Training and work organisation:

An action-research study in a sales and distribution company

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Introduction

This article is based on a master's dissertation in Occupational Sciences entitled "Training and the Organisation of Work: an Action Research Trial in a Sales and Distribution Company", completed at the *Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa* (ISCTE) in 2003.

In this project, the concept of training goes far beyond the traditional models based on traditional education and formal training courses or schemes. It also goes far beyond the idea of training by catalogue, in which a series of people enrol with the intention of learning something when given a choice of existing defined, structured courses.

We regularly find that the results of training courses are not measured, whether or not there has been a change in practices or in the organisation. This is because, on one hand, other statistics take into account other aspects such as the number of courses given or trainee satisfaction and, on the other hand, because training is designed out of context, without taking into account real problems and the actual people involved.

Training should not be based only on a choice of courses. Rather, it should be clearly oriented towards demand, towards meeting the real needs of a particular setting and its people. As a means, not an end in itself. It should be defined on the basis of real problems and situations that are being regularly assessed

and monitored in a cyclical process, guaranteeing that learning occurs in a work context and that the organisation is being constantly improved. In this age of uncertainty, to ensure employees' performance, organisations have had to ensure that work situations are also teaching situations, according to Le Boterf (1989) - always with a view to permanent improvements in economic and social performance and a reduction in dysfunctions.

This project could be defined as a transition from a system of *training schemes* to one of *action training* (Le Boterf, 1987): training is no longer based on programmes or courses that are defined and structured at the outset and organised without prior analysis and without considering the interests of all parties. Training not only focuses on an assessment and study to identify the problems, but also on existing knowledge and practices. It is all identified by the involvement of the parties, while the training objectives are defined on the basis of the real situation in the field and on work practices.

But learning should not only occur during the training scheme; it should be become a part of practice so as to serve as a basis for ongoing improvement. The idea is to go from a training model that is centred on the individual to one that is aimed at the learning organisation. The implementation of this project will mean that training is organised on the basis of existing problems and needs or on the interests and knowledge expressed by the individuals themselves. When devis-

This study seeks to define a method of designing work-linked training, based on day-to-day work practices and the collaboration between all those involved. From diagnosis to evaluation, no training is designed or given without considering the opinions and interests of the parties involved. The method used is based on action research (AR) and on the cyclical process that characterises it: planning - acting - observing - reflecting. Training officers take on a new role here: they become facilitators and the driving force behind training practices.
The conclusion is that there are reasons for considering more dynamic approaches in the design and organisation of training, based on research and reflection and with the participation of all parties involved.

ing action training, it is important to draw out each person's knowledge and introduce this individual knowledge into that of the group and organisation.

The first part of the article refers to the theoretical fields inherent in the subject of the study and also addresses action research, which is used here both as a research method and for training purposes. All the research is based on a real, concrete situation: the design and organisation of ongoing training (technical aspects and knowledge of the product) for sales assistants. It is a case study of a large department store in Lisbon (¹), in which each of its departments has the characteristics of a small retail outlet and the whole is a true network of small business units.

The subject of sales also has implications in terms of training. Being in direct contact with the customers, sales assistants are a strategic group for the company. According to a study conducted by Cedefop (1995:14), what is necessary and "increasingly to be found is training aimed at improving knowledge of products and employees' attitudes and behaviours, in order to improve the company's image".

Because of work organisation changes and increasingly well-informed customers, it is necessary to have well-trained, customer-oriented sales assistants who are specialised in the products they sell. The question is how to achieve this most effectively. We cannot focus only on jobs or only on people when the aim is to increase work skills.

The article describes the method followed in designing and organising effective training which takes into account conditioning factors in the organisation of work. There are sales assistants who work in shifts and there are others who work part time; there are highly specialised sales areas with only a small number of sales assistants while there is a shortage of specialists in some retail areas. Creativity is required and it is necessary to design the training to go far beyond traditional classroom courses.

The explanation of the whole process and the understanding and reflection of the scheme do not refer to a law or a theory but to an understanding of this particular situation. In this project, the criterion for defining practices is therefore more important than the criterion of representativity. The idea was to use the complex, concrete situation in which the scheme took place and then, after understanding it, set out principles of action. In this case, problem solving involved everyone's participation and the training officer, a researcher, was the co-producer of change and knowledge.

The second part of the article first addresses the process that brings out a new training paradigm. It is necessary to analyse the limits of the traditional training model, which was based on the instrumental, adaptive perspective of training processes with structured courses and a vision of humans as being programmable. In fact, in many schemes designed in the past, more thought was given to means than to results; at the heart of the training were the trainer and his or her command of the contents. Today, it is important not only to bring training close to the workplace but also to bring the workplace to training. In this increasingly close link, what matter is results *in action* not results *of the scheme*. In linking training situations and work situations, we recognise work situations as being instructive. Moreover, each person is considered to have a training potential gradually created through their knowledge and personal experience and interests. It is this fount of knowledge, experiences or attitudes that it is important to bring out in each person and place at the service of a whole community.

