By following lifelong learning programmes, professionals all over the world pursue the same goals: improving their qualifications, bringing their skills up to date or retraining for a new line of work. Corporate training has similar goals, with the concept of lifelong learning used by organisations to promote a more dynamic employee base, better able to react to a rapidly changing environment.

One of the reasons why lifelong education has become so important is to keep up with the acceleration of scientific and technological progress. The knowledge and skills acquired during formal education are usually not sufficient to support a professional career spanning three or four decades. Therefore almost all businesses have adopted aspects of lifelong learning. Do associations follow the same trend?

**TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES PROPOSED BY THE INTEREL TRAINING CENTRE (ITC) TO ASSOCIATIONS ACROSS EUROPE**

Interel’s training division, Interel Training Centre (ITC), regularly organises and delivers seminars for association executives. These training sessions are held either in Brussels or in client / member locations and are usually designed around three main content axes: interest representation with the EU, modern communication techniques and management training.

**INTEREST REPRESENTATION WITH THE EU**

Today, almost every business sector or civil society branch is represented in Brussels through a trade or professional association. Over 850 European and international associations or federations have their offices in Brussels. Most of them struggle with impending legislation and the complexity of the EU system. ITC’s sessions dedicated to interest representation with the EU foster a greater understanding of the EU dimension and how it impacts the working environment, providing insight into public affairs by demystifying lobbying and its methodology. They offer an invaluable background for association and member organisation staff who deal with European legislation and EU institutions. Some federations invite their member organisations to send representatives for group seminars held in Brussels; others organise workshops on EU affairs for their own staff groups. These seminars help organisations manage their policy monitoring and advocacy campaigns professionally.

**COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES**

Dealing with corporate communications in an online world has added a whole new dimension to training any communication professional. The 24/7 online information economy has dramatically shortened the time in which organisations have to respond to breaking news. Employees not only need to know about the workings of Google, blogs, Wikis and YouTube, they also have to be able to develop a proportionate response when their company is mentioned in any of these new media channels. Using a hands-on approach, we therefore developed a series of courses that cover in-depth the communications potential of these new online phenomena. Step by step, participants cover a range of subjects from the challenges of online media relations, to developing a successful online campaign strategy, to how to write for the web and how to manage websites effectively.

In the true spirit of the medium, some of these courses are also available online.

**MANAGEMENT TRAINING**

Part of associations’ internal professional development programmes, these courses are run internally by ITC for some associations and provide a new tool for performance management and aim to better assess and enhance employees’ skills and knowledge, identifying talent and to ensuring the right people for the right job. When skills and staff potential are correctly identified and developed, organisations benefit from a higher degree of management efficiency at all levels. Professional development contributes not only to a better integration - it also leads to a higher degree of staff retention as it helps people build more meaningful careers.

Each employee attends courses taught in-house on an instructor-led basis, via e-learning systems or at outside seminars. Traditionally, training and development areas covered are: management, finance, professional and personal skills, language classes, IT, and in some cases mentoring and coaching programmes.

For associations, the value of lifelong learning programmes is not limited to improving operational capacity and efficiency. Learning communities integrate their members better, allowing participants to develop new bonds, a strong identity and higher degrees of motivation, while pursuing a common goal.

*Information Literacy: The skills necessary to locate, access, and use information in today’s society.*

**WHAT IS LIFELONG LEARNING?**

**THE VIEW FROM THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

According to the European Commission, the scale of current economic and social change, the rapid transition to a knowledge-based society and demographic pressures resulting from an ageing population in Europe are all challenges which demand a new approach to education and training, within the framework of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning is defined as ‘all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective’.
Lifelong learning is therefore about:

+ acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from the pre-school years to post-retirement. It promotes the development of knowledge and competences that will enable each citizen to adapt to the knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, taking more control of his or her future.

