HOW TO IDENTIFY, SELECT AND BRIEF A TRAINING PROVIDER
Sourcing a training provider

With an ever-increasing number of training providers offering a bewildering array of business-related training courses, choosing the best supplier for your business can be a time-consuming and daunting task. This practical guide may help you to make a more informed decision when sourcing and selecting the best training solution.

Before you start, what is your brief?

It usually pays to set down some of your key criteria in writing before embarking on your search for a provider. This not only helps when you are narrowing down your options but will also prove useful if you need to brief the trainer at a later stage.

A basic training brief should include the following:

**Overall objective**
Put simply, what capability is the training intervention going to develop, in terms of skill area and level? For example, “advanced sales skills” or “finance for non-financial managers”.

**Learning outcomes**
These are your key performance indicators for the training intervention. Think in terms of the changes in knowledge, behaviour, performance, etc that you need from the trainees as a result of their training. For example, “After the session, participants should be able to perform basic Visual Basic programming functions” or “On completing the course, participants will have demonstrably increased in their confidence in public speaking”. Think about several learning outcomes and prioritise them. You may have to compromise depending on cost, logistics, etc.

**Level of assessment/reinforcement required**
What level of guarantee is necessary in terms of the learning outcomes being achieved? Should participants’ learning be tested and/or formally accredited in any way, or is it preferable for participants to self-assess? Much will depend on the nature of the learning outcomes, but these measures should look at assessment both of the participants and of the trainer.

**Number of participants, time commitment and budget available**
Obviously, these three criteria impact one another in terms of the level and depth of trainer/trainee contact time is involved, and the extent to which the training intervention can be tailored to organisational and individual needs.

Consider both economies of scale and costs vs benefit in terms of your learning outcomes. Is the course content or programme more important than the quality of the trainer? Do you want to send one person on an open course where they are one of many participants from different organisations, or do you want the trainer(s) to develop something targeted at a specific group in your organisation?

Consider the degree to which the learning is experiential and interactive – will cutting back on the trainer:trainee ratio greatly inhibit the learning opportunities for participants?

Finally, consider whether the training can be effectively cascaded. If it is very knowledge-based then sending one person on a premium-price, in-depth open course, then having them share their learning with colleagues, may be more effective than sending everyone on a shorter, cheaper course.
Sourcing a training provider – routes to try

Talk to your local expert
If your organisation has one, talk to your HR or learning and development team to see what contacts they have and what deals they have in place. It may be that large training organisations have preferred supplier contracts with your organisation that oblige them to provide training across a number of skill areas at a reduced price. Most HR teams, however, allow line managers a high degree of discretion regarding the suitability of courses and training providers for their staff, and in many cases decision making in this area is devolved along with a training budget. Even if this is the case, you should tap into their knowledge of the market where possible.

Web research
For someone with little experience of identifying training solutions, the internet can be a tempting option for an initial list of contacts. However, given the number of options this will generate, it is likely to take a great deal of time to sift through the numerous providers to find one that meets your needs. A more effective use of your resources would be to use the specialist websites that enable you to target your search more effectively.

For example, www.trainingpages.com, www.findasupplier.com and www.trainingzone.co.uk will allow you to target your search by subject area, course difficulty and location. Taking this approach will allow you to spend time assessing the quality of the providers rather than generating a list of options.

Exhibitions and conferences
Attending exhibitions and conferences provides you with the ideal opportunity to meet a host of suppliers under one roof and establish which ones have an understanding of your needs and industry.

These events offer a number of training organisations the facility to provide short tasters of their courses. Attending some of these taster sessions will give you a clearer insight into what is available and clarify what training approaches will suit your needs.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development organises annual training exhibitions in London and Harrogate. Check their website at www.cipd.co.uk/cande for details.

Trade press
Scanning the trade press related to the training industry can be a useful way of spotting potential suppliers. For example, the publications People Management (www.peoplemanagement.co.uk), Personnel Today (www.personneltoday.com) and Human Resources (www.hrmagazine.co.uk) contain details of a numerous training providers.