We then classify the types of schemes and how they were implemented in this organisation. We give the results of some case studies: forms of training put into practice, linked with work and following the same method, based on the cyclical process characterising action research.

In the third part of the article, we reflect on the impact of the study on the organisation and make suggestions for future research.

Theory

The study is based mainly on the constructivist model of training, theories on the qualifying and learning organisation and the theory of human relations.

The action training project implemented is based on trainee-oriented training, on training rooted in the work itself, and on train-

ing oriented towards reflection and research into practices, involving the exchange of experiences between people. These principles are included in the assumptions of the constructivist training model, as they are based on the idea that occupational practice is, in itself, an important way of constructing knowledge. The experience of specialists and reflection on their practices take precedence. The subjects build on their own knowledge through direct intervention on the object.

Learning organisations often employ the concept of "working for projects". The project team is not formed according to the chain of command, but brings together the skills needed to solve a problem. *Qualifying* companies and *learning* companies [2] are always evoked in the dynamics of change, which, in turn, is associated with the idea of progress. A qualifying company is one that improves individuals' skills; a learning company develops collective skills [3].

Human relations theory suggests the ongoing improvement in practical knowledge, including of low-skilled workers, has a key role to play in increasing productivity. The receivers of training are not just objects of teaching but subjects with whom others work and who analyse themselves. Training is thus aimed at the integral development of the adult. The action research method itself is also based on a humanist conception: people are valued and supported in developing their skills and abilities.

The process used to evaluate training was based on Kirkpatrick's four-level model of training evaluation (1998) [4], in which different dimensions of training can be assessed. Level 1 measures satisfaction, level 2 assesses learning, level 3 evaluates behaviour and transfer to the work context and level 4 measures results for the organisation.

Action research (AR) as a training method

The purposes and functions of AR can vary considerably. It may be used for investigation, research or action purposes and its function may be critical or one of action, with a view to achieve change and specific training purposes. As training is aimed at change, both individual and collective or company changes must be considered. AR as a training strategy is to be implemented

in this company to help training officers, trainers and participants or their supervisors develop their abilities and to foster an attitude of self-questioning.

Methods used

The study is based on reflection about the reality and concrete practices in the organisation of training. It was supported by the use of a research diary. Different methods were used to organise the different forms of training in the various phases of the process.

Interviews and questionnaires with feedback

In this study, all the training is based on problem solving and is part of an AR loop in which the situation to be changed is analysed and assessed on the basis of the needs felt by the employees themselves. In the case of classroom training, the situation is identified and assessed on the basis of a questionnaire answered by sales assistants and their supervisors. The questionnaire is drawn up on the basis of a preliminary assessment made by the training officer or researcher on the basis of meetings and conversations with supervisors, buyers and suppliers. In the second, feedback, phase, the information gathered is analysed by the Training Department and sent to the trainers, who then use it to decide on training subjects and contents. The questionnaires were used in 10 different technical or product training courses for 72 sales assistants.

Where on-the-job training was concerned, the trainer herself used an evaluations scale for several parameters with 78 sales assistants from 16 different sales areas, before and after observing them in their actual work environment.

During assessment of training by project, we also used semi-structured interviews with the managers of floors involving clothing alterations, with the seamstresses in the service studio, with sales assistants and with despatch operators.

Problem solving with experiments in the field

The loop that characterises AR consists of an integrated cycle of activities in which each

phase learns from the previous one and determines the next one. Generally speaking, the process begins with a general idea or a situation that needs improving. After deciding the scope of action and conducting preliminary reconnaissance of the field of action, the researcher or trainer draws up a plan of action. S/he defines ways of monitoring the effects of the first step, the strategy to be used and the circumstances in which it will be used in practice. Data are gathered from each step implemented and then described and assessed. This assessment provides the data that will be used to prepare a new plan, and so on. Kemmis and Elliott (1982), quoted by Winter (1989:13), regard the process as a loop between the analysis of practice (essential for bringing about change) and the implementation of changed practices (essential for increasing understanding).

All the authors whose works we researched agree that AR involves participation, collaboration, knowledge acquisition and social change. The researcher achieves these aims by implementing a loop consisting of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The purpose of AR is not so much to eliminate the problem but to develop the situation: thus, small steps in the right direction by those involved are all valued.

