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Independent vs. Certified Product Training

A WHITE PAPER FROM ASPE TECHNOLOGY

INDEPENDENT VS. CERTIFIED Product Training

Reducing your Total Cost of Ownership and Mitigating Risk

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Buying a product is simple, but using it correctly and efficiently usually involves a lot of tough steps. The key to effective and efficient use of a product is always training. Product training is a business service that teaches proper setup, configuration, administration, troubleshooting and use. Generally speaking, good product training provides trainees with clear instructions on how to use the product based on need, but also provides a detailed understanding of what the system cannot do within the context of that need. When done properly, total cost of ownership goes down. If done wrong, ownership costs go up significantly.

A great illustration is open source products. These products are virtually free, so from a market standpoint you would expect a high demand. But the demand doesn't come close to what you'd expect, because of the "fear" surrounding the ownership costs of an open source solution. The market views open source products as difficult to setup and maintain. There can also be major "ownership" legality concerns. As a result, demand for open source becomes a function of not just price, but also the "assumed" cost of ownership.

Now, if an organization had a fully-trained open source professional demand would naturally increase. Supposing price is constant (as in this example), this organization's perceived total cost of ownership (TOC) would go down, because a well-trained employee minimizes risks and burdens of using a product. The key variable here is how well the employee is trained. If this organization moved to an open source product but found their trained employee did not have the correct skills, TOC would rise drastically. At this point they'd probably have to do one of the following: outsource continued support of the system, hire a new person/people with proven skills, train the staff anew, or scuttle the system for something else.

As shown in the open source illustration, training and experience has a HUGE impact on total cost of ownership, especially the quality of the training and experience. But not all training and experience is alike, and here are a few factors which can complicate its quality:

- **Some certifications add initials to a name, but might not be backed up by real skills.**
- **Some certified product training that doesn't have cost of ownership as a primary goal (makes you wonder what the primary goal is, eh?)**
- **Sometimes experience on resumes is over inflated.**

To ensure your staff has the required experience, training is a critical success factor. When looking for training solutions, the reality is that independent product training provides a much lower total cost of ownership and significantly higher risk mitigation than certified training. **The question is, "Why?"**

Independent vs. Certified?

To understand why independent product training has a stronger positive impact on TOC than certified training, the first step is to understand the attributes of independent product training, then compare them to certified training.

Instructors/Subject Matter Experts (SME)

Independent instructors focus on the product itself, not on vendor certifications or vendor product strategy. Independent SMEs are experts on the most practical use of the product, and is open to all questions related to how the product works (good and bad).

With certified training, much of an instructor's value comes from having the vendor certification. Because the vendor is the source of the certification, the instructor has a significant motivation to incorporate the vendor's product strategy into the training. With a vast portion of their time focused just on vendor-sanctioned product solutions, certified instructors don't always have the skills or experience to discuss interoperability with other systems. As the vendor's product line grows, it's still implied that their generic instructor certification covers everything, which leads to a number of instructors being "certified" to teach products when they actually have no real-world experience on a number of products in the line.

Courseware

Independent courseware details the good, the bad, and the ugly of the product — discussing real-world snags, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as practical interoperability options. Also, independent courseware generally offers a larger range of choices. Whether you need classes on management-related needs, high-level technical details, multi-day deployment boot camps, to half-day or less user sessions, an independent provider can give you a solution that dovetails more closely to your own company profile. With independent courseware, there's no company mandate placing restrictions on what can be discussed about the product and in what format that discussion can take place.

In certified training, courseware is either written directly by the vendor or outsourced and approved by the vendor. Teaching material becomes an extension of the product's marketing message, and like the labs, showcases the product in its best possible light. The only choice for content is what the vendor decides to develop, which limits the opportunity to match content to need.

Course Labs

The labs in independent product training employ a similar approach as the courseware: instruction on the entire product, from good to bad, with focus on interoperability and exercises that make you think before you act. Labs show problem areas or configuration/use challenges and how

to overcome those issues. The goal is to ensure that the trainee sees everything about the product, so he or she knows just what to expect.

In certified training, labs are written by the vendor and focus on providing step-by-step instructions to ensure no out-of-the-box setup and use. The labs showcase how the product works within the entire product line and little to no interoperability is presented. The goal is to show the product in its the best light, always inter-working with other products from the vendor.

Overall Goals of the Training

Independent product training's ultimate goal is to ensure that the trainee understands all aspects of the product, including system flaws and bugs, and to provide practical solutions on the use of the product in heterogeneous environments. So...understanding what the product can do before you buy and seeing which 3rd party tools work with it are key learning outcomes. But it isn't about scaring you away from the product — it's to make sure you have an objective viewpoint on what the product can do and on the best possible uses for the product.

Certified product training's ultimate goal is to sell more products. Hardware and software vendors understand product training increases the "stickiness" of their customers. They want the trainee to use products "properly" based on the use approach that makes the product look best. They also want to give options and solutions which tie the entire product family together to ensure other product purchases. The key is to reduce problems by getting the trainee to use the product the way the vendor intended, and use it in conjunction with its product family. This isn't a bad or unethical goal; it just isn't aligned with a total cost of ownership reduction or risk mitigation strategy.

Independent Product Training is the Better Investment

The real expense of any hardware or software system is maintenance and support. When preparing to migrate to a new product, the key to an efficient and effective migration is independent product training. An independent trainer will give you the best risk mitigation strategy because their solutions focus on complete disclosure. Lectures, labs, and courseware will openly discuss all the flaws, bugs, 3rd party capabilities and interesting/effective shortcuts. Total cost of ownership is reduced by fully educating staff on the function of your new hardware or software as it relates to specific needs. Linking need to use is a key component of independent product training. If you want to learn only positive and "correct" attributes of a company's product line, certified training is the right choice. If your goal is to successfully integrate a product into heterogeneous production environments, the obvious route is to pursue independent product training.



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