

# The importance of learning and development to your organisation

**Richard Mitchell** from Excitech takes a look at Autodesk's recently launched Certification Program and the benefits that it can bring to both an organisation and its most important assets – its employees.

Is it really clichéd to say that an organisation's greatest asset is its people? Some will say the brand, fixed assets, systems or patents matter most and, to a point, in extremely large global manufacturing organisations this is true. You could even argue that in production companies, physical assets such as property, oil and money maintain a value (albeit resale) even without people to manage them.

However, these are really exceptions to the rule. Knowledge, creativity and passion is a key differentiator for industries requiring advanced skills and expertise such as the mechanical and construction design sectors, particularly when it comes to success and winning business. This makes people a commodity that you cannot easily attach a value to.

While skills and knowledge are replaceable in the mid to long-term, there is a huge cost in terms of replacing staff and providing the necessary training and support to bring them up to speed.

## Investing in staff

Investing in staff on a regular basis is paramount to maintaining or obtaining a low staff turnover rate and motivating employees to invest more of themselves into their work; achievements that are vital for any successful firm.

I am not just talking about pay increases. We all like to receive a little extra at the end of each month as recognition for the work we do. However, enhanced remuneration packages offer a positive effect in the short to mid-term, even sometimes causing productivity levels to rise, but it never quite truly satisfies a person's longer-term aspirations and provides little, if any, benefit to the organisation — at least that is the theory.

## What employees really want

There is a school of thought that suggests there are three goals that the vast majority of employees desire at work: equity (dealt with above), achievement and camaraderie. It is these things that in turn help to maintain employee enthusiasm.

Camaraderie is prevalent to some extent in all organisations whether it is within smaller teams, offices or across entire businesses. If it were not then, there is a strong possibility that most, if not all, companies would suffer from high staff turnover.

Achievement is a slightly difficult goal to place a

marker against because this varies enormously from one individual to the next. Achievement might be as far reaching as promotion to a management position, but might be more work-oriented such as helping to deliver a major project on time or finding the solution to a complex problem. In addition, many of us take for granted one of the biggest forms of achievement — learning and development.

The late American philosopher Mortimer Adler (1902–2001) once said, "the purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue growing as we continue to live". So what greater achievement than to validate knowledge so that learning can be a continual process?

## Return on investment?

It seems obvious that learning new skills and knowledge is beneficial to carrying out tasks to a more proficient level, but the process of learning and the positive impact it can have not only on an individual but on an organisation is often taken for granted.

Pulitzer Prize winning poet and critic, Mark Van Doren (1894–1972), explains aptly: "Any piece of knowledge I acquire today has a value at this moment exactly proportioned to my skill to deal with it. Tomorrow, when I know more, I recall that piece of knowledge and use it better."

The biggest issue with learning is attaching a return on investment or financial measurement to the process. With tangible items such as new machinery, software or hardware, there is usually an identifiable financial measure be it more efficient production, error reduction or bringing outsourced processes in-house. When it comes to learning, there are no readily available facts and figures that can be drawn upon in the same way so some organisations remain sceptical when it comes to investing substantial sums in learning.

There is a new resource available that not only provides users with a clear learning strategy but also, to some extent, provides organisations with a way of attaching a return on investment against training. And, Autodesk, a major software house, is behind it.

## The Certification vision

Certification is not a wholly new venture from Autodesk. In fact, the programme has already been implemented successfully in a number of countries including the US and there are plans to expand this



across the world over the next few years. Even the concept is not entirely new, as various programmes with similar goals exist in the UK market, such as cadsmart.

Where Certification really differs from its competition is in its vision. For all intents and purposes, Autodesk Certification is just another form of CAD testing but a closer inspection shows just how much thought has gone into the whole process. Certification has a vision of continual learning — as Autodesk's core applications evolve so should the users, especially as so many users across the globe receive software updates as part of their annual subscription package.

## How does it work?

The program in the UK is currently only available for AutoCAD, AutoCAD Architecture, AutoCAD Civil 3D, Revit Architecture and Autodesk Inventor. The offering consists of four staged elements; two preparatory levels of testing designed as precursors to two levels of certification.

