SPOTLIGHT

By Karen Main, Englewood training specialist

LEVERAGING INTERNAL KNOWLEDGE TO CREATE A CULTURE OF LEARNING

IT'S EASY TO GET STUCK IN "that's how we've always done it" mode in any organization. Sometimes the best solutions are right under your nose — or already in your employee ranks.

A constant that every organization faces in today's competitive environment is keeping employees up-to-date and trained in technology. Sending employees off-site to attend half-day or full-day trainings can be cost-prohibitive for many organizations, and the transfer of learning, even after a full day of training and practice, can be limited. Similarly, hiring expert computer staff to deliver software training in-house can be outside the price range for many organizations, especially in today's economic climate. Using Web-based training solutions may be more cost-effective, but they may not necessarily mesh with the learning styles of many employees. The challenge for the City of Englewood was how to deliver this important training, but do so in a cost-effective manner?

The City of Englewood's "Computer Coaching Network" was devised as a means to deliver computer training to employees with a realistic price tag. The City didn't want to sacrifice quality, nor reduce offerings or make computer training only open to a small number of our population. The solution is a method based on a peer training model.

Peer training is a largely underutilized approach in organizations. But in the right context, it can be wildly successful. The City of Englewood recognized that they had a large reservoir of competent employees with the skill sets and knowledge to train others, and tapped into this pool of resources to create a network of Peer Trainers or "coaches" who share their knowledge with other City employees through traditional classroom instruction, monthly brown-bag sessions, and one-on-one coaching. The network of coaches consists of employees from different divisions in the City. Their participation in the network is voluntary and coaches do not receive additional compensation for their time. Coaches teach only as much as their work schedules allow.

The network began with a call from the City's training specialist for savvy volunteers willing to share their areas of expertise and computer knowledge. After a "What Can We Do" brainstorming session, the group decided that current resources allowed them to offer:

- **Training classes**. Coaches deliver a progressive series of training classes on Microsoft Office Suite applications such as PowerPoint, Outlook, Excel and Word.
- **Brown-bag workshops.** Short workshops help reinforce concepts learned in regular workshops or give employees helpful skills they can bring back to their desks and put to work immediately. Past topics have included "Labels & Envelopes," "Mail Merge," "Creating Tables in Word," and "Working with Word Art."
- **One-on-one coaching.** Computer coaches provide "just-in-time" assistance to employees by phone, email, or in person. As a result, employees spend less time troubling over problems, increasing our overall workplace productivity.

A few points that were learned early on have contributed to the success of the program and may assist you in devising a similar program in your organization:

- Obtain top-down support for the peer training model:
  - make sure supervisors and managers are on board before rolling out a peer training program; and
  - employees volunteering to participate in a peer training program should understand that they are responsible for effectively managing their time ... primary job responsibilities first, peer training second.
- Identify and assess training needs on an ongoing basis.
- Evaluate, on an ongoing basis, workshops and make changes when necessary.
- Identify early on what resources are available (human expertise, physical space, technology, etc.).

Englewood Computer Coach Page Parker helps Cheryl Adamson and Chris Biasio during a training workshop. Photo courtesy of the City of Englewood

• Start small, but deliver!

   • Don't feel as though you must roll out a comprehensive training program right away using peer trainers. Pick one or two areas as a way to introduce the approach to your culture.

• Make sure that the training is relevant and practical to the work environment:

   • include realistic practice activities in all training classes; and

   • know what you teach and teach what you know!

• Provide advanced training to members of the Coaches' Network. By continuing to expand their skills, coaches bring new skills to their workshops.

• Celebrate and reward accomplishments:

   • Find some way to recognize your Peer Trainers. Since peer training is on a volunteer basis, provide some additional means of recognition — whether a luncheon, a small plaque or some other meaningful form of acknowledgment.

The effectiveness of the Computer Coaching Network is evaluated by three key outcomes: return on investment, student satisfaction, and organizational impact.

In 2006, Englewood Computer Coaches delivered 7 one-hour brown-bag training workshops and 34 three-hour computer training classes at zero cost to the City.

At market rates, this easily equates to a $30,000 value.

Class evaluations reveal that the delivery methods and content of classes meet or exceed employee expectations. Of those employees who attended a computer training workshop and completed a class evaluation (2006, with 102 respondents):

• 100 percent of respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that "the workshop content was realistic." (51 percent agreed; 49 percent strongly agreed);

• 98 percent of respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "the course content was well organized and followed a logical sequence." (56 percent agreed; 42 percent strongly agreed);

• when asked if able to "practice new skills during this workshop," 98 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (42 percent agreed; 56 percent strongly agreed); and,

• 99 percent of respondents said that "overall the course met their expectations." (52 percent agreed; 47 percent strongly agreed).

In addition to meeting tangible needs for computer training, peer training produced a number of latent outcomes. For example, some peer trainers improved their public speaking skills. Others bettered their ability to explain concepts and coach others. Still others improved their skills in software applications. In addition, as an organization:

• IT staff are freed up to address more complex IT issues rather than answering basic questions on their help desk;

• increased employee morale;

• more relevant application of software throughout the organization;

• application of the peer training model to other organizational training needs.

Peer training encourages information sharing among and across the employee population. It is a methodology that may become more and more popular as younger generations of workers, most accustomed to working collaboratively and demanding instant access to information and solutions, enter the workforce. The importance of a peer training approach is the way to make learning much more of a collaborative effort; learning and the transfer of knowledge occurs from employee to employee, creating instant solutions, rather than relying solely on the expertise of an authority. The potential for using the Peer Training model in organizations is extraordinary. In the City of Englewood, only the surface of this approach has been tapped. But now it is realized that learning together and working together to solve problems is truly the hallmark of a learning organization.