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A light gray world map is centered in the background of the cover page, showing the outlines of continents and major islands.

### Improving Training Outcomes: An Innovative Approach

**William G. Powers**

Professor, Dept. of Communication Studies, Texas Christian University

**Graham D. Bodie**

Dept. of Communication, Purdue University

**Margaret Fitch-Hauser**

Dept. of Communication, Auburn University

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## **Abstract**

This paper identifies and discusses a selected series of special challenges that impact the ability to generate change when delivering soft-skills training. The potential benefits of a recently emerging and innovative solution is then discussed that provides an opportunity to produce a blended training format bringing together the special benefits of online access to content presentation blended with the more traditional face-to-face instructor-led interaction and activity. The positive outcomes from this combination of information delivery with skill practice and enhancement are suggested to merit further exploration.

Soft skills or those non-technical abilities often referred to as social skills that determine an individual's fit into a company's structure, include at least four sets of workplace competencies: problem-solving and other cognitive skills, oral communication skills, personal qualities and work ethics, and teamwork skills (Leigh, Lee, & Lindquist, 1999). Within these broader categories rest specific skill sets necessary to perform a certain job. For instance, a customer service representative is expected to, at the very least, build rapport, uncover needs, listen, clarify, explain, and manage conversational flow, as well as handle complaints, customers, conflicts, negotiations, and challenging situations. Whatever the job title, when one gets past basic technical competence and attitude, the dominant success factor is directly tied to communication orientation/skill and the reduction of misunderstandings (Evers, F.T. & Rush, J.C., 1996; Zorn & Violanti, 1996).

A significant competitive factor for every organization is the continual improvement of soft skills throughout the workforce. In fact, research has indicated that learning organizations, defined by an organization's continual efforts toward employee training, fare better financially as compared to organizations that are not as focused on continued improvement (Ellinger, Ellinger, Yan, & Howton, 2002). Consequently, the company that has more skilled workers simply has greater productivity than their competition. Furthermore, as downsizing has become common, the absolute requirement to reduce costly misunderstandings with customers, vendors, and associates while obtaining higher levels of individual productivity is obvious. However, since in many instances downsizing is the result of a lack of funds, one of the first cost cutting efforts is often to eliminate soft skills training (Gunn, 2003). This tendency to snuff soft skills training efforts is aggravated due to the perception that such training has not been successful. Moreover, the strategic planning philosophy based on the traditional educational model has been only slightly adjusted to the work environment and has not produced adequate results. Changes must be made. This paper reviews several challenges faced in the production of individual improvement in soft-skill areas relative to the potential response found in a blended learning approach with the innovative Concept Keys online learning system (Powers, 2003a).

## **Barriers to Soft Skills Training**

There are three predominant barriers to the trainer's capacity to produce actual change in the participant's behavior in the workplace. First is the trainer's orientation toward the act of training busy adults and skill in implementing a variety of training strategies. Second is the participant's orientation toward training and professional

improvement as part of the organizational and personal obligation and responsibility. And, third is the responsibility of the organization to create a learning culture and support program that stresses the importance of continual development in soft skills and allows such development to be not only beneficial to individual growth but enjoyable as well.

## *Training versus Education*

One of the challenges facing those academics who enter training or who teach training courses is to make the distinction between education and training. Academics are evaluated on teaching. Most teaching evaluation forms focus on educational experiences not training experiences. Consequently, when academics try to engage in soft skills training, they often engage in classroom educational activities that tend to give short-term workplace results, at best. More times than not, so-called training sessions focus only on transmitting information. Not enough time is allotted to allowing participants to practice repeatedly so their minds and bodies get a “feel” of doing the skill with proficiency. Training isn’t just about making people more aware of concepts, it should be about making people more competent (Georges, 1996).

Soft skills development should involve a blend of information and opportunities to incorporate concepts and skills into practice (Greene, 2003; Segrin & Givertz, 2003). Georges (1996) suggests that the best way for trainees to develop skillfulness is to use a two-step process. In step one (about 5-19 % of the time) the focus should be on educating students about the results and skills they need to know about. Then, step two (90-95% of the time) provides trainees the opportunity to practice with coaching or supervision until the skill is present. One way to add training elements to an educational experience is to allow individuals to bring their own ideas to the event.