- **Assessment Test:** The entry-level test designed to assess user product skills, knowledge, and the suitability to sit the Certified Associate examination.
- **Certified Associate:** The first level of certification designed for those who have attended relevant training and have at least 100 hours hands-on usage.
- **Practice Test:** An application-based precursor to the Certified Professional examination designed to assess advanced user product skills and knowledge as well as providing a means of preparing the user for the type of examination they can expect.
- **Certified Professional:** The current top tier of certification, this application-based exam is aimed at testing the practical skills of users who have attended relevant training and have at least 400 hours hands-on usage.

This process is not just about CAD skills testing. It is about providing a clear learning path and acknowledging the skills and knowledge acquired along the way. Autodesk is promoting Certification as a global qualification/standard with all users regardless of localisation (language, measurements) undertaking the same examination process. Therefore, to complement the process and add further credence, there is a range of collateral that on successful

completion of the relevant levels allows the user, and indeed the organisation, to promote the talent within, including certificates and logos.

This is not a one-off process. Certification is release specific (although only available in the UK for the 2009 products) and passing the relevant exam(s) on any product is only valid for that release. Cynics might think this is a ruthless ploy by Autodesk to extract money on a regular basis but there are two things here that need to be considered.

Firstly, this really is a cost-effective package, therefore not a huge money-spinner for Autodesk; nowhere near as profitable as selling boxes of software or the subscriptions that go alongside these.

Secondly, without making Certification version specific and instead opting for a catchall test, the level of depth behind the examinations would have been so superficial that the validity of the results would have been tenuous at best, especially given the rate at which Autodesk is driving its products forward.

## What are the benefits?

There are a number of significant benefits that can be gained from Certification. Earlier we touched upon return on investment and the difficulties of calculating this for intangible items such as training. While Certification is not intrinsically linked to training, the process has much merit when the two are tied together. Certification can be used as both a precursor to training and as an indicator of its overall success.

One of the complexities of planning training for

a large number of individuals is knowing precisely what is required to satisfy the entire groups' learning requirements. In most organisations, there is a variety of skill and experience and that diversity means a blanket approach to training can sometimes prove less than effective. Where Certification becomes useful in this instance is assessing knowledge upfront. In turn, this allows HR departments and CAD managers to source (either internally or externally) training that is more tailored to the needs of the individual.

Take for example an architectural practice in the process of adopting a new design tool, in this instance Autodesk's Revit Architecture. To first test the effectiveness of the product, a phased roll-out might be used with a small number of advanced CAD users forming a pilot group. These users to undertake a significant level of training, but that training might not be sufficient for this group to use the product in a live project environment. The implications of not delivering a project on time to a client or to an agreed standard could be very significant.

In this instance, Certification could serve as a means of assessing retained knowledge and highlighting areas where further help is required before any substantial level of work is undertaken.

Certification is also beneficial in the recruitment process. It is not easy to judge the skills and knowledge of an individual from a CV and face-to-face interview. Assessment could enable decision makers to identify suitable candidates, which in turn could reduce recruitment costs.

As the Certification Program expands in the UK, a base of users holding either Certified Associate or Certified Professional qualifications will form. This will provide recruiters with assurances that candidates do possess the skills and knowledge required.

## Positive impact on employees

If there truly is three goals that employees desire at work, and the first two (equity and camaraderie) exist, then Certification can also provide the opportunity to satisfy the third – achievement.

There are a whole host of genuine benefits an organisation can gain from Certification. These can range from benchmarking employee performance to providing motivation towards reaching specific targets, which could ultimately lead to financial rewards.

As an employer, such an investment demonstrates a commitment to the continual development of what is a highly-skilled and knowledgeable group of employees.

Enthusiastic employees significantly out-produce and outperform the average workforce because they are willing to go the extra mile and to do the hard or even 'impossible' jobs.

Sir Walter Raleigh (1554–1618), the great British explorer and writer, said: "The employer generally gets the employees he deserves." By investing in staff, the organisation benefits substantially in both the short and longer-term by retaining what are its most valuable assets.

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