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eBay Tackles Its Customer Support Training Challenge

Like many companies, eBay, the fast-growing online auction and trading Web site, moved its best customer support representatives into managerial roles. But given its phenomenal growth, from 200 employees in 1998 to 1,600 in 2000, it had no time to sufficiently train these new managers to be effective leaders. The result was reduced employee satisfaction and higher-than-expected turnover. And few can plead ignorance as to the effects of unhappy employees and high turnover on customer satisfaction.

Customer concerns aside, employee distress over lack of management training, confirmed in a culture survey of workers conducted by eBay, made sense: 80% of the dot.com's workforce was under 25 years of age and 80% of those had never managed people before. So, following employees' urging for leadership-development skills, the company set out to devise a training program for its 60 in-house customer support managers and supervisors in Salt Lake City and the 12 it had in other locations across the U.S.

With the assistance of AchieveGlobal (Tampa, Fla.; 877-651-9389; www.achieveglobe.com), eBay set out to devise a leadership-training program that would deliver information that was accessible and could be applied. It also wanted to rate each group's satisfaction with the program.

Those in the Salt Lake City group received standard classroom training once a month over a

year; those at remote locations participated in a mix of Web-related activities. The latter posed the most challenges for the company. The classroom training, which allows instructors to read body language, use eye contact, and engage individuals through visual and auditory means, was fairly standard. But the company had never before tried to achieve buy-in, participation, and learning among its remote supervisors.

A kick-off meeting. To start things off, the company brought both groups to Salt Lake City for an introductory classroom session. They all took a 360-degree assessment of their leadership skills, "but that is where their paths diverged," noted Kathleen Hurson, who was involved in developing the online training. She spoke on this topic with a group of individuals from eBay, AchieveGlobal, and Performance Consulting International at the American Society for Training and Development's (ASTD) International Conference.

The training. Both groups were given an introduction to leadership, coaching, giving and receiving feedback, giving recognition, influencing others, correcting performance programs, conducting performance reviews, managing priorities, understanding organizational goals, and identifying priorities and setting goals.

The Salt Lake City classroom group attended regular sessions on training, whereas the remote groups first had a "learning how-to learn online" session and then they worked their way through asynchronous self-study modules for each topic. After each module, they completed a just-in-time (JIT) planner where they selected a situation in which they would have to practice the skills, and

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scripted it all out. Then, Hurson explained, they e-mailed the script to the online facilitator so he knew they had done their homework and were prepared to come to class. Following that, the online learners “attended” a synchronous-skills practice session online, after which they came together as an online group to get coaching from the facilitator.

“The remote learners could also use the asynchronous modules to review the skills. E-mail follow-up messages prompted people to use the skills and gave them suggestions on how to do it,” Hurson added.

Ensuring success. The eBay training was based on a concept that all effective training—classroom, online, or blended—must include five essential learning experiences. For the Web-based group that meant:

1. A commitment to learning the new behavior.

Show people the benefits and the relevance of the training, and that there is management support for it. The best application for this phase was an actual classroom, so that’s what eBay supplied.

Senior management participated in the kick-off

session that focused on getting people to make a personal commitment to the training. “There was a lot of discussion in the sessions about the importance of good leadership to eBay’s strategy. eBay says it wants to be a dot.com that lasts. And it has certainly proven that,” Hurson continued. “So we stressed that leadership was part of building a culture that was going to last.”

