Reduce, Reuse, Recycle
How to Maximize Corporate Training ROI
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A portfolio of training programs represents a significant investment in company resources, including the annual training budgets of years past and the time and effort of training personnel, subject matter experts, and training vendors.

The value of outdated training programs can be maximized by reducing the amount of unnecessary or redundant content, reusing instructionally sound content, and recycling content with an eye towards improving and modernizing its design. This white paper explores best practices in maximizing corporate training ROI through the modernization of outdated content.

**TRAINING IS AN INVESTMENT**

Companies have an average training expenditure of about $1,200 per employee per year, and over the years, the time and budget spent on curricular design and the creation of learning assets represents a significant investment in company resources. The average Global 1000 company has over 1,000 hours of learning content within its training portfolio. The development of this portfolio requires an average investment of $18 million, including $8.1 million and 100,000 hours of labor from instructional designers, $4.5 million and 34,000 hours of labor from managers, $2.7 million and 67,000 hours of labor from instructors, and $2.7 million and 18,000 hours of labor from subject matter experts.
Despite significant investment in training programs, annual training program reuse hovers at a rate of about 50% annually, meaning that approximately half of a given company’s training portfolio is not being utilized annually. Annual expenditure and time investment on new training program development exceeds the attention placed on maintaining legacy content by a wide margin. This is especially problematic because old training programs still contain valuable information developed in cooperation with a company’s subject matter experts.

As years pass by, legacy training content depreciates in value and effectiveness for a number of reasons:

- **Content inaccuracies**
  Company statistics change, products get updated with new specs, and errors in the original content are uncovered over time.

- **Outdated design**
  The graphic design for PowerPoint slides and e-learning courses tends to look dated after a few years.

- **Training not aligned with business needs**
  Older training programs might not be aligned with the company’s business needs and desired employee performance outcomes.

- **Changing learner demographics**
  Training solutions that might work well for Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers might not be suitable for Millennials; changes in learner demographics require L&D professionals to revisit their methodologies.

- **Outmoded digital formats**
  E-Learning content developed in Flash, legacy versions of rapid development tools, and in older versions of SCORM can result in non-delivery of the content over learning management systems and on newer Internet browsers.
Training programs become unusable, irrelevant, or outdated if they are not properly managed and maintained. Companies that constantly maintain and reuse their learning assets enjoy a much better return on investment for training expenditure.³ The value of outdated workplace training programs can be maximized by reducing the amount of extraneous content, reusing instructionally sound content, and recycling content with an eye towards improving and modernizing its design. Below we will explore best practices in training portfolio conservation through reducing, reusing, and recycling outdated content.

**REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE: MAXIMIZE TRAINING ROI**

Reduce
Reducing the amount of extraneous training content improves the impact of training and increases learner engagement.

Reuse
Reusing instructionally sound training content where possible saves time and money, and is preferable to developing new content from scratch.

Recycle
Recycling content with an eye towards improving its effectiveness and design requires the application of modern instructional design techniques to select reusable pieces of content.
AUDIT TRAINING PROGRAMS AND REDUCE THEM

Reducing the amount of extraneous training content improves the impact of training and increases learner engagement. A common issue with older training programs is that they are overly long, contain too much information for employees to remember on the job, and rehash some of the same concepts multiple times throughout the program. After auditing older training programs, learning professionals can strategically prune away extraneous training content to ensure that whatever content remains is more succinct and impactful.

As long as the content is instructionally sound and contains useful information, it can be leveraged for the development of new training programs in the future as well.

Auditing your training portfolio and identifying extraneous content that can be condensed or removed requires a critical eye. Here are some questions to keep in mind when performing a training portfolio audit:

1. **Are the programs too time consuming?**
   Training workshops that pull employees away from their jobs days at a time and hour long e-learning courses are good candidates for consolidation.

2. **Will learners suffer from information overload?**
   Learners can only retain so much information at a time from formal training programs. Content that is too information-rich and relies on workers to memorize lots of information becomes unwieldy and should be condensed.

3. **Are there learning assets that have gotten negative feedback from workers?**
   Unpopular training content should be removed from your company’s training portfolio. However, if some of the base content is still useful, it should be partitioned away from the program as a whole instead of deleting it.

4. **Are there learning objects that are no longer accessible due to technological limitations?**
   For e-learning content in particular, older content published in legacy formats can become inaccessible on modern Internet browsers, learning management systems, and mobile devices.
IDENTIFY USEFUL CONTENT AND KEEP IT

Reusing instructionally sound training content where possible saves time and money, and is preferable to developing new content from scratch. As a result of a training portfolio audit, you will identify content that should be reduced or removed as well as content that should be reused for future programs. In particular, instructionally sound, informative training content developed with the help of a company’s subject matter experts is valuable enough to be considered for reuse in the future rather than neglecting it or throwing it away.

