

## The Training Services Sector



### Marzena Raźniewska-Półkoszek

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**Reporter:** The EU economy and most of its sectors seem to be emerging from recession. In what ways has the economic crisis impacted the training-consulting sector?

**Marzena Raźniewska-Półkoszek:** It was similar to the way all other investments were impacted. Training is, after all, an investment in an individual, working in an organization and for an organization. It is the most profitable of all investments, although it is the most difficult about which to calculate the rate of return. Managers wait for hard and unambiguous indexes that can support authorized allocations for trainings budgets. Meanwhile, the intangible character of the services is that it can be an important advantage, and also, a panacea for the crisis.

I think that the crisis has simply "rearranged" the market. Training-consulting companies that are managed professionally can survive and even strengthen their position in changing markets. Effective managers, and there are such managers in

the sector, treat such a crisis as something normal in business. Managers with keen awareness just know what was already known in ancient times – "Panta rei". A training-consulting company, can not only survive, but can develop if it is managed wisely. A crisis is a test for management. Weaklings grumble, and look for the guilty in an enterprise, and attempt to capitalize on the situation. The courageous search for new ideas, develop themselves and try to change the environment in what can seem like a "frozen wasteland". These second types of managers enter new markets, implement product diversification and improve service quality. These managers define new standards of service. It is said that a shoemaker goes without shoes. I cannot agree. A company that tries to teach other enterprises how to manage, motivate, sell and serve customers, how to realize investments and fight a crisis, should itself serve as an example of good practice in this field. To sum up, I recognize this crisis as an opportunity to sort out the grain from the chaff.



**Reporter:** So, there are also some positive aspects of the crisis. I suppose, however, that in the face of a crisis many companies decide to decrease training budgets. Is this so?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** It is true that a lot of companies cut costs and delay the realization of planned training investments. I don't share this approach. I'm not a member of the group of malcontents who are able to specify endlessly the pitiful effects of the crisis on their training efforts. I want to emphasize that a crisis is a chance which can be used to one's advantage; if not, one will fall. The result of the crisis on my training company? We sought out opportunities where other did not even suspect to look. We entered completely new markets. And the result is great.

**Reporter:** Congratulations. Leaving this up-to-date topic behind, I would like to talk for a moment about training processes. Should a training company be a mere subcontractor, or is it better for the firm to be a partner and advisor for a range of analyzed areas?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** The correct answer is a partner, a diagnostician and a healer. Practical experience, however, indicates another reality. A company, represented by board's assistant, a human resources specialist and other employees, carries out casting for the best training firm. The reality is that they are looking for the cheapest ones. It is disgusting that a financial specialist or expert on infrastructure projects can assess a training company. These people do not have enough knowledge to do it. The evaluation is reduced to pricing in a charming demonstration of so-called "expert behavior". It defames the dignity of world class specialists. When I am invited to such interviews I ask directly what the aim of such meeting is and who will be my partner in the discussion. When I find out that the purpose is to get to know my company I propose not to waste our time just to send some electronic cards. The effectiveness of such presentations will be the same. The chosen company will be the one that promises more pie in the sky for a lower price. They will do it the

cheapest because of "training quackery". After such experiences, companies are astonished that the training has not changed anything; nothing has been improved. An old merchant rule says the more foolish a buyer, the higher risk one has to incur. On the other hand, we accept invitations to meetings with pleasure when I am sure when we are going to talk about content-related issues. Either I go, or I send a team headed by a person who is trained and experienced.

**Reporter:** How do you define the training process itself? Is it possible to single out particular stages?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** I strongly feel the training process is similar to the process of diagnosis and treatment in medicine. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize the cause of the illness. A patient knows what bothers him and has his own hypothesis as to the cause, though in the course of examination there is additional data which is discovered. Treatment can be a very complex process. Every organism reacts individually to the therapy. The illness can last one or two days in one case, and in another, the patient needs more time. Some circumstances, such as a lack of necessary understanding, a lack of funds, or conditions of the staff, force us to simplify the training process. From the methodological point of view, a proper training process has four stages: one, analysis and recognition of need; two, designing, preparation and conducting training; three, gaining feedback about the training; and four, testing of a training effectiveness.

In practice, the best developed is the second and third stages. This consists of giving the training, and receiving the feedback. Professional recognition, if it is possible at all, comes in simplified way. An experienced coach, working with a group of a few people, is able to pick up on the needs perfectly during the training activities. Obviously a coach should recognize those needs earlier during conversation. The questionnaire and experience very often verify book theory. For example, I frequently obtain information about a group, its training needs and requirements, from a person working in human resources or the



training department, or even sometimes, from the manager of the company. During the course of the training I become convinced that the needs of those receiving the training are completely different than I was led to believe. My own definition of the training process is as follows: *The training process it is the ability to hear and listen to, look at and see, and also look for, possibilities to be applied as solutions.*

**Reporter:** So, this process can be very long and complicated. That is why motivating people taking part in training seems to be crucial. What kind of motivational techniques are the most effective, in your opinion?