These four elements or cycles of the spiral ([5]) *(planning, acting, observing and reflecting)* are based on the idea that, in each cycle, the researcher plans before acting and reflects on findings and methods after acting. The reflection at the end of each loop fuels the planning for the next loop. As a result, something is learnt in each of these phases. In other phases, we confirm previous learning or find that the proposed learning is inappropriate. This is what Gummesson (1991), quoted by Dick (1993:14), says is a *hermeneutic spiral*, where each turn of the spiral builds upon the understanding flowing out of the previous turn. Each research cycle therefore corresponds to the underlying action in individual reflection. After each cycle, the planning, action and reflection are criticised. And this is done as the data and documentation are gathered for the AR itself.

While action training is designed to solve existing problems, AR is used as a means of obtaining information about a situation in order to act on it. Instead of waiting for solutions from the outside, the specialists directly investigate the problems placed before them in order to find partial or total solutions. This helps the specialists to achieve a better understanding of the problems and the possibilities for intervention. The organisations to which they belong can then change the way they work, question their culture and rethink their relations with the community, and the community's knowledge of both the professional group and the company's community is enriched.

There is always permanent iteration and interaction between the research and the action, and knowledge is produced by changing the existing circumstances. Training by research can be achieved with different strategies and activities which, after an analysis of practices in the field, lead to training, through which knowledge is manifested and situations are changed.

Evaluation method

During on-the-job training, one questionnaire was given to the 16 supervisors of the 16 sales areas and another to the 78 participating sales assistants eight week after the beginning of the follow-up. After the same period, the trainer who had done the monitoring filled in her on-the-job observation forms, assessing the different items for each participant and comparing them with the assessment made at the beginning of each sales assistant's follow-up.

In the simulations during classroom training, one questionnaire was given to the 10 supervisors of 10 different areas and another to the 72 participants (although only 48 from seven different areas answered), 2 to 3 weeks after attending the course. An informal questionnaire was given to training providers after the same period.

In training by project - specifically training in clothing alterations - one questionnaire was given to the five different apparel areas, to three despatch operators and 12 sales assistants from the alteration team, four months after the teams went into action on each floor.

After-sales information on the number of events, customer complaints and costs of garments was also gathered before and after the project.

([5]) For Kemmis and McTaggart, quoted by Dick (1997), the phases of the typical spiral or cycle are as follows: 1a) deciding what questions we want to answer. If it is the first stage of the process, it can be a broad question like "how does this system work?" 1b) deciding who to ask and how to ask. 2) Asking (acting) 3a) checking the information gathered 3b) interpreting the information 3c) checking that the choice of participants and the method of gathering information are suitable 3d) checking the data and interpreting them with the applicable literature.

Changing the training paradigm: from training scheme to action training

This action training project emerges as a result of a strong wish to reorganise the company's existing training model in order to help bring about ongoing, in-depth organisational change, in the sense given by Quinn (1996). In this sense, it means going beyond the research process and, for the writer's professional practice, represents an opportunity for critical reflection.

In terms of company training techniques, I have been working on training design and now intend to take a critical view of the way in which training has been organised in the company. The idea of this self-criticism exercise is to define a valid model for the company based on a process to be applied to all training coordination, thus providing a prospective as a well as a retrospective picture.

The whole project was born out of my reflection, initiated by the training technique and supported by field notes and my research diary, on my own daily practices. The result emerging from my reflection and reading was a series of ideas and possible different ways of doing, analysing and organising, which were first put into practice during my work activities.

The idea of the project is to test a concept of training design by means of a cyclical process, with the final goal of its serving as a basis for the organisation of training in the company. In order to achieve this, we not only defined a form of action for different training situations based on needs and objectives, we also implemented the model in a series of training courses. All the examples have a point in common and that is the fact that the working environment was used in some way in all of them in order to activate the training situation. Another common feature is the fact that we tried to achieve the *production-mobilisation-acquisition of knowledge* (Barbier, 1996), by inviting the target population to get involved.

The main goal set for the Action Training Project is to *ensure that technical training produces results in terms of knowledge, skills or organisation of work*, on the basis of the objectives defined.

The problem arises later, during evaluation, when we want to find out whether in fact knowledge and practices have been acquired and whether they have been transferred to work situations. It is not always easy to gather data in the field that can clearly be attributed to training. For one thing, improvements may not be exclusively due to training, in that there are always many contributing factors. At the same time, questionnaires for participants and supervisors - the easiest and most practical means of getting feedback, which should be used in any case - only reflect individuals' experiences. It is therefore important to know not only the results and the product of the training, but also the way in which these results were actually achieved.

The method used in the project seems appropriate in that there is constant monitoring and dialogue between training design, trainers, supervisors and participants, which go beyond the training itself.

What is at stake here is a change in the process, the creation of a new model; a new way of designing, organising and evaluating training that was already being done in the company. We also feel that the situations described do not exhaust all the possibilities for designing training linked with work.

