Chapter 8

Lessons Learned from Distance Workforce Training Applications:
Example from Cooperative Extension

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ABSTRACT

North Carolina Cooperative Extension (NCCE) depends on the skill set and subject matter competency of its field faculty to deliver quality, credible education to North Carolina citizens. In order to maintain and enhance field faculty competency, NCCE uses distance technology to provide training to field faculty located in offices across the state. Although not the only method of training, distance training allows NCCE to maximize resources by reducing the cost of travel and protecting valuable professional time. This chapter's case studies identify areas in which NCCE utilizes distance education to train employees for on-going competency development, crisis response, program development and implementation, and program evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore case study examples of distance workforce training for North Carolina Cooperative Extension (NCCE) Family and Consumer Sciences field faculty. Specific examples include the use of distance training for continued subject matter competency building for field faculty, program implementation and crisis response training.

NCCE is a non-formal educational organization dedicated to helping citizens and communities improve their quality of life. As the outreach education arm of North Carolina State University and North Carolina State A & T University, NCCE takes evidence and researched based information and constructs and delivers educational programs that empower individuals, families, businesses and communities to solve problems. Created by the Smith-Lever in 1914, Cooperative Extension is a trusted source of educational information for the populace across the nation and state (North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, 1998).

NCCE depends on a complex delivery system to provide education to its various constituencies. Faculty specialists design educational programs across a variety of subject matter areas. Field faculty, also known as agents, are then provided with training on the background, use and evaluation of the program. Field faculty are located in county offices in all of North Carolina's 100 counties and on the Cherokee Reservation. In this delivery system, it is essential that field faculty have mastery over the content subject matter of the educational programs they deliver, detailed technical knowledge of the deployment methods necessary for implementation, and a thorough understanding of how to assess the impact of the program in their county.

This chapter will address field faculty professional development through training in the Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) area. The mission of the NCCE FCS program is "to improve the well being of the family through programs that educate, influence public policy, and help families put researched-based knowledge from the land grant university of North Carolina State University to work in their lives" (Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2006, p. 2.1). Specifically, FCS focuses on improving and empowering families by providing education in specific disciplines including housing, food safety, nutrition, human development, health, and family resource management.

Distance Education in Training

Training is critical to the success of Cooperative Extension programs for multiple reasons. It is central to retaining quality professionals, developing an organization's human capital, empowering employees, and is a major element of an organization's commitment to employee development and retention (Safrit & Owen, 2010). Training in Extension is predominantly conducted face-to-face, however more Extension programs are beginning to use distance education technology (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). Distance education, also known as distance learning, is defined as "the transmission of educational or instructional programming to geographically dispersed individuals and groups via telecommunications" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Although this method of instruction allows teachers and learners that are separated physically to be connected solely through technology, some programs use a combination of distance technology and face-to-face instruction (Christensen, 1995: Engineering Outreach, 1994). E-mail, digital media, and Internet technologies are major components of a distance education program (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001).

The current work environment of the Extension professional is no longer conducive to traditional training methods. Field faculty work in an environment that often lacks direct support and has multiple inefficiencies that contribute to job stress (Strong & Harder, 2009). A stressful work

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