

Save Dollars with an In-house Symposium

by Shirley Fine Lee

With budget cuts and other cost saving measures, training departments are asked to come up with new and inventive ideas for delivering training at lower costs. Why look for something new when there are tried and true ways of doing this at a low cost already? One such method is the in-house symposium held in a large room at the organization's facility instead of renting a location. A symposium is a series of speakers delivering information on related or unrelated topics in order to share knowledge with their audience. The topics can be unrelated as long as they fit in the overall knowledge sharing theme of the event. A symposium takes some coordination but overall it is the simplest training delivery method and requires minimal instructional design. Thus the low cost.

For the symposium to work well, the pre-event process should begin a few months prior to the delivery date. To start, assign someone in the training department to be the project manager. As the project manager they will be responsible for communication, coordination, and any facility or system requirements for the event.

The project manager would then do a call for presenters from subject matter experts (SME) in the organization. To get a list of SMEs in your organization and possible topics, ask the department managers. Once you have the list of topic ideas, determine which ones are currently bigger needs for your organization and develop a title or theme for the symposium based on those topics. Once you have this list, you can send an email to potential presenters asking for volunteers to present on the topics and outlining the requirements for their presentations such as time and maximum number of slides. Be sure to ask for a quick response but include a deadline date so you can pick presenters and still allow the selected presenters to have at least 30 days to prepare. If you plan to give copies of the slide show as handouts, be sure to allow a week before the event to get all presenters' masters and arrange copying.

To keep the presentation topics within the framework of good training, it may be best to use an hour outline. This would include 30 minutes total lecture time, 10-15 minutes of activity, and a 10-15 minutes for a question and answer period at the end. The activity portion can be as simple as individual's evaluating themselves against criteria the presenter gives, developing a work plan for deploying what they learn, or taking some sort of test. Alternatively it could be having the audience pair-up and discuss different points of view on information the presenter has shared. The activity should not be directly after the lecture and before Q&A as it will look too much like a "time-filler". Instead it should be presented either mid-lecture or near the end of the presentation prior to summarizing the topic. The presenter should provide a debrief for the activity by having some of the audience members share from their discussion results or explaining what taking the time to survey, plan, or test was important. Since you may have SMEs who do not know how to build an activity, you may want to suggest they choose to exercise the option of meeting with an instructional designer (ISD) in the training department. The ISD professional can review their planned presentation with them and help develop an appropriate activity.

The symposium should have 5-6 topics on the chosen date. Below is a potential schedule for a six topic day. Notice that there is thirty minutes between sessions. This allows for the leaving and entering of attendees and presenters as well as for some break time if someone is returning for the next event. If you want to make the symposium more of an event, you can have the first session be a kick-off for the day or have the ending session be a wrap-up of the day. This special event portion could be a state of the industry address by a high-level member of management who connects the topics of the day to what is being done in your type of industry or organization.

SESSION TIMES	TOPIC	PRESENTER
8:00- 9:00 AM	Topic #1	Name #1

9:30-10:30 AM	Topic #2	Name #2
10:30-11:30 AM	Topic #3	Name #3
	LUNCH BREAK	
1:00- 2:00 PM	Topic #4	Name #4
2:30- 3:30 PM	Topic #5	Name #5
4:00- 5:00 PM	Topic #6	Name #6

A way to bring more attention to the event is to spend some money on a keynote speaker to talk during the lunch break. The keynote should take no more than 45 minutes total including Q&A. It should also be someone outside the organization with expertise in their personal field. You can start looking for a keynote using your ASTD chapter [consultant directory](#). If you choose to do a keynote over lunch, you do not have to provide lunch as long as you advertise it as a brown bag event. If you still want to have six topic sessions, you may need to reduce your session topics to fifty minutes in order to have some movement and break time between the last morning topic session, the lunch keynote, and the first afternoon topic session. You may also choose to reduce the thirty minutes between sessions to twenty minutes.

Except for the project manager and the optional ISD help, a symposium should require little labor from the training department. You should let the presenter make their own PowerPoint slides so they can order it as they feel appropriate. Every slide show does not have to match in order for it to be a professional-looking program. After all how many conferences have you been to where everyone had the same slide template? However, if you want the cohesive look, then design a PowerPoint slide template and provide it to the SMEs when you let them know they were selected to present. This way you will not have to take time to copy everyone's slides into the new format for them.

About a month prior to the symposium, start advertising using email, posters, flyers, and other inexpensive alternatives to make sure the word gets out. This will get people looking forward to the event. The symposium should be just like an outside symposium where attendees get to pick and choose which topic best suits their needs and plan their attendance. Although computerized registration is now an easy task, it should not be necessary as people could just sign in when they attend. An easy way to get attendance is by having the presenter send an attendance sheet along each side of the room. However, if you plan to have pre-registration, be sure to include how to do this and when the deadline is in all announcements. A week before the symposium, send a reminder email so people will be sure to put the sessions they want to attend on their calendars. Send a final reminder email the day before the symposium to increase participation.

Next time you need new training options, think before you plan a new workshop or course module. If little time is needed to impart new knowledge or build on existing knowledge, ask yourself can it be done in under an hour? Can it be combined in a day with other training needs? Instead of digging for new training methods, can you dust off the old symposium idea? Think about what offers you the most value for the buck.



About the Author: Shirley Fine Lee is a trainer and speaker. She is the author of "[R.A.I.R.A! A Meeting Wizard's Approach](#)", a guide to planning and conducting meetings for productivity and effectiveness, and smoothly run. She has considerable training and expertise in leading effective meetings herself, as well as training others to do the same. Shirley has worked as a training and development specialist since 1986, and an independent consultant since 2000 when she joined Dallas ASTD. She has extensive experience helping organizations with their team building, training development, meeting facilitation, presentation delivery, and other communication needs. You may read many business articles by Shirley (some of the e-articles may be reprinted in company newsletters) from her website or on the multi-contributor productivity tips blog at <http://2bproductive.blogspot.com/>. If you want to find out more about Shirley, sign up for her newsletter, or contact her, please see her website at www.ShirleyFineLee.com.