

# STRUCTURING OFF-SITE STAFF TRAININGS

by Raymond J. Struyk

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Training needs arise from on-boarding new staff and from the need to improve staff quality. Most think tanks experience significant staff turnover, particularly at the junior researcher level and among lower level support staff—as people leave and are replaced, and, in some cases, as the institution expands. Consequently, a great deal of time is often devoted to providing on-the-job training to new staff (i.e., training where one worker explains to another the institution’s policy on such items as formatting documents, archiving statistical analyses, working with clients, and the IT system).

There is wide agreement that ongoing skills improvement is essential as well to enhance productivity and staff satisfaction and retention. Opportunities for skill enhancement are legion. Many new researchers do not have a strong grounding in policy analysis or in program monitoring and evaluation—skills that are very likely to be needed at most think tanks. Most have also had only limited experience with the main statistical analysis packages such as SAS and SPSS. It is certainly possible for support staff and researchers to gain competence gradually through mentoring from their peers, but relying on colleagues alone can be inefficient. Colleagues do not always have time to explain carefully, not all colleagues can answer the questions posed, and the explanations almost certainly will be less thorough than would be optimal. To avoid wasting resources and potentially frustrating more experienced staff, think tank management must give careful thought to defining the best mix of in-house and external training options.

Nearly all think tanks pay for off-site “professional development,” a term used here to include attending relevant professional conferences and participating in vendor-provided skills development short courses. These workshops can be quite basic, such as improving one’s skills with Microsoft PowerPoint, or quite specialized such as a multi-day seminar on alternatives for analyzing trends in house prices and their variation among neighborhoods or regions.

Beyond development of skills, deeper learning is often necessary. Most think tanks offer some support for tuition at academic institutions particularly for courses directly relevant to the staff member’s responsibilities or likely future role in the organization. Some think tanks are prepared to support staff obtaining an initial college degree, funds permitting.

Important for senior management is to embrace the fact that staff in support offices—including IT, communications, HR, contracts, and accounting—have career paths and training needs and expectations parallel to their research center counterparts. Vendor-provided in-depth workshops on government contract regulations and requirements can sharply accelerate the professional development of those relatively new to working with such contracts. Similarly, those in IT responsible for maintained the organization’s computer systems can gain knowledge and certification through short courses aimed at helping student pass the next Microsoft test for a higher level of systems certification.

This post focuses tightly on off-site training by vendors and academic institutions and it identifies strong practices many of which are worthy of emulation. It relies heavily on the actual practices at four think tanks I view as well-managed: NORC at the University of Chicago, the Urban Institute, the Results for Development Institute, and the Institute for Urban Economics. The first three are large organizations (measured by staff size, headcounts range from about 150 to more than 1,000) all located in the U.S. The last is in Russia with a staff of about 50. Below these organizations are referred to as “study think tanks.” The practices identified as strong in the text are based on my distillation of material about their practices, from policy and process statements and interviews with responsible staff) and other resources about additional think tanks.

The post fills a void in on-line postings on this topic. Whereas many posts vigorously support training in various forms to increase staff productivity and satisfaction, finding discussions of the actual organization of such training is challenging. For example, my examination on October 13, 2017 of the 109 postings on *On Think Tanks* under the heading “staff training” yielded none devoted to actual policies and processes.

# Broad organization of external training

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It is standard practice for think tanks to develop an annual training plan. Naturally, the level of detail varies widely. Typically the plans are developed shortly after the annual staff assessment process. The advantage of this timing is that managers will have just held discussions with all staff about their future development, including needed external training, either professional development or academic courses.<sup>1</sup> This often results in managers identifying patterns in training needs that can be fed into the plan development process. While the Human Resources Department (HR) develops its own ideas from its sampling of performance assessments and discussions with managers, managers often directly contribute ideas to a Management Committee that leads plan development.

The Committee balances several factors in determining the total training budget and the allocation of funds among different kinds of training. These include: (a) expectations about institute revenues in the next year and the share that can be devoted to training overall; (b) major institute initiatives that carry training requirements such as the change to a different statistical software package or the clear necessity for a mandatory workshop for all researchers on ethical research practices including such issues as plagiarism and fudging statistical results; (c) changes in the incidence of staff seeking to take academic courses, both over the past few years and as suggested by the performance assessment results; and (d) the institute's experience with staff intentions for participation in off-site training being converted into actual participation. Funds for training are explicitly identified in institute-level budgets of all four study think tanks in various accounts.

