

Business Briefing

We're all pirates now - the future of Procurement training

New freedoms to share experiences and redesign teaching materials is heralding a new era in procurement training, says Rebecca Howard

When Boeing were creating the design for the new Dreamliner aircraft, they invited 120,000 volunteers to contribute design ideas onto forums on their website. They took the experiences and requests of passengers and came up with a winning solution that was customer-focused.

Designing products around user-generated material is now part of life, with YouTube and others encouraging people to pirate existing materials - music videos, advertisements - and mix them to make parodies or promotions. The distribution of content is no longer the preserve of media companies. Now everyone can publish something they did themselves. Everyone can be a pirate.

This approach has implications for training in procurement. Who better to refine and share procurement learning than procurement professionals themselves? The challenge is to build on the learning materials that already exist while reaping the benefits of constantly refreshed examples from the real world of business.

We are likely to see more user-generated content in procurement training because engaging with learners and helping them to embed the learning is key to successful organisations. Learners achieve this when they feel they can contribute to the experience.

One great way to do this is to allow them to interact with training materials, remixing and improving content that Procurement training organisations have originated.

Trainees can add new content or models to already existing materials, adding credibility to the original training. For many procurement professionals this is the next generation of category management. A sourcing process is created which reflects current best practice, and once it is launched, buyers are invited to add their own experiences in the form of templates or how-to tips.

After classroom training, participants can share experiences of how they applied the learning on an intranet-based discussion forum. This is of particular value to those in the same company who find they have suppliers in common across diverse business units or countries. For example, buyers can blog their experiences and plan a coordinated global supplier negotiation.

Before classroom training is designed, organisational representatives can contribute to the training design. It is always challenging to gather enough real-life category examples when designing company-bespoke training. If procurement teams have online forums to store category knowledge, training providers can incorporate this to enhance the experiential aspects of training.

Of course there are some concerns which have limited the possibilities for user-generated content. First, training providers are often unwilling to expose their content to be critiqued, manipulated or stolen. It takes a long time to generate innovative intellectual property, and this is typically the main area of value in any training organisation. If you share it with others, you lower the entry barriers for competitors getting into your space.

While many firms are keen to encourage their purchasing professionals to share their knowledge and experiences, many individuals are reluctant to do so. There is often a fear from buyers that they are giving away something which may makes them unique, specialist or promotable.

Intranet forums for compiling user-generated content are great in theory, but if no-one uses them, they become a wasted investment. Sometimes, of course, the reverse is true, and you get so much content that managing it becomes a full-time job.

There are ways to address these challenges. For example, training providers who have confidentiality agreements with their customers could agree that any user-generated amendments to training are for internal use only. Typically organisations that have a good history of knowledge sharing among staff are those who reward it by recognising it as a key capability to be assessed at annual appraisal.

Or companies could limit access to the learning materials to those who submit their own content as a precondition for entry.

To make this approach work, procurement-training organisations will have to be less precious about their intellectual property and see the opportunities of allowing participants to shape and evolve the materials they use for training.

The beneficiaries will be the training participants and the trainers who will be able to introduce improved learning to new audiences.

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