

The ABCs of Working With SMEs

by Challey Yancey

Challey Yancey is a graduate student in the Instructional Systems program at Penn State University. She may be reached at 10 Blue Ridge Road, Voorhees, New Jersey 08043, (609) 428-4507, FAX (609) 840-1143, or e-mail: cayll3@psu.edu.

An important part of the instructional design process involves interviewing subject matter experts, or SMEs. Most instructional designers know there is more to obtaining content information than asking straightforward questions and getting straightforward answers. Behind the rambling bits of information provided by the SME are usually thoughts such as:

"I'm the content expert, why don't they just hire me to do the training? Why do we need to pay someone else to do it?"

"How can I put 20 years of knowledge into one interview?"

"How do I really know that this person won't go back to management and divulge information that could hurt me down the road?"

Unfortunately, these unspoken fears can result in a partnership paralyzed by frustration and uncooperation. They are hidden roadblocks that can adversely affect the design and development of an entire project. The challenge to instructional designers is to overcome these obstacles while efficiently obtaining useful information for the design and development of a course.

With a bit of preparation, you can walk the path to successful course implementation by gaining the SME's acceptance, using behavior conducive to gathering information, and concluding the relationship on a positive note.

Acceptance

The acceptance stage is not for you to gather content information from the SME, but to develop strategies and create a rapport with the SME so he or she feels completely comfortable working with you. Before speaking with the SME, do your homework to find out everything you can about the organization, the SME, and the subject field. During the acceptance stage, you will work out an agenda and define roles so the SME will understand the processes and results of instructional design.

These strategies require a considerable amount of time, but they will pay off in terms of obtaining specific information in a limited time frame. Let's look at some of the key tasks involved in each of these areas.

Homework

Before you meet the SME face to face, you should gather as much information from outside sources as possible about the organization, the subject matter, and the SME. Doing this will establish a common ground between you and the SME and help you communicate with credibility.

Background information about the organization is helpful in developing a framework for your relationship with the SME. Some questions to consider might include:

- Are there other projects that will compete for the SME's time?

- Are there any re-organizations about to take place that could affect your relationship with the SME?
- What is the client's relationship to problem?
- What does the client want from the problem?
- What is a successful outcome?
- How important is the problem?
- Where is the power in the organization and how can you work with it?

It may help to get buy-in and support from a respected individual higher up in the organization who can explain the importance of the project to the SME and help reinforce the SME's role. Do not turn to this individual as a parent figure if you experience cooperation problems with the SME. It is best to deal with any lack of cooperation yourself. Arrange to work with an alternate SME in case this happens.

Next, you want to find out about the SME. Some questions to consider might include:

- Who decided that this person will work with you?
- How can you help the SME obtain the high regard of others in the organization?
- What are some personal hobbies, interests, or specialties of the SME?

Finally, although the primary source of your content information will be the SME, the more knowledgeable and conversive you are about the field, the easier it will be to gain the SME's trust and glean information. Find out everything you can about the field. Books, libraries, and company education and financial departments are good sources to turn to for more information. Review personnel records, accident or sales reports, previous needs assessments, existing training materials, procedures manuals, and anything else you can find. This will help you develop and ask more intelligent questions, which helps your credibility.

Establish Rapport

Rapport is a state in which you and the SME get along so well and are so com-

fortable with each other that extracting the necessary information about the field is painless, perhaps even easy. Establishing rapport goes a long way toward increasing your credibility and expediting the information-gathering process. This is especially true in situations where content may be confidential and the SME may be reluctant to provide information. It also demonstrates that you will not use the information against the SME in any way.

The first step in developing rapport is to schedule an introductory meeting to get to know the SME. At this time, you can work out your points of agreement, set up an agenda for the project, and define your individual roles. As much as possible, meetings should take place on the SME's turf at his or her convenience. The SME will be most comfortable in familiar surroundings where he or she has access to references and supporting material. If this isn't possible, try to meet in neutral territory such as a hotel conference room or a restaurant. Also, be on time, preferably 10 minutes early. Verify the length of the meeting with the SME and stick to your schedule. For example, say "I realize you are busy and I'd like make the most of our time. Do you agree that we have an hour for this meeting?"

