Database training for SAAP Management and Reporting Tool

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Background

IN EARLY JULY 1998 a partnership between the National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) and the Australian Centre for Public Administration and Business Training, part of the Canberra Institute of Technology, was established to provide database training for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) Management and Reporting Tool (SMART) software. NDCA is located within the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). The Centre for Public Administration was to manage the roll-out of this training in two stages. Stage 1 was to be finalised by October 1998; stage 2 by June 1999. Stage 1 was designed as the pilot program. In stage 1, SMART training for approximately 370 participants was required in 29 different locations across Australia.

SMART is the name given to the customised database package commissioned by the NDCA to assist it in the collection of data. Agencies who regularly reported to the NDCA required training in the use of this package designed to simplify and computerise the reporting process. A series of one-day workshops providing training in the use of SMART had to be rolled out during a three-week period in August 1998. In the six weeks before the first workshop, three volumes of resource materials had to be updated, printed and distributed to training venues, the software had to be modified, trainers from six States had to be trained and the scheduled training dates and locations had to be finalised.

To achieve the goals of the project within the timeframe and within the budget, a series of ‘partnerships’ was established. The premier partnership was between the staff from the NDCA and staff from the Centre for Public Administration and Business Training. A secondary network was established with a technical and further education (TAFE) institute or college from each of the participating States. Each TAFE partner was located either in the capital city of that State or close to it. This network was developed from contacts made through the Australian TAFE Consortium.
The long term goals of the NDCA

The AIHW is an independent statutory authority which undertakes statistical and research work in the health, welfare and housing fields. The NDCA's role within the AIHW is to collect and analyse data for SAAP for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services.

The SMART software was commissioned by the NDCA to improve the reporting process for both the agencies and the NDCA.

The long-term goals for the rollout of SMART software are to:
- increase the number of agencies using computer-based recording processes
- increase the accuracy of data submitted to the NDCA
- increase agency responsibility for electronic data collection
- reduce the time taken for agencies to reproduce data required by NDCA
- decrease the calls to the NDCA help desk from agencies who are using SMART
- improve the potential for using SMART to collect additional data and use this for research purposes

The CIT centre strategy

In order to keep costs to a minimum, an innovative strategy was proposed by the centre. This strategy involved the delivery of SMART workshops across Australia by a 'virtual national TAFE training provider'. A TAFE network was seen by industry to offer major advantages, as most cities and larger towns contained a TAFE college or TAFE annex.

One of the workshops in Canberra was attended by NDCA staff, some of whom were to provide telephone assistance to agency staff in the use of SMART should they require it. The second Canberra workshop was attended by six State training co-ordinators, NDCA representatives and two SAAP agency staff members.

The involvement of these industry representatives on this day was an essential ingredient to ensuring commitment to the national and local clients. The industry presentations enabled TAFE trainers to understand the rationale behind the SMART roll-out from the NDCA's perspective and also the nature of SAAP agency work.

After the Canberra workshop, four of the State training co-ordinators then organised their own State-based training day to increase the number of SMART trainers in their team.

A centre project manager was located at CIT's main campus at Reid in the Australian Capital Territory. A major challenge for CIT's centre project manager was to set up processes to ensure quality and consistency in both presentation and access to computer laboratories across the training workshops. Problems did occur when network restrictions prevented trainers from loading SMART onto TAFE networks even though this requirement had been cleared in advance.
The role of the NDCA

The main industry partner in this project was the NDCA. A team of four staff acted as the communication link between the SMART project and the SAAP agency participants who had identified that they wanted to be part of stage 1 of the SMART roll-out. The training provider was not directly involved in this communication loop. The NDCA staff provided information about both Windows training and SMART training to SAAP agencies. They decided on the number and locations of these workshops. They scheduled workshops and communicated this schedule to participants. The NDCA was also responsible for modifying both the SMART user manual and SMART supervisor manual. This team organised a consistent presentation of all manuals and then printed and packaged these for distribution to all 29 different training locations.

Implementation and measuring success

Forty-three SMART workshops were delivered in seven States in three weeks for 370 participants. These workshops were held at 29 different venues and involved 18 trainers.

The immediate measurement of the success of the project has been gathered through a statistical analysis of the rankings and comments offered in participant evaluations and trainer evaluations. Overall, the participant evaluation forms provided a very positive view of the national implementation of SMART training. There were, however, some issues raised that need to be addressed to improve the process for the national roll-out of SMART training for stage 2. Most trainers reported that the workshops in which they were involved were successful, with participants enthusiastic about what SMART has to offer, and satisfied that they had achieved competence and confidence in the use of SMART within the timeframe available.

Benefits for industry

The benefits for industry of the approach described above are as follows:

- successful outsourcing of industry training
- the creation of an excellent product
- industry employees or agents upskilled and therefore more valuable assets to the organisation
- a training program delivered within budget and within a difficult timeframe
- the training provider acts as a third party and thus, although they are employed by industry, they are perceived by clients to be more neutral in the implementation of training for occasionally unfavourable activities
- useful information about client responses to training and new ways of working gathered for future programs
- industry managers can retain control of the direction and focus of training programs
- working with a TAFE network allows industry to effectively share the risks and encourages active problem-solving within a competitive environment

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Benefits for training providers

The benefits for training providers of the approach described above are as follows:

- new links with other training providers trialled and established
- increased links with local industries re-promoted
- communication channels re-used for additional projects
- national team of trainers who have experience with projects not managed locally perceived a great advantage for commercial training areas
- national feedback by trainers provides valuable information about methodologies and problem-solving and validates professional approaches to training
- improved profile of each of the partners on the national training scene
- a model for the roll-out of other training

Benefits for participants

The benefits for participants of the approach described above are as follows:

- improved confidence and skills in the use of customised computing packages
- reduced time spent on reporting
- ability to share approaches with other agency staff
- improved understanding of government requirements
- positive attitude to the usefulness of training and TAFE as a source of upskilling
- catalyst to changing work practices