

## **Questions to Ask *and Answer* when Establishing Your Firm’s Learning Program**

When a CPA firm is struggling to define, implement, or restructure a comprehensive learning program, one of the best steps the leadership team can take is to ask some questions. The collective, honest answers will help define the program—from developing a governance structure to evaluating the learning program’s impact—in ways that will maximize its benefits and even financial return. The key is to ask the right questions in several critical areas.

***Should the learning team have a seat at the table when the firm’s strategic initiatives are discussed, prioritized, and developed?***

Planning for the learning function is critical as a firm discusses and implements new strategic initiatives. For example, more and more firms are organizing around industry niches rather than traditional service lines (e.g., audit, tax, and consulting). This go-to-market strategy calls for new customer relations and team management skills, and a firm cannot take the chance that those skills somehow will be identified, appreciated, and mastered on the fly over time without exceptional training and reinforcement.

**How much responsibility and authority should the firm grant the learning team?**

The level of training autonomy is a function of experience and trust. In general, firms should define a process in which the strategic decisions of the training team are subject to the input and approval of an advisory committee, but in which execution tactics are left to the team. Where to draw the line separating the strategic from the tactical will be different in every firm based on a host of factors. The key is to make a conscious decision on where to draw that line and make sure all stakeholders are on board. Ambiguous areas of authority will inevitably lead to confusion.

***What should be in the firm’s annual learning plan and how should it be communicated?***

The firm should prepare an annual learning plan that describes objectives and measurable goals for the year with an indication of how each element supports the firm’s strategic plan. It should be relevant at all levels, with directives to the executive team, the learning team, and the rest of the individuals in the firm. Messaging about the plan should cascade from the top, creating an unmistakable expectation that effective training and training compliance is critical to the firm and to every staff member’s performance.

***What is the right mix of in-house and external training resources?***

CPA professionals tend to have a “do it yourself” mentality that serves them well in some areas, and not so well in others. Learning is one area where firms should think

twice before assigning their own professionals to develop and deliver training content. Effective learning requires both technical subject matter expertise (which firm professionals have) *and* instructional design expertise (which most firm professionals do *not* have.) We have all attended presentations by technical experts that miss the mark because the content was not designed or delivered in a way that was engaging and thus it did not accomplish defined learning objectives.

Firms should challenge this DIY paradigm and seek to strike the right balance of internal and external teaching resources. When performing their cost benefit analyses, firms should be sure to consider the relative cost of an internal expert's time away from client work as he or she prepares and delivers high quality training.

***How should the firm manage CPE vendors and the vendor selection process?***

The number of CPE vendors has rapidly grown in the last decade, and keeping track of the players and their offerings can be time consuming to say the least. The best approach to CPE vendor management is to identify the ones who approach the relationship as a partner, meaning they understand and can predict the firm's needs—not just those the firm has identified but also those it has not. That calls for a vendor in tune with the profession and the challenges firms face.

Firms should think twice about using a CPE vendor who offers the same program year after year, merely updating the technical content. Instead, they should seek out training firms that approach the opportunity creatively and with the real world needs of the firm in mind. They should identify the firms that can point out, for example, that industry trends seem to call for incorporating an element of project management within the audit staff training curricula for the coming year.

***What type of human resources should be allocated to administer the learning program?***

Managing a learning function is a full time commitment. Even for a modest sized firm, it is best to hire a full time learning manager as the firm grows, rather than assign someone part time to manage learning.

Years ago, one of my clients brought on a person to administer its learning program. She had an education background, but at the time the firm didn't consider those education credentials to be necessary—it was just a nice happenstance. Over time, though, "Elizabeth" grew her role and her value-add well beyond the meeting planning/registration role the firm had originally envisioned. The firm now has a training program that may be second to none, and this would not have happened if the firm initially had assigned the job part time to a Human Resource admin.

***How should the learning function be evaluated in a budgetary context?***

A CPA firm should evaluate its learning and training programs in the same way it analyzes any other investment in the firm and its people. Quality training can and

should stand on its own in terms of return and benefits and should not merely be considered a necessary overhead cost. And just like with any other investment, the firm must consider *all* costs and benefits—quantifying those that can be measured and at least factoring in those that can't.

Here's an example. To save travel costs and minimize time out of the office, some firms are moving toward significantly more online training. That may be an appropriate strategy for a given firm. But often those decisions are based on a general sense that, for example, travel costs are high, productivity cannot happen outside of the office, or online training is just as effective as instruction provided in an interactive, peer-supported setting. Such assertions should be supported with facts, data, and logic.

### ***Conclusion***

Accenture recently undertook an internal, organization-wide study to determine the value of its investment in employee training. The analysis showed first that there were significant human resource-related benefits, including higher recruitment and retention rates. They also found direct bottom line benefits from professional training, including higher billing rates and billable hours for employees who spent more time in training. All told, the ROI of the firm's training program was determined to be \$3.53 for every \$1 invested in training.

The key to realizing this type of value is to embrace a learning culture, institutionalize the learning function, and deliver high quality training experiences that support the firm's mission. Firms that address and seek clarity around the questions above will undoubtedly have better learning outcomes that will drive their own profitability in the long run.