



Webbmedia Group, LLC

Convert Your Staff

Prepared for the 2008 Sulzberger Leadership Program

by Amy L. Webb

Every news organization is making some effort towards using digital media, whether it's to build a website, apply social networking tools such as del.icio.us or Facebook, or even to launch video footage. But for most, the motivation to use digital media comes from trying to stay relevant and solvent in our ever-changing media landscape, rather than because of a genuine enthusiasm to try something new or to learn more about emerging technology.

In reality, many journalists are terrified to try new technology, or they see it as a threat to the way they've historically practiced their craft. As news organizations make the inevitable shift to include digital media in daily operations, staff training becomes necessary, and in many cases, job duties need to change, too. Feelings of insecurity or fear will automatically start your staff off on the wrong foot. They will approach any digital initiative with outright skepticism and resistance rather than with an open mind and the urge to continue exploring digital media after your training program has completed.

Here are 10 tips and hands-on learning exercises that any newsroom trainer can use to motivate staff to use and embrace technology.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

1. Take apart a computer together

There's a reason that tech support is so expensive: most consumers are afraid to take apart their own computers. One easy way to demystify the machines we rely on is to hold a short session where staff "dissect" a computer together. A good way to begin this session is to tell a story about dissecting a frog during a high school biology class. Relate that to taking apart a computer - stress that nothing will be damaged, and that the best way to understand how a computer works is to take a peek at its guts.

Adapt It: Use an older desktop computer. We strongly recommend that you DO NOT use a laptop. Undo the plastic outer shell. On most computers, it will easily snap off. Remove the memory. Point out what each part is and what each part does. Remove as much or as little as you'd like. Allow everyone to each to touch, feel, hold all of the parts. Pass them around. Provide a vocabulary list and definitions - make sure to call all of the parts by their proper names. Make the session fun by inviting all of the staff to take apart and put back the equipment.

Outcome: Staff will feel more comfortable once they have a better understanding of what's inside the box they use. They will approach new technology with less fear and insecurity.

2. Set realistic expectations and goals

Even the very best trainer will not create a Photoshop expert out of a new user. Not everyone will have the aptitude or creativity to do web or multimedia work. At the same time, some staff may surprise you and will learn and use new techniques much faster than you may anticipate.

Adapt It: Keep in mind that everyone learns and understands in his or her own way. Multimedia/ web ability has little to do with age, gender or demographic, so it's important not to make any assumptions. You might begin a training initiative by having staff fill out a self-evaluation form. You might even consider creating a skills challenge (we advise against calling it a "test") to evaluate where each student is before starting your training. It's important to set challenging, but realistic, goals.

Outcome: The more that you can tailor training sessions to each staff member, the better. If each staff learns to his/her potential, your newsroom should see maximum benefit.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

3. Build an office intranet

An intranet is a website or portal that is usually password-protected and contains information specifically for the people working within a company. It can be used for posting staff contact information, sharing resources, hosting a meeting calendar and more.

Adapt It: Many news and other organizations already have intranets, but they aren't used for continuous learning. Trainers should consider using the office intranet to post training modules, tipsheets, practice exercises and even weekly puzzles. Discussion boards can be used for staff to post questions or comments on topics they're learning. *Important note:* This blog is intended as a non-threatening practice space for staff and should be used *only* for practice and should be viewed only by the organization. It should not be made available on the organization's website.

Outcome: If training resources are readily available, constantly updated and easy to access, your staff will more likely make use of them.

4. Create a staff blog

Blogs are typically seen as venues for gossip mongers or political columnist imitators. In reality, a blog is really just a publishing platform that enables any user to quickly and easily post any kind of content to the web. For that reason, a blog can be a fantastic place for staff to learn how to use digital media tools and technology.

Adapt It: Start a training blog for staff. You can either build out a new blog using your newsroom's content management system, or you can register for a free blog with Blogger.com. We strongly recommend keeping this particular blog private and requiring a password to access it.

You can have each staff be responsible for covering their own newsroom or topic of choice for a week. S/he should write an entry at least once every day for a set number of days, and s/he should try to also upload and post photos and embedded video. You might structure the weeklong coverage period using a series of exercises. Examples are below - we recommend that you provide training worksheets along with clear explanations and a contact person for help when it's needed. It's important, too, to create a system for feedback and positive reinforcement.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

DAY ONE: Post text entry

DAY TWO: Post text with at least three hyperlinks

DAY THREE: Post text, at least three hyperlinks and a photo

DAY FOUR: Post text, at least three hyperlinks, and a centered photo with caption

DAY FIVE: Post all of the above plus an embedded YouTube video

Outcome: Starting an internal blog with a structured plan of exercises will make learning web/ multimedia editing less threatening. Staff may be more willing to contribute more multimedia for the organization on their own.

5. Start an internal mentoring program

Providing staff with a friendly mentor is a good way to nurture teamwork and continuous learning in any organization. It is also an excellent way to start an internal peer network.

Adapt It: Identify those in your organization with advanced digital media/ technology skills. Approach each to see if s/he would be interested in mentoring other staff. We recommend strongly that the program uses one-on-one relationships so that the mentor can provide maximum attention and support.