+ valuing all forms of learning, including: formal learning, such as a degree course followed at university; non-formal learning, such as vocational skills acquired at the workplace; and informal learning, such as inter-generational learning, for example where parents learn to use ICT through their children, or learning how to play an instrument together with friends.

The European Commission specifies that learning opportunities should be available to all citizens on an ongoing basis. In practice this should mean that citizens each have individual learning pathways, suitable to their needs and interests at all stages of their lives. The content of learning, the way learning is accessed, and where it takes place may vary depending on the learner and their learning requirements.

Lifelong learning is also about providing second chances to update basic skills and to offer learning opportunities at more advanced levels. All this means that formal systems of provision need to become much more open and flexible, so that such opportunities can truly be tailored to the needs of the learner, or indeed the potential learner.

COHERENT AND COMPREHENSIVE LIFELONG LEARNING STRATEGIES: THE BUILDING BLOCKS

What are the tools that can better integrate learning environments and open up access for all European citizens to good quality learning opportunities appropriate to their needs at any time of life?

The consultation which followed the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning identified six essential elements for coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies:

+ Partnership working, not only between decision-making levels (e.g. national, regional and local) but also between public authorities and education service providers (schools, universities, etc.), the business sector and the social partners, local associations, vocational guidance services, research centres, etc.

+ Insight into the demand for learning in the knowledge-based society - which will entail redefining basic skills, to include for instance the new information and communication technologies. Analyses should take into account foreseeable labour market trends.

+ Adequate resourcing, involving a substantial increase in public and private investment in learning. This does not only imply substantially increasing public budgets, but also ensuring the effective allocation of existing resources and encouraging new forms of investment. Investment in human capital is important at all points in the economic cycle; skills gaps and shortages can certainly co-exist with unemployment.

+ Facilitating access to learning opportunities by making them more visible, introducing new provision and removing obstacles to access, for example through the creation of more local learning centres. Special efforts are necessary in this context for different groups such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities or people living in rural areas.

+ Creating a learning culture by giving learning a higher profile, both in terms of image and by providing incentives for the people most reticent to opt for learning.

+ Striving for excellence through the introduction of quality control and indicators to measure progress. In concrete terms, provision must be made for standards, guidelines and mechanisms whereby achievements can be recognised and rewarded.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

On the basis of the feedback relating to the six key messages the Communication identifies six priorities for action: (1) valuing learning, (2) providing information, guidance and counseling, (3) investing time and money in learning, (4) bringing together learners and learning opportunities, (5) ensuring basic skills and (6) introducing innovative pedagogy.

Valuing learning is a key element in the creation of a culture of learning and for realising a European area of lifelong learning. The Communication stresses that a comprehensive new approach both to the mutual recognition of qualifications, and to the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning are needed in order to enable people to have individual learning pathways suitable to their needs and interests. Such an approach must be based on increased cooperation, and possibly based on voluntary minimum quality standards in education and training, creating the conditions for transparency and mutual trust.

Other key concrete action points include:

+ The Commission will also introduce a ‘portfolio’ system, which will enable citizens to present their competences and qualifications anywhere in Europe. The system will comprise the European CV.

+ As part of strengthening the European dimension of information, guidance and counselling services, the Commission will launch an internet portal on learning opportunities, aimed at bringing learning opportunities and learners together, and making learning more visible.

+ The Commission urges the European Investment Bank to support lifelong learning as part of the ‘Innovation 2000’ initiative. To supplement this, the European Investment Fund (EIF) could help to locate risk capital funding dedicated to the development of human capital - e.g. by supporting SMEs’ access to learning.

+ The European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) can be utilised to support lifelong learning, as can the EQUAL initiative. The ESF in particular is the main Community financial tool for supporting lifelong learning.

+ The Commission will encourage quality control through the granting of a European label to firms, in order to reward and publicise best lifelong learning practice.

For more information, please download the European Commission’s memorandum on Lifelong Learning: 

http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lll/lll_en.html