

Local Member's Organization Wins National Award for Just-in-Time Training

Part of a new series that will spotlight people doing workplace performance improvement, both inside and outside of organizations. The following shares the story of three people on the inside.

Each year, Workforce magazine recognizes HR initiatives that create positive business results for their organization. Their Workforce 2002 Optimas Award for Service went to Health Partners, a Philadelphia non-profit organization set up by a partnership of seven hospitals. Health Partners and its 360 employees administer Medicaid and Medicare coverage for 130,000 members in the Philadelphia area. We called Bill Austin, the HR professional behind the award, to find out more.

In October 1999, employees at Health Partners were facing a major upgrade to their data-processing system. The employees had been trained by outside consultants but delays in the installation left employees facing a new way of doing their work with no memory of what they had learned.

Vicki Sessoms, Health Partners' Vice President for Human Resources, had recently created a three-person team called the Organizational Learning Center (OLC) to make sure the organization had great training and support capabilities. This team included all in-house employees. Bill Austin, Manager of OLC led the effort with help from Lisa Cosentino, Trainer, and Bonnie Smyczek, Training Coordinator. At the time of the actual conversion the team had no budget to fall back on and the employees were stressed for time. So the OLC team got creative. They created a plan that would serve the needs of their customers: 360 worried employees. They recruited instructors from amongst their workforce, which saved the cost of outside consultants. In addition, they created short-focused sessions of 45 to 90 minutes in length. These two decisions made it possible for employees to come back as often as they needed, thus meeting the employees' individual needs. We interviewed Austin and Cosentino.

Resource: What is the Optimas Award, and how did you come to receive it?

Austin: Optimas is Latin for "among the best." Each year Workforce magazine selects one recipient for each of its 10 categories. The application is extensive and has to be completed months in advance.

Resource: How does OLC function?

If you exercise in small amounts on a regular basis it is good for your health. If you learn continually in short sessions once or twice a month it is good for the health of our organization and the careers of our employees.

Austin: Our mission is:

- To provide a high-impact learning infrastructure.
- To manage and accelerate Health Partners employees' knowledge and productivity.
- To provide Health Partners with a progressive learning center.

Our Vision is:

- To be the best Training and Organizational Development unit of any company our size.
- We also have team norms that include behaviors like:

- Have fun
- Think creatively
- Be receptive to other's ideas
- Serve as a role model
- Show energy and passion
- Work toward constant improvement

Resource: What's next for OLC?

Austin: Our new CIO asked us to provide policy training. We knew that policies would be boring and put people right to sleep. We decided to turn the training into theatre, so we created a play and call it "Privacy Court."

Also, we listen to our supervisors at all levels. They said they wanted leadership training but because of on-going time restraints it would have to be short. So we created "Leadership Quick Takes," quick practical leadership tools and concepts they can take back and put into practice. Each session was 45-minute long and then the biggest complaint was that it was too short. We settled on one hour.

We use the analogy of health and exercise for learning. If you exercise in small amounts on a regular basis it is good for your health. If you learn continually in short sessions once or twice a month it is good for the health of our organization and the careers of our employees. And people actually end up spending more time in learning sessions.

Resource: What else are you working on?

Austin: We are working with the "top of the house" to create a Master's Series. Our first one featured a presentation by our VP of Pharmacy. He picked a topic (Thinking Out of the Box) which he is passionate about and submitted his presentation to us before the session. We had people from six different departments attend, and several new ideas were generated. A vice president or senior vice president will conduct each session of our Master's Series. Space is limited to 15 people, and each session is an hour in duration.

Cosentino: Many of our ideas are generated by employees' suggestions. An employee said she would appreciate knowing what classes she had taken and we felt a transcript would be a great tool to go along with performance evaluations. We want to work toward offering in-house degrees to recognize people for learning. We plan to work with the person in HR who is responsible for promotions and job postings so she can see which training employees have taken.

Resource: Any other initiatives?

Cosentino: You cannot get far away from the basics. Bonnie and I are conducting a business-writing course. The participants receive almost one-on-one attention and because they bring their own work to the class they can easily apply what they learn.

Resource: What do you each see as the biggest challenge facing the Training/Performance profession?

Austin: Budgets. With tight times and the economy growing at a slow rate we still need to meet needs without asking for more money. This is why Workforce selected us because we were able to pull off the conversion training and support with no money.

Keeping fresh is also a challenge. We need to be open to new ideas. We must figure out how to deliver training in short segments. Consultants must be more flexible in terms of the time they offer training. People don't have time for long classes.

Resource: Lisa?

Cosentino: Evaluation, we need to measure our results better. OLC has had many successes, but we need to ask hard questions before they are asked of us.

Austin: One challenge for in-house learning programs is class attendance. Because of competing work demands, employees are tempted to keep working and not go to a specific class for which they have enrolled. To be pro-active in meeting this challenge we created a report that shows the cost of no shows. This report educates managers and their employees on the cost of absences. We also involve employees to a variety of fun and interactive activities during each session.

Resource: Does your senior management see what you can do or do you have to sell them on what you can do?

Austin: We have a strong partnership with our senior management and we do not take it lightly. We stay in constant contact with them assessing the learning needs of their specific business and how best to meet these needs. We are grateful to have a CEO who understood our capability and involves us in major business issues. For example he has asked us to be involved in performance improvement projects. For our first project the organization wanted to go to a new barcode system but hadn't been able to get it into place and it was costing us money. OLC looked at the process and got the right people involved. As a result we are now saving about \$1000 a month with the new process. We have the attitude that says, "To whom much has been given, much is expected."

For more information about the Optimas Award, read the article at <http://workforce.com/section/11/feature/23/35/28/index.html>