


# Training Is Broken: Here's How to Fix It





## The Wall Between You and Effective Training

Would you believe it if we told you that each employee in your organization wastes 91 hours a year—more than two 40-hour work weeks? If you believed that statistic, you might assume that wasted time came from office gossip, cellphone fiddling, or Facebook. You would be wrong! According to a 2016 study by Robert Half Technology, office professionals waste 22 minutes each day dealing with technology-related issues. That's 91 hours a year! These issues manifest in two forms: hardware or software malfunctions and an organizational failure to train employees to properly use the technology tools they have. As John Reed, executive director of Robert Half Technology, stated, "Technology is a double-edged sword in most organizations—it can be an enormous time-saver, but it can also be a drain if things aren't working well or people don't know how to use the tools provided to them."

Doing something the hard way can be rewarding, perhaps even invigorating, but rarely is it efficient. We have seen people accomplish in an hour or more what should take ten minutes. Naturally, most people would rather get 50 minutes back in their day than endure the frustration of figuring out a task, or a convoluted workaround, themselves.

When it comes to educating yourself and your team, far too many individuals are working so much harder than they need to accomplish regularly performed tasks. Software sophistication has long since exceeded the ability of the "wandering mouse clicker" to learn how to properly and efficiently operate the tools necessary for the modern legal world. If you feel that training at your organization has failed, you are not alone.

At Affinity, we see legal organizations struggle with this every day. The lack of quality, legal-specific training forces employees to work inefficiently, even with common, everyday tools like Word and Outlook. A culture of training can fix this. You can fix this!



## Training Today

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Steve Glaveski surveys the mess that is modern workplace training. According to Training Industry, in 2018, businesses spent approximately \$355.2 billion on training programs for employees, split \$166.8 billion for North America and \$199.3 billion for the rest of the world. Judging by the survey results Glaveski unearths, trainers have many frustrated customers:

- **75% of managers across the surveyed organizations were dissatisfied with their training results. As the survey authors state, “For the most part, the learning doesn’t lead to better organizational performance, because people soon revert to their old ways of doing things.”**
- **70% of employees lack mastery of necessary job skills, according to Gartner.**
- **Only 12% of trainees apply what they learn to their job.**
- **Only 25% of respondents to a McKinsey study thought their training improved business performance.**

# The Present Disaster

Those four numbers tell quite the story: managers think training is ineffective, and trainees quickly forget what they learned, regressing to old habits. The fact that only 12% of trainees apply a learned skill supports that conclusion. But this isn't a "managers versus managed" situation. Employees know they lack critical job skills, but they also believe the training they receive is unlikely to improve the organization.

