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Introduction

"Do more with less due to RIFs". "Measurement and results: this is where we show our value in instructional design". "Increase the size of your toolbox". After hearing these messages and more from Michelle Thompson, through her presentation to the Issues and Trends in Instructional Design class on September 20, I was intrigued. I immediately asked this experienced professional in the field of organizational development and training for a follow-up interview.

Background Information

Michelle's fifteen year professional career began after completing a bachelor's degree in psychology. She began working at Cleo Wallace Centers as a mental health worker, and then "accidentally" fell into the training world being called upon to train others and eventually be the training supervisor. She realized after time that she really did not know enough about the learning cycle, that she was "unconsciously incompetent" and needed more skills. She began graduate school while working at Cleo Wallace and eventually moved to EchoStar as a curriculum and training specialist. After completing her master's degree in information and learning technologies from CU Denver, she worked as a senior instructional designer during the peak of the tech boom for Rhythms. It was during this period when she learned foundational instructional design skills, along with working in different mediums such as computer-based training (CBT), web-based training (WBT) and video. After the dot-com bust, she worked at Nextel communications as a call center supervisor and was instrumental in the creation of Nextel University-developing training plans and trainer competencies. She is presently the Learning and Organizational Development Manager at Janus Capital Group where she heads up a five-member team providing customized professional development solutions.

Michelle explored with our Trends class four additional aspects in her presentation:

- Business Trends
- Training and Development Trends
- Key Lessons Learned
- Michelle's Expectations from her team members

These gave me the basis for my follow-up interview questions, which I designed to delve deeper into the concepts she presented to us in class. I have attempted to find out what makes Michelle tick-what gives her drive and the desire to continue to succeed in her active career in information and learning technologies.

So armed with questions in hand, which I shared with Michelle at the beginning of the interview, dictaphone to record our conversation and an OK from Michelle, we jumped right in to the interview.

Interview

Della: What do you find is the most enjoyable aspect of your work in organizational training? In other words, what gets you up every day to start a new workday?

Michelle: Two answers: it is the people I work with and my team-I love my team. They all work hard and I find that I want to work hard for them. As far as training, there is a connection that I make with people. I love it when one person out of twenty says to me "wow, I really found that useful." Another example is after a recent class for a call center on instructional design, I was given feedback several weeks later from one of the participants. She had the training manual out and said, "Look Michelle, I am writing objectives, and am learning how to make this (project) interactive." It is the "impact and connection" which I really enjoy.

Della: And this class was to help the trainers understand instructional design?

Michelle: Yes, these were brand-new trainers. It was designed to give methods and direction on, for example, systematic approach, giving them guidance on how to go about developing training.

Della: What do you find is the most difficult or challenging aspect of your current position? (She chuckled after I asked this question.)

Michelle: Suffering from our own success-we do good work and that leads to more work. Because I have a hard time saying no, it is sometimes hard for me to prioritize and say to a client "do you really need this?" The other difficult aspect goes back to having a seat at the table- whatever we do needs to add value. So this adds a challenge- to make sure what we do is having an impact.

Della: So to add value, are most of the training programs decided within your department? I realize there is required training, as part of company policy, but what about the other programs you develop?

Michelle: I would say it is half and half. Half is self-identified, for example, presentation skills, and the other half comes from the company. For example, currently our company is focused on leadership and is asking us to put together new leadership training.

Della: Along with the dot-com bust, what led you back to corporate training – Nextel and now Janus? And how do you view your role now in regards to the instructional design process?

Michelle: I was laid off from Nextel for two months but I always knew I wanted to be involved in training-it really is my passion. I felt the risk (of reentering the corporate training arena) was worth it, even though I knew that training departments are always the first to be hit when RIFs occur.

Della: You previously were involved in more hands-on development, for example with Rhythms you were involved in web-based and computer-based training. It appears that your role has really changed from that.

Michelle: Yes, my role is now half management and half practitioner. As a manager, I review everything my team is doing, and provide feedback. Then dependent on workload, I may do a project on my own, like the recent call center training instructional design class.

Della: And you still enjoy the hands-on training aspects?

Michelle: Yes, I do. I still like being in the classroom and I like the balance of doing both training and management-it keeps me fresh.

Della: What plans do you have to incorporate more web-based or interactive training into the Janus Professional Development resources?

Michelle: We have someone from our area is doing some of that right now, but Troy gets stuck doing a lot of web stuff that is not training. I am in the process of pushing back on many of those outside projects so that he can be directly involved on a full-time basis with development and learning-related projects.

