For all the differences between achieving quality in manufacturing and service environments, there is at least this important similarity: Both require top quality inputs and processes.

And now for an important difference: Measuring the inputs and processes that create quality service is a tough challenge. True, you know a good report when you see one, and when purchase orders are processed in a timely fashion, you get materials faster. But how do you know the procedures and mental processes used to create the report or procure the materials were based on quality principles—or were even efficient?
Defects in intangibles such as problem solving, decision making or project management are much more difficult to spot and correct than defective raw materials or problems on the line. Yet, these often invisible inputs and processes are just as fundamental to providing high quality service and support as high quality inputs and processes are to manufacturing.

Critical Questions

Having recognized the need for a quality focus in service and support functions, many organizations are now confronted with the challenge of developing necessary quality skills. Smart companies begin by asking themselves a few key questions - the same kind of questions manufacturing organizations ask and answer about quality training:

- What attributes will define quality in these functions?
- What skills will most rapidly improve and sustain those quality attributes?
- What are the most efficient and effective ways to deliver quality training?
- How can quality skills be supported and deepened after training?
- How can the organization assess the value of quality training?

And, as organizations look for electronic learning tools and strategies to improve the delivery of training, assess its value and support the ongoing use of quality processes, here’s another important question:

- How can the organization impact the quality of service and support through the use of electronic learning tools and strategies?

As companies begin to explore these questions, their answers offer interesting insights into approaches that work, effective methods for achieving and assessing specific results, and foolproof planning for continuous improvement in the future.

American Honda Example

American Honda Motor Co. is part of Honda’s North American operations. Based in Torrance, CA, American Honda provides information services, purchasing, financial services, leasing support and a host of sales and marketing related services to Honda’s business and manufacturing units throughout North America.

In 2001, American Honda’s associate learning and organizational development group undertook a broad assessment of its approach to training, looking at what was offered, why, to whom and how.

One focus of this initiative was to deepen the emphasis on quality, which has long permeated Honda’s manufacturing operations, within the internal support and service portions of the organization.

“The Honda philosophy encourages every individual to continuously expand his or her ability to identify and impact both internal and supplier quality,” says Lou Juneman, manager of associate learning and organizational development for American Honda. “Innovation, branding, customer satisfaction and efficiency are central to our success; therefore, quality is at the core of everything we do.”

The challenge laid out for the development group was to improve and extend the delivery of training for employees, reduce their time away from the job for
training, take advantage of expanding technology capabilities and infrastructure and, above all, ensure a tangible transfer of skills that would take internal service quality to an entirely new level.

“It was important to build on what we were already doing well, not replace it, or worse, introduce problems or barriers in the name of technology enabled learning,” notes Juneman.

Honda’s approach to service quality improvement through e-learning was focused and disciplined. First, the company began to use a learning management system (LMS) to schedule, administer and track training. The system was applied not only to instructor led offerings but also to pure online training, blended learning (a unique mix of online and instructor led training) and other offerings.

Using a customized LMS, Honda employees and their managers learned to define and manage individual training plans as well as enroll in, complete and track their progress courses and curricula through a learner specific Web portal.

Decisions also had to be made about which programs to offer and which formats would best support the overall emphasis on growth and quality. “We were committed to providing the best mix of electronic, instructor led and self-paced learning to our employees,” explains Juneman. “From the beginning, we focused on blending components whenever possible to meet the needs of both the learners and the organization.”

**Blended Learning**

One of the programs to which the blended learning approach was applied was problem solving and decision making. This program sharpens an individual’s ability to separate and clarify issues, identify those that need immediate attention and resolve them using a systematic, rational problem solving, decision making or action planning process.

These rational thinking skills have been successfully taught at American Honda for many years in a purely instructor led workshop version. The skills have been critical to establishing and sustaining quality throughout Honda, in both the manufacturing and service/support areas.

American Honda worked closely with several vendors to shorten the time spent at the workshop, produce online learning elements and document results electronically. “Since it was important not to lose the dynamic that occurs when people work together, learn from each other and receive direct coaching from an instructor, we decided against a completely virtual approach,” notes Juneman.

“Rather, we elected to utilize the power of online learning at specific points before and after the workshop,” Juneman continues. “This enabled us to increase initial understanding of the topics and get learners talking to the instructors about their objectives before coming to the session. We were also able to set the stage for immediate use of the concepts back on the job and provide learners with online tools to support sustained use over time.”

The blended learning approach also enabled American Honda to capture and measure detailed, useful data about how the problem solving and decision making processes are used to impact and improve quality in critical service and support areas.
Improving Service Quality at Honda

American Honda realized from the beginning that training, by itself, wouldn’t lead to quality improvements. Applying the skills you learn during a training experience regularly and accurately requires a great deal of practice and support. Enter American Honda’s three-phase learning model (see Figure 1).

**Phase one:** The first phase takes place online. For two to three weeks, learners access a series of online modules that introduce the logical processes for effective problem solving and decision making. Learner progress is essentially self-paced, but since the content is driven from a Web server, the instructor can follow the progress of each learner and provide ongoing encouragement and support.

During phase one, learners are also asked to identify situations to which they intend to apply the techniques so they can focus on these situations when they attend the workshop. This powerful combination of initial learning and preparation for applying the concepts to real-life issues ensures the following phase will not only be efficient but also build deep understanding and significant motivation to use the ideas on the job after training.