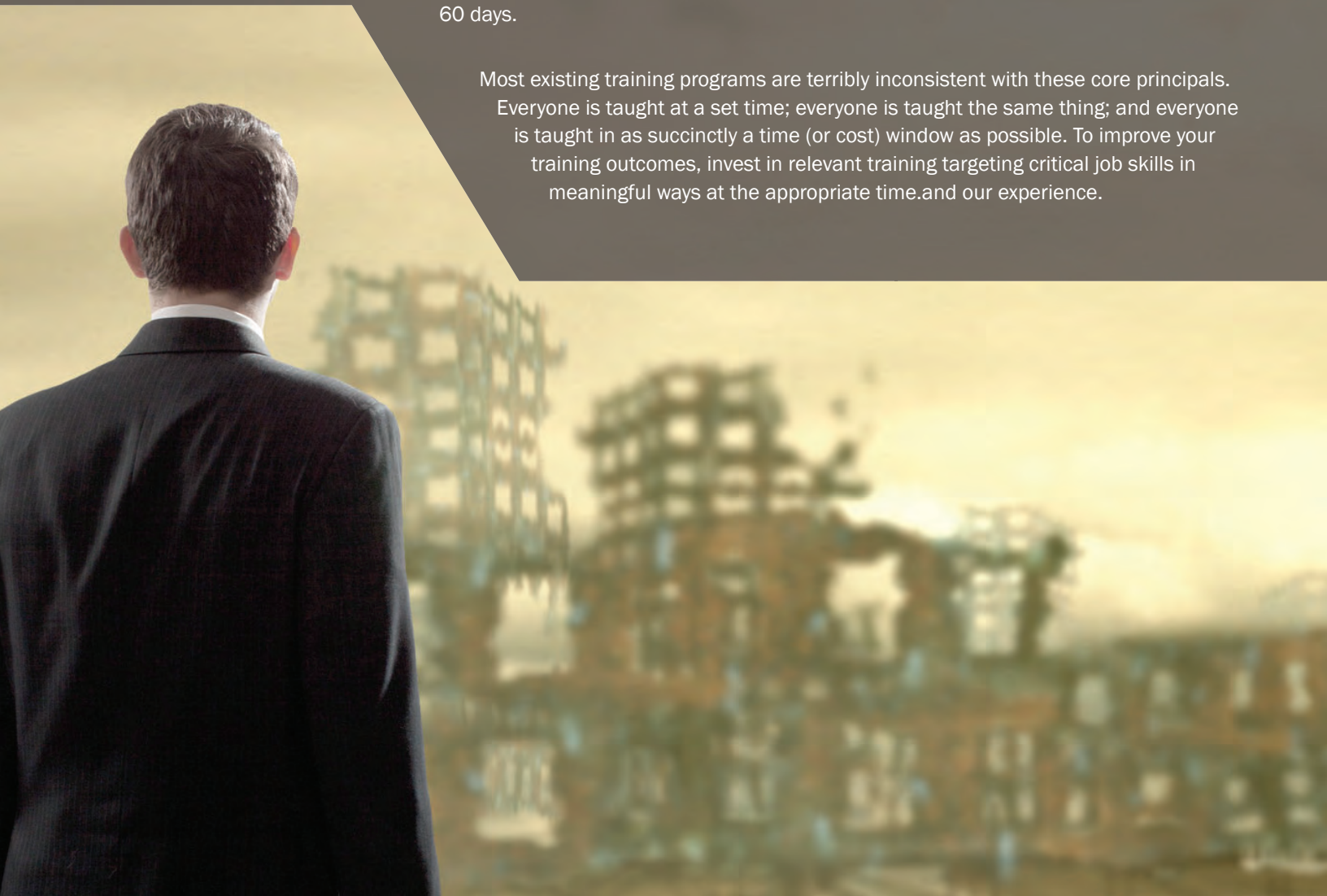
We have all entered training sessions thinking, and perhaps even saying, "This is going to be a waste of time." Sometimes we're right; sometimes we're wrong; and sometimes our attitude going in makes it so. Many employees view training as wasted time. Why?

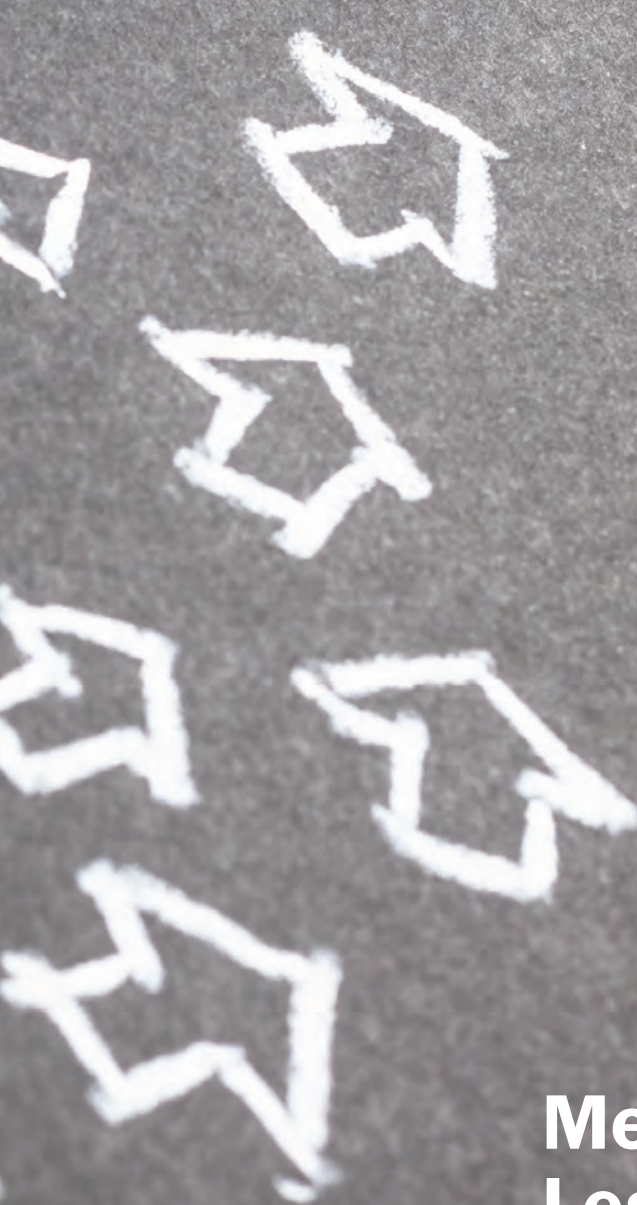
**1. Training comes at the wrong time:** Intuitively, we know that the best time to learn a skill is when we need that skill. For example, it makes no sense to read board game instructions today if we are not going to play the game until next month. Learning a skill in a timely way means using it soon after acquiring it and, ideally, using it repeatedly to both retain it and improve our knowledge of it.