Once the overall training budget is defined, then the division is made among formal on-site training, professional development, and academic courses. This division is heavily informed by the factors just noted. The balance of this note addresses professional development and academic courses. The administration of the two training types is very different.

Note that one study think tank does not offer assistance for staff development of the kind covered by Professional Development (PD) and Tuition Assistance (TA) programs. It does conduct in-house training sessions, often with outside instructors. Thus the following discussion is based on targeted interviews with three think tanks and my discussions with other think tanks over the years.

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1. The Management Committee at one of the study think tanks goes further and makes decisions at this time on most of the tuition assistance requests for the next year. It is possible for staff to apply over the course of the year but they are more likely to face funding restrictions.

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# Professional development

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The funds budgeted for professional development are assigned to research Center Directors and Directors of support offices. These Directors are responsible for distributing the funds among their staffs. The reasoning for assigning this responsibility to the Directors is their superior knowledge of the strengths and limitations of each staff member and of the “development plan” for each staffer that should result from the annual staff assessment process. Directors can use the training resources as incentives to encourage staff development and greater productivity. Recall that PD funds can be used to send staff to conferences (both local, at other sites in the country and international locations), to give analysts paid time to write an article for external publication (sometimes with active mentoring by more senior staff), as well as paying for vendor-offered short courses on various software and other skill areas.<sup>2</sup> Participation in such activities is usually highly valued by staff.

How are funds divided among research centers and support offices? A good practice is to base the allocation on the payroll in each office as a percentage of the total payroll for all the offices included in the allocation. The logic here recognizes that staff time is required for PD activities; indeed, the cost of staff participation is often greater than the cost for participating in an event, such as conference fees or travel costs. Giving more funds to offices with more senior people promotes an equal number of “training days” per staffer across Centers.

Some think tanks also simply allocate the funds available on a per capita basis. Additionally, some have separate funding pools for research and support offices, sometimes with differing average per capita funding levels.

A Director allocates funds to staffers for a particular PD activity through a simple memo to the finance department. The department assigns a project number to the activity (usually a sub-project number under the Center’s account for PD activities), and the staffer charges her time and costs to the account.<sup>3</sup> Directors receive monthly cost reports on all projects, including these. So oversight is easy.

Directors are expected to distribute the opportunities in an equitable manner, allowing for differences in training needs each year among staff and other factors. For example, in some countries donors provide off-site training courses without charge which reduces the funding requirements for some offices.

Senior management has an important oversight role to play: checking that Directors do not unduly favor certain staff. Only one of the three think tanks interviewed reported any checking of the distribution of these expenditures among staff within Centers. In a small think tank, such as the Institute for Urban Economics, favoritism would be quite clear to senior management. But at organizations with several hundred staff, this is unlikely. It is hard to overstate the negative effect on a group’s morale that results from obvious favoritism. At the think tank that said there is oversight, a review of this spending could be a topic at the quarterly review meetings between a Director and senior management. But it is not an item on the standard agenda.

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3. A full discussion of the of incentives to enhance productivity and increase staff retention is in Chapter 3 of R. Struyk, *Improving Think Tank Management* (Washington, DC: Results for Development Institute, 2015).

4. This assumes the organization has in place a time management system where staff record hours worked on various tasks. Where this is not the case, it may be that fund allocations do not include money for staff time.

# Tuition assistance for academic courses

All of the three study think tanks this assistance is centrally administered by the HR office. I believe this is because the policy and the procedures for tuition assistance are more complicated than for professional development activities and the funding commitments per activity often are larger.

Still, coordination with Directors is essential: otherwise the institute may be supporting courses which a Director does not view as particularly important. Remarkably, one of the three study think tanks does not have approval by the applicant's Director built into its process. Because staff seeking tuition assistance must submit an application to HR to authorize the assistance, the simplest coordination between HR and the Director can be for the Director to countersign the application and check a box indicating the course is necessary for the performance of the applicant's work.

A good tuition assistance policy includes a provision for staff to appeal a negative decision by a Director. One study think tank created an Education Assistance Review Committee for this purpose and broader policy advice on the program. It is comprised of the senior vice-president, the controller, and the HR director.