This concept of demand-based training stipulates that the design of all training is based on the needs and interests of individuals and of the organisation. We assume that training must have measurable results (some harder to measure that others). These must be known and analysed and used not only as output but also as an input for ongoing training and work process improvement. We also assume that training should be assessed, not on the basis of the number of courses given or the number of training hours per employee, but of tangible results for each individual or group, in terms of the organisation and of work processes.

While before training was merely classroom courses, with this project it becomes development in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. While courses were once organised in modules and on the basis of content, the idea now is to base the content and the process in which the training occurs on how work is organised. The definition and structure of the training depends on what is

happening in the whole work context, what is there, the difficulties, the needs, the problems, the (ab)normal situations and on what people already know.

In the past, there was absolutely no flexibility; in simulations, the training providers merely "gave" another course on the basis of the model and programme that they already had. Conversely, this project is based on an empirical, inductive approach. In the old model, the trainees learnt the theory and went on to put it into practice. In the current model, the idea is for classroom training to ground, systematise and consolidate knowledge and learning that participants have already gained from practice. General considerations will thus be inferred from situations experienced by the participants rather than from theorising.

According to Lesne (1984), in the past, training was based on the *transmission of knowledge,* in which the trainer was the transmitter of knowledge in an *asymmetrical relationship,* and action was taken in isolation, without considering the department with all its members. Action training is intended to develop the effectiveness of a group through the development of all its members. For this to happen, we must encourage the sharing of knowledge and know-how, self-training and working groups.

Indeed, in the recent past, training in the company was based on and practically limited to a trainer-trainee relationship, whereas action training aims at a multidirectional relationship including internal parties (trainer, supervisors, buyers, sales assistants and co-workers) and external parties (⁶) (suppliers, customers, competitors, trainers...).

Another aspect that separates this project from the old training model is the relationship with know-how. Before, it was a question of using knowledge, while now the idea is to construct know-how. There is now a decisive commitment to experienced individuals who are agents of change. In addition, it is the employees themselves who define or suggest the training subjects.

This change in paradigm includes the acceptance of the new role that training has to play in the organisation. It should begin with a rethinking of its role in the Human Resources Department and in the organisation. This has to do with the need to antic-

ipate developments in the organisation of work. The proposed project assumes a reduced focus on Training as a department and a room, seeing it more in terms of action, context and individuals, with a view to building a learning organisation (⁷). It also focuses on measuring results at the different levels mentioned above.

Implementing the different types of action

Another purpose of this study was to organise training into three different types, according to Barbier's classification (1996) (⁸). It is not a question of deciding which of them is best or most valid. They must be considered on the basis of each situation. No type of training is better than any other. Ideally, they should be complementary. They are all useful and necessary and this study gives an appropriate description of how to design, organise and assess them, always in connection to work, in order to guarantee their success and suitability to different situations.

Training in work situations

This concept of training is designed to construct a personalised training path in a wide variety of work areas implemented in accordance with the type of work organisation. Although it all takes place in the workplace, some training happens on the job, while other training is separated from it. Training aims not only to perceive the work process and work relations in general but also to acquire content by placing it into real situations. The need for this training is a result of the constant influx of new sales assistants to each of the areas.

Training in work situations (Barbier, 1996) as part of this project includes all technical training in dressmaking, focusing on practices with a trainer in a work context. Nevertheless, the model is equally valid for training involving tutoring, generally during the recruitment phase. In each type of training, work situations and context are used to activate and accompany learning.

Instead of a trainer providing content to a passive trainee, here it is the employees themselves who actively seek information - and thus themselves generate, rather than just use, know-how. This requires getting the participants to learn how to learn and

(⁶) External bodies include suppliers as businesses and as trainers; customers, to the extent that we take into consideration the training and knowledge that sales assistants can acquire in their relations with the customer, (although analysing it is not one of the purposes of their job); and competitors, in that some training can be held on the supplier's premises with the participation of the competition's employees also.

(⁷) According to Senge (1990), there are five *disciplines* that can contribute to the systemic thought inherent in learning organisations: "adoption of systemic thought", "fostering personal mastery of one's own life", "challenging prevailing mental models", "creating a shared overall vision" and "promoting learning in a team".

(⁸) *Training during work situations, training from work situations and training in actual work situations.*

how to reach into know-how that hardly been formalised, as a way of taking part in the joint transformation of people and work - their performance and their organisation.

This type of training is intended to get individuals to construct and absorb know-how from the instruments, contents and processes of their own work. No immediate, direct change in work situations is expected. There is, we hope, a lot of know-how that can be mobilised in their current work situation or transferred to a similar situation. The basic technical and vocational know-how is acquired by using the work situation and the work is the starting point for the training.