**2. Training is not relevant to job tasks:** If one trainee is an accountant and another a legal secretary, they may need different training, even in the same program. For example, the knowledge each needs for spreadsheets and word processing share core, foundational skills, but the necessary training for advanced tasks in each program is quite different.

**3. Trainees don't retain training:** Glaveski cites the work of 19th century German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, who developed a mathematical equation for how soon people forget a fact or skill. Ebbinghaus' aptly-named "Forgetting Curve" states that, after someone learns new information, if that information is not used, 75% of it will be forgotten within six days and 79% will be forgotten within a month. The best-known way to counteract this fact is to spread out training, including reviews of previously covered subjects, over gradually increasing intervals—for example, two, then four, then eight days. Doing so provides trainees with approximately 80% retention after 60 days.

Most existing training programs are terribly inconsistent with these core principals. Everyone is taught at a set time; everyone is taught the same thing; and everyone is taught in as succinctly a time (or cost) window as possible. To improve your training outcomes, invest in relevant training targeting critical job skills in meaningful ways at the appropriate time and our experience.





## Meaning for Legal Organizations

Now that you know the training problem your organization faces and understand its very real costs as a business drain, let's talk about how to alleviate this problem. Here are a few guiding principles for effective training.

# 1. Trainees must be approached properly.

This issue reveals itself in many ways. Presentations are often “canned”—delivered in a scripted manner that fails to address attendees’ concerns when those concerns arise in the context of their jobs. You do not want a trainer who trains everyone the same—whether the trainees work in legal, medical, or automotive, for example. Different markets, and even different roles at the same organization, require trainers who emphasize different functions within the same program. Scripted, untargeted, scattershot presentations risk the one-two punches of being both dull and inapplicable to the listener.

A failed “approach” is not just the fault of a mediocre trainer, although that can sink a training enterprise on its own. Employees have many competing demands on their time. Firm leadership or supervisors may view training as an intrusion on the workday rather than a learning opportunity to celebrate. Such an attitude, intentional or not, diminishes everyone’s view of the training. Legal organizations should encourage and celebrate a culture of learning. Everyone should strive to be lifetime learners, wanting to continually improve. Organizations that fail to nurture employee learning are not “protecting their investment” in their people. Rather, by “keeping people in their box,” they are implicitly encouraging employees to look elsewhere for challenge and growth.

A well-known management parable about training employees goes like this:

**CFO: What happens if we train them and they leave?**

**CEO: What happens if we don’t and they stay?**

Failure to properly train employees, to invest in them, may lead the best, self-starter employees leave or not. But, setting that aside, even if no one leaves, without investing in them, your employees will continue to work ineffectively and inefficiently, negatively impacting their work quality and consequently damaging your business’s bottom line. According to a 2009 study, businesses without high-quality training or employee development plans reported average revenues of \$82,800 per employee. Similar firms that emphasized learning and development saw per-employee revenues of more than twice that—\$169,100. That’s quite the difference! You might think that, for training and development to make such a dramatic difference, you have to spend a lot. Not true. Organizations that spend as little as \$1,500 on training per employee see an average of 24% more profit than similar organizations who invest less. Investing in your people is investing in your business.