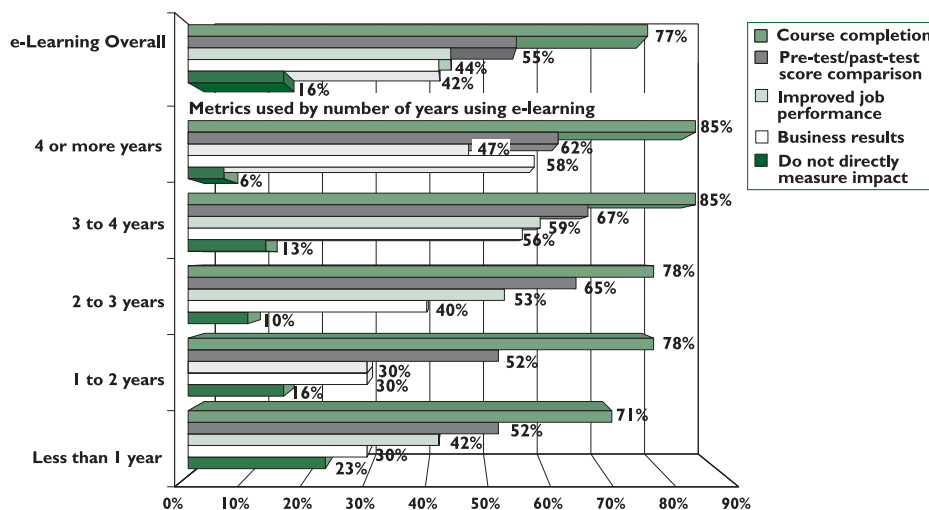
Activities were scheduled for all participants—those in the classroom, the remote learners, and the trainer—to get to know each other. This aided in their being committed to the program, Hurson explained.

2. Assessing and measuring performance gaps and improvement efforts. Participants must be able to assess their own performance, to have a personal motivation to attend sessions and improve. Web-based, 360-degree assessments were completed for both types of participants before and after the training.

3. Acquiring knowledge about the new behavior and how it supports the strategic goals. This component was provided through the synchronous Web-based training units, which included simulations and other learning scenarios. Each unit concluded with an assessment of content mastery.

4. Developing competence in the new behavior. Opportunities to practice the new behaviors were provided through live, synchronous Web practice sessions, augmented with individual phone coaching by the facilitator/instructor.

Figure 1. Metrics Used to Measure Effectiveness of e-Learning



(Source: On-Line Learning.com)

“When we first started teaching online, we had two groups of six. After three or four sessions, we moved to one group of 12 and used a ‘two-teach model.’ The instructor got content out and kept the class moving,” noted Jennifer Hoffman of InSync Training, which was instrumental in creating the synchronous part of the program. Hoffman, who acted as the producer, set up the breakout rooms where remote learners would chat and set up a board where ideas could be exchanged.

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The goal, said Hoffman, was to keep all the participants doing something all of the time, with each other and with the teacher. AchieveGlobal used chat rooms because the remote learners were, through their day-to-day experience, very comfortable with and used to instant messaging.

5. Applying and sustaining the new behavior on the job. Participants were able to call the facilitator with questions about applying the skill on the job. Additional follow-up and Web-based reinforcement tools—like the tools menu on the training and the just-in-time planners—were also instrumental in achieving this goal.

Employees' reactions. To test whether the leadership training was a success, at the beginning, eBay and AchieveGlobal asked the customer support managers and directors what in their training made it easier to apply the new skills, Val Rasmussen, the eBay trainer from Performance Consulting International, told ASTD conference attendees.

Admittedly, those being trained online were more skeptical at the beginning: 25% doubted it would be as effective as classroom training; 13% were concerned that the dynamic instructor would

not be present; and 35% said they had never done online training and therefore had no expectations.

At the end of the training session, however, the responses from the two groups were very close. When asked what in the training made it easier to apply the new skills, the two groups responded as follows:

