a reward for attendance may be an incentive (although I think bacon butties may work better!). Establish a presence in the training culture of the firm. Tie up with the HR department's secretarial and support staff training (what online resources could they be making use of?), and IT training (how can lawyers manipulate the information once they have found it?)

Emphasising the importance of excellent research skills as a counter to business risk will get senior management buy-in – senior partners don't want their lawyers passing on bad research techniques, or worse, bad advice.

Be clear on your aims and objectives for running a training session, seize the opportunity to raise the profile of the information services team, be enthusiastic and enjoy!

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669606001071 Published online by Cambridge University Press