## 2. Culture is paramount.

Hopefully by now you understand the importance of employee training and development, and you understand the impact poor employee skills have on your legal organization as a business. The first course-correcting step is to establish and live an organization-wide commitment to training and development. No one can be “too busy” to learn. Oftentimes the “untouchable” people in an organization are too important or senior to participate. In the hierarchical world of legal, everything flows from the top. Is the organizational leader or managing partner participating? If not, you have a problem. If so, who is willing to say they are busier than the managing partner? Probably no one.


When attorneys or other leaders of the firm skip training, they send the message that the subject is beneath them or their time is too valuable to spend on training. It's even worse when an attorney or supervisor intrudes on a subordinate's training to help the attorney with “real work.” What does that action say to the subordinate, the other trainees, and everyone else in the office who learns of the action? And, what effect does the fallout have on subsequent training opportunities and office culture?

Jason Fried, Founder and CEO of Basecamp, and author of several business books, including, most recently, “It Doesn't Have to Be Crazy at Work,” tweeted an apt summary of organizational culture:

Company culture isn't a moment in time. It's not something you write down. Culture is the by-product of consistent behavior. It's what you do over time. Your current company culture is essentially a 50-day moving average of your actions.

It's a 50-day moving average of your actions—not of your wishes, desires, or even statements. It's what you do that matters. Fifty days may seem like an eternity, but it's really a short window. Begin creating a culture of learning now, and it will pay off exponentially. Signal the importance of training by making time for training yourself. If training is a regular event, and especially if firm leaders make it a point to attend and engage, even if the specific content is not strictly relevant to them, they send a message to other trainees of the value to the firm of continual education.





### 3. Meet your trainees where they are.

Trainers must speak to trainees on their level. Trainers must understand their trainees' needs and the language that they use. Trainers should not speak above their level, using technical jargon the attendees don't understand. Trainers should be familiar with their attendees' work environment and job responsibilities. Building on number 1 above, there is negligible value in teaching someone a task he will never perform. In a legal organization, training should be tailored to job duties or departments. For example, there is little value in teaching the accounting team how to format legal brief footnotes in a word processor.

Training success cannot be judged by the volume of material covered. The goal of training is not for the teacher to show the students how much he/she knows; it is for trainees to learn and apply the material. As with childhood schooling, there are foundational concepts everyone must know—perhaps email and the phone system—and then discreet skills for different job functions—only some people need to know how to bill for time or work the expense-reimbursement system. In this sense, training cannot be both uniform across an organization and relevant wholly to each attendee.

Relevant training at the right time encourages “buy-in” from trainees both for the instant training as well as for future training. If I learn something I need when I need it, the teacher becomes a trusted partner rather than just another meeting I must attend. For firm leaders, having such a trusted partner makes change (i.e. from one software product or version to another) easier to implement because employees know they won't be left in the lurch—where the old way doesn't work, and no one ably taught them the new way.

## 4. Allow trainees to offer input on topics and style.

An ongoing theme of the above-listed flaws is top-down delivery of pre-determined information. Passive receipt of information is bad enough, much less passive receipt of unnecessary or ill-timed information. Training need not be a game show, but it does need to hold students' interest and address their concerns.

Students may feel embarrassed or shy to ask a question, particularly if that feeling flows from a lack of confidence—maybe someone knows their skill set is deficient in an area “everyone should know.” That problem remains unless employees are consulted on training—perhaps through anonymous pre-training surveys on topical coverage.

Similarly, not everyone learns the same way. Some people are visual learners; others auditory; and still others hands-on. We cannot expect everyone to learn via the same class or webinar. Some students may prefer a recorded video or a live webinar where they can ask questions, or a handout with instructions on accomplishing a discreet task. One-size-fits-all training is impossible to deliver in a way that's conducive to the needs and learning styles of all users. Successful training requires materials in several formats—perhaps a customized webinar, presented as a whole, but divisible afterwards into individual topical videos, accompanied by instructional handouts.





