Chapter 8
Organizational Systems' Effect on Training Success: Why Covering the Content Is Not Enough

Maria del Socorro Hubbard and Andrew A. Tawfik

Context and Setting

Instructional designers can generally be counted on to follow formalized processes to develop training instruments for their clients and employers. This is especially true when new human performance systems are implemented that significantly impact workplace tasks. Despite their knowledge and professional commitment, instructional designers sometimes encounter business goals that diverge from best practices within the field. In many instances, instructional designers may find themselves looking for faster alternatives that fit better with project timelines. This could lead instructional designers to skip the performance assessment, overlook formulation of learning objectives, delay or abandon the creation of evaluation instruments, and bypass any type of guided learning process. They instead push out content that is technically accurate, but does not build skills or lead to organizational change. Workplaces that solely rely on content assume the risk of failing to prepare employees to be successful with new systems and tools. The consequences are manifested in the potential need to create work-arounds and unnecessary processes to make up for the lack of skill.

Lave and Wenger (1991) provide a relevant theoretical framework through which to study how training takes place in organizations. If one imagines organizational settings as environments where individuals work with their peers to accomplish tasks, then it may be said that organizational settings also encourage informal social learning among employees. Lave and Wenger (1991) further argue that communities of practice provide a setting whereby learning emerges and meaning-making takes place. As we detail below, the organization presented in this design case aims to support continuous learning and engender the ability to manage change.

M. del Socorro Hubbard · A. A. Tawfik (✉)
Department of Instructional Design & Technology, University of Memphis,
Memphis, TN, USA

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Nonprofit organizations often explore various strategies to maximize efficiency and support organization goals. An important part of this strategy is the process used by organizations to systematically provide accountability resources that allow managers to support dynamic learning. This design case details how a mid-sized nonprofit organization implemented a new HR information system beginning with *payroll*, *benefits*, and *timekeeping*, which are considered core HR transactional functions. The HR group in this organization examined their current HR information system against their strategic plan for talent management and concluded that the existing system was inadequate to support upcoming initiatives and agility needed in the nonprofit sector. To remedy this, the HR business group embarked on a search for a modern, cloud-based system that could integrate HR transactional functions and talent management functions, such as employee profiles, individual development plans, succession planning tools, and *performance appraisals*. This human performance technology was implemented to streamline various aspects of the organization while supporting the requisite efficiencies needed to catalyze change with the communities of practice.

The HR business group purchased a new system with the full support of the organization's senior leadership team and then hired an implementation partner to manage customizations, system testing, branding, and change management. The project was implemented in two phases. First, the plan was to implement the payroll, benefits, and timekeeping features in order to give employees an opportunity to learn basic system navigation. Following this, the plan was to implement the system's talent management, beginning with the p*erformance appraisal* forms and then employee relations case management and succession planning tools. The master plan for both phases included internal communication and marketing, employee training, and temporary post-implementation support.

There were four principle stakeholders within this organization as it related to this design case – the HR business group, the organization's functional business groups, the implementation partner, and the software developer. All were experiencing high stress with this project for various reasons. For example, the functional business communities were managing through the most important season of fundraising; the HR group was managing vacancies in key leadership and specialist positions; the implementation partner's staff assigned to this project was relatively inexperienced; and the software manufacturer was experiencing turnover in their team of consultants tasked with executing system configurations and customizations. Given all of these dynamic variables, the software developer conveyed to the HR business leaders that the planned implementation timeline was unusually aggressive. Unconvinced to change the plan, a project team was assembled, an implementation schedule was formulated, and the project was initiated.

The implementation schedule for payroll, benefits, and timekeeping reflected a "go live" date in the winter (called Phase 1). The project managers made every effort to keep the project on its timeline, but small delays eventually added up to major ones. As such, the project implementation soon intersected with the annual performance appraisal season which was scheduled for late spring. This situation forced the business leaders to make a decision. Specifically, they wondered if the implementation of the new performance appraisal system could be pushed back to the following year or whether it was best to introduce this additional system on the same timeline. The risks of combining the implementation with the new performance appraisals were many – system configurations would not be complete, there would not be enough time to test the new system, and a practice environment for training would not be available. Thus, any communities of practice could implement this, but be untrained how to properly amend their workplace behavior to accommodate this new technology. In spite of these risks, the business leaders decided to implement the new performance appraisal system along with the payroll, benefits, and timekeeping systems (called Phase 1a). The outcome was a trial and error, learn-by-doing-type training that resulted in confusion and a poor impression of the new technology that had been heralded as a modern, easy to navigate, integrated HR information system. Rather than a "content only" approach, this design case explores how a more holistic approach was necessitated for the system integration.

Designing Training for a New System

The organization in this design case is a mid-sized nonprofit with about 1,500 geographically dispersed employees. It is a corporate-style organization with a manager-to-employee ratio of about 1:4. The HR division manages the full range of services in the employee lifecycle, including *recruitment* and s*election*, benefits, payroll, *talent development*, and *employee relations*. The HR training team is comprised of six employees—two instructional designers/trainers, one facilitator, a coordinator, two advisors—one of whom is a performance management expert and a group manager. Together, this team created and agreed upon a training strategy to usher in the implementation of the new talent management system.