### *Participant Attitude*

As with most aspects of life, predispositions and/or negative thinking toward a certain scenario often produces an unwillingness to participate, and in some cases learn. In a 2002 study, Naquin and Holton found that over half of the variance in employee motivation to improve work through learning, a concept that includes both the motivation to learn and the motivation to transfer learning to a working environment, was explained by the combination of 1) the tendency to experience positive emotional states, 2) commitment to ones work, and 3) extraversion. Unfortunately, the reality is that many employees do not express a positive orientation toward continual improvement of soft skills, nor do many maintain a positive orientation toward work itself.

There are many reasons for the negative attitudes toward continual improvement. These include discouraging reactions to pressures of standard education practices, a concern with return on investment of training, the perceptions that the employee is not the problem and the employees and their “improvement” are not really valued by the organization, an escalating level of mistrust and antagonism between management and workers, and the generalized suspicion of being taken advantage of that exists within many workforce cultures. These produce a lackadaisical employee attitude toward personal improvement that minimizes the development opportunity. Powers (2004) suggests that contemporary organizational leaders are faced with a unique workforce composition containing three distinct groups formed on the basis of attitude toward work.

1. The first group (Maximizers) approximates 15% of the average workforce representing those ideal employees who look forward to professional improvement, are loyal team players, and demonstrate a continuing commitment to quality and productivity.
2. The second group (Maintainers) contains about 55% of the workforce representing employees who do their job, but only as instructed.
3. The third group (Minimizers) consists of the remaining 30% of the workforce who present continuing resistive challenges.

Given such a workforce composition, expectations for the breadth and depth of actual employee improvement under the current employee improvement development model must take into consideration all three groups. Given the combination of the negative attitude toward improvement and work plus the natural human resistance to changing behavior and thinking patterns, it is realistic to anticipate only partial improvement within each group. For example, we would suggest that an improvement program with 100-employees will have actually been an enormous success if it generated positive improvement in 35% of the participants (i.e. approximately 12 of the 15 Maximizers, 20 of the 55 Maintainers, and 3 of the 30 Resisters). Unfortunately, most workforce development efforts do not even come close to reaching an overall success rate of 35% of the workforce improving their soft skills. The Return On Investment of money and time in employee improvement programs with a success rate of merely 35% is simply unacceptable. The bottom line is plagued by participants having negative attitudes toward training and improvement, participants not seriously engaging in personal improvement efforts, a clear lack of participant accountability for improvement, and an actual lack of participant improvement. The latter is made worse due to the intangibles associated with the measurement of soft skill levels and improvements particularly as it relates to the job (Pine & Tingley, 1993)

## ***Organizational Responsibility***

When the participants become enthusiastically “engaged” in the learning process, understanding, retention, and application will increase. In the “old school” classic educational model, school leaders do not greatly concern themselves with overtly providing positive motivators for students to learn. It is simply assumed that students see the value and will engage themselves. The use of negative motivators such as the grading system, the principal’s office, and the parent conference are frequently assumed to provide sufficient incentive. Admittedly negative motivators do work—up to a point. Modern educational leaders do not eliminate these negatives but have provided more positive motivators than ever before, and we are seeing educational assessment demonstrate clear growth in the knowledge and skills of our future workforce.

Organizational leaders have frequently followed the classical model, asserting that employees are being paid to learn, that adults certainly understand the significance and relatedness of both positive and negative career consequences, and that the “hammer” is a great motivator. There is merit to that position, but it is only minimally successful with the adult workforce in the long term. To maximize learning productivity, organizational leaders simply must move forward in modernizing their approach to supporting employee improvement.

Combinations of these three factors stack the deck against the typical soft skills trainer. The following section discusses the potential of an emerging approach and a specific online educational system.

### ***A Unique Solution in Blended Training***

The challenges in the previous section are all meaningful ones—particularly for faculty. Because faculty are charged with educating the youth of our county, they are constantly being examined by all members of society relative to the quality of their thinking and actions. The development of new ways to increase the effectiveness of faculty consulting and training is quite helpful in that regard with a major breakthrough to the technology revolution being the ability to combine classic training strategies with very innovative strategies.