## **5. Training must be presented in memorable ways.**

Training for most employees occurs in a lecture-style format, usually in-person or via webinar, either when software/hardware is deployed or upgraded, or when someone in authority realizes a critical mass of employees are deficient in a skill. Depending on the budget, the organization either imposes the training burden on an existing employee or it hires an external training firm. This approach poses several problems:

- a. As noted above, trainees forget 75% of new material within six days if it goes unused. Good instruction must anticipate and correct for that fact. Training should incorporate “refresher” exercises soon after initial training to cement knowledge of the material. This could be done in the form of “post-training” exercises that trainees do and which the trainer reviews with them. Hands-on training—in the case of software, following along with the instructor—helps trainees retain learned skills. “Cheat sheets” or pictographic guides allow trainees to refresh themselves when skills are called for. Without “going through the motions,” being corrected where appropriate, and possessing “study guides” when the challenge arrives “in real life,” trainees understandably walk away with an ever-diminishing reservoir of knowledge.
- b. Trainers must understand their trainees’ environment. A trainer pulled from other internal responsibilities has a few advantages when training co-workers. They know what it’s like to work in the trainees’ legal organization. They know, or should know, the firm’s software/hardware infrastructure. And, they are probably sufficiently “tech-savvy” to learn the new skills. An internal employee-trainer also suffers from several deficiencies. This person is not a teacher and just because they know something or can learn it, doesn’t mean they can instruct others effectively. If the employee-trainer possesses an IT background they may relate poorly to the “user” side, as opposed to their typical “administrator” side, of technology and the workflows that the law firm uses. Finally, if the employee-trainer is someone whose time would otherwise be dedicated to client work, that employee’s productivity and billable work suffers because they are asked to wear two wildly different hats, and they are unlikely to be relieved of client responsibilities when training duties are added. Consequently, neither assignment achieves its full potential.

External trainers with legal experience mitigate these issues. They know how law firms work. Their job is training; they know how to teach. Good external trainers can easily speak to both users and IT to educate firms on efficient workflows that benefit everyone. They talk with trainees about their challenges and, with the end-goal in mind, move a trainee from a convoluted process or work-around to a seamless experience that makes the task simpler to complete.

## 6. Understand that trainees are not infinite sponges.

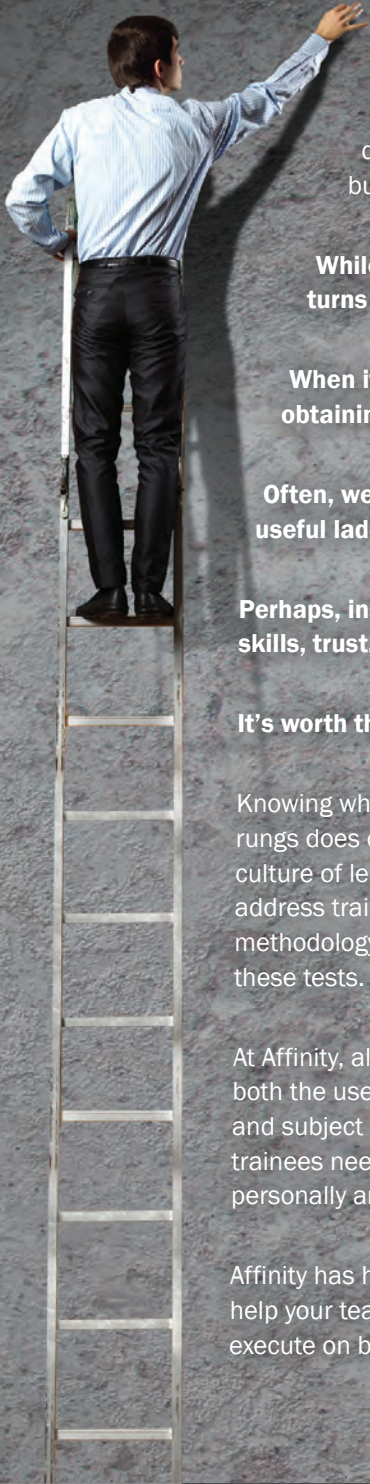
The most common training in legal organizations occurs at or near an employee's first day of work. Some of this is necessary—how one enters time, uses the phone/intercom system, or lookups case files and documents, for example. However, the bulk of what remains need not be presented immediately upon hire. The first day of a new job is overwhelming enough—meeting people, new hire paperwork, et cetera, without bombarding the new hire with training they won't remember. In this respect, new hire training is a red herring—you think you are doing something productive when it's really just lost in the sea of the "first day frenzy." Your goals are noble, and your heart is in the right place, but there's only so much new employees can absorb out of the gate.