**Marzena Raźniewska-Półkoszek:** Showing personal benefits. If a person understands what kind of profits will be gained from taking part in the training, they will have the motivation to be engaged. The immediate supervisor of the person designated to be trained should inform his subordinate of the aim of the training and why it is important to participate in it.

During one of my training sessions, organized in the customer's workplace, participants asked me: "What time do we finish?". By the end of the first day, it was Friday evening, I took the risk and asked: "Are you going to come tomorrow?" I heard "Why shouldn't we come? The training is really great. But what the point, since we won't use what we've learned since some of us will be fired..." When there is lack of essential information in communication between and among superiors and the staff and employees, as to why some activities are undertaken, in this instance training, then many will understand the training in their own way, relying on rumors, guesswork, and insinuations. Therefore, it is the immediate supervisor who has a crucial role to play in efficient training. He should be an example, and ought to indicate to his subordinates some of the benefits profits they can gain from the training.

**Reporter:** Motivation is necessary to have engaged participants. But what about planning? What kind of development and planning methods utilized by career staff members in a company are the most effective in your opinion?

**Marzena Raźniewska-Półkoszek:** I would like to emphasize that everything starts from the immediate supervisor. He knows his subordinates the best, he has the most direct and biggest motivational impact, either positive or negative, on the quality of his subordinates' work and their professional development. The most original motivational systems will not bring any worth to the life of a company if leaders do not understand the significance of their role in employee development. A manager, open to subordinates, can see more than an HR manager or external consultant. So it is good to start from the boss. I recently talked with a production manager, who will soon undergo an assessment. There is such a custom in this company that after three months of probation in a managerial post, the new manager's management is evaluated. I want to emphasize that my interlocutor had, until that time, a harmonious and motivated team. He received positive recognition from his direct superiors, achieved good results and felt good in this position. Meanwhile, after just a few days, an assessment conducted by external consultants created conditions that could negatively impact on the manager's future. It is outrageous because they do not have the real picture of the person's career activities and achievements. Even the most fashionable methods can bring more harm than benefit when they are adopted indiscriminately in enterprises.

**Reporter:** Can you observe any changes in the way training are conducted? What is your attitude to training digitalization? Specifically, I'm thinking about the growing popularity of e-learning, internet seminars and virtual classes.

**Marzena Raźniewska-Półkoszek:** I have tested it myself, and up to now I have been disappointed with its superficiality. I believe that even the most essential and functionally attractive e-learning course will not replace contact with an authentic coach who has knowledge, and also a personality or temperament. An individual is a social being and needs to see himself through the eyes of another human being, whether that is a business trainer, advisor, consultant, or mentor. One



expects return information about oneself that is authentic and individualized.

**Reporter:** The importance of interactivity of an educational process is emphasized by stressing the usage of games and business simulations. Do you use such tools in your professional practice?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** I use what my customer requires. Sometimes it is a game or simulation, or just a sincere conversation, one based on facts. Unfortunately, too often training is identified with fun. We go from one extreme to another; from an academic lecture that is yawn competition, to interactive training that is so much fun you cry. Because training is an investment I choose the methods most appropriate to achieving the goals in the circumstances in which I am working at the moment. Very often at the beginning of a training meeting, I paraphrase Churchill's words: "That which I can promise at this training is blood, sweat and tears." As long as customers are coming back to me I believe that we understand each other well.

**Reporter:** I suppose that many customers require some confirmation of training efficacy. Can we apply quantitative rates to verify this efficacy? If so, which one do you regard as the best?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** In the time of economic downturn people who order training want these to be a panacea for all shortcomings. They expect an increase in the number of contracts finalized, more engaged employees, a decrease in the number of complaints, etc. They await specific numbers; how much, how many. To my most inquisitive customers, I recommend calculating the ROI (return on investment) index, similar as is used in other investments. We can calculate it in such way:

$$ROI = \frac{\text{Sum of savings or incomes gained from training} - \text{training costs}}{\text{training costs}} \times 100$$

**Reporter:** So how can we verify a training efficacy not using quantitative methods?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** In the range of staff competencies, it is enough to look at and

see, listen to and hear, and therefore, broadly recognize the factors that determine an individual's effectiveness and efficiency in an organization. In the case of training covering a special discipline of knowledge, for example, public orders, economic and financial analysis, contract conditions FIDIC, a good way to verify training efficacy can be a knowledge test, which aims to reveal the level of expertise internalized by training participants. I want to indicate an important reservation concerning the credibility of knowledge tests. The knowledge should be verified before and after training to be reliable. Such an option is chosen by some customers, especially training from European Union funds. Vocational training is a special form of self-development. It should be based on trust between a trainee and a trainer, mentor or lecturer. Additionally, there should be mutual openness, the possibility to share ideas, experiences and observations. This work is focused on individual human beings; it does not matter if one works alone or in a training group. I deplore a situation when an individual is treated like the object of training. Concentration on hard indexes causes a paradoxical situation when knowledge and skills are presented at training are not applied, because there is a lack of motivation among training participants.