### ***Solutions that Blend Educational Strategies with Training Strategies***

The notion of blending online materials with face-to-face training sessions is not actually new in the classic sense. Students have been required to read books and articles for a long time prior to attending a lecture. However, asking busy adult training participants to do so has proven a bit more challenging—and when the strategy is for the adult participants to read materials after the training session, the need must be very clear and demanding. Their time is as limited as is their dedication combined with the aforementioned lack of concern for actual demonstration of improvement. The ability to use the Internet to deliver small units of information right into their work area alleviates some of those concerns.

Trainers have been using supplemental instructional strategies and materials for some time. These include traditional books, magazine articles, videotapes, audiotapes, and most recently, online e-training programs. Some trainers use them in the training session. Some use them in place of the on-site training session. And some trainers use them as an additional assignment outside of the training sessions. Many of these programs contain good information. The challenge is that they are most frequently modeled after the traditional educational process rather than the needs of busy adults with many calls upon their time, attention, and motivation.

Since the advent of the Internet, companies have changed the way in which business is conducted; email has evolved as the preferred communication channel, websites are a necessity in most industries, and just-in-time has taken on new meaning. Slowly but surely, the training and development industry has embraced this technology with many companies benefiting from the nature of online training, or e-learning with even more expected to do so in the future. As reported by Bonk (2002), “there [is] significantly greater interest in e-learning than actual commitment to it... [but] the Web is flourishing as a training delivery mechanism” (p. 7).

Respondents in two studies (Bonk, 2001; 2002) indicated access to learning was the most appealing aspect of online learning. Additionally, the ability to track employee progress throughout the process of learning, and the “ability of Web instruction to enhance learner skills” (Bonk, 2002, p. 47) were viewed highly positive. The primary barrier to adopting this type of training was the perception of high cost followed by time concerns, resistance to technology, lack of support, difficulty measuring ROI,

and a lack of training on how to use the Internet. Due to the newness of this type of training, the barriers to a solely online-based program, and reluctance to accept such a program, it is clear that innovation was needed. Concept Keys provided an innovative approach to dealing with these problems.

Concept Keys utilizes the benefits of online supplements to be used in conjunction with a more traditional approach to employee training. Specifically, Concept Keys provides the learner participants with small units of key information in chunks, on a daily basis directly into the learner's environment. More importantly, this information is a supplement to and extension of material already covered by a professional trainer. Thus, the learner is primed to the most important elements of the training regiment and learning is enhanced.

The really good news is that there are several key factors that maximize improvement productivity in the shortest time with working adults from all three groups. First, when employees are presented with *digestible* amounts of high quality information, they understand, retain, and apply more than when *overloaded* with information. This represents a universal educational practice called "chunking" that makes both good common sense and good business sense. Chunking is the foundation of effective human learning systems. The entire American educational system is actually based on this idea with college degrees being earned through student participation in about 40 classes (very large chunks). Each class consists of about 45 class sessions (medium sized chunks). Each class session contains about 10 new ideas (smaller chunks). The smaller the chunk of quality, fundamental information delivered at any given level, the greater the opportunity for understanding, retention, and application. To maximize learning productivity, organizational leaders must reexamine the size of the chunks of improvement within their programs relative to the complexity of the improvement area with consideration for the time and application opportunity restraints of working life.

Second, when the small chunks of information are systematically delivered over an extended time period to the employees in the most appropriate learning environment, understanding, retention, and application increases. If one is learning to operate a machine, the instruction pays off most when it occurs in the machine shop right next to the machine, not a seminar room. If one is learning workplace communication skills, the highest opportunity for significant application is when the learning occurs over time right in the actual work interaction environment, not a hotel room. To maximize learning productivity, leaders must reexamine the opportunity to create employee improvement engagement right in the job environment on a systematic, extended basis.

## ***Chunking and Training***

McCroskey (1982) claims that one cannot testify, "learning has occurred unless we can observe a modification of behavior" (p. 2). The first step in the process of teaching an individual how to improve his or her competence in any area is to build that individuals cognitive base of skills that define such behavior. In fact, without a base of knowledge an individual will have no substance on which to base whether competence has been achieved. Several theories attempt to explain how individuals process information about the world around them, one of which is the concept of chunking.

