Continuing education opportunities—A mark of a profession

by ROLAND D. SPANIOL
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois

INTRODUCTION

Authorities indicate that one of the marks of a profession is the availability of continuing education to its members. Education that will tend to keep the members current with their technology and skilled in applying it in their work. It seems reasonable this should be a requirement of information systems if it is to be designated a profession.

AN INTERPRETATION OF PRESENT CONDITIONS

Educational products for people in information systems occupations come from a variety of sources including hardware manufacturers, software houses, government regulated industries, universities and colleges, profit motivated schools, businesses, etc. Based on the large number of advertisements in the mail each day, it is easy to identify the variety of educational offerings that are available. There are many; they are offered in many big cities; and they cover a wide range of topics.

The present situation with respect to educational offerings is summarized in the following paragraphs.

The enormous number of group and self-instructional courses presently on the market cover the majority of the subject areas revealed in the DPMA Education Foundation’s “Survey of Educational Needs and Desires.” For example, 25 of the 34 most frequently mentioned subject areas in the survey are covered by one or more current promotional brochures.

Is the demand for these courses so great that the needs of the information systems practitioners cannot be met? Is the demand being driven by a desire on the part of the information systems practitioners to be professional? Do you think the courses would be as heavily advertised as they are if this were the case? In short, most of what the information systems practitioner says he needs is probably available; but to be blunt, much of it is probably the “paper tiger” variety.

At the present time prospective registrants have no feasible way of evaluating the quality of an offering beyond the general reputation of the firm that markets it or the personal recommendation of past participants with whom they may have had some chance contact.

Many private educational offerings are priced well beyond the reach of those who probably need them the most. This unfortunate situation is due, of course, to the high cost of producing and delivering an educational product in combination with too few buyers spread over too many sellers.

To summarize present conditions, it can be said that most of what information processing professionals say they need is available. It may not be in the precise form they would like it to be, but it is available. Their problem is to find it among the plethora of offerings while avoiding poor quality and figuring out a way to pay for it.

If it is true that the information systems practitioner’s educational needs can generally be met with current offerings in a variety of big cities, but that the cost is high, what is the solution? The one obvious solution that comes to mind is to cut the number of offerings, teach to a larger group at a time, and lower the tuition for each student. Those of you involved in higher education in recent years will note this is not an original solution. Those of you involved in offering the courses from the private sector may be curious how this can be accomplished.

EVALUATION TECHNIQUES

What I am suggesting is not new either, it is supply and demand aided with market analysis, evaluation of the offering, publicity, and a booking service.

Market response to an educational offering is a good indicator of the worth of the offering. If the course is popular and makes money, it can be repeated; when it loses its appeal, enrollments decline, and profit wanes, it will be dropped. This is not an unknown phenomenon (except maybe in public education). As a matter of fact, for educational offerings from the private sector it is principally the law of supply and demand that decides whether a course is to be repeated. Demand and enrollment are the required measures of the quality of the offering.

Reaction to an educational offering is a commonly used indicator of the quality of the offering. The technique is familiar to you; the attendees each receive an evaluation form near the end of a course and the attendees rate the presentor, the presentation, the content, the facilities, etc.
Since it is easy to do and results are quickly available, it is often used with market response as the way to improve the offering, to determine whether or not it should be offered, which instructor is getting the best evaluation, type of facilities most desired, etc. Later, you will see that it leaves room for improvement as an evaluation instrument, but it is an important measure of how well the program was accepted.

Learning that has taken place because of an educational experience is a better measure of an educational offering. For this situation, suffice it to say that learning is the ability to recall a concept, knowledge, technique, or item of information in a testing situation. Comparing reaction to learning, it can be seen that learning is a better measure of the success of a program than reaction because with learning we know that the program message is getting through to the enrollees.

Learning is more difficult to measure because if we are to be precise, we must test before we teach and then test after we teach so we can develop a statistical correlation and/or confidence level. Because it is more difficult may be the reason we rarely see testing done in courses offered by the private sector. What do you think?

Behavior changes in an individual that are perceptible to others as the result of an educational experience is an excellent measure of the value of that experience. But, measuring behavior changes is much more complex, difficult, and costly than measuring learning or reaction. It usually requires experts in testing, is usually administered to a special group or groups at a time, is usually done on contract, etc. Though difficult, measuring behavior changes is certainly a valid evaluation process and should be considered in special situations.

Results is what everyone wants. Why not measure the contribution of educational programs based on whether the enrollees get satisfactory results from implementing their new found knowledges, techniques, skills, etc.? Probably because results are more difficult to measure than market response, reaction, behavior, and learning combined. Not only that, but it is difficult to be sure that the results achieved are related to the instruction. Much more work needs to be done relative to measuring results.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A NATIONWIDE PROGRAM

Catalog of programs

Initial efforts should be directed at facing the formidable tasks of identifying programs and materials currently in existence that will meet the members professed educational needs. Indeed, the greatest contribution may be in seeing that an ongoing cataloging process is set in motion to identify to the membership where and when they can enroll in programs they feel they require to keep them abreast of current technology. A catalog of these program offerings could be made available on a subscription basis to libraries, businesses, individuals, etc. In order to be kept current it would have to be updated no less than monthly. The listings should be complete with course outline, presenter, dates, places, costs, etc.

