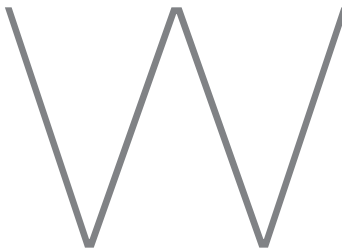


Driller app

Hands-on training is essential at power tool manufacturer Black & Decker, but so is picking up product knowledge fast



When it already has a good learning programme in place, why would a multinational

company's learning and development team want to change it? In particular, why do something that could be seen as potentially very risky, like moving several hundred learners to learning on smart mobile devices? At Black & Decker the answer was simple, according to Rob Sharpe, director of sales training and recruiting: "We wanted to keep up with our learners and with the needs of the job."

The US business has always taken training seriously. Each new sales hire goes through an

intensive week of face-to-face training on a dedicated 35,000 square foot training facility that has a training staff of 12. "Around half of this space is the 'shop floor', where new hires get a good general grounding in the sales process and construction as well as introductory training on a range of Black & Decker power tools," explains Sharpe.

This focus on hands-on training is crucial. Black & Decker has a 600-strong sales and marketing team for power tools. "Slightly over one-third of that audience makes up our field sales force," explains Sharpe. It is these 250-odd people who are Black & Decker's contact point with its retail channel – including over 3,000 stores operated by Home Depot and Lowe's Home Centers. "The field sales personnel have a wide remit," says Sharpe. "They could be operating across a number of stores at district level,

or talking to individual staff within a particular store." Whatever level they are operating at, though, Sharpe says one thing is essential: practical product knowledge.

Hand-held devices

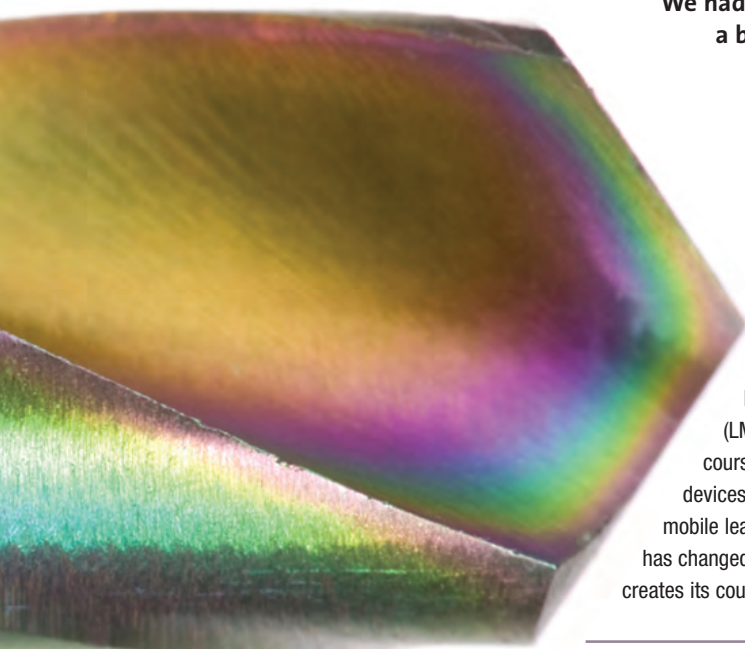
"You can study to be a scuba driver, but you can't do it or talk about it honestly until you're in the water," says Sharpe. "And you can't talk convincingly about the benefits of a particular mitre saw until you've held it in your hands and used it."

After their initial training, sales staff receive a week's face-to-face training per year. In addition to this hands-on training, Black & Decker knows it's essential to get product information out to its sales force quickly when they're on the road. Early in 2009 that need for fast knowledge dissemination made Sharpe consider a new approach to training the field sales team on the road.

"Typically we're hiring into sales roles off a college campus. We're not looking for sales or product experience, but the right attitude and leadership skills. These are the future leaders of the company."

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technology, the company has used CERTPOINT's Learning Management System (LMS) for 10 years to deliver courses to desktops and mobile devices. However, the addition of mobile learning for the field sales force has changed both the way Black & Decker creates its courses and how they are used.

Solid courses

"We have a good range of solid courses that took us a while to produce," says Sharpe. "In our library today you will find a range of courses that last up to 45 minutes, deal with the subject matter in depth, and look great, with 3D animation. And they typically took two to three months to complete."

They are very thorough, says Sharpe, but the field sales team mostly needs much shorter, to-the-point courses. So the company has switched to rapid development. "We now use the LMS built-in authoring system to create a 10-15 minute course, complete with video and assessment in a day or two. For example, we recently had a course to accompany the launch of a new cordless drill. It was five slides long, delivered over, and tracked by, the LMS. We produced it in a day. The field sales guys like it because it helps them do their job."

Black & Decker's courses generally include assessment, animation and video too. This has led to some changes in the approach to the courses. "We've had sales guys use the courses when talking to in-store sales teams," says Sharpe.

Sales people have also produced their own videos to share with other team members. "They might have a particular piece of knowledge that they want to share," explains Sharpe. At present, these videos are uploaded by the field sales person

and vetted for quality by the learning and development team, but it doesn't wait long before posting them online.

There is another plus in this approach to course creation. Not only has it reduced the time taken to produce courses, but has also driven down the cost, allowing courseware development budgets to be allocated elsewhere.

Change in organisational learning is often difficult, with the greatest problem being buy-in from managers and users. But, says Sharpe, this was not an issue at Black & Decker. "We've forced no-one to use our mobile learning. We're letting the enthusiasts spread the word, and they're doing just that."

As for manager buy-in, that hasn't been problematic either, says Sharpe, because learning and development is not a separate department, but integrated into the business of sales and marketing. "Everyone understands its value."

Change, then, is part of life at Black & Decker. And the company has always, as Sharpe points out, broken new ground in learning. "We had our first mobile learning 70 years ago. Okay, it was a classroom in a bus, but it was still mobile! We aim to be in perpetual beta. We ask ourselves what's next and how can we get there?"

With its approach to mobile learning, it seems the company may already be on its way to the next stage.



Rob Sharpe will be presenting the Black & Decker case study of mobile learning at the Learning Technologies Conference in January

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while his graduates were comfortable with computers, they were also a mobile generation. "They're using Twitter to share thoughts in their lectures," said Sharpe. "I thought it was time to make our learning mobile too."

While the field sales force had previously been equipped with laptops, they usually turned them on in the evening, in hotel rooms rather than on the road, and even then connectivity was always a concern. Black & Decker decided to supply to some of its sales people a smart mobile device – a Microsoft Windows phone that could be used not only for training but also to provide vital sales information.

The move has been enthusiastically adopted by the field sales team. "They absolutely love it!" says Sharpe. It's no surprise: it lets them get key information fast, when they need it (often in their car just before a store visit), rather than having to boot up their laptop. "Just enough information, just in time," says Sharpe.

This combination of a solid grounding in the use of power tools with just-in-time information seems to be working well for Black & Decker. It has also led to a change in the way the company produces and delivers courses. An early adopter of learning