Also reviewing trade publications linked to your profession may provide you with details of training organisations that have specific experience within your sector.

Word of mouth
Use your networking contacts to learn about training opportunities. IOP branch meetings, the IOP mentoring service and community websites such as optics.org offer a chance to get some first-hand information about training, particularly specialised technical training.

Personal recommendations from competitors and colleagues are a good way of sifting through the numerous options. These people are likely to have similar needs to you so, when the opportunity arises, pick their brains about who provides their training. They may have useful information about training organisations related to their roles or based on previous courses that they have attended.
The Institute of Physics

IOP has a range of professional development courses available. Details of these can be found at iop.org/careers. Professional training is offered through the endorsed training provider scheme and also through specialised courses, which are offered in house or on an open arrangement.

In addition the IOP endorses a range of short technical and soft skills courses. Providers of relevant training are asked to provide full details of their courses, the credentials of their trainers and the names of two referees, and to give IOP members a 10% discount from their full course rate.

Other courses are available through the IOP Electronic Professional Development service – Learning On Line. These are short, low-cost and self-paced transferable skills courses developed exclusively for members. Topics include leadership skills, negotiation skills, coaching skills, conversations with customers, managing workload, employment law for managers, recruitment and selection, and networking skills. You can choose how you want to tackle each topic and can access the topics as often as you like.

Having used the above to generate a shortlist of potential suppliers, there are a number of other factors that you need to consider before making your final choice?

Assessing potential training providers and trainers

If you are unfamiliar with the training provider, determine how long they have been in business. Establish if you are dealing with a stable and respectable organisation. For example, has the company received any awards, do they have a reputation for innovative approaches or are they associated with any published work? The presentation of their proposal and course materials can be used as an indicator of their professionalism.

Consider the amount of prior experience that the training company has in delivering training in your sector and working in organisations with a culture and values similar to your organisation. The credibility of the company is important because it is likely to influence the response of course participants. Request references from previous clients or attend one of their courses yourself before making a final decision.

The quality of trainers is essential because they are going to make a difference between the success and failure of a training programme. However, some training providers select trainers based on low cost or geographical location. Unfortunately, your participants could be confronted with a trainer who has only received the materials the day before the course.

You want a training provider that chooses trainers based on experience, qualifications and communication skills. Talented trainers can explain complex subjects in an understandable way. Their courses are enjoyable and meet the learning outcomes.

Establish who the trainers are, what training they have received to deliver your materials and how many times they have presented similar courses before. If you are concerned about the trainers, you could ask to meet them to gain a greater insight into their experience. You can monitor their performance by reviewing copies of student evaluations.

Some key issues to consider when assessing the trainers

1. **Do the trainers’ role model the materials they are presenting?**
2. **Does the training provider have adequate trainers to deliver the number of courses when the programme is at its peak?**
3. **Will it be able to provide cover if a trainer is unable to attend due to illness or transport difficulties?**
4. **Are the trainers willing to deliver courses outside the standard 9.00 to 5.00? Are they flexible enough to deliver courses to meet the needs of shift workers and part-time staff?**
5. **What distance will trainers have to travel to deliver the courses? Does your training provider have a limited network of trainers? Having trainers incurring additional travel and accommodation costs could have a serious impact on your training budget.**
Assessing training course content

The course material forms an essential part of any training programme. What materials will be used during your programme? Are they fit for purpose? Some companies simply print PowerPoint presentations and call these training manuals. Others consist entirely of bullet points and lack detail for future reference. The course materials should be easy to read, clearly labelled for quick retrieval of information and should provide adequate space for taking notes.

Other factors to consider:

1. How often does the training provider update its materials?
2. Does it take into account recent developments in the subject area?
3. What activities are included to meet the various learning styles of course participants?
4. Do the materials take into account differences in relation to ethnicity, gender, age, etc?
5. Do they mirror the behaviours that your competency framework is wishing to promote?

The materials should act as a valuable resource reference on completion of the course. Further, they should reflect the diversity in your organisation and compliment the existing behaviours that you wish to promote.