As outlined in the strategy, two training partners from each functional area (marketing, IT, business development, legal, and HR) were selected to assist in the content delivery and to act as first-line troubleshooters after implementation. For example, two employees from marketing assisted in the initial training sessions for all employees on basic issues, such as general system navigation. Afterward, the marketing training partner served as the first point of contact for problems experienced by the marketing department, thereby reducing the number of help requests made directly to HR. This approach leveraged the organization's affinity for leaders-as-teachers and amplified the HR training team's small number. The HR training team conducted a series of train-the-trainer sessions to prepare the training partners. The training partners expressed appreciation for the time spent in their preparation and for the easy-to-use tools, which included a scripted facilitator guide and formatted presentations.

After this preparation, the HR trainers and partners delivered 10 instructor-led sessions in one week for up to 100 employees. In addition to the large, one hour group training sessions, small group sessions were held for managers to answer specific questions about managing payroll, benefits, and timekeeping for their employees, especially when deadlines and cutoffs were concerned. To ensure access to training materials, an intranet site was also created to house the job aids, frequently asked questions (FAQs), video recordings of the live sessions, system demonstration videos, and a link to the practice environment. The organization had a strong sense of self-directed learners, so providing on-demand materials was seen as a way of providing resources that aligned with learners' needs.

The training sessions focused on navigation of the benefits, payroll, and timekeeping systems. Employees were encouraged to bring their laptops to follow along with the trainers in the practice environment. In addition, step-by-step aids included screen captures taken from the practice environment, which was designed for employees to visually "match up" what they saw on the screens. Trainers used the practice environment to give employees a thorough tour of the new system. During the sessions, employees could log in to the practice environment and follow along with the trainers. Upon completion, the evaluation feedback referenced appreciation for the opportunity to learn the new system in community with their peers.

By all accounts, this training strategy worked as planned for the benefits, payroll, and timekeeping system. The performance management system, however, was still under construction. The forms and accompanying processes were thus not complete, and a practice environment that reflected the new performance appraisal system elements was not available. In response, the instructional designers made an effort to prepare employees and managers for the upcoming system implementation by creating a document that described the (a) overall performance appraisal process steps (b) timeline and (c) a worksheet for employees to begin drafting their annual self-evaluation. Once the employee had completed their performance summary, they were given instructions to paste the summaries into the new system. However, this instructions proved to be too complex without a practice environment. A time gap of one month between the dissemination of this instruction and the performance appraisal system implementation further diminished the solution's usefulness.

Challenges That Arose During Implementation

The implementation schedule for the new performance management system was set at one month after the implementation of the payroll, benefits, and timekeeping systems in Phase 1. The aggressive timeline to configure the performance management system left no time to establish a mirrored and accurate practice environment. As noted earlier, the software maker had a sample system that could be purchased and utilized as a practice environment, but its configuration (icons, system forms) were very different from the system that was being implemented within this specific nonprofit organization. The HR business leaders decided it was not worth the expense to purchase that sample system because it would be too different from the system that was being configured. This business decision created difficulties for the implementation on multiple fronts. First, this meant employees would receive training on a system a month or more before they could put it to use. In the end, training for the new performance appraisal system was limited to a job aid that illustrated only basic navigation steps rather than the organizational goals supported by the new human performance technology. Accompanying the job aid was a verbal description of the new form and system on the order of, "This is how the new system is intended to work. The appraisal forms may resemble the paper versions you have been working with up to now. The categories and ratings will not change."

The HR group had high expectations that the new system would be easy to learn and use. However, the dependence on simple job aids and the absence of a practice environment for learning resulted in a workforce who felt ill-equipped to operate the system when it went live. Once again, this negatively affected the organizational change that was intended as part of this new technology. The depth of this consequence was visible in the need to hire extra specialists to provide temporary assistance to manage calls to HR for help with navigating the system.

While there were various immediate challenges, it was interesting how additional problems arose over time. Phase 1 of the project was implemented as planned with minimal assistance from the training partners and the HR group. One month later, the performance management phase (Phase 1a) was implemented and the performance appraisal process launched using the new system. The training partners reported to HR they were unable to manage the requests for assistance from their business units. Once the new system configurations were complete, the HR training team updated the generic performance management job aids with the actual screen elements. Unfortunately, it was too late in terms of how the content was received by the various communities of practice within the organization. Specifically, the performance management system felt too complex to navigate and the unfamiliar forms were hard to use.

Struggling to Create Learning That Goes Beyond Delivering the Content

Implications of this design case highlight the impact on employees' ability to manage change and the cost of insecurity when training fails to consider learning "beyond content." From a content perspective, the training strategy included live instructor-led sessions, step-by-step pictorial job aids, FAQs, and a fully functioning practice environment for the new system. However, it fell short in preparing employees to actually interact and transfer their learning when specific work tasks arose, such as an employee performance appraisal. A key lesson is that a more representative practice environment was essential to fully understand how the system would catalyze change in everyday practice. Instead of learning as a community, employees navigated the system and managed the appraisal forms on their own in the live system and under pressure to complete appraisals within 30 days. This created noticeable learner insecurity, which produced calls for additional help with the system. The call volume generated by employees and managers seeking assistance from the HR group resulted in unplanned overtime costs and contracted temporary specialists. The HR group, like the rest of the organization's employees, had not learned how the system worked. They were therefore not prepared for the influx of calls, along with the discomfort and disengagement that followed.

