

# SEVEN ESSENTIAL QUALITIES YOU SHOULD LOOK FOR IN YOUR TRAINING PROVIDER

## When budgets are tight, how do you justify your choice of training company to your CEO and CFO?

*With thousands of training companies to choose from, finding the right one to support your employees and maximise your return on investment can be difficult. Here **Nic Hallett, Managing Director of Excel Communications**, draws on his 30 years experience of commissioning and providing training and mentoring services to identify the seven essential qualities you should look for before engaging any provider.*

If you are an HR manager, a sales manager, or even a dedicated training manager, you will know how hard it is to find a single company to provide all your training needs. You need to know they can do the job and that you can justify your choice to colleagues in your organisation, including your CFO and CEO. Identifying the following seven qualities should help you narrow down your shortlist to two or three possible contenders, who you can then invite to pitch.

In short order, these seven qualities are: **Approach, Flexibility, Resources, Back Office, Pre and Post training support, Evaluation, and Value for Money**. We will look at each in detail shortly – but first, how do you draw up your shortlist of possible candidates? The obvious answer is to start with who you know and who you can most easily validate – the closer your network links with the candidates, the more likely you are to find the right provider for your needs.

### ***Five short steps to a shortlist***

Recent client research has confirmed my experience that most companies tend to follow just five steps to identify a shortlist of candidates. The first is to see if your company has the appropriate combination of subject knowledge and training skills in house. Even if it does, it is probably wise to also consider at least one external provider by way of comparison, so the next step is to ask internal colleagues for their recommendations. Step three (if you need



more names) is to ask your trusted, external industry contacts for their suggestions, preferably based on their personal experiences.

If your extended network can't provide reliable recommendations, you may have to resort to searching online and offline through professional directories and other industry sources. The important point to bear in mind is that the further away you move from known contacts and personal recommendations, the more susceptible you are to sales pitches: and the more you have to verify basic claims and trust your own judgement. The final step is to meet with possible contenders to draw up a pitch list, what I call **the evaluation/assessment stage**; this is when you need to look hardest for the following seven qualities.

### **The seven essential qualities to look for in a training company:-**

#### **1. Approach**

The first question you should ask yourself during the evaluation/assessment stage is: *does this company simply want to sell an off the shelf product or is it interested in meeting our specific training needs?* The 'off the shelf' types are likely to launch into their pitch without much delay. Whereas, a customer focused training company will normally start by asking searching questions and actively listening to your requirements.

Our client research indicates that finding a real business partner is the big challenge. So, ask yourself: do they know your business, do they understand your sector challenges and are they looking for the right solutions for your company? Also, don't be afraid to ask them if they are willing to build the training course you need and whether it will deliver specific outcomes. This is a matter of both what and how they train, which leads to our next quality.

#### **2. Flexibility**

By flexibility, I mean the company's approach before, during and after the training but particularly on the day. You need to determine whether they are willing and able to work with the training participants to match their needs – or whether the trainer will simply be a prisoner of their own agenda, tasked with delivering inputs rather than outcomes. If a trainer has to stick rigidly to a script, it possibly indicates they don't have a firm grasp of their subject and may not engage with the ideas.



An established training company should be able to offer a range of trainers, with the maturity and breadth of knowledge necessary to flex their style to suit their different audiences. You want trainers who can assess the needs and dynamics of each group, so as to manage it for the best outcome, which is specific learning for individuals. This means they need the confidence to think on their feet – and that takes time and experience to develop.

Ideally, you need insightful trainers who can relate the learning to specific aspects of your business and respond positively if participants want to explore issues. They must also welcome being challenged by intelligent trainees – because, as our own research shows, bright employees won't simply accept everything at face value and quickly spot when a trainer is out of their depth. This flexibility of style will also give you some indication as to whether the company has the capabilities to work with your team long term (if that is what you want).

### **3. Resources**

This may seem obvious but it is often overlooked, particularly when people put 'personal chemistry' ahead of practicalities. No matter how convincing the sales pitch or the trainers, you need to be sure the company has the resources to deliver. Similarly, 'redundancy' capability – the ability to provide an alternative trainer to cover for someone (if they fall ill for instance) – is also an important test of a company's resources and resilience.

That doesn't just mean having enough trainers with the right skills, capabilities and experience. It also means being able to cover the places where your employees work, in the languages they speak, and on dates that fit your schedule. So, a pan-European organisation will probably need a training company with a matching pan-European network and people able to train in the main local languages. It will also need training that works across borders and takes account of local cultural differences.



