

Getting the Most from IT Training Courses for Africa

[Richard Heeks](#)

IDPM, University of Manchester, UK

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An ongoing survey of IT training in Africa - conducted by the Institute for Development Policy and Management at the UK's University of Manchester - has uncovered widespread dissatisfaction among managers with current training provision. Typical examples of unsatisfactory outcomes include:

- Staff from a Ugandan public agency who left their spreadsheet training programme understanding what a spreadsheet was, but with no idea how or why to use a spreadsheet in their work.
- Staff from a Zambian bank who returned from a word processing course able to repeat the command combinations they had learned by rote, but unable to do anything else. They could bullet point paragraphs, for example, but had neither the skills nor confidence to find out how to number paragraphs.
- Staff from a Tanzanian parastatal who found their supposedly 'hands-on' course meant three staff sharing each PC. There were unsubstantiated reports of trainers trying to teach Windows using books, markers and whiteboards during a prolonged electricity cut.
- Staff from a multinational subsidiary in Kenya who found their trainer blitzing them with a wall of jargon; possibly, they felt, to hide his own ignorance. Many returned from the course feeling they knew less, and felt less confident, than when they started.
- Staff from a Nigerian hospital who were all trained together near the end of the financial year because a block of funds was available. Unfortunately, the system they were trained on did not become operational in the hospital until six months later, so they all had to be re-trained, having forgotten almost all of what they'd learned.

Is this a supply problem? Yes it is, with local IT training being the 'cinderella' of the African IT world: an afterthought arena in which unscrupulous and fly-by-night operators overshadow the few firms trying to deliver a quality training service. Local IT trainers must get their act together or trainees will continue - despite the high cost - to fly out to Europe and the US, or to bring in expatriate trainers, in search of high-quality training. The creation of local IT training professional associations - along the lines of Britain's Institute of IT Training - would be a good starting point.

But this is also a demand problem. Too many African senior managers are handing over money for IT training without finding out what is to be delivered, let alone steering training objectives and training content. Why does this happen? First, because they lack IT knowledge and confidence themselves. Second, because they lack guidelines on what to demand.

The first problem can itself be addressed by training on basic IT awareness and skills, with a few provisos:

- Train these senior managers first before all other staff, to give them a head start.
- Have them sent to some prestigious training institution commensurate with their perceived importance.
- Have them trained overseas or one-to-one, to avoid their ignorance being exposed to other staff members.

This approach was adopted in one East African country during reform of the legal system. Senior judges were the first to be trained about IT via one-to-one coaching in their offices from staff based in the country's leading management training institute. The result was a development of competence and confidence that led to senior-level support for - and planning of - a roll-out of IT skills throughout the country's legal institutions.

The second problem can be addressed by guidelines, some relevant examples of which follow.

- **Why: Purpose.** Don't have your staff trained on some general 'one size fits all' course where, say, the trainer illustrates database design with their standard example of a library catalogue system. That's fine for librarians, but not so good if your team is trying to computerise personnel records. We say this type of training is too 'task-focused'. Instead, get the training you commission to be a) 'process-focused': helping your staff to understand exactly how computers will support their particular work processes; and b) 'context-focused': helping your staff to understand why computerisation is happening and what benefits it will bring. Yes, such a customised approach is more costly, but it will provide a tremendous return on investment.
- **What: Content.** Don't have your staff trained just 'which buttons to press'. Such training is narrow, shallow and of only short-term value, if any. Ensure therefore that staff are also trained a) what is possible with an application; and b) how to find out things for themselves. What if your staff didn't learn (or have forgotten) that you find mailmerge under the Tools menu? That doesn't matter if they learned that mailmerge exists, what mailmerge is, and how to use the Help menu and/or the manual to find out 'which buttons to press'.
- **How: Process.** Related to the last point, don't have your staff trained by someone who stands at the front calling out 'Now click the database icon' to the whole class. No-one learns confidence or self-reliance that way. Instead trainees must - after an initial injection of skills and knowledge - learn to stand on their own two feet as much as possible. A more radical test of trainers is to look at them when trainees have a problem. Do they grab the trainee's mouse and do it for them, or do they get the trainees to select the correct commands themselves? Do they answer the trainee's question straight away, or do they sit with the trainee helping them to find out the answer for themselves from the Help system?
- **How: Technique.** Don't have your staff trained unless there is a one:one ratio of computers to trainees. Anything less is just a joke.
- **Who: Trainers.** Don't have your staff trained by some IT boffin or show-off who wants to dazzle everyone with the latest meaningless jargon. Don't have your staff trained by someone who doesn't understand your organisation. Survey results confirmed that the best IT trainers are often your own staff.

Pick a few staff who are IT-literate. Have them trained first by IT specialists or outsiders, and give them a quick blast of training for trainers or, better, training for computer trainers. Then have them deliver the rest of the IT training to their own colleagues. In large organisations, you can arrange this in a structured cascade of skills and knowledge.

- **When: Timing.** Don't have your staff trained long before (or after!) a new computer system has been introduced. If you do this, many elements of training will be forgotten and expenditure will be largely wasted. Training should be timed just at the moment when staff are about to use the system, allowing them to move directly from training to application.