The concept of chunking is largely attributed to the work of Miller (1956) who distinguished between bits and chunks of information. Chunking is the process of organizing and grouping bits of information into familiar units or chunks. The ability to chunk information helps an individual remember more and gives a means of accessing the information that is ultimately stored in his or her memory. More importantly, chunking increases “the amount of information we can deal with” (p. 95). Miller also suggests that we recode information constantly in an effort to assimilate new information with current knowledge. Therefore, the process of chunking also seems to serve as a mechanism for reinforcing information. For instance, as we learn new information, if it sounds familiar or if it fits into an existing category, we tend to remember and relate the new information to the existing category (Higham, 1997; Gobet & Simon, 1996b). This allows for more powerful connections to be made by the learner.

Chunking serves as both a triggering device and as a code-building device for our memory. The triggering aspect of chunks relies on the strength of a chunk or group of related chunks. Since chunks are arranged in a hierarchical fashion, the most memorable will consist of information that is most relevant to the individual attempting to learn (Servan-Schreiber & Anderson, 1990). Code-building is often accomplished through replication of chunks or related information that allows the participant to recall chunks for later use. As students build this system of codes (i.e. chunks) patterns begin to emerge with which the student is able to relate to other chunks and eventually build larger and larger stores of information (Koch & Hoffmann, 2000). Consequently, students are able to develop skills that are more complex than simple rules yet straightforward enough to be stored in memory.

Chase and Simon (1973) and Gobet and Simon (1996b) report that three areas of expertise are important in skill development: pattern recognition, selective searching, and “rich knowledge in the domain of expertise” (p. 2). In looking at the performance of master chess players, Gobet and Simon (1996a; 1996b) concluded that professional chess players seem to rely on chunking to categorize their knowledge and to access information. They seem to use their catalogue of information to look ahead and make strategic choices about what move to make next. It stands to reason that this concept can be extended to soft skills such as communication. If given a method of chunking information into useful categories, a trainee should be able to build a knowledge base of skills and ultimately be able to access this information to make decisions about what type of skill they need to use in a given situation. Such a method should give students information that can be chunked as well as suggestions for ways to create these chunks. In addition, the system should build the store of knowledge about producing and receiving information. Finally, the system should provide a means of accessing the knowledge in a meaningful way. Just as chess players seem to store chunks about patterns of pieces in their long-term memory, trainees need to store chunks about soft skills like communication strategies and techniques in their long-term memory.

Another element that must be included in any effective training is repetition. Just as our memories are organized and stored in chunks, they are reinforced through repeated exposure to an idea, concept or skill. In one regard chunking provides an avenue for repetition insofar as the chunks are built as bits of information and compressed or integrated into a chunk. This is particularly evident in observations of certain ritualistic behaviors, such as many compulsive behaviors (Graybiel, 1998). Although message production and reception are not ritualistic behaviors, it stands to reason that we engage in these acts often enough that much of the skills considered necessary for communicative competence are performed in chunks. As we learn

more skills, we seem to build cognitive and neural sequences that may help with the use of these skills.

Further research in the area of learning supports this conclusion. In three experiments on sequence learning, Koch and Hoffmann (2000) found clear support for the idea that sequence learning can be thought of as a chunking process. Students who are attempting to learn a series of related concepts can use their theory of “relational chunking.” By chunking information that is similar into large sequences of information, skills can be taught and competence in a certain area can be improved. A skill or set of skills, such those composed in what we typically judge individuals as effective communicators and listeners, can be thought of as a learning process in which the steps and concepts are presented in a sequential pattern. Once the pattern has been learned, the issue turns to how the individual can recall the concept for use when he or she has so much information in so many chunks stored in memory.

### ***Using Priming to Recall Chunks***

One theory that elucidates how information is recalled is priming theory. Priming, when viewed as spreading activation, works to retrieve information from memory when a priming stimulus is presented and sets off a chain of events in which one node of a concept is linked to another (Doshier & Rosedale, 1989; Ratcliff & McKoon, 1988). Ratcliff and McKoon (1998) suggest that

. . .the prime and the target concept form a compound cue and that this compound cue interacts with memory to produce a value of resonance, goodness of match, or familiarity that is determined by associations in long-term memory between the prime and target (p. 405).

