Editorial Preface

A New Look at Learning for the Organization

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This editorial preface examines two features of end users in organizations learning to use the systems and software (S&S) implemented in the organization. One, it reiterates the importance but failure of end user involvement in the learning process. The implications of this failure are emphasized. Two, it posits that the learning which is done in a distant learning mode — as opposed to the traditional lesson delivery method — might be suited to insure that the end user is more fully involved in learning to use the S&S. As such the paper does not arrive at strong conclusions but rather asks questions from the literature that need to be addressed before any new technology is introduced in large numbers in the work place.

The importance of end user involvement in the process of learning to use new S&S is well documented and has been the subject of work since at least the 1980s (Pressman, 1987; Immon & Caplan, 1992; Kronke & Hatch, 1994). A recurring theme in these studies is the importance of the people factor (Nickerson, 1998). What this means is that the delivery of S&S to an organization must not omit the human component of an information system, although this is often done. This shortcoming can be partially attributed to the rapid growth of technology coupled with the increasing use of computer technology by people (end users) who may not be particularly computer literate. Perhaps Bjorn-Andersen (1988) expresses the situation best when stating that “are we just doing our best to adapt the technology to the known so-called ‘human weaknesses’ to reduce the resistance to using the technology, or are we working on providing a technology that will help to liberate the intellectual capabilities of human beings.”

With this knowledge in mind, S&S developers and implementers have resorted to many ways to improve the learning process in order to encourage end user involvement. These approaches have been used with varying levels of success. One problem with the current training methods is that many IS professionals/implementers are more comfortable with the technology than with making a lesson plan and therefore this task is given a lower priority than its importance.
would suggest it should (Seilheimer, 1987). However, not only does good end user training produce better information systems but it can also reduce conflict, frustration, and in some cases sabotage. The unfortunate thing about this well documented and recurring conclusion concerning the importance of end user training is that the literature also strongly suggests that the problem is not getting solved. An objective observer might even conclude that developers have accepted this as part of the normal process of implementing systems. In other words, the situation is set in concrete and efforts to address the issue are being ignored.

One of the unique manners in which the above concerns could be addressed is the use of a training method in which the user has lots of control of the learning process as concerns depth and breadth of knowledge. Speed of the presentation of the material to be learned is another user control factor. This delivery method is often referred to as distant learning. While usually applied in a university environment, it can and has also been used in the corporate world to address the issue of training. University distance learning and its value is well examined (Nather et al., 2003, pp. 11-12) but the study of corporations which try distance learning is much more limited (Phillips, 2003).

Although it is perhaps obvious that distance learning results in the corporate environment should be similar (in terms of success rate) to that in academia, differences in the type of person and the motivation for learning might be sufficiently large to skew results. However, lacking in any analysis is whether the two environments (universities vs. the work place) and types of people affect the results when the goal of the training is not a general overview knowledge but rather specific user tasks. There is support for both ideas — that it does and does not affect the results.

From the above one can create a list of logical possibilities concerning end user learning in the corporate environment. They are presented below.

**Logical Possibility # 1:**
End user training on the use of S&S will continue to be inadequate. Business should consider the unprepared end user as just another cost of doing business. There is a lot of support for this possibility. A problem identified in the 1970s, and to which a number of people in the field and academia have devoted considerable time and effort to solving, is still not solved. Arguing even stronger for this possibility is the fact that inadequate end user training is a large and growing financial expense for the organization, yet it defies solution.

The best that one could hope for if this possibility is correct is that small incremental improvements in the way instruction is delivered will be made. Perhaps after a period of time in which end users become more sophisticated and S&S become more user friendly, this problem will solve itself. There however is not much support for this hope. The problem was identified nearly thirty years ago, end users have gotten more sophisticated, and S&S have become more easy to use. One would expect some major improvement in this area.

This possibility is also a defeatist “solution” and is clearly not appropriate for a field such as Information Systems. We are problem solvers and vigorous efforts must be made to solve or at least reduce the problem.

**Logical Possibility # 2:**
The present and past methods of teaching end users on S&S are basically appropriate but more effort in this direction will reverse the disappointing results of the last few decades. In other words, it is not the tools or the methods of delivering the instruction
that is the culprit in this problem but rather an inadequate dedication or commitment to them. By applying more and more well directed resources into the tools and methods the problems will ameliorate.

This solution has the economic appeal in that the tools and methods are already in place and would therefore require no new instructional delivery system to be developed. It would, if it worked, be the most cost effective. Some people, however, might consider this to be a case of “throwing good money after bad” but that is only true if the traditional instructional delivery systems were a total failure. That is not the case. The references cited above do not claim that the instruction end users currently receive is terribly wrong but rather it is not as effective as is possible. The situation of end user training could be made a lot better.

Clearly then, organizations should not totally abandon their traditional end user training methods. Rather these methods need to be supplemented by other delivery methods that work better. Only if one of these other delivery methods prove to the ultimate, successful solution to the problem should the currently used delivery methods be dropped. The other delivery method that shows promise of success is distant learning.

Logical Possibility # 3:

Distant learning has the potential to mostly solve the problem of end user training. The advantages for the university learner using this type of delivery system are well documented and will not be covered in this write up. Sufficient it to say that distant learning has proven itself as capable of solving many of the problems — loss of self control, loss of self management, employing only one sense during instruction, etc. — also associated with the end user dissatisfaction in an organization. If organizations, wishing their employees to be better trained on the use of S&S, pursue this avenue then it is hoped that the problems stated in the first part of this preface will be solved or at least better addressed.

Distant learning has one major drawback. It is expensive and time consuming to develop. Before many organizations embark on distant learning, they need to be assured that the initial investment would be money well spent. This is a fruitful area for future research.

In conclusion, end users are not receiving the training they need and require. This problem has existed for a long time and shows no signs of abating. An alternative method of delivering the educational lessons for organizations is distant learning. This would probably work best, at least at first, if used in conjunction with other more traditional lesson delivery systems.

REFERENCES
Nather, K. et al. (2003 May). Distance education report. Chancellor’s Office California Community Colleges Educational Services Division. v-vi.