

# Create SME Champions

A successful subject matter expert program must involve the following: a team-oriented approach, a customer-focus, and a continuous-improvement environment **BY BONNIE F. MATTICK, M.A. ED., MBA, CPT**



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**D**o you know how to get the most from your subject matter experts (SMEs)? asked Kendra Lee in "How to Leverage Subject Matter Experts" in the March/April 2008 issue of *Training*. I agree with her general recommendations that we must "establish a relationship of trust and communication.....and be open about your expectations," but more specifically, a successful SME program must involve the following: a team-oriented approach, a customer-focus, and a continuous-improvement environment that ensures bottom-line results.

With shrinking budgets and workforce restructuring, it makes sense to find more ways to use subject matter experts who work with the instructional designers and the training department for the design, development, and implementation of training. A successful program is well-documented, and incorporates a formalized approach to identify and work with the SMEs. The SMEs make the commitment to quality performance and teamwork. To achieve the best business outcomes from the investment in a SME program, I recommend a team-oriented approach: Have the human resources (HR) department, the learning and development organization, and quality assurance work together to identify SMEs and support a formalized program. Put the focus on the operational units (customers).

A formalized program includes the following steps:


- Identify and recruit SMEs using specific criteria.
- Involve SMEs in training design and delivery.
- Evaluate and measure outcomes of training.
- Document pre-established quality standards.
- Include SME responsibilities in the performance measurement process.

I was asked by a major financial firm to initiate a formalized SME program that involved three

departments: the HR, learning, and quality assurance organizations. These departments partnered with the operational business units of the company and identified characteristics, competencies, and quality standards for SMEs. The SMEs were selected from the predetermined competencies. Such job competencies were linked to the quality standards already in place. The SMEs took skills assessments, and attended course development training to learn processes and tools. They worked with instructional designers to develop the job-specific training programs. The program also included a customized job coach and mentor training workshop for the SMEs.

The company used a cost-effective approach that resulted in the SMEs demonstrating innovative and

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creative ideas and suggestions. The SMEs took an active part in the training development process and made a personal investment in the content that resulted in more effective and relevant training. They became more engaged and enthusiastic in their job roles—excellent characteristics for part-time instructors. Peer recognition of the SMEs' expertise created a win-win situation. The SMEs were proud they were selected to participate and were recognized as the company "champions." 

To read "How to Leverage Subject Matter Experts," visit [www.trainingmag.com/experts](http://www.trainingmag.com/experts).