Therefore, if the prime is directly related to the target concept, the individual will have an easier time recalling the concept as a chunk of information. This chunk of information, as related to communicative competence, should include both the appropriate behavior and the situation in which the set of behaviors should be used. If a training or instructional system could build such a pattern of association and provide a convenient chunking mechanism that was closely connected to effective communication skills, this information should be easy to access by triggering the associations.

### ***Repetition Over Time, Engagement, and Accountability***

Every soft-skills trainer could use more time with each participant. More time means more potential learning and greater opportunities for actual application. Now, the nature of the Concept Keys program delivery system provides each trainer with an opportunity to extend the amount impact presence with each participant without increasing actual facilitator time. In fact the training session will be extended from a very short time-period, frequently one-day or less, to a 2 and ½ month long program that takes only a few minutes each day and it happens right in the participants work environment.

Concept Keys system is based on continually engaging the participant in processing the fundamental Key. For example, four Food For Thought questions appear at the bottom of each of the 50 daily Key micro-lessons; that totals 200 engagements over the 50 Keys, each of the 10 weekly Quizzes asks participants to select the 5 Keys



from the previous week for 50 more engagements, each of the 10 weekly Most Important Keys and action plans produces another 20 engagements—and all of these are without an additional organizational support program in place.

The nature of the Concept Keys system allows participants to display not only their level of engagement but also their degree of accountability to participate and improve in the work environment. For example, all engagement indices are available to the participant and to the Program Leader (usually the faculty/trainer/teacher, small business owner, or HR manager and sometimes the direct-report boss). Another aspect of accountability is the extent to which the participant actually participates as the system recommends. An index of the number of activities that are processed by each participant is calculated and made available to the participant and the Program Leader. Furthermore the participant responses to the Food For Thought, Quizzes, and Most Important Key and Action Plan are available to both the participant and the Program Leader. The degree of accountability is indeed increased over traditional and alternative online workforce development programs.

A special feature tied back to both motivation and accountability is the ability to brand the Key Micro-lessons so that the trainer continues to receive credit for the extended training program up to 2.5 months after concluding the original training session and frequently is retained to conduct a concluding session to that specific content area. Or, the trainer can provide an organization such as “Grandson Accounting Services” an opportunity to send a clear message to all participants every day for 2.5 months. An example that would appear at the top of every micro-lesson for every participant might be as follows: “Career Success at Grandson Accounting Services Means Communicating Clearly.” These types of messages impact employee perceptions of the significance and importance that the company places upon individual improvement in the specified area. Furthermore, there are indications that such messaging clarifies the position of the organization relative to areas where litigation may emerge. Thus, both employee motivation and accountability are aided.

### ***Solutions that Blend Participant Attitudes with Organizational Responsibilities***

The list of reasons for employees not to become engaged in learning is extremely long. The response is actually rather simplistic. The organization must make continual development an important aspect of organizational life, advancement, and reward, and it must make the improvement process one that people can enjoy.

Organizational leaders must be very creative in their effort to maximize learning productivity. The differences between “school” and “work” must be recognized and used to generate an internal cultural revolution. Appropriate use of workforce opinion leaders to plan, execute, and coordinate the improvement project eases management workload, while also increasing the potential for a successful improvement project. Maximizing employee improvement productivity is an organization-wide project that has long-term implications for organizational survival and success. The more reasonable negative reinforcement options (because they are valid) must be integrated with the very best of the positive reinforcement options (because they are valid). A “big-picture” vision by leadership is essential. For example, here are just a few frequently overlooked factors that impact the level of learning productivity in a challenging culture that are contained in the Concept Keys e-book titled, *Teamwork, Loyalty, and Commitment: A guidebook for program leaders* (Powers, W. G., 2003b).

1. Sustained demonstration from the organization of the value associated with employee learning
2. Employee input on selection of workforce improvement soft-skills
3. Creation of soft-skills assessment procedures
4. Inclusion of soft-skills in job description
5. Inclusion of soft-skills in regularly scheduled job appraisals
6. Public inclusion of soft-skills appraisal in consideration of raises, promotions, recognitions, special assignments, and other points of evaluation and assignment of awards/rewards
7. Consistent display of organizational support for employee team leadership in decision-making and implementing an organization-wide employee improvement support project
8. Clear illustration of organizational support for meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences

Visible organizational focus on producing employee pride in the organization by combining support for employee value through continual learning with thematic emphasis on teamwork, loyalty, and commitment to quality within an enjoyable working environment is invaluable. The appendix contains a case study composite representing the various support options combined with participant learner outcomes that have occurred during use of a Concept Keys program in an organizational setting.

