

# TARGETED TRAINING

Employers partner with higher education providers to customize training.

By Carolyn Kott Washburne

**M**ORE AND MORE COMPANIES TODAY ARE becoming invisible, with fewer face-to-face interactions between company representatives and customers and more via telephone.

"We no longer have offices where customers can pay bills or lodge a complaint," says Shelley Olson, manager of education and performance support for customer services at We Energies, which provides electricity and natural gas to customers in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. "And many people don't read our bill inserts. So we have to make certain that every touch we have with our customers is a positive one."

To enable customer service employees to provide a high level of service despite these limitations, the company sought out customized training on coaching for its customer service supervisors.

According to Nelson Soler, director of business development at the School of Continuing Education at UW-Milwaukee, "targeted training" is an increasing trend. While many companies find that the school's publicly offered noncredit, credit and certificate programs meet their needs for employee professional development, customized courses are available on just about any subject, from project management to rubber technology to cybersecurity.

In the past, Soler says, companies would buy one of the school's public programs just as it was. Now, firms are picking and choosing, eliminating from a standard program what they don't need and requesting additions of what they do need.

"They want to ensure that the final product is applicable, effective, measurable and immediately usable," he says. Primarily, this trend is driven by economics. "Many companies can no longer afford to send employees for a whole week of training, so they are rethinking the training function and what they want to accomplish."



At We Energies, Shelley Olson used a customized training course to improve the coaching skills of the company's customer service supervisors.

"We didn't think we could get results by putting people through one day of coaching training and expect presto change!" Olson says. "So we decided to make a significant investment, not just in training dollars but in the time put in by the participants."

Under the guidance of trainer Laura V. Page, participants worked on issues such as building trust and ratcheting up their level of listening to head off or resolve conflict.

Olson says participants found Page's style to be very engaging. "She did a good job of putting together an experience that was very little lecture but lots of exercises, projects, discussions and role-playing," Olson recalls. "These different approaches to learning made it easier to be in the classroom for eight hours a day."

The participants gave the training good ratings, but even more important is measuring its long-term impact, specifically how much and how long do participants retain what they learned. To assess those outcomes, all participants filled out a discussion planner, to share with their boss and

supervisees, that covered what they learned and what they planned to implement.

"In order to make the expenditure of time and money valuable, we have to do a lot of things to try to make it stick," Olson says. "If employees make a commitment to their boss and direct reports, there are quite a few people who know what they're supposed to be doing."

A follow-up session is planned for September, when the participants will review key concepts, share what did and did not work in their new approaches, and problem-solve about handling difficult situations.

While the training could have been provided at We Energies, the firm chose to hold it at the School of Continuing Education's 100,000-square-foot modern adult education and conference facility in the

the school, which is through September of this year, the company can use the Plankinton facilities for other training, if space permits.

"The facilities are excellent and the staff is easy to work with," Olson says. "We've been really happy with the relationship we've established, and we'll look favorably on doing business with UWM in the future."

More recently, Fleetguard, a division of Cummins Inc. based in Stoughton, also took advantage of the school's custom-training, but at its own facilities. Fleetguard designs and develops custom and after-market filtration products, for diesel-powered fleets, small engines and recreational vehicles.

It became clear that Fleetguard's engineers needed to upgrade their technical capabilities for designing parts for the firm's plastic injection molded products. "This need to upgrade was something new for us, and we decided it would be valuable to get outside help," says Chris Holm, director of air filtration and specialty product engineering.

Fleetguard contracted with the School of Continuing Education to bring in a professor from the University of Massachusetts, who provided training to a group of 20 to 25 engineers and operations staff. Economies were achieved by combining staff from Fleetguard's

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technical center in Stoughton, and company sites in Cookeville, Tenn., and Quimper, France.

Holm says in addition to lecturing about the different aspects of the technology, the instructor showed numerous parts and other samples to illustrate his lectures.

"He came with a suitcase full of parts, and we showed him our parts — it was a real geek fest," Holm laughs, adding that this "show-and-tell" stimulated the participants to think of new ways to design parts to meet specific customers' needs.

"And the training forced them to think about the whole injection molding process, not just their part in it," Holm adds. "They might not use some of the specific designs that were covered, but this was a good addition to their general knowledge."

Holm has measured the success of this training by the variety of product designs that have emerged since the completion of the course. "We can already see that the cost of tooling has been lowered because we understand part design better," he says.

Companies are also working jointly to ensure that even publicly offered continuing education programs are customized to represent

At We Energies, the goal of the training was to instruct supervisors in ways to help other employees more easily express ideas, give feedback and make recommendations for improvement. This, in turn, would provide a model for how the employees would relate to We Energies' customers.

After a bidding process, UWM was selected to conduct the training, which involved five groups of 19 or 20 supervisors, each receiving three full days of training, spaced three weeks apart.

Plankinton Building in downtown Milwaukee. We Energies does have classrooms, but they can be difficult to schedule for an entire day.

"I was looking for space for 15 full-day sessions. To find them, I would really have had to scramble," Olson says. "The fact that UWM could provide classrooms for us at no additional charge, other than paying for the food, was a big plus."

Olson says that creating a relationship with the school has brought other benefits. During the time We Energies is under contract with

the needs of their industries. For example, an Information Technology Advisory Board, composed of representatives from leading Wisconsin companies, helped the UWM School of Continuing Education develop its Wireless Local Area Network Certificate program, and a focus group of plastic injection molding professionals helped create targeted training modules after it identified a critical need for skills development among entry-level employees in the industry in the Greater Milwaukee area. ●