Booking service

A natural byproduct of a catalog of programs is a nationwide booking service, a centralized office where persons could enroll in the courses of their choice. This office could be the central point for all tuition, enrollments, evaluation activities, etc.

EVALUATION PLAN

Evaluation of the programs cooperating in the project would be a major activity. It is recommended that reaction evaluation be the first method used. This method should be used for all educational offerings made a part of this service. The courses in the top 10 to 25 percent should be given special publicity such that they would be widely recognized as popular courses.

As the project matures, the testing for learning process should be initiated. Attempts should be made to see if learning does take place. In the programs where learning is greatest, the courses should be given special publicity so they would become widely known as good programs to take to learn the needed information.

In some special cases, attempts should be made to determine changes in behavior. Because this evaluation method would be difficult to implement and would have marginal influence on this project, it will not be dealt with in this paper.

Results evaluation is an interesting method and in a broad sense could make some real contributions on a nationwide basis. Initially, or in the foreseeable future, there does not seem to be much results evaluation can do for this project and will not be dealt with in this paper.

On a nationwide scale, however, it would be interesting to see if the information systems professionals could identify the knowledges of the citizens about an issue such as privacy. Then, after implementing a large scale public education program on the issues of privacy, follow this up with a post test. Enough said.

WHO COULD MANAGE THIS CONTINUING EDUCATION PROJECT?

Possibly the DPMA Education Foundation. Or maybe any of the professional organizations. How about AFIPS? Perhaps because of my prejudices, I think the DPMA-EF is best suited for the job. They are an IRS 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit corporation. They have no members, and they were organized with the major objective of providing education to the information systems practitioners. Why not let them know how you feel about having them sponsor such a project.
WHAT WOULD MOTIVATE COOPERATION WITH THIS PROJECT?

Have you ever sat through a two or three-day course or a semester one for that matter and felt you were wasting your time? Do you think that experience was unusual? Would you like to do something about it? Of course, we have all had bad experiences on occasion. And, if there was a formal process where we could input our thoughts about a course, we would have done so. The primary motivation for an individual to cooperate in the evaluation process is improved education. The more information systems practitioners we can get to evaluate the course offerings they take, the better chance we have to weed out the less effective courses.

Getting cooperation from the presentors may initially be more difficult than getting cooperation from the individuals taking the instruction. After all, what is in it for the presentor? Of course, it depends upon the management of the project, but I would hope the presentors would soon see the merits and become the proponents of the process.

The project incentives which will engender presentor participation will be positive incentives. If the project is to be successful, the presentors must want to participate, must strive for the opportunity to be listed in the catalog, must encourage enrollees to participate in the evaluation, etc. What will encourage this eagerness?

The possibles include the following:

An honor roll of blue ribbon presentations. A panel of judges selected by the participating presentor organizations would select a limited number of offerings for special recognition. The top two or three presentors would be selected from this group for a special award or prize.

The opportunity of participating in a cooperative nationwide publicity activity. Through advertising in the trade press and other publicity, the offerings of the cooperating presentors would be made available to the information systems practitioners.

A catalog of the offerings of all the presentors. The listings would be by presentor organization, by subject, by city, and by date, for example. This catalog would be made available on a subscription basis. The subscription price would be low enough to be attractive to public libraries, companies, and certain other training organizations, and governmental agencies.

The opportunity of participating with experts in the process of developing evaluation techniques. It is anticipated that the number of presentors involved would be great enough that they could employ testing specialists to work with them on the evaluation processes.

Altruistic as it may sound, I hope some of the presentors would want to participate for the simple reason that they would like to improve their offering. Just because they want to do a better job.

Then, there are other kinds of reasons. Some information systems practitioners would like to show that they have the trappings of a professional. These might include a college degree, a certificate such as the CDP, and some would even prefer a license to practice.

In any event, it seems reasonable that if a profession offers continuing education opportunities to its members, its members may want to have a formal method of showing they are taking advantage of this education.

There is such a system where courses are evaluated and are then assigned whole or fractional units of instruction. These units are called Continuing Education Units and are known as CEU’s. It seems reasonable the programs cooperating with this project could be dealt with in a similar fashion and the record keeping for the participants could be kept as part of the project.

SUMMARY

In this paper the surface of an idea has been presented. What we need now is someone who wants to develop this idea into a reality. I hope you will agree that there are several prevailing reasons for our industry to formalize and strive to improve the continuing education aspects of the industry. We in the industry will be the last to know we are in a profession or when we became a profession. Let’s make sure we have taken every opportunity to be as professional as we can be now that we are a part of that group.

REFERENCE


From the collection of the Computer History Museum (www.computerhistory.org)