Once a person is recruited and evaluated by the trainer, an assessment [9] is made on the basis of items defined for each sales area. The trainer and trainee both then identify their current knowledge of each item. The trainee is informed of the objective that is set for each item, depending on the area or the job to be done. After that, trainer and trainee define lines of work and support so that she or he can achieve this goal.

As this process involved over 400 sales assistants from five different floors in dress-making alone, it proved necessary to hire a trainer just for these subjects. This became possible when a dressmaker who was also an experienced trainer joined the Training Department. The process consisted of continuously analysing work situations and practices with all those involved, in order to pinpoint training needs.

In this type of training, the target population's training goals and paths are mapped out - but only partially. They emerge progressively from work situations and can include moments of non-formal training with the trainer, self-training or even informal on-the-job training. These situations are provided for but not planned, given that we are talking about personalised training paths in which each participant has his or her own rhythm, needs, interests and motivations.

The trainer monitors the sales assistants, from identification to evaluation, as follows:

❏ The trainer joins the sales assistant to be monitored and makes an assessment of his or her knowledge and know-how in a real situation and then, together, they decide on a score of 1 to 10 depending on each area.

❏ The trainer indicates the objective for each parameter. Strategies and activities (theoretic and practical assignments, PC exercises, local support with customers,...) are defined on the basis of each individual's knowledge, needs and interests.

❏ The trainer monitors each individual and reformulates their follow-up plan.

❏ After eight weeks of follow-up, the trainer gives the sales assistant a grade.

Training from work situations

Training given from work situations (Barbier, 1996) consists in occasional formal training courses, meaning, in this case, classroom simulations. Their purpose is to improve specialised knowledge or knowledge of the product. Training is triggered usually by work situations and products sold; it is usually administered by specialists or trainers sent by suppliers. Training is scheduled on the basis not only of individuals' interests and motivations but also of the specific reasons for providing it, which are discussed in advance with the supervisor and buyer. The training is designed and oriented on the basis of the knowledge expressed (not only on doubts but also on individuals' perception of the products). The work contents in each area are used as training tools, as the intention in the classroom is to rebuild and finalise knowledge. We try to recreate the work situation; sales assistants' time in the classroom is intended to improve or correct their practices in work situations.

Organising the training requires advance preparation involving participants, supervisors, buyers and the suppliers themselves. The training officer is there to encourage and mediate the process, watching the signs from all parties, always intent on ongoing improvement. We always start with reflection on the results of previous training so that they can be used to plan subsequent courses. Individuals are asked to reflect on their practices.

The planning phase of each simulation takes into account employee awareness. People often do not realise what they know or what they can or cannot do and this is an obstacle to developing skills. The training is

[9] This assesses not only knowledge but also know-how. To do this, the trainer watches the sales assistant work or, if this is not possible, gives him or her the assessment questionnaire. The grade given to the trainee should be defined jointly by the trainer and trainee.

intended to help the sales assistants become aware of their abilities. They have to participate and experiment until they can acknowledge their abilities and use them - even if only unconsciously and spontaneously.

Internal and external partners contribute to this process. The trainers not only point out what is all right but also what can be improved; they observe what people do or do not know. Before the training, they will have had access to the sales questionnaires assessing the sales assistants' knowledge. The questionnaires and other information tell the training officer and trainer what the sales assistants know best, what they know less and what they do not know at all. The training officer outlines the training, establishing goals, methods and strategies (practical in nature whenever possible) on the *training form* to be sent to the supplier's trainer, who will fill in the remaining fields. This ensures that the training is planned on the basis of the goals and interests of all those involved. An assessment is made three to four weeks after the training, when the supervisors and the participants in the training answer questionnaires.

Training in work situations (training by project)

Cases of *training in work situations* (Barbier, 1996) are devices aimed at the production or modification of working methods with a view to better collective effectiveness. All the players involved should have the opportunity to speak, either to describe their work and the problems that they come up against or to help find solutions to the problems. This is called *training by project*, because it leads to the development of individuals as a whole and also because it uses work methods and processes that are similar to project methods. The groups that are formed (according to the need to solve different problems) meet more or less regularly. The meetings precede the training, which will be based on the observation of and reflection on them. In this situation, the learning comes from the individuals as the builders of know-how. No one pushes know-how on them; it is only necessary to encourage them to think about the way they work for knowledge to emerge.

Training in its usual sense is not the main purpose of these meetings. Training oc-curs because the employees involved are both the subject and the means of the change we want to bring about. The people who intervene and are formally asked to speak are deeply involved. The didactic aspect comes from the work method itself, which is the main content of the training. The didactic process comes from something that already exists, from work practices used by different groups, each with different experiences. In the crossroads of know-how and situations information is exchanged and new know-how is built. This results in an ongoing teaching process, one which focuses not on the content but on the process itself - the interaction between the players. The point is to bring about changes in behaviour or attitudes rather than merely to transmit knowledge.

