Around Town...
Skills Practices Build Buy-in on Many Levels

By Robert D. Brown, Instructional Designer, Fuego, Inc.

Fuego, Inc. wanted to make its three-day software training course more challenging and relevant to its customers' businesses. The training group chose a strategy that built user competency – and customer loyalty. Instructional designer Robert D. Brown explains how.

To accomplish their goal, the training team decided to create skills practices based on an industry case study in two of Fuego's key client industries, banking and insurance.

Each skill practice is no more than a page or two in length and begins by stating the skill practice objective. There is a short scenario explaining the assignment, with hints or suggestions that might help the student, and a list of tasks that must be completed. Students are asked to note insights, questions or issues for later discussion.

Each skill practice section is tied directly to the learning objectives just presented in class. Although this may seem repetitive, the guiding principal is one of applied learning in a context that is relevant to the learners. (Applied learning means that a student has not really learned a concept, principle, fact or procedure until they demonstrate that they can apply it appropriately.)

In a typical class, following a lecture and demonstration by the instructor, the students complete step-by-step exercises. By contrast, in the skill practices, there are no step-by-step instructions. The students are forced to think for themselves, and apply what they just learned in the regular class. Current adult learning theory suggests that adults learn more quickly when they are familiar with the learning context, and are engaged with the subject matter. The skill practices meet both of these needs because the scenarios are based on the industry in which the adult learners work.

We have found that the skill practices serve as a great selling tool for our product. As students see that our product can solve real-life work problems, they become enthusiastic about the benefits of our software. Since they have seen it work, and have learned -- through application -- the skills they need to use the tools effectively, they return to their workplace confident and eager to begin using it. They become customer evangelists, extolling the virtues of our software to everyone they meet.

Rob Brown has more than 20 years experience in the design and development of employee performance support solutions.