Once reusable learning assets have been identified, they should be sequestered away from content that will be reduced or thrown out. As a general best practice, the best way to manage learning assets is through the use of a robust learning content management system (LCMS). Proper usage of an LCMS will ensure that useful learning content is stored in a safe place and can be reused and recycled in the future as necessary.

Reusable learning assets come in many forms. Here are some of the most common types of reusable learning assets:

- **Training Slide Decks**
  Slide decks from older instructor-led training programs can be a treasure trove of powerful content, including statistics, infographics, and illustrations.

- **Instructional Videos**
  Instructional videos can serve different purposes in training programs: onboarding videos for new hires, product information videos, videos interspersed throughout e-learning courses, etc. Try to think of ways in which instructional videos can be reused, since video production in and of itself is a significant investment.

- **Job Aids**
  Job aids are meant to serve as a reference to workers on the job – and to that end, they are oftentimes highly succinct and information rich learning objects that can be reused for a variety of different purposes.

- **Instructor-Led Training Manuals**
  Breakout sessions, role-plays, homework assignments, and hands-on workshops help learners to struggle through the material and learn dynamically.
APPLY MODERN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN BEST PRACTICES

Recycling content with an eye towards improving its effectiveness and design requires the application of modern instructional design techniques to select reusable pieces of content. By recycling existing content, time, effort, and budget are all conserved during the development process when compared to new program development. The three key success criteria for recycling training content are future reusability, content modularization, and content searchability.\textsuperscript{7,8}

Future Reusability

Training content that can be reused and continually offered to learners for years into the future is an excellent investment. To future-proof training content, it should contain broad statistical trends rather than specific annual statistics, be published in interoperable formats, and contain timeless case studies and examples rather than current events and topical stories.

Broad Statistics > Specific Data
Using current annual statistics, figures, and reports in training content leads inevitably to future data inaccuracies and learner perceptions that training programs are outdated and irrelevant. Using mean statistical trends over a period of years paints a broader factual picture for learners, and will be much more useful as a reference for the future.

Interoperability > Compartmentalization
Properly recycled training content can be used in multiple contexts and platforms. Can instructor-led training manuals be used by trainers both in-person and virtually? Can e-learning courses be accessed from desktop computers and mobile devices alike? Ensure that recycled content can live where learners have a need to access it.

Timeless Examples > Current Events
Five years from now, which leadership development example will have more cultural relevancy: Odysseus’ epic struggle to overcome a Cyclops, sirens, and Gods along with his own shortcomings as a man in the \textit{Odyssey}, or the crude and Machiavellian rise of Snapchat CEO Evan Spiegel? Illustrate training concepts with timeless examples rather than current events which may or may not be recognizable to learners years from now.
Content Modularization

Logically modularized training content ensures ease of access for learners that want to take a deeper dive into a particular subject area. In recycling legacy training programs, modularization should mostly be applied to formerly lengthy and unwieldy courses that were identified earlier during the Reduce stage of content conservation. Two instructional design frameworks that can be used in content modularization are microlearning and just-in-time training delivery:

- **Microlearning**
  Rather than e-learning courses that can drag on for 30 minutes to an hour at a time on a multitude of subjects, breaking e-learning content up into modules of no more than two minutes long each for specific subjects is a powerful exercise in content modularization.

- **Just-in-Time Training**
  Learners might want to reference training material on the job so they can learn key concepts just in the nick of time. If learning modules are laser-focused on specific subjects, just-in-time training delivery becomes a reality.

Content Searchability

One of the most exciting ways to recycle training content is to ensure that learning assets are properly metatagged and stored in searchable databases like LMSs for learners and LCMSs for learning and development team members. The work of going back and adding metatags to old learning assets is not exciting, but it holds immense potential for ensuring that learners and L&D staff can access training content on-demand. To add relevant metatags to training content, sometimes the assistance of a subject-matter-expert is also required. However, in the age of Google when learners are accustomed to having information directly at their fingertips, ensuring training content searchability and ease of access is extremely important.

Summary

Corporate training portfolios are a massive investment, and most companies are allowing the depreciation of their training portfolios by neglecting to use old content. Companies can maximize the ROI on training if they modernize old training programs by reducing extraneous content, reusing instructionally sound content, and recycling the remnants into future-proof, modularized, and searchable training programs.
References


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