

Trends & Issues

Professional development in the nonprofit sector What's the demand?

Professional development in the nonprofit sector is a vital tool for strengthening organizational effectiveness in the face of continuous change. It stands against a backdrop in which community needs are many, resources are few and both funding and policy parameters are continuously in flux. At the same time, the field of professional development is itself evolving to meet the challenges of satisfying current training needs, responding to emerging ones and developing cost-effective options for how, when and what training is delivered.

Is the level of demand for training increasing, decreasing or stable? What are expectations for the future demand for training? What are the changing needs with respect to the content or focus of training? What are the changing needs of the sector with respect to the way training is delivered (e.g., classroom, onsite, online)? With these questions serving as a starting point, we interviewed seven leaders of community-based training organizations dedicated to advancing professional development in the sector. These seven organizations provide training on a wide range of topics of interest to board members, senior management and supervisors as well as front line staff. They offer in-class, in-agency and online opportunities. Viewed together, these training organizations serve nonprofits engaged in virtually all areas of the sector and in various regions of the country. What follows is a synthesis of key observations, insights and ideas reflecting their experience.

Demand for training now and in the future

The people we talked to indicated that the overall level of demand for the services of their organizations is fairly stable with some noticeable trends for particular kinds of training. Demand is strongest, and from the point of view of some interviewees it is increasing, for training in the areas of board governance, grant seeking, proposal writing, sustainability and fundraising. As well, demand is strong for leadership training and core managerial skills, including volunteer engagement and management. Demand for what are, relatively speaking, 'niche' topics (e.g., applications of cognitive behavioural therapy, conflict resolution, understanding the complex and multiple challenges homeless people face) is steady, but trainers must often cast increasingly wide nets to fill seats. Areas that appear to be emerging as potentially popular topics include succession planning and the use of social media.

Training organizations are well aware that like any other service provider to the sector, they must compete to provide a service that meets the needs of their clients at an affordable cost. Trainers also know that as important a consideration as cost is, there is more to the value proposition for training than its price. Perhaps the most important value learners demand from training is that it be tied in a concrete way to what they do in their current role (or aspire to do in another role). What they learn today, they want to use tomorrow. There is little demand for training that focuses on what would be nice to know – the demand focuses on what learners need to know right now.

1. ASPECT Social Ventures Corporation (British Columbia); Canadian Training Institute (Toronto and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan); Centrepoint (Alberta); Charity Village (national); LearnSphere (New Brunswick); Toronto Advanced Professional Education (Ontario); Toronto Hostels Training Centre (Ontario). We recognize that colleges and universities also provide relevant professional development to the sector as do trainers who cater primarily to the needs of for-profit organizations, but who also provide training opportunities relevant to the nonprofit sector.

Observations on client organizations

Trainers indicate that client organizations recognize the importance of providing training and development opportunities as a means of meeting three specific ends, in addition to the general or overarching contribution to attracting and retaining employees. First, training can help organizations deal with specific unexpected needs (e.g., training in contract negotiation in response to abrupt changes in funding procedures and priorities).

Second, organizations widely recognize that while formal education tends to focus on research-driven theoretical and macro perspectives, it cannot fully prepare graduates for many field realities facing the nonprofit sector. Hence, as Beatrice Traub-Werner, president and director of education at TAPE Educational Services Inc. puts it:

“We fill the gap between what is taught in colleges and universities and what is happening on the ground.”

— Beatrice Traub-Werner, President and Director of Education at TAPE Educational Services Inc.

Third, client organizations recognize that professional development meets a need that stems from the changing nature of demands placed on management. There is a growing sense that managers who used to consult, educate, supervise and mentor employees must now put more of their time and effort into administrative work. With more of management time spent on administration, there seems to be a greater role to be played by professional development activities for employees.

What isn't as widely recognized among client organizations, however, is the need to integrate training and development with organizational development; which in turn needs to be addressed in strategic planning. John Sawdon, executive director of the Canadian Training Institute notes that “there is a need to integrate organizational development and employee training and development.” Barbara Ferguson, Chief Executive Officer of CentrePoint, points out that training and development together with HR strategies for supporting

employees and succession planning, have to be linked to an overall organizational strategy.

Observations on learners

Shawn Mitchell, director of content and communications at CharityVillage® finds it helpful to think of learners as falling into one of three market groups. First, learners who are generally trying to upgrade their skills and knowledge in their role or, more broadly, in their area of professional practice; second, those who are considering making a move from one role or area of practice to another; and, third those in the for-profit or public sectors who are interested in transitioning into the nonprofit sector in a specific role that builds on their current skills and experience (e.g., communications and marketing).

Regardless of the market segment learners may fit into, trainers note that there is a growing number of individuals who are taking responsibility for their own learning, and by extension, their career path. Sometimes, they pay for their own training. Typically these are younger learners (in their 30's) who are more comfortable with new technology and are attracted to online opportunities.