One of the best books about developing rapport with others is *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie (1936). This book states that one of the basic desires of humans is to feel important. If you can capitalize on this, you can go a long way toward developing rapport. You could say, for example, "Your boss tells me you know more than anyone else in the company about this subject," or "I've been told you are the best person in the field to talk to." This will make the SME feel important and more enthusiastic about providing you with information.

Another point Carnegie makes is that people are more likely to be influenced by someone they can relate to, someone with whom they feel they have a bond. A simple way to capitalize on this is to

dress in a way that makes the SME feel comfortable. To establish rapport, wear clothing appropriate to the SME's environment. To maintain your credibility, dress professionally. This translates into dressing at or slightly above the SME's level.

Briefly discussing mutual interests such as hobbies, professions, sports, or family is another way to relate to the SME. Although business is your main reason for meeting with this person, opening up communication and overcoming anxieties are top priorities. Sharing common ground can help develop rapport in the most difficult of situations. Use any information you may have discovered in the homework phase to develop rapport.

Develop the Agenda

The introductory meeting is a good time to go over what will be accomplished during the information sessions. If it is not possible to hold an introductory meeting, either send a copy of the agenda or a list of questions to the SME before the first information session, or briefly review the agenda upon your first meeting. The agenda can be as simple as a list of questions you wish to ask or items you hope to accomplish. To set the agenda quickly, be sure all questions lead to answers that can be put into objectives or instructional goals. For example, ask "Which of the many sales techniques used should be taught?"

If you did your homework well, these questions should fill in the gaps in your knowledge that only the SME can address. You can then make optimal use of your time with the SME.

Finally, ask the SME to add items to the agenda that he or she feels are important. Work together to get these items stated as accomplishments in the same format yours are, and negotiate until you both agree on the list. Always emphasize your places of agreement and de-emphasize any differences.

Review Roles

Although you, as an instructional designer, should try to build a relationship with the SME, the role each of you plays in training development are distinct. Reviewing these roles in the appropriate way can overcome the misconception that anyone can design and develop training. Define your distinct roles by saying "I am from the Training Department (or have been hired by your organization) to design and develop this course. My expertise lies in asking the right questions to learn about your field, developing efficient and effective instruction that produces the desired results, and then measuring those results. You are the expert in this field who can provide me with the information I need." If you have developed a positive rapport, this task should be relatively easy.

The final part of the introductory meeting should address any concerns the SME may have. The SME should have the opportunity to ask questions, but keep in mind that he or she probably won't voice his or her real concerns. The SME may be thinking about why he or she was chosen to work on the project, your willingness to keep responses confidential, and your ability to grasp the technical content of his or her experience (Rossett, 1987). If you can engage the SME in a conversation about these concerns, not only will you ease his or her mind, but appear to be able to read it as well! You will also appear competent, which will enhance your credibility.

The Q & A Session

At last you get down to business. Straightforward questions, straightforward answers, right? Perhaps. First, you must ensure that you don't lose the rapport you have worked so hard to develop. There are several types of questions you can ask during the interview that will help you establish credibility and maintain a trusting relationship. These questions will keep the SME focused and help you quickly obtain the

information critical to developing instruction. These techniques are helpful if you are faced with unusually technical or difficult subject matter.

Open-ended questions will elicit more information than closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions that begin with "Tell me about....," "What," "Why," "How," and "Describe," open up conversation. They allow you to pinpoint areas of definition, and put questions in the appropriate sequence, beginning with general ideas and moving toward more specific topics. Bring along any reports, charts, or other items that will help you clarify information.

Visualization techniques encourage the SME to provide more specific information (Cram, 1981). For example, you can ask a top sales performer what steps he or she takes when meeting with customers.