**Phase two:** The second phase takes place at the workshop. Guided by the instructor, learners spend two days deepening their understanding of the concepts, discussing best practices and additional techniques for problem solving and decision making, and practicing on detailed case scenarios.
Since skill transfer—and results—occur most rapidly when you start with the learner's on-the-job issues, a significant portion of the session is spent working on the problems, decisions and plans identified in phase one. Simultaneously, learners receive coaching and feedback from the instructor and one another.

Learners leave the session ready to fully apply the concepts and with a plan in hand to move successfully from the workshop to consistent use of the concepts back on the job.

**Phase three:** The final phase takes place back online. In the three weeks following the session, learners resolve the on-the-job issues they began to work on during the workshop. They document for instructor review, feedback and approval the specific techniques they used to resolve the issues.

During phase three, learners have access to a host of online support tools and information. They can contact the instructor with questions at any time.

The goal of this phase is to ensure use of the learned concepts, build confidence, get results and capture information about how the problem solving and decision making tools impact American Honda’s business—how they create quality and value through their use.

**Lessons Learned**

“We learned a lot about the pros and cons of electronic learning when we began to use this approach,” observes Leon Ronzana, assistant manager, organizational development, at American Honda. “True online learning requires culture change, and like any change, it requires planning, communication and persistence.”

While online learning displaces some workshop time—the session was pared from three days to two—learners must take time to go online and learn. This requires new behaviors on the part of learners (who have to find the time and resist distractions), managers (who have to encourage and protect the time necessary for online learning) and instructors (who become performance partners and must be available to coach and support learners).

To promote and support the success rate of online learners, American Honda now kicks off each training session with a Web conference to clarify expectations and provide participants with practical tips for online learning. In addition, learners’ managers are brought into the loop and asked for input into the choice of high priority problems, decisions and plans to be tackled during the workshop.

Instructors at American Honda have also received additional training to help them effectively coach online learners and act quickly to intervene with anyone experiencing difficulties. The company has also created an extensive online library of reference and support materials on which instructors can draw.

“Online learning is not for everyone, especially people who’ve never learned that way before,” Ronzana points out, “so we’ve made sure learners can print paper versions of most on-line materials if they learn best in other modes, want to continue learning while traveling or are in a location without Web access.”

These kinds of adjustments—continuous improvements—have added up to a performance environment that better supports the learning experience and promotes the desired outcomes: problems solved, decisions made and quality protected and improved.
Improving Service Quality at Honda

Success Indicators

How has American Honda’s learning experiment improved the quality of its support services? Juneman points to three areas in which the blended learning approach has had a positive impact: the increased quality of the actual learning experience, the quality—and visibility—of issues being resolved immediately after training and the increased use of the learned concepts over time to drive up business results.

Because instructors can track phase one learning progress in real time, they can provide direct support to individual learners even before they come to the workshop. As a result, the instructor can tailor the learning experience, minimizing the one-size-fits-all approach that frustrates many people in traditional training.

After the session, the instructor becomes an on-call coach—tracking progress, providing pointers and answering questions so learners get personalized support during the critical days following the workshop, when traditional learners often stumble and give up in frustration.

This adds up to a higher quality learning experience that produces the motivation and support Juneman believes are key to setting the stage for integrating learned concepts into daily use long-term.

“Training only leads to quality improvements back on the job if people embed new ideas into their daily routines,” Juneman explains, “and that only happens if the learner is sufficiently motivated and supported by the learning experience to consistently use new ideas until they become second nature.”

Ronzana believes the quality, visibility and value of issues learners resolve immediately after the workshop portion of the training have been greatly enhanced by the new approach. Because learners now submit online documentation of the issues they have resolved, it is much easier to see how and where the concepts are being used and evaluate the impact of the training on the bottom line of the organization.

“We have direct visibility into both individual and organizational improvement,” notes Ronzana. “It is impressive to stand back and look at 30 or more fully documented decisions made, problems solved or activities undertaken using clear, rational thinking processes. Sometimes we can assign clear dollar results to outcomes.

“At other times, the results are less tangible, or we choose not to quantify them but to look for improved systems, reduced barriers or overall employee and customer satisfaction,” Ronzana explains. “In either case, we know with certainty our associates are using what they’ve learned to improve the quality of services and, by extension, of the organization.”

If you plan to adopt a blended learning approach similar to American Honda’s, here’s a pivotal question: What constitutes success? The indicators of success in Figure 2 should serve as thought starters.

With more than 300 taking advantage of the blended learning opportunity in the last couple of years, American Honda is happy with the results. Juneman offers an example: “When someone in our dealer support function uses these rational thinking processes to systematically find and resolve the cause of a longstanding computer systems issue, I know he or she and a number of other people across the organization will be able to work more efficiently. The quality of individual
output is improved, customers are happier and more efficient, and learners are very likely to use the problem solving process again and again to achieve similar results.”

Although American Honda has not yet studied the long-term impact of blended learning on quality in service and support functions, Juneman and Ronzana are comfortable the impact is already there, has added value and will continue to grow.

As Juneman sees it, “The fact that our associates talk about decisions, problems and actions using a common vocabulary and approach and routinely include specific documentation of results speaks volumes about blended learning’s ability to stick over time.”

American Honda has found training for service quality improvement works best when it is multimodal. In blended learning, high touch and high tech converge. It is also where vision and the basic blocking and tackling of performance management meet to create significant behavior change and business results.
**Kepner-Tregoe, Inc.** (www.kepner-tregoe.com) is a Princeton, NJ-based consulting and training company that works with organizations worldwide to meet complex business challenges and achieve measurable results. The renowned Kepner-Tregoe processes for problem solving, decision making, and project management provide logical and consistent approaches to tough business issues.

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