Finally, there is consensus among trainers that learners especially value training that provides formal certificates of completion or that can count toward formal certification (e.g., participation in a workshop on fundraising be credited toward the certified fund raising executive (CFRE) designation).

Observations about training methods

Trainers continue to provide in-person training in both training facilities and/or workplaces because of their direct suitability for complex topics, their flexibility and the unmatched opportunity they provide for team-building and peer-to-peer learning and exchange of ideas. Nonetheless, there is also a good deal of excitement around online learning, which falls into one of three general formats. One format is unfacilitated, stand-alone modules that can be accessed via the internet, and started, stopped and re-started at any time by learners. These modules may consist of slides, audio/video presentations,

along with accompanying readings and quizzes that allow participants to learn at their own pace. A second form of online learning consists of webinars essentially, brief presentations facilitated in real time, that allows some Q & A but little interaction among participants themselves. The third is a more structured and typically lengthy (e.g., spanning several weeks) form of presentation that consists of web-based stand-alone materials, a discussion forum and pre-scheduled opportunities for real-time web-based interaction among learners and a facilitator.

Though less costly than in-person training, it is clear that each of these options has their strengths and limitations. There is no single best form of online learning; the challenge is to ensure the best fit between training modality and the nature and scope of the material that needs to be taught.

Summary

Interviews with spokespeople from seven community-based organizations, all of them dedicated to advancing professional development in the sector, give us a better understanding of how professional development activity in the nonprofit sector is continuously evolving to keep up with current training needs. They stay responsive to the kinds of training that are needed now, they have a sense of future needs and they provide cost-effective options for both in-person and web-based training.

Appendix

Training Organizations and Interviewees

ASPECT Social Ventures Corporation (ASVC)

<http://www.everyaspect.ca/>

Interviewee: Chris Atchison, Chief Operating Officer, Membership Services

ASPECT Social Ventures Corporation (ASVC) is a social enterprise that conducts business under the name Every Aspect Management. ASVC's sole shareholder is the Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training (ASPECT), a registered nonprofit society, based in Victoria, British Columbia (<http://www.aspect.bc.ca>). ASVC concentrates on entrepreneurial activities that seek to generate profits to be directed to ASPECT's social purposes.

Canadian Training Institute (CTI)

www.cantraining.org

Interviewees: John Sawdon, Executive Director; Stephen Hughes, Manager, Training & Development

The Canadian Training Institute (CTI) is a national nonprofit organization with offices in Toronto and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Its mission is to reduce criminal behaviour and violence through the direct provision of services and by addressing the social determinants of health. To accomplish this, CTI provides a range of services, including training in such areas as crisis prevention and intervention, managing aggressive behaviour, train the trainer, community work, trauma work and self-care.

CentrePoint

<http://www.thecentrepoint.ca>

Interviewee: Barbara Ferguson, Chief Executive Officer

Based in Calgary, CentrePoint education focuses on the fundamentals of running nonprofit organizations. It provides both classroom training and webinars in areas such as Board governance, fund development, leadership, marketing and communications as well as human resources.

CharityVillage®

<http://www.charityvillage.com>

Interviewee: Shawn Mitchell, Director of Content and Communications

CharityVillage is a nationally recognized on-line resource for the nonprofit sector. Among its services, CharityVillage provides eLearning programs on a wide range of topics, including: board development, budgeting for nonprofits, event planning, grant-seeking, policies & procedures, proposal writing, strategic planning and volunteer management.

LearnSphere Canada, Inc.

<http://learnsphere.ca/nonprofit/>

Interviewee: Laura Maynard, Project Coordinator

LearnSphere - Training for the Non-Profit Sector offers several workshops (e.g., strategic planning, grant-writing) in half-day or full-day sessions for non-profit organizations in English or French. Workshops are provided by independent trainers contracted by LearnSphere.

Toronto Advanced Professional Education (TAPE)

<http://www.tapestudies.com/index.html>

Interviewee: Beatrice Traub-Werner, President and Director of Education

TAPE Educational Services is a provider of Continuing Education programs and professional consulting services. TAPE provides a wide range of training programs for those working in the human services, education, family law, and health care fields; and offers certificates in several areas of intervention. Programs are delivered in both face-to-face and virtual (on-line and video-conference) learning environments.

Toronto Hostels Training Centre

<http://www.thtcentre.com/>

Interviewee: Ruth Gillson, Executive Director

The Toronto Hostels Training Centre offers practical and accessible training for hostel/shelter staff, managers, volunteers, students in job placements and agency board members. The Training Centre provides over 120 workshops in a wide range of subject areas (e.g., crisis intervention; standardized training for standards and guidelines, First Aid, CPR, WHMIS), as well as certificate programs.

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