The example given for this type of training also had to do with apparel but in this case it dealt with the management and organisation of garment alterations. It began with some meetings, first informally with certain people, and was then extended to supervisors on the apparel floors. The result was a working group called the *Alterations Project*. In the first phase, the group drew up a single apparel-related document for the whole store. The group has been meeting once a month, always keeping minutes. It consists of a technical body (hierarchy and duties directly related to the problems and solutions), the group of the teams involved, which are operational, and the training department as coordinator and moderator. Later, it was found that there were other problems that needed solving. So there was a second round to establish an *Alterations Team* which would be responsible on each floor for enforcing the rules drawn up by the group. It had become clear that training needs to be done at team and group level and involve work situations.

For the assessment, questionnaires were given to supervisors and participants and data was gathered comparing incidents and complaints before and after the *training by project.*

Analysis and discussion of results

After the action training model had been implemented, supervisors and others (trainers, suppliers, training officers) found that the knowledge of almost all the sales assistants had improved, that this type of train-

Results in the four levels of evaluation (Kirkpatrick's model)				
Type of training	**1. Reaction to training**	**2. Learning**	**3. Transfer**	**4. Results in the company**
Work-context training in apparel	100 % of the sales assistants considered the exercises useful and 78 % very useful, because they were related to their work. They preferred on-the-job training.	98 % of the sales assistants said that they learned more. For the supervisors, there were improvements in all performance parameters in at least 60 % sales staff.	In the supervisors' opinion, 95 % of the sales assistants applied the things they learned in the training. For the trainer, all improved in all assessment parameters. The sales staff's performance went up 2 to 3 points on a scale of 1 to 10.	More people trained in less time without leaving their work stations.
Technical product training in simulations	When asked orally after the training, their reactions were generally highly positive. Opinion 2-3 weeks after training. 59 % suggest more practical training, 38 % lasting longer and 19 % with later support in the store.	The supervisors said that the knowledge of 95 % of the sales assistants improved and 98 % of the participants said that they learned things that they could use in their work.	For the supervisors, the sales ability of 60 % of the sales assistants improved, multitasking improved in 30 % and versatility in 22 %. 77 % improved their arguments. Average performance before was 5.6 and after was 7.9.	Where results were concerned, no increase in sales was recorded due to the difficulty in isolating variables and contamination by other factors (fairs, campaigns and promotions).
Training by project - "Alterations"	No questions asked about it but there was 100 % attendance at the monthly meetings where representatives of each floor were present.	58 % of the sales staff and 67 % of the despatch operators said that they learnt something.	100 % of the despatch operators began to respect standards, 40 % of the supervisors learnt about the circuits and over 60 % improved their relationship with an outside workshop, supplier.	Incidents in the store with or without the presence of the customer reduced from 5.1 % (at the end of the 1st month of the project) to 1.1 % (4 months later).

ing had a practical application, that the knowledge acquired was used on the job and that - in the opinion of all the sales assistants assessed by the supervisors in simulations or in their jobs - their performance had improved.

The results were different for each of the types of training identified and the training course given because the problems and goals were also different. Not only the form of training, but also the strategies and activities differed in each case. Nevertheless, in all of them we followed a model based on a cyclical process, close to the action research method. In addition, all of them assume that the training meeting itself is a moment for reflection on the training. Therefore, before each training session, there is a need for preparation and reflection, which must also continue after the training. So here we have a new role in the organisation for the training department and its practitioners. They must first ensure that everyone participates, that the trainees and work practices are the focal point of the training, and that the others become reflective professionals. The training department instils curiosity, generates research and creates knowhow as a way of reaching a more abstract knowledge.

Evaluating the results in the light of Kirkpatrick's four levels (1998), we obtain the data shown in the above table. The result of this training method was that training situations were integrated with work. This was what we wanted to happen in order to achieve some changes in work practices.

Another aspect that distinguishes this project from the company's previous course-based training model was that there were fewer training sessions. In training by project, we work on actual work practices and training and work are fully integrated. With on-the-job training, transfer and monitoring is immediate; there is no need to take people away from their jobs for training. Less time is needed for classroom simulations, while reflection before and after training prepares and continues the learning process.

It is therefore a model that aims at rationalising training times, with no time wasted on useless information (usually included in programmes just to fill the schedule defined or imposed at the beginning). This model is effective, produces results for work and for the organisation and reduces training times, making it more efficient. The form and context of the training obviously have to be adjusted to existing conditions and needs.

This project seems to have made an impact, albeit limited, outside the company, i.e. regarding suppliers and their own training staff. This way of applying training was new to many of them, and opened up a new way of understanding training. For those who had never offered training, this new way was appealing, helpful and attractive. For the old hands, it at least showed them that there were other ways of organising training. From courses that were all defined from the start and structured on the basis of the product itself or the way the trainer organised the information, we moved on nec-

essarily to tailor-made training. Thus the training path followed corresponded to the needs and interests of the training's customer system (Lopes, 2002), with the trainee as the focal point.