Della: It sounds like Troy has been pulled into more web master duties.

Michelle: Correct. The problem is we don't have a person who has ownership over the Intranet area and that is where Troy has been called to work on many of the projects. We are looking to develop that position, so that I can have Troy refocus on projects within the development area, and not so many of those web master duties.

RE: Trends

Della: You spoke of recent RIF's at Janus within your department and that one of the trends in the field is "doing more with less". Any thoughts about how you will move forth and "do more with less"?

Michelle: Two things we are doing at Janus. We are creating an internal library of resources. For example, if someone comes with XYZ problem, and we have already developed something for another team, we can adapt and repurpose materials. A second example is utilizing adjunct faculty-key people, for example, who have gone through a six-month essential leader program. These people are identified to take parts of the next training and facilitate those. Some of those people are at the project manager level, some are at the executive level. We are also developing training for 150 IT personnel, where our development people are helping to coach the IT Directors so they can role out the training for their staff. This will allow them (the IT Directors) to move forth within their department and it will mean that I will not be taking 10, 1/2-day sessions to do the training. Taking one or two days to coach the directors will pay off in the long run.

Della: I am always fascinated when people mention working "smarter not harder", which ties in with the concept of "doing more with less. Would you elaborate on this for me-as a manager and as a trainer?

Michelle: Sometimes it means, "pushing back" on a client; helping them to identify when they need the development team services and when they don't. I ask to see their department goals and team goals and ask the how the training they are requesting relates to that. If they can't show me the link or tie and if it isn't going to help their team or department goals, then we ask: "why do you want this"?

Della: So, you are making sure that you are utilizing the resources you have wisely and efficiently?

Michelle: Yes, and that what we are doing has a positive business impact. Sometimes you do just have to "check the box" in training, but my clients get used to me asking "how does this support your business goals for the year?"

Other ways (to work smarter not harder) may sound silly, but sometimes I just shut down Outlook, because I just don't have time to see what new is coming in.

Della: Right. That noise from the speakers, or the message alert saying "you've got mail" is annoying.

Michelle: Right, it just distracts me. Also, as manager, when I give projects to my team, I don't micromanage. But I spend detailed time going over timelines, my expectations, what they need from me-"an all-in-one chunk". This way, the team member doesn't have to come back every hour or every day for more clarification. I try to be as efficient as possible with my team members and then they learn to take notes, know their timelines, and know when to come back to me with the completed project. Spending a bit more time up front planning with people helps me (work smarter not harder).

Della: Those are very specific ideas, exactly what I was looking for.

Della: How do you think trainers can demonstrate the "value" of training? I realize this is important-we keep hearing this from all of our guest speakers!

Michelle: This is the hardest one. First it goes back to looking at what are your company's metrics and goals, and if the training can show any impact on those goals. Last week I did a four-hour team-building activity to identify what is working well and what is getting in the way of them doing well. At the end of the activity, we identified very specific, actionable steps and a timeline, with a follow-up meeting planned in four months. We identified who is accountable for changes, and created a 5-step scale, with 1 being where we are now. We completed the rating now, and will repeat the ratings in 4 months.

On a larger scale, we are conducting an annual employee survey company-wide. Last year's lowest ranking was around "support for developing my skills" or "resources for developing my skills". Due to RIFs and the reduction and elimination of most of the Learning and Development team two years ago, we will compare the numbers from two years ago, to last year, to this year. I will be very interested to see the changes.

Della: Thank you for elaborating on that question in such detail, Michelle. It appears that you are getting your ducks in a row so that in two years from now, upper management doesn't say, "we don't need this training and development area anymore".

Michelle: Right. Also, we are sharing our accountability in discussing a Performance Measurement objective to each Director and above-about how they must develop and support their employees, "actively participate in training and development programs for their employees," someone putting the manager responsible for this, and tying it to their bonuses and raises.

Della: That way it starts at the top, and translates down, instead of the other way around.

Michelle: Exactly. We still have work to do, but maybe in 2007 we will be ready with this.

Della: Great. I'll be finishing up my program then. You can come back to campus and share with us how you were able to implement this shared accountability.

Michelle: OK.

We both laughed.

RE: Key Lessons Learned

Della: You provided us the Key Lessons you have learned including "increasing the size of your toolbox. What is one new tool have you added to your toolbox over the last six months?"