Course accreditation

Is the course accredited by the necessary industry standards or qualifications? If the training is not accredited to a particular qualification there is no reason why the supplier delivering the training should not be. For example organisations such as the Institute of Leadership & Management and the Chartered Institute of Management have stringent procedures for vetting potential suppliers of the courses that they accredit.

A supplier that has been approved in one area by a professional body will generally offer high standards across the board. Further, it may even be able to gain accreditation for training that was not previously thought possible.

Meeting your needs and achieving the necessary learning outcomes

To ensure a positive outcome from the training experience, the client company needs to be able to explain to the potential providers their learning needs and the outcomes that they want to achieve from the training. This should be the starting point with all negotiations with your providers. Obviously, you have more negotiating power where you are engaging a provider to deliver just for your organisation than when you send people on an open course.

In some cases the client company may need guidance and support in identifying the training needs. Will your training provider offer their expertise and knowledge in this area? For example, are they prepared to facilitate focus groups to confirm your training needs? Are they prepared to deliver a number of pilot courses to gain initial feedback about the quality of the training, course materials and learning outcomes? Are they willing to amend their materials and content based on these findings?

There are suppliers that believe that they have completed their task once all of the delegates have left the venue. The better ones believe that the end of the training marks the beginning of the implementation of the course learning. Are your suppliers willing to help delegates to draw up personal action plans with agreed timescales and to support the implementation of this learning via the internet and telephone?

If a supplier is hesitant about explaining how certain outcomes are to be achieved or what support is in place to implement the learning, you may wish to consider other options.
Learning environment and venues

An excellent trainer combined with high-quality materials can be undermined by a cramped and badly lit training environment with a poor air-conditioning system. This can result in disgruntled employees returning to work with tales of cramped conditions rather than the benefits and learning gained from the training.

When booking your learning venue discuss with the training provider the following key points:

1. the number of delegates attending each course and whether the venues can deal with these;
2. whether you need break-out rooms and whether the venues provide them;
3. whether the training provider uses its purchasing power and contacts to negotiate a discount for the hire of the venues;
4. whether the venue has adequate secure storage facilities for equipment, materials and videos used during the training;
5. who is responsible for setting up the room layout and equipment before each course;
6. how easy it is to move the furniture in the training venue; as this can impact on the various activities and atmosphere needed for a successful course.

Evaluating the training

To establish that you have spent your money wisely and that your organisation has benefited from the training, you will need to choose a training provider that is willing to work with you to evaluate the training and learning experience. The following options can be discussed with potential providers.

Delegate satisfaction
How did the delegates respond to the training? The use and examination of post-course evaluations will present a picture of delegates' satisfaction.

Learning
What learning has occurred and has it been transferred to the workplace? Evaluating the immediate learning can be measured by using pre- and post-course questionnaires. Whether learning has been applied in the workplace can be confirmed by gaining feedback from employees, their peers and line manager a number of months after the course.

Job performance
Has the job performance of course delegates improved as a result of the training? Use of the appraisal system and feedback from course delegates and customers will generate useful evidence to assess if the training has increased performance.

Outcomes
Did the training achieve the expected outcome? This can be gauged by measuring the expected business benefit, such as greater customer satisfaction, increased sales or productivity, or reduced costs.

Establishing what is most important to you and what methods of evaluation your training provider uses will assist you in choosing the most appropriate supplier.

Selecting the right training provider can make a positive contribution to your organisation by helping to improve its capabilities and achieving its business objectives. Taking into account the above suggestions will increase the possibility of your making the best decision.
Further reading

www.cipd.co.uk The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development is the professional body for those involved in the management and development of people.

findasupplier.info/training Find a Supplier is a free online directory that enables in-house training managers and other business professionals in the UK to find the right training providers for them quickly and easily. It lists more than 4000 training companies in the UK that specialise in the supply of training-related products and services.

peoplemanagement.co.uk This is the website of People Management magazine, the UK's biggest human resources publication.

personneltoday.com This is an online HR news magazine.

trainingzone.co.uk This is the UK's most popular site for corporate training professionals.

trainingpages.com Training Pages is the UK's largest independent directory of training courses on the web.