Many mentoring programs fail because they lack structure. It would be good to set expectations early. Consider holding a one-time group meeting, where mentors can connect and talk about how they'd like to proceed. We recommend that mentor pairs meet once a week for a set time period (eight weeks, six months, a year) informally to discuss projects and troubleshooting.

Outcome: Sometimes problems arise, or creativity is stifled, because staff are afraid or unwilling to ask questions. A mentor relationship is an easy, low-cost way to provide ongoing training for your entire staff and to help organizations work together in groups.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

6. Provide access to gear for everyone

Too often, only the photographers get to play with new equipment in newsrooms. We recommend initiating a program that allows all staff, regardless of position, to gain access to equipment and training.

Adapt It: We recommend building a small library of gear: audio recorders, digital cameras, digital video cameras. This need not cost thousands of dollars (see our Gear Guide for details).

Create a library system so that all staff members - even those on the business/ advertising side - can gain access to equipment. We recommend that you create a series of short, clear instruction sheets that explain the basics of how to use the equipment. But really, it's best for staff to explore and learn on their own.

Outcome: The more access staff has to experimenting with equipment, the more likely they'll be to use it for content. For example, if business staff has the experience of shooting video, they may become more motivated to develop new ad-buy video models for your website.

7. Develop multimedia storytelling templates

Your staff may be eager to try multimedia techniques, but without a formula or template for creating new content, they may be reluctant to try on their own. Offering a series of templates will remove at least one barrier from creating digital content.

Adapt It: You might brainstorm internally to determine what kinds of digital stories you're most likely to use on a given website. Examples include: data-driven interactive projects (charts, tables), photo slideshows with audio, videos with polished graphics, simple interactive maps, simple timelines.

Depending on the content management system and the available software, it's easy to create basic templates that can be used again and again for any website. Create a series of fixed templates that reporters can choose from for virtually any story. Include an explanation of what kind of information is required for each. For example, the photo slideshow might require: 10-15 300 dpi images cropped to 300px x 400px, nat sound for a minimum of 120 seconds, audio that describes/ narrates each of the images, full cutlines and scene information for each saved as a txt file.

This enables all staff to participate in the multimedia storytelling process - and removes some of the critical decision-making steps from the process.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

Outcome: Offering pre-built templates is a good way to encourage staff to collect and create content for the web. This also makes it easier for web teams to streamline their workflow because sizes, qualities, nomenclature and the like will have already been determined and formatted correctly.

8. Start an internal _____ user group

Take a cue from the technology world. There is a user group for virtually every software application and digital media tool. Most user groups connect via wikis and listservs, and occasionally they meet in person. Their purpose is to troubleshoot problems related to a particular application/ tool, to share enhancements and news, to offer advice and sometimes to just act as a sounding board when frustration strikes.

Adapt It: Determine which software applications and digital tools your organization relies upon most heavily. These will likely be your content management system, your workflow or edit system, your photo correction/ editing system, your video editing system and in many cases Flash, which is an interactivity software application.

We recommend that you create a user group for each and that you invite people to join in. You can create a listserv (example: BayTribuneFlashUserGroup) and let folks hash out problems or share ideas on their own. Every large digital media company (Google, Microsoft, Apple) maintains internal user groups.

Outcome: This should encourage teamwork and will aid in continuous learning/ training throughout the organization.

9. Appoint a tech guru/ evangelist

If your organization already has a staff member who is enthusiastic, affable and excited about technology, consider appointing him/her your organizations Chief Technology Evangelist. This concept was popular during the dot com bubble in the 1990s, but it's a great way to win over staff who might be reluctant to embrace technology.

Adapt It: Determine who among your current staff would be the best candidate. This role should not supersede his/her current duties. The evangelist should instead be responsible for spreading enthusiasm and for motivating others to try out new technology.



Webbmedia Group, LLC

S/he might maintain a blog about technology just for your organization. S/he could also lead informal brown bag lunch talks or even coordinate a quick field trip to a local tech company.

Outcome: Every organization can use a cheerleader. The more his/her enthusiasm spreads, the more others will become motivated to use digital media.

10. Coordinate a series of master classes

A good way to inspire and motivate staff is to offer a series of master classes conducted by someone who's both a great teacher and an expert practitioner.

Adapt It: Coordinate a series of workshops or classes that can be held during convenient times for staff. Workshop topics should be very specific and address a granular topic, such as "how to embed video using our content management system" or "how to create a data-driven real-time election graphic." We DO NOT recommend holding general sessions, such as "Photoshop basics" or "Flash for beginners," because without constant use, students will quickly forget what they've learned.

Workshops should have a specific goal (make one chart with three data fields) that can definitely be accomplished in the allotted time. The instructor could be someone on staff or might be a person from outside your organization. We recommend that the workshop sessions are very small - 10 people, maximum - and should include only those staff with enough of the required skills for that particular project so that they can refine and enhance what they already know.

Outcome: Advanced training is always appreciated but rarely offered at news organizations. This will motivate staff and encourage further growth and development.

For Additional Information:

Webbmedia Group, LLC
2336 Cambridge Walk
Suite 400
Baltimore, MD 21224
tel: 267.342.4300
info@webbmediagroup.com
<http://www.webbmediagroup.com>

Training Paper: Convert Your Staff

© 2008 Webbmedia Group, LLC

<http://www.webbmediagroup.com>