Michelle: One-on-one coaching, for example, for someone new to management, or career exploration. This is more of an OD (organizational development) aspect vs. instructional design, but it is something I am doing more of than any other company I have worked for-mainly

because this position is more professional development vs. technical.

Della: And this is due to your current position having this strong management component?

Michelle: Right.

RE: Future Employment

Della: You presented the Training and Development Trends that you see in your area last week. Based on these trends, do you see any new avenues opening for ILT professionals?

Michelle: I've seen this at the last three organizations I have worked for: people fall into training with no formal knowledge of training. I see a trend that there needs to be more economical way to train people to be trainers. There are companies like Langeven.com-a train the trainer organization.

Della: I haven't heard of them. Does Langeven come to your company for training?

Michelle: No, most of them are public workshops you go to, for example Training the Trainers is a three day workshop I sent one of my trainers to. It was \$1600 for three days, plus travel expenses. They are not cheap so some companies will not invest in that. But there needs to some way for someone in the ILT profession to train people who know nothing about training-to give trainers the skills they need in facilitation, instructional design, and simple web-based training.

Della: I am curious if anyone has already developed software for this type of training? One that could be purchased or that could be leased.

Michelle: Right, something simple like a toolkit that includes templates. Many people fall into this profession by accident. They don't self-identify that they need to go back school. They are hungry for information on how to train and they are the last people to get the training they need. So, I think figuring out to reach out and identify people who need foundational training in instructional design, ILT training skills and how to do it economic could be a new opportunity.

Della: Great Idea. That gives me something to think about.

Michelle: It is my epiphany for the day!

Della: Quick, right that one down!

We both laughed.

Della: What do you believe is the employment outlook for this field-both corporate training and instructional design?

Michelle: I believe it is always going to be there. It may be part of a HR (human resources) department like I am, but there is too much value in it to go away. I think the people who are successful in this field are multi-faceted: they can facilitate, do instructional design, and do all aspects including development.

Della: Do you think much of it depends on the economy, especially related to RIFs?

Michelle: Absolutely. In my opinion, it is directly tied to the economy. When the economy is going down, one of the things to go is training. But when the economy is coming around, we have more money to spend on "value-add vs. necessity". We will always be there in the lean times; it may just look a little different.

Della: And during those times there will be fewer people involved. Instead of a staff of ten, there may be three.

Michelle: Exactly and you may need to change your focus and be more specific about what you do. But training will never "go away."

RE: Your Future Career Goals

Della: You seem to have found your niche in corporate training? Any thoughts about next steps or directions you would like to take in your own career?

Michelle: I have always been a very goal-oriented person and very driven. One of my goals was to complete my Master's, move into corporate training, and to be part manager, part practitioner. If you had asked me two years ago, it would be to continue to climb the corporate ladder, move up to the Director or VP level. But I have more work/life balance now.

Della: You started a family.

Michelle: Yes. I purposefully waited to have a child so I could do what I wanted to do in my career. So, I don't really have an answer to your question, but if you figure it out, would you let me know?

Della: Sure, I would glad to share that with you!

Michelle: I have always known somewhere, somehow, when to change jobs, where I have maxed out and when I should move on. I think that perhaps my perfect job is right now.

Della: I appreciate the fact that you are excited about what you are doing.

Michelle: I think I have been at the right place at the right time. And through networking, people have called me up to ask me if I'm looking for a job. I think half of it is luck and half is skill.

Della: I think there is an element of hard work and determination that is involved as well.

Michelle: Well that is what helps see you through. But I do think it is luck, being in the right place, hard work and doing well.

And that concluded a very informative interview with Michelle Thompson.

Reflections/Conclusion

To succeed you must be multi-dimensional. This was one of the key lessons that Michelle shared with us initially. It was very interesting to me how her initial role in training, along with advanced education, eventually led to a position that combines corporate training and development with management. Through my telephone interview with Michelle, I realized that to be successful in the instructional design profession, I must keep up to date by constantly learning on my own, as well as networking with others. Although downplayed modestly, the element of hard work in its relation to success was very clear from this interview. In IDT you must constantly be looking ahead, constantly thinking about trends, constantly juggling and planning for the day when you will be asked to do more with less. If I work to keep my skills updated, keep adding new tools in my toolbox, establish and keep open network channels, I have prepared myself take on those challenges. Thanks to Michelle, my previous beliefs were also validated about career: although a successful career takes hard work, you can have fun if you love what you are doing. It is all about life/work balance.