All three study think tanks that offer tuition assistance have extensive policy and procedure statements that explain the program and guide applicants through the process. HR makes payments directly to the college or university.

The following text describes which courses are eligible for support, the costs that are covered, standards that must be satisfied for the institute to pay for the course, and practices that come into play when a course is not satisfactorily completed.

*Courses eligible for support. Conditions of the following type typically apply.*

1. The course is directly related to the employee's current job; or, the course satisfies the requirements for completion of a graduate degree related to the employee's current job; or, the course will help qualify the employee for other positions at the institute.
2. The course must be offered by an accredited institution. (Courses at nonaccredited institutions could be funded with PD funds, at the discretion of the responsible Director.)
3. On-line courses offered by accredited colleges and universities qualify. NORC at the University of Chicago has a significant number of staff taking such courses.

**Costs covered.** Practices here vary. All institutions offered tuition assistance pay the actual course fee including laboratory fees. (Payments are pro-rated for permanent part-time workers.) Books are often paid for as well.

Many other possible fees tend to be excluded: supplies, health fees, graduation fees, application fees, student center fees and similar charges.

**Other conditions.** Some common additional conditions include the following.

1. Applicants must have worked satisfactorily for the institution for a minimum amount of time, usually 3–6 months.
2. Course work must not interfere with the employee’s day-to-day responsibilities at the institution. If there will be interference with the regular work schedule, arrangements must be made in advance with the responsible Director for a different schedule.
3. Student must satisfactorily complete the course. Standards vary: many think tanks require a minimum of a “C” grade; some insist on at least “Bs.” For ungraded courses students must submit a letter from an authorized school official indicating successful course completion.
4. Employees must present the official grade report to HR.
5. In some cases where the course costs are exceptionally large, employees can be asked to sign a statement that they will continue to work at the institute for a period, perhaps three years, after course completion.

**Failure to satisfactorily complete a course and the special case of large think tank commitments.** There are a couple of possible reasons for non-completion. The most obvious is receiving a grade below the required standard. The other reason is leaving the institute before the course is completed. Employees leaving voluntarily or those terminated for cause during the time the course is underway are not eligible for tuition assistance. On the other hand, an employee who leaves the institute because of a reduction-in-force, i.e., there is no more work for the individual, is eligible for assistance for ongoing courses.

Where repayment of course fees is necessary, arrangements are made by the finance department for recovery of fees paid by the institute. For staff continuing at the institute, repayment in installments over a 6–12-month period is typical, with the funds withheld from salary payments. For those leaving the institute, the fees paid are deducted from the final payment. The labor laws in some countries do not permit the withholding of final salary payments for this type of debt.

The Institute for Urban Economics (IUE) occasionally sends a staffer to a highly specialized course not available in Russia. An example, is a staffer attending a three-week course at the University of Pennsylvania in the U.S. focused on secondary mortgage markets. The costs of the training, including airfare, accommodation, and course fees is substantial. IUE requires the participant to sign an agreement to work at the Institute for three years after course completion. If the staffer leaves voluntarily earlier, he is liable for the costs incurred. To date, IUE has had only one case of this type.

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# Concluding

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The general outline of professional development training and tuition assistance programs is quite straightforward. But here, as in many other management tasks, the “devil is in the details.”

In professional development programs the Directors have key responsibilities. They usually have wide latitude in distributing the pot of funds allocated their groups. If they adopt a rather reactive and mechanical approach to distributing funds, the opportunity cost can be very high indeed. The program goal is to encourage and advance the development of staff members. Development includes both technical competence and strong motivation to contribute to research and support tasks being accurately and creatively undertaken. Senior management has the responsibility to mentor new Directors and monitor the fund distributions made by all of them.

Tuition assistance programs are simple in concept but involve a host of details in defining the kinds of courses in terms of content and rigor that will be supported, which courses receive priority if funds are limited, the extent of assistance that will be provided, the application process, the payment process, requirements for successful course completion, and rules regarding repayment if course performance is poor or a student departs from the institute before the course is completed. With so many dimensions to the program, a carefully drafted, comprehensive policy and procedures statement is essential to guide applicants, Directors, and program managers.

It is easy to get lost in the details. Critically, one needs to recall the powerful role that Professional Development and Tuition Assistance programs have on staff productivity and job satisfaction and employee retention rates. Remember that both research and support staff thrive on the incentive of improving their professional qualifications.

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