Mirror statements work well also. In a mirror statement, you simply restate what you've heard. For example, you could say, "You just demonstrated a problem with selling XYZ widgets. Is this true for the entire company, certain branches, or just your branch?" This would not only demonstrate your understanding (credibility again), but also create an opportunity for further discussion and interpretation.

Encouraging personal anecdotes and inquiring about problems the SME has solved can contribute to the success of your course. If the SME is particularly respected for his or her expertise, you can use this material as valuable, credible case studies and examples. The SME will be honored to have his or her expertise become the focus of a training class and will feel a sense of pride and ownership toward your project.

Try to mix information-gathering techniques. The interview is the most common tool for gathering information, but on-site observation is also valuable for obtaining qualitative as well as quantitative data. By combining observation, interview, and records examination

techniques, you will pick up on activities that an expert performs unconsciously and therefore may not communicate in an interview.

Behavior During Information Sessions

The most important guideline for any instructional designer, performance technologist, or consultant in maintaining credibility and a positive relationship with the client is to practice a code of ethics by maintaining confidentiality, avoiding derogatory terms such as "bean counter," and being trustworthy. Maintaining credibility means not only refraining from badmouthing others during your sessions with the SME, but discouraging the same behavior in the SME. Keep the discussion focused on objective, course-related material.

Avoid using terminology specific to the fields of instructional design and performance technology. Using industry jargon will not warm anyone up to you, and it may increase the SME's anxiety over the project. Use terms familiar to the SME, and, if appropriate, from his or her field—but do so only if you know what you're talking about, or you'll lose your hard-earned credibility in a heartbeat. Remember that the SME is the content expert. Allow the SME to feel important and needed and you will maintain your rapport.

Be flexible. If the SME insists that he or she can write an objective or wants to be the star of the video, give it a shot. A highly regarded SME narrating your video may give your project more perceived value (Morrison, 1985), and you may have an SME who possesses talent or charisma. If not, it will be evident that he or she is not suited for the job after the fiftieth take.

To stay focused on the content, reinforce desired behavior and neutralize digression. Look directly at the SME and use statements like "Great, that's just what I'm looking for." When the SME digresses, get him or her back on track subtly by using body language

such as sitting back or putting down your pen (Cram, 1981). Or, steer the conversation back to the topic by saying, "Tell me more about this point that you covered earlier."

Indermill (1986) provides some good suggestions for matching the SME's personal style through the use of Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) techniques. NLP behaviors such as matching breathing patterns, body language, postures and rhythms, or voice tones and tempos are effective for making another person comfortable in a conversation. Practice these techniques before using them so they are natural and routine.

Wrapping Up

You've painlessly gathered your information and are ready to begin the design phase. Concluding your interviews on a positive note is crucial. Obtaining all the information on your agenda means maintaining the relationship with the SME. You will have to go back to him or her for approvals, and you may need further information, clarifications, or complete revisions of portions of the course. Keep in mind that you may have to work with this person on future projects. He or she may be in a position to recommend you for another project in the future.

During your information sessions, plan for and discuss anticipated weaknesses of material. This will become important if critiques of the work require you to return to the SME for further clarifications once you have begun course development and are entering the formative evaluation stage. Stay on the SME's side to avoid the "us versus them" mentality. Try to soften criticism when asking for the SME's feedback (Morrison, 1985).

As in your initial meetings, if you need further meetings with the SME, always prepare something to show to him or her. Don't waste the SME's time or yours.

When the course is over, write a thank-you note to the SME. Better yet, cele-

brate by taking him or her out to lunch or throwing a party for all those involved in the project. You're being paid to work, but sometimes making new friends is a pleasant windfall of establishing a good working relationship.

The ABCs of working with SMEs are not elementary skills. Executing them correctly requires time and effort. People are skeptical of others about whom they know nothing. They are also curious as to why you need the information you seek and what you will do with it. These fears can hold SMEs back from giving you what you need to know. If you implement these guidelines, however, you will be perceived as organized, professional, and effective. You will lay many of the SME's unspoken fears to rest and make him or her comfortable with the process. The return on the investment is worth it.

References

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