Often, the training department was the first to get suppliers, supervisors, sales assistants and the department store together. Generally we found that the suppliers saw themselves as partners. After the training was completed they often came to tell me about the changes they had noticed in the sales assistants' performance .

Reflection about the study

Difficulties and resistance

The first difficulty encountered was the actual design of the action research as a training strategy, given the shortage of studies on the subject.

Getting people to behave as thinking practitioners and to be responsible for their own training, so that the training does not become a transmissive exercise, was extremely difficult. Neither was it easy to involve the different partners, who are not usually called upon to get involved in training. Another problem is that transmissive training and school training is deeply rooted in tradition. The attitude of many trainers when teaching is one of lecturing; they uncritically accept the idea that their job is to 'teach' and 'train' others, whose job is respectively to learn.

When trainers are suggested by suppliers or even by brand promoters, it is also necessary to define how they should be selected. Should we choose specialists who are familiar with the production and manufacture of the products or should we prefer practised sales assistants who know from experience what questions customers ask and are closer to the work culture of the sales assistants being trained?

Another difficulty was the fact that there were several parties involved throughout a process that took place during work time. Often, only with persistence did we get the supplier trainers to collaborate. Buyers, too, were not always available to collaborate in the joint advance activities needed to prepare the training.

Where the targets of the training were concerned, it was important to confront them (as suppliers, buyers, supervisors or sales assistants) with a preliminary analysis of the results of training. Their response may help understand whether the original idea is correct. But we cannot rely completely on the targets, as they tend to see things in their own way and this may hinder their ability to stand back and analyse the situation.

In evaluating, it is essential to recognise how difficult it is to obtain internal results and indicators. This is why in classroom training we use self-evaluation or evaluation by others that is based only on people's perception of actions. We were not able to conduct evaluations as often as we would have liked. The more short training sessions are offered, the more difficult it is to evaluate them systematically. We also have to take into account that the sales assistants are asked to assess their knowledge in a questionnaire they fill in before each act of training. The supervisors are asked for their cooperation before and after training, in the identification and assessment phase. It would be unthinkable, in the two or three weeks after simulations, to ask everyone for an evaluation of all the training. As some of the training processes would overlap, we would even run the risk of getting the wrong evaluation.

Some limitations

The limitations of this study had to do mainly with methods and results. Where methods were concerned, the study was not representative of all ways of organising training and may not be adaptable to all companies. We are not claiming, therefore, that the results and conclusions can be generalised, given the diversity of situations and circumstances.

A considerable limitation was the fact that the people who conduct the evaluation are judges and parties at the same time. The evaluators (supervisors or trainers) may run the risk of unintentionally ignoring or minimising negative aspects in which their responsibility is involved. It also impossible for them not to be influenced by their own experience and the relationship they have with the people they are evaluating. The internal evaluation may therefore not be enough to assess the results and the functioning of a training session or system.

An external evaluation would have been useful and appropriate and should have been used to complement the internal one and to help make a final appraisal of the effects of training. The trainees' skills should have been tested, and this was not done for the simulations. It is easier for an external evaluator to be objective and analyse things at a distance while contributing his or her own point of view. We decided at the outset that no outside assessment would be made, either from customers or suppliers. It would certainly have been interesting, but it was not feasible at the current stage of the process.

The results of research must obviously be independent from the researcher but the truth is that we do not know the impact that personal presence and influence had on the field work and results. There may also have been a lack of detachment, distance and critical reflection because the practitioner and researcher were the same person.

Impact of the study on the organisation

It is important to reflect on events that would not have occurred if the previous situation had continued. Without the action training programme, we would have followed the model imported from the parent company, which is the same as that imposed by the bodies that regulate funded training, or even the training model used by most companies. What they all have in common is that training is designed on the basis of contents or modules structured into a more or less compulsory timetable, and that courses are offered by catalogue.

One of the difficulties was the inability to compare with the previous situation, due to a lack of data on the impact of training on sales or on the organisation. What we can say is that should the previous situation have continued - with no planned methods and without taking the stakeholders into account, merely scheduling courses in response to a request from one of them - the changes achieved would not have occurred. We feel that the main change is the ability to achieve changes in the future. This study showed that it is possible to do things differently from the way currently in use or normally imposed by what we could call supply.

The *simulation training* was given without any prior preparation with the suppliers, store or buyers. The suppliers would simply offer to come and give training about their products, and this was accepted. On the other hand, the training department was expected to organise a considerable number of training sessions. Often participants found that they were already familiar with the product or that they had learnt nothing new - even that they did not offer this product in their sales area. If this had continued, sales assistants and supervisors would have ended up believing that there was no point in engaging in training.