Advancements in learner engagement using modern learning tools offer innovative ways to improve learning experiences and knowledge transfer within communities of practice. Organizations consider these advancements important because effective employee training is known to promote a learning culture and reduce resistance to change (Sanchez, Arago, Arago, & Valle, 2003). Design tools used to create and deliver effective training have changed in recent years in terms of the ways information can be represented and the underpinning theories that drive educational experiences (Hedberg, 2002). In modern organizations, learning and development practitioners are encouraged to minimize decontextualized, formal training and instead support learning based on the needs of specific community tasks (Lombardozzi, 2016). Even with advances in training designs and learning tools, practitioners in the field struggle to align various stakeholders in ways that support holistic approaches to learning within an organization.

Why Was the Training Not Effective?

Organizations regard performance appraisals as a critical internal process aimed at improving employee performance and, ultimately, organizational effectiveness (Cascio & Aguinis, 2011). Performance appraisals are typically conducted annually to summarize and rate individual performance in terms of goal achievement and demonstration of competencies. Despite their utility as a way to measure and document performance outcomes, they are often regarded as problematic and managers often have negative attitudes towards the performance appraisals (du Plessis & van Niekerk, 2017). This problem is further magnified as most business managers have as many as thirty employees depending on the organization and nature of the work.

The organization in this case dealt with similar challenges and explored technology as a way to make their communities more efficiently aligned with organizational goals. Managers and employees alike expressed initial excitement over the prospect of the new online system that was expected to modernize and simplify the performance appraisal process. They felt it would be a welcomed improvement over the current paper-based system and tools. However, managers and employees across the organization discovered how ill-prepared they were when they attempted to complete the first appraisal in the new system. Upon reflection, the decisions made along the way also played an important role in the lack of project success. The HR business leaders and other business stakeholders appeared satisfied that learning objectives were disseminated through the tutorials and one-hour training session. However, the performance appraisal process and forms were vastly different from the paper-based system the employees were accustomed to using. Training on a generic system that did not look or work like the actual system was too abstract and hypothetical; therefore, the materials served as an impediment to transfer. The absence of a practice environment system also negatively affected the success of the training strategy. The combined force of these two conditions resulted in a workforce that was not prepared to interact with the new performance appraisal system. This became especially evident when the annual performance appraisal process was launched.

This design case elucidates other important principles about communities of practice and organizational learning. First, it shows the ways in which the instructional design strategy must account for the "organizational system" as a way to go beyond content. Second, it illustrates that managing change on the personal and organizational level requires systemic alignment between the resources and communities within which it is implemented. Business decisions influencing project timelines, the absence of a practice environment, poorly designed training materials, and a missed opportunity to leverage the built-in communities of practice resulted in employee resistance (White, 2017).

Lessons Learned

The organization examined in this design case has a strong culture of continuous learning within communities of practice. Seventy percent of its members were under 40 years of age and with five or fewer years of tenure. The remaining 30% of learners often consisted of managers with an age of 40+ years and 5–25 years of service. These appear to be favorable conditions for learning, and thus the project team was satisfied with a training strategy that leveraged the new system's seemingly intuitive nature. A formal needs analysis was not conducted and no other training alternatives were considered. Instead, there was an overreliance on covering the basic content as a form of training, which proved to be problematic. The business decisions related to project management of this system implementation resulted in constrained timelines for all training activities. The HR training team was concerned that "pushing out" training on a new system without a practice environment would result in frustrations with the system and possibly a poor impression of it As such, instructional designers developing the training materials felt boxed in and unable to deploy instruction beyond the basics. As the project moved forward, the business leaders, the project team, and employees felt the apparent tension.

What instructional design practices might be derived from this case study? With Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning principles in mind, we proffer the following:

1. Consider using change management tools to prepare the organization for changes, and spend more time with individuals that might encounter heavier individual resistance.

2. Emphasize the value of incorporating a test system that mirrors the actual system to give learners a realistic experience and a safe setting to practice new skills.
3. Manage learner insecurity and communicate expectations for the organization's communities of practice.

The size and scope of the new performance management system may have called for a project plan of its own. If it had, the implementation timeline might have aligned with the annual performance evaluation cycle, albeit in the following year. Even though it meant delaying implementation for another year, it would have allowed for thoughtful and thorough change management. In addition, it would have given employees a chance to learn the new content and skills in community with their peers and thus feel better supported by the organizational setting. In this case, however, the HR business group was not willing to delay the implementation of the performance appraisal system for another year. They instead felt it was worth the risk to focus on dissemination of information, as opposed to a more thorough training strategy. Future implementation strategies should consider how to go "beyond content" by exploring how to align knowledge gaps, learning resources, and communities of practice in terms of organizational goals.

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