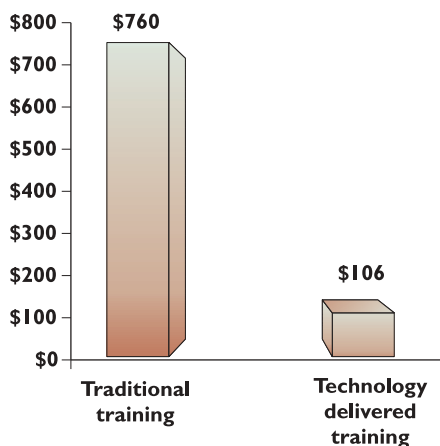
- Sixty percent of the classroom learners and 67% of the online learners said sharing the experiences peer-to-peer made a significant difference.
- Seventy-four percent of the classroom learners and 67% of the remote learners said they had learned to listen and give better feedback.
- Seventy percent of the classroom learners and 67% of the online learners cited the step-by-step approach to skills.
- Sixty percent of the classroom learners and 67% of the online learners cited skills practice.
- Forty-seven percent of in-class learners and 56% of online learners stated that visuals made it easier to apply what was learned on the job.
- Thirty percent of the classroom and 67% of the remote learners cited homework, a clear confirmation of the value of the JIT planner that helped the online learners prepare for their synchronous sessions with the instructor and other remote users.
- Finally, 86% of the classroom and 78% of the remote learners said their new skills were having a positive impact on their workgroups.

Many Web-based learners said they had new resources to get the information needed. "If they had a problem employee, they could go to the module called Correcting Performance Problems, get the key action, write a script in their JIT planner, and be prepared," Rasmussen said.

"The remotes also seem better able to communicate," said Jeff Anderson, HR director at eBay. "The training brought everyone together as one big team, not a bunch of small teams operating independently. The remotes had felt separate from the customer service managers in Salt Lake City, but now they are more of a cohesive team.

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Figure 2. Costs Over Five Years of Traditional vs. Technology-Delivered Training



(Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers)

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“With the entire management team attending these sessions, we are in a much better position than we were before, not only in terms of productivity but also on the customer service level. That’s the bottom line for customer support.” (For other benchmarks used to determine the success of e-learning efforts, see Figure 1, “Metrics Used to Measure Effectiveness of e-Learning.”)

Could e-learning support CRM efforts (and more) at your organization? Perhaps, if your organization is ripe for the challenge. The desire to save money and/or train a ton of CSRs isn’t enough, according to Brandon Hall, CEO of Brandon-hall.com (Sunnyvale, Calif.; 408-736-2335; brandon@brandon-hall.com) and an e-learning expert (although saving money certainly is part of the appeal, as Figure 2, “Costs Over Five Years of Traditional vs. Technology-Delivered Training,”

amply demonstrates). Hall suggests that interested managers assess their organization’s readiness in six key areas:

- 1. Business drivers:** What are the challenges facing your organization?
- 2. Stakeholders:** Who should be involved?
- 3. Content:** Is it available or can you create it?
- 4. Technology:** Is it available or can you acquire it?
- 5. Learners:** Do the learners have the receptivity and capabilities for e-learning?
- 6. Tracking:** Do you need to manage registration, progress, and results?

Hall has developed questions to help organizations determine their readiness in each of these six areas (for an example, see the table, “Business Drivers Assessment: What Are Your Organization’s Challenges?”). *Note:* A high score in one area alone isn’t sufficient. Hall asserts that organizations “need to be ready in each of these different areas” to succeed in e-learning. □

Business Driver Assessment: What Are Your Organization’s Challenges ?

4 = Strongly Agree; 3 = Agree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly Disagree.

(Circle the appropriate answer, multiply by the weight factor, and write the total in the right-hand column)

Statement	Rating				X Weight Factor	Total
The business is rapidly changing (consolidation after merger or acquisition); new business requirements, need to scale very rapidly	4	3	2	1	2	_____
Suppliers and partners are not well aligned	4	3	2	1	1	_____
Customer satisfaction is flat or declining	4	3	2	1	1	_____
Product/service information needs to be disseminated more rapidly to the workforce and the customers	4	3	2	1	1	_____
A skilled workforce is difficult to attract and retain	4	3	2	1	1	_____
The business and people skills of the current workforce need to be improved	4	3	2	1	2	_____
Business results are adversely affected by current speed and access to training	4	3	2	1	5	_____
We need to do more with current training budget	4	3	2	1	1	_____
					Total	_____

Minimum suggested total score: 26

(Source: Brandon-hall.com)

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