The problem is that usually suppliers are not used to offering training, or else their courses are already structured - normally in the form of PowerPoint presentations. With the action training project, training is tailor-made to meet specific needs. Now everyone knows what to expect and everyone plays an active part in planning. In view of the context and the target population (sales assistants who are often already familiar with the product), not that many of the presentations are of interest.

Training is now organised and designed to respond to real problems and to improve sales assistants' skills. Classroom time aims to consolidate knowledge and to work on practical situations arising in the store. It is important to identify the problems involving products and services as a whole, i.e. not only the technical characteristics of the product but also sales arguments and the services the company provides. The communication established is thus more important than the information transmitted. Otherwise we could expect supervisors and sales assistants who were unavailable or uninterested in the training to be unwilling to take it. Now that the project has been implemented, we have noticed that the word and concept of *training* are widely used by all who have participated in it, guaranteeing greater efficiency. As a result, the training department's role and image in the organisation have improved.

There are also differences with the other forms of training introduced during the project, *training in a work context* and training by project. Without these it would be difficult to train all new sales assistants, possessing different degrees of knowledge, who gradually join the organisation. It would al-

so be difficult to arrange shifts for part-time employees, allowing them to participate in classroom training. Today in the apparel departments, training is taken to the new recruits and helps with their integration and development. What is needed now is to extend the same method to other sales areas. For this, we must be able to count on the supervisors, who are a central element of the *customer system* of training. It is not feasible for the training department to have trainers in each area of knowledge. This type of training would have to involve supervisors and other specialists as training agents in their own work areas (qualifying them as tutors by giving them training as trainers).

Training by project was another form of training introduced. It involves setting up heterogeneous groups that work on wide-ranging problems. The idea is that participation in the projects and the creation of work dynamics and methods in themselves serve a didactic purpose. If the alterations working group had not been set up, incidents would have continued to increase and each area would have tended to solve problems in its own way and by its own criteria. By creating this group, we were able to begin standardising criteria and solving problems on a continuous basis in the apparel and despatch sections. Monthly meetings can detect and address new problems, which are often solved within new sub-groups. Before, needs were identified sporadically. Today, there is no single moment for detecting training needs. The new system makes it possible to identify and solve problems at any time. At these meetings, the idea is not just to say 'we need some training' or to think that training will solve high spending on alterations. Supervisors, operators, sales assistants and the Training Department are all involved in identifying causes of and solutions for problems using a method similar to work systems auditing. This goes against the existing trend, in which a supervisor leaves it to training to change a sales assistant's practices and gives up any responsibility for changing the way she works. We also try to reverse the tendency of supervisors to avoid responsibility for the training they should be offering in their areas. Each training facet should be incorporated in the organisation of work itself, giving the organisation the disciplines it needs to become a learning organisation (Senge, 1990).

Traditionally, neither the Training Department nor the trainers are held accountable. After giving the training, they often feel that their job is done and they then wash their hands of any problems that may arise. With this project, rather than just organising training and summoning people to take it, the training department is involved in the process, acting as a partner with the working groups. From the preparation to the monitoring and quantitative assessment, the company's training department is working side by side with the teams in a constant, cyclical process of assessing, planning, observing and reflecting on the training.

Future research

We suggest that other forms of training should be studied in the context of the organisation of training in sales and distribution companies. It would be interesting to analyse how certain ways of working create a professional identity and help build knowledge and skills, not so much through training, but through the organisation of work itself. An analysis could be made of how work itself often generates more qualifications than training does. The idea of on-the-job learning confirms the contribution made by work to the development of thought, to forms of representation, and to knowledge, attitudes and skills.

Another interesting approach in this line of research would be to investigate the new role of human resource managers, who should recognise the importance of employees' acquiring the capacities and skills to become reflecting practitioners. Possible ways of working could be analysed with supervisors, helping them to identify the changes needed and ways of implementing work processes, coordinating human resources and integrating people and management practices. It would mean analysing people not only as resources with abilities, talents or the necessary knowledge for doing a job, but also for their personalities, attitudes, motivations and personal goals.

On the basis of the proposed model, training should be seen as a service sui generis of the company that designs it and transforms it into a series of resources. Training must become part of the work process; in this way, fewer and fewer training courses will actually be necessary. It will also be gratifying to workers to feel they work in a place

where their knowledge and experience are appreciated and used and where their personal and vocational interests, their life projects and career plans, converge. This idea is in line with the trend in today's post-bureaucratic organisations, which value both the personal and professional lives of their staff and take into account the needs and wishes of those involved in the creation of wealth. In this way, organisations can achieve the sustainability they need.

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