#### **4. Back office support**

It's all too easy to focus on the trainers and forget they can't do their job alone. So remember to ask about the account management process. For instance, will you have a named individual handling your account who knows you, your business and what you want – including your budgetary constraints? This is important because your account manager has a key role to play in matching both the trainer and the training with your team's needs.

Their role is not just to create the right agenda; it is also about aligning the right people with the right experience and cultural fit. The trainer must be a subject expert first and foremost, with sufficient sector experience to provide additional insights that are relevant to your needs. However, different trainers work better with different teams – even within a business. For instance, the culture in a pharmaceutical company's clinical team can be very different to that of its sales team.

So you will need a good rapport with your account manager; but you will also want to know that they are supported by a robust back office and client services team who can also provide the personal touch. You don't want to be dealing with a call handling service that doesn't actually know who you are or what you need. Ideally, you should also have access to a named administrator who manages the trainers' bookings and diaries, and can answer your questions promptly.

#### **5. Pre and post workshop activities**

Successful training depends on the participants knowing why they are being trained and what they should get out of the course. It also depends on them having the opportunity to put the learning into practice immediately, so it becomes part of their work ethic. Unfortunately, too many trainees are ill prepared for the courses they take and then quickly forget what they have learnt when they return to work.

That's why a good company will aim to engage its audience before the training starts, to ensure all trainees arrive mentally prepared and informed. Equally, at the end of the course, they should offer post-workshop communications to encourage application and embed the learning. So, remember to ask candidates how they will help your trainees remember what they have learnt and use their new knowledge



and skills to improve their performance – which brings us on to the question of evaluation.

## **6. Effective Evaluation**

How do you evaluate training – and how do you show a return on your company's investment? This can be a contentious point with some training companies – a few even claim it is not possible to put a firm value on their courses because there are "too many variables." But why would you work with any company who said you couldn't actually judge the value of the work they did?

You will often need to justify your training budget to someone: your manager, finance director, perhaps even your CEO. So you need to know how much you will spend and what the company will get for that investment. So the training company you choose must be able to provide you with a robust method of judging the value of their work: in short, what's the payback?

The best way to look at training is to see it as investment in your people; a way of increasing their skills and raising their productivity. Interestingly, too many companies are willing to invest a lot in recruitment (and sometimes spend a lot more on redundancies) but remain very reluctant to invest in training to ensure the recruitment was worthwhile. There is an old joke that's relevant to this.

**CFO:** "What happens if we spend all this money on our staff and then they leave?"

**CEO:** "What happens if we don't invest in training them – and they stay?"

Effective evaluation is not simply a case of finding out whether people enjoyed the training or not; although that's a good start. You need your training partner to be able to measure more sophisticated responses. The challenge facing all training is to **achieve behavioural change** – so any evaluation must show how behaviours have changed as a result of the learning.



## ***7. Value for money***


Choosing a training company (or any other service provider) should never be just about cost. Cheap isn't necessarily the best option – not least because it often leaves gaps in the learning – but expensive doesn't guarantee quality. Successful training depends as much on the cultural fit and rapport between trainers and participants, as it does on budgets, systems and structures. As such, there are plenty of good, mid-market providers.

A crucial test of potential value often lies in the ability of the company to explain what they will do, why they will do it and what it will achieve. This is closely linked with their ability to provide effective evaluation (point 6) and their willingness to engage positively with feedback (point 5) as well as the simplicity and workability of their approach (point 1). Which is why it is worth remembering that expensive fashionable theories (which are often reworked old ideas) are not always good value; and that many affordable, traditional approaches have a proven ability to deliver practical results.

Most people's training needs are straightforward and well understood. So why over complicate matters? It doesn't add value and is often confusing and potentially damaging. Although it is useful for training companies to know about and understand current thinking, the solution you need may be something quite fundamental – because human needs don't change that dramatically.

### ***Join the debate today***

I hope you find this guide useful – but do you agree or do you look for other attributes? My colleague Andrew Waiton and I would be interested to hear your thoughts on these issues.

So please feel free to post your comments via Linked  , and either myself, or Andrew will reply.

**For more information**, please contact Andrew Waiton, Marketing Director, Excel Communications and Head of The Excel Academy.

Phone office: +44 (0) 1628 488 854 or email: [andrew.waiton@excel-communications.com](mailto:andrew.waiton@excel-communications.com)

