Chapter 38
User Design:
A Case Study in Developing Workplace Curricula

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ABSTRACT

This case describes how a federal government agency engaged in a user design process to design, develop, and implement a workplace learning curriculum to be implemented throughout several agency offices. While several offices had developed their own training program, there were inconsistencies and a lack of standardization. The authors describe how a user design process was utilized in the development of a standardized curriculum. User design shifts the responsibility of design from expert designers to frontline users and stakeholders. Several user-driven tools are available to organizations that adopt user design processes. Potential advantages of a curriculum developed through user design include better adoption and diffusion of the curriculum and improved engagement of the users in the workplace.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The case involves a federal government agency that collects, tabulates and reports statistical data related to the labor market. It employs approximately 2,500 employees who work in the Washington, D.C. national office and five regional offices spread across the nation. Economists comprise approximately 80% of the agency's workforce.

SETTING THE STAGE

The senior leadership at the agency expressed an interest in developing a learning curriculum for the agency economists. While some offices within the agency had developed their own training plans, other

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offices had no such plans for their employees. In addition, a lack of consistency characterized these office-specific curricula, and no general learning plan applicable across the agency had yet been developed. Curricula had been previously developed for new supervisors and agency mathematical statisticians using expert-driven curriculum development processes. The top leadership at the agency had indicated an interest to complete a curriculum for economists in the agency.

In addition, management hoped to link learning opportunities to the agency's economist competency model which had been developed some years before and had been previously used to assess the competencies of agency economists. Several years before, an agency team developed an economist "resource guide" that contained a list of suggested training courses and other developmental resources for economists, but it had not been updated in many years and was linked to unofficial Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs). Senior management charged an interagency team comprised of economists to develop an economist curriculum that would meet the general learning needs of all economists across the agency as well as reflect office-specific learning programs. This team would be managed as an official agency project team but the key question that emerged was what sort of design *process* the team would adopt.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The agency senior managers assigned the project leadership to the agency's training and development branch located in it human resources department. An instructor designer within the branch was assigned as the leader for the project design team. The team was comprised of eight agency economists from the major program offices that employ economists. Team members were assigned to the team by each office. Some team members were supervisory economists, while others were not. The team had one year to complete the curriculum. Team members were expected to complete the work in addition to their normal work duties. In addition, no specific budget was provided for this project making the actual costs to the agency difficult to accurately calculate. The primary costs were the individual team members' work time. This varied by team member and we collected no data on the hours that individual team member's spent on the project, although no more than five hours a month per team member was anticipated at the beginning of the project and this proved to be the case. Neither the project sponsors nor other agency leaders required that a return-on-investment (ROI) calculation be provided by the team regarding the project. Unfortunately, no such data are currently available.

Given that the benefits of the curriculum are not linked to an easy-to-identify performance increase, such as increased sales, it might have proven difficult to calculate the dollar value of such benefits. In addition, the notion of user design is built on a premise of long-term returns that will take many years to realize as well as ease of implementation of this and other innovations, which is a difficult thing to measure within a short time after a user design has been undertaken. One of the primary benefits may be improved employee productivity that results from having an easily accessible program for professional growth and development but such a productivity increase would be difficult to calculate in robust ways even if such data could be easily collected. Isolating the percentage the curriculum would have contributed to a productivity increase would be problematic. Finally, the agency would likely not have approved the additional costs of collecting of such data since the curriculum was developed internally with existing resources not specifically earmarked for the project.

The team leader had seen previous efforts at developing curricula fail to be adopted and was seeking a different design approach that would more deeply engage the team members in the development process