**Reporter:** Over the last few years, we have observed the growing demand for an individual coaching. How could you characterize the difference between coaching and training?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** For me coaching is one-on-one work, based on mutual exchange of experiences, observations, and views. For orthodox coaches this service concentrates mainly on posing questions to persuade trainees to reflect and search for answers inside themselves. I also use this method, but I do not understand the idea of restricting your own activity to only posing questions, especially in a situation when we can not spend half a year just trying to find an answer. It is the reason why I try to be specific when I present my proposals. I also make it clear that my partner should not believe me, but rather, he should verify if he suspects that my ideas and guidance have



not led to the expected results. In business, there is no place for complaints; problems should be solved quickly.

**Reporter:** What recent developments or trends connected with the science of effectiveness in the workplace will have the most important influence on the training-consulting sector?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** We will observe some trends leading to cutting training costs, especially in the face of the growing number of pseudo trainers and quasi consulting companies. Trash has to be cheap to attract its buyers. On the other hand, I can observe with pride the rising number of decision-makers who make their decisions consciously attaching importance to the selection of the best training company, and who will do the training. Across the spectrum of professional training, a increasingly significant role will be played on e-learning. It is a chance for high content-related quality for lower prices in the field of training services. I predict that in the future competence training will be more similar to consultant services, because nowadays customers require more and more individualistic approaches.

**Reporter:** Last year we saw a growing number of financial training from EFS by the European Union. Has this influenced on the quality of offered trainings

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** Unfortunately, it has and this impact is rather negative. Money from the European Union is needed by many companies to be able to develop their employees, but in many cases, the money was directed to incorrect firms. The procedure of applying for money application was more important than the training itself. Individuals became objects in the training process, beneficiaries devoid of identity. The main focus was the application process. A company preparing a project proposal was required to prove everything using quantitative indexes, e.g. dates, times, numbers of trainees, trainers and goals. This made it easier for officials who assessed the applications. If a project fits a template then it is considered good enough to be

granted funds, even if the training was irrational or illogical. A good example is when housewives in a rural area were encouraged to come every to training learn how to apply make up. It leads to a reflection that a lot of money was just wasted. A lot of valuable, innovative and socially important projects will be never realized because officials evaluating applications, and did not have broad knowledge to recognize really good projects. Money is often light-heartedly distributed. Quality, content-related and teaching worth of a training services are all not crucial in comparison to procedure. The most important thing is to realize projects, clear the accounts, present quantitative indexes just to show that goals were achieved. It is pathetic! Fortunately there are some precious examples of how a procedure can be combined with quality. This should sustain us.

**Reporter:** What kind of challenges do companies face when they want to develop their employees?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** The greatest challenge is to select a reliable partner who will do the training. It can be a training company, an individual trainer, a lecturer or consultant. It is always worthwhile to check references and to remember that good solutions do not come cheap. Effective training should not be a show of a erudition. Training should be easy to listen to and one should be able to change the program of a meeting to adequately adjust to the group. Training should motivate participants not only by being able to take part in funny exercises, but should also force trainees engage in realist activities and reflect more deeply. I very often hear the question how to choose a good training company. I answer outright that you should just to talk with a trainer, discuss who will be trained, and at the same time, recognize one's own value system and attitudes on different issues. Such a conversation should be held by the direct superior of the employees who will take part in a training. He knows best his subordinates' needs. It is worthwhile to emphasize that a leader should be an example and employees ought to require much from him. However, many employees are



very often not aware of their leader's shortcomings. As long as companies do not understand that training should be started from management they will copy the mistakes of many companies. Even the most motivated employee will lose his enthusiasm if a superior behaves differently from what is in the training.

**Reporter:** What kind of challenges does the training sector face?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** Trainers must stand against triviality and superficiality. Trainers need to learn humility. The arrogance of many trainers who have just graduated and aspire to be a mentor or a teacher of people who occupy high posts having broad vocational output is really embarrassing. This is megalomania. As a training company director almost every day I receive applications for a trainer position from people who have a certificate confirming completion of a training course. I do not know in what they would like to train my customers since they have never assessed any investment, never mediated public orders, never hired or fired, and certainly have never negotiated any business contract. They declare their willingness to be a trainer of everything. These applications are sent by younger and younger people, writing with pride about their lack of any professional experiences,

but emphasizing their readiness to instruct others on how to sell, manage, or negotiate. What hypocrisy! Training is an interaction with another person for whom a trainer or mentor should be a partner; the trainer should be open, able to listen, be a good conversationalist while having professional experience and practice in the trainee's area. One has to render a customer knowledge, time and skills. Moreover, a trainer is someone who can calm tensions in a group and break down resistance of particular group members. To do that they need personality and charisma, not just be a person who knows the essentials of body language. I regret this flood of human trash in the training sector. Without knowledge, without reflection, without experience, these trainers are the skeletons of ghosts, to paraphrase Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz.

**Reporter:** Last question. Is the training sector still a market of a huge potential?

**Marzena Rażniewska-Półkoszek:** Yes. It has huge potential, but only for brave people who are not scared of being nonconformists fighting against stereotypes such as the overconfident trainer and the training company which sells the same service to all customers. It is a market which is still maturing.

**Reporter:** Thank you.