## **Conclusion**

The Concept Keys learning system has great potential to enhance learner skill outcomes. Students and training program participants build a code for effective personal improvement. As Gobet and Simon (1996b) suggest, this type of code building develops a rich expertise in an area and the ability to recognize patterns among the information. Because the separate Concept Keys provide reinforcement and repetition of basic concepts, the individual is able to build chunks of information related to effective behavior and is better able to access this information in memory. In addition Concept Keys uses case studies and activities/exercises to build an association between the keys and best practices communication behaviors. This type of training builds a system of associations that can be readily accessed or primed when the individual faces a similar situation. Concept Keys provides an exciting, innovative means of incorporating technology into instruction and skill development.

When a modernization of learning principals is applied to the uniquely valuable aspects of an adult working environment, consistent employee improvement productivity will become the norm rather than the rarity. These are amazing levers that do not consume excessive money or time. The challenge of maximizing employee improvement can be successfully met.

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## ***DIVERSIFIED APPROACH, INC.***

### ***An Overview Case Study of Concept Keys Program Implementation***

Diversified Approach, Inc. (DAI) is a fictional organization representative of several different real organizational approaches to implementing Concept Keys workforce development programs.

DAI has 156 employees and diverse internal functions. Although managers have received some management training, little developmental work has been done with the employees. The general work atmosphere is “average.” Employees are neither antagonistic nor supportive toward management. Basic communication misunderstandings occur somewhat frequently. Managers sometimes talk about the “attitude problem.” As the company has grown in size, the feeling of “family” has decreased. Turnover rate has increased. Productivity is okay, but the general feeling is that it really could be much higher.

The CEO distributed a personal letter to each employee describing the motivation for improvement, the basics of the new project, and a request for employee input and involvement. Nominations for the (TLC) Project Team were solicited and the management group reached consensus on a Project Coordinator and Team members. The Project Team decided to use existing work groups as discussion groups. Two exceptions were made—a skeleton night crew of nine employees whose duties crossed departmental lines and a special cross-departmental crew of 13 employees working a three-day weekend shift. A complete base plan of operation with 5 theme-oriented activities was selected for the first 10-week period. Secretarial support and a budget allocation for support materials were received.

Following a successful Kick-Off Program, each discussion group identified a leader. The Project Coordinator briefed them on the Project regarding areas of freedom and desired outcomes from the project. Leaders were encouraged to establish regular group meetings to discuss improvement areas and progress reports, to determine group participation in company activities, and to develop local activities. To enhance participation and motivation, the discussion groups were given a fairly large area of freedom.

Each group was requested to determine the frequency, length, and place of meetings, agenda for meetings, and a group name. Due to the differences between the groups, each discussion group designed slightly different approaches and use of support materials. To say the least, the discussion groups became quite creative in developing a unique “signature” to their approach! Not every idea worked. As the project progressed, some groups met more or less frequently to meet their needs. One key development was the setting of “rules of politeness” for giving each other “Keys.” This seemed to have a special benefit for the supervisors. On an overall basis, the initial stage of the project was considered to be very successful. Employees got involved in their own personal improvement. Some groups even got involved in submitting creative ideas to the Project Team for the next stage of development.

After some initial reluctance, the management level discussion group began to open up with each other. In addition to discussing communication with their employees, they began to discuss improving communication with each other. Because managers

were also members of their departmental groups, the creativity was allowed to bounce back and forth and improve efforts at all levels. A feeling of “family” was beginning to return. Managers and employees were more considerate of each other and general working relations improved throughout the organization. Misunderstandings were handled on a more positive level. An upturn in the standard productivity indices was indicated.

People at all levels in the company began to realize that it was “okay” to talk about communication. Groups became involved in competition for the company-wide awards. The CEO publicly praised the results of the Team and Project. Employees saw a difference—and that made a difference. All employees looked forward to the next area of development.