To borrow a childhood game example, top-notch new hire training should look more like a ladder than a chute. New hires should not be force-fed a bunch of technology skills as they are "sliding out the chute" at the end of a very hectic first day or first week. Excellent new hiring training occurs over weeks, step by step or rung by rung up the ladder. As the new employee becomes ever more acclimated to their environment, new questions arise, which a regularly appearing trainer could happily answer at a time relevant to the employee when he/she can remember it; perhaps cover one program per week, with ample time in each session for review and questions.

New hires need training, even on "everyday programs" like Microsoft Office or Adobe Acrobat, things most hires have been exposed to but likely never taught. Remember, today's "wandering mouse clicker" doesn't teach someone how to work effectively; at best, someone learns an inefficient approach and, at worst, something that will make their work both slower and more difficult. But the calendar should not dictate new hire training. As outlined above, effective, and therefore efficient, training is delivered at the right time, for the relevant task, in a way that makes it memorable. The first day of work meets none of these requirements.



# Building a Ladder



In building and running your legal organization, you face many obstacles to success, both internal and external. The most immediate positive impact you can have is to get everyone inside the organization working efficiently towards the same outcome. Proper training and employee development are vital pieces of that success. Wise people who pursue training seek out what business writer Seth Godin calls a “ladder”:

**While it might be fun (or appear expedient, or brave, or heroic) to try to scale a cliff with no tools, it turns out that ladders are a more effective way to level up.**

**When it's time to drive a nail, a hammer is a lot more useful than a rock. Even if you have to invest in obtaining one.**

**Often, we spend most of our time throwing ourselves at the wall instead of investing the time to find a useful ladder instead.**

**Perhaps, instead of restating our audacious goals, we can spend more time finding useful tools—insights, skills, trust, attention, access—instead.**

**It's worth the search.**

Knowing what causes training to fail or be wasted guides us in knowing what quality training entails. What rungs does our training ladder contain? First, firm leadership must commit to the value of training to create a culture of learning. Second, the training must speak to trainees, meaning quality, legal-specific trainers who address trainee-driven concerns on relevant job tasks. Finally, training must be presented at a time and with a methodology that connects with trainees and cements new knowledge. Few trainers or training programs pass these tests.

At Affinity, all our trainers have years, even decades, working and training in legal organizations. We have seen both the user and the technical/IT side of firm operations. We know how to teach and how to approach users and subject matter with an end-task in mind. Finally, we present the right material to the right audience so that trainees need not sit through training inapplicable to their jobs. Each person's time is valuable, both to him personally and to the organization overall, and we respect that fact.

Affinity has helped legal organizations climb the rungs of successful operations and we would be delighted to help your team “ladder-up” by helping you make the best possible use of your team and your technology to execute on behalf of clients and stakeholders so they see you as a valued member of their own teams.

## About Affinity Consulting Group

At Affinity Consulting Group, we inspire, enable, and empower legal teams of all sizes to work smarter. Our holistic approach incorporates people, process, and technology. Our passionate, well-connected industry experts work hand in hand with you to help you better understand and optimize your business—from software to growth strategy, and everything in between. Our vast network of partners and deep industry expertise ensure that we can deliver cost-effective, custom-tailored solutions to even your toughest business challenges. If we don't do it, we know someone who does. Please visit our website to learn more about our training programs: <http://affinityconsulting.com/insight>

