

Enterprise Zone

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Training firm starts: Verne Morland, managing partner in Kettering startup ROI Learning Services, conducts a video conference with Herb Bivens, chief learning officer for ROI. The men hope their previous business experience will help them grow their corporate training company in a competitive market.

Earning Curve

New corporate training company focuses on bottom-line

• **By Kristen Wicker**
DBJ Staff Reporter

Continuing education is not simply an employee perk. It's an investment -- and one businesses should expect a return on.

That's the philosophy of ROI Learning Services, a recently launched Dayton-based employee training firm.

ROI enters what its executives admit is an ultra-competitive field. Yet managing partner Verne Morland said the firm's focus on developing and providing custom, high-tech training programs aimed at improving companies' bottom lines will set it apart.

The firm hopes to capitalize on a growing trend: corporate outsourcing of training. U.S.

corporations spend an estimated \$105 billion annually on training, according to San Francisco-based research firm ThinkEquity Partners, with an ever growing chunk of that being spent out of house.

ROI hopes to get a piece of this pie by targeting companies headquartered in Greater Dayton with between 500 and 5,000 employees.

While Morland said he hasn't fleshed out any revenue projections, plans call for the firm to grow as its client base grows, eventually building an in-house staff rather than working with freelance course designers. Still, ROI also enters the field at a tough time, after the economic downturn led many companies to cut back on such items as training.

"It's a tough sell," Morland said. "But what we're trying to help people understand is it's not going to last forever and now is the time to... invest in your people to take the business forward when it does turnaround."

Jeff Hostetler, manager of workforce development for the Dayton Area Chamber Of Commerce, said that there are several firms similar to ROI in the Dayton market, but added that employee training is one of the best ways to retain good workers.

"I believe in the coming years, there will be even more of these kinds of companies, because retention will be a key issue," he said. "Many companies are now keeping track of how much money they are losing from (employee) turnover..."

"If they (ROI) have the resources to whether the storm in the short term, then they will be very well positioned to take advantage of that."

Morland, former director of learning systems for NCR Corp.'s global learning division, and Herb Bivens, whose background includes developing training

programs at NCR and serving as senior manager at the Cincinnati-based AT&T Center for Excellence in Distance Learning, head ROI Learning Services.

"Our distinctive competence is a combined understanding of technology and understanding of education," Morland said. "We first ask, 'What are your business goals and needs, and where are you failing to meet them at the levels you need?' Very often, it can be traced to... some training that could be provided to make things more efficient."

Its programs can take many forms, such as online courses, and be delivered in a variety of media, such as videoconferencing.

ROI is focused on blended learning, which means each performance objective -- and the best way to learn it -- is examined individually, Chief Learning Officer Bivens said. For example, live Web seminars might be the best approach for learning one subject, while an online course might be the best approach for another.

TRAINING: Firm to measure outcomes

The firm is also focused on evaluating and measuring the outcomes of its training programs.

"You can buy training off-the-shelf,... but do you really know three to six months from now if it was effective or not?" Bivens asked. "If you've matched the training to the strategic goals of an organization or company, then you

need to prove that it's working."

Morland and Bivens officially opened ROI June 5. While they are currently negotiating with potential clients, including a Texas-based company, none have been secured.

One associate said it likely won't be long before ROI nails down contracts, thanks to the expertise of Morland and Bivens.

Rich Walsh, assistant dean for business services and executive education at the University of Dayton's Center for Leadership and Executive Development, has been working with the pair on distance learning strategies for the past several months.

"They've been there and done that in terms of their knowledge and experience," said Walsh, who also worked with Morland for about five years at NCR. "They come from an, 'I know what it takes to be successful in this environment' perspective,... so it's helpful because you know that they're telling you the straight story."

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