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Time for Police Agencies to Embrace Online Training

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ABSTRACT

Training remains an important issue for police agencies. The courts have held agencies accountable citing that “training police personnel is a critical managerial responsibility and is not viewed as a luxury” (McNamara, 2006, p. 1). Historically, litigation against agencies has been costly and usually as a result of the lack of training or improper training (McNamara, 2006). The current economic turndown compounds the issue of providing adequate training (“Policing in the 21st Century,” 2011). Therefore, police agencies must evaluate and evolve in order to meet training requirements in a more efficient manner.

Online training has been in use in the private sector for decades. Increasingly, educational entities have incorporated online training as a valuable asset and a part of strategic planning. As a result, private companies providing online training resources, including police training, are available and increasing. Also, Millennial officers are adept to this type of training (LaFevre, 2014).

Some may argue against online training because of a concern for learning validation, limited topics, and a lack of communication between students and instructors. In addition to private company online training providers, learning management systems allow for checks and balances in learning validation. Some private companies allow for blended courses and online seminars.

Police agencies have a responsibility to provide adequate training. Because of the efficient use of resources, readily available technology, and technology savvy officers, online training becomes a viable option. The facts conclude that agencies should use online training whenever feasible.

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INTRODUCTION

All police agencies have an obligation to ensure that officers receive adequate training. Proper training not only protects the officer and citizens, but can protect the agency from liability. In the 1990's, police agencies were sued 30,000 times (McNamara, 2006; Ross, 2000). Unfortunately, lawsuits will never be eliminated completely. In 2000, Ross conducted a study of Section 1983 lawsuits filed against police agencies from 1989 to 1999 and found that about 1/3 of the 1525 cases were upheld. The average pay out by police agencies was \$425, 000 (Ross, 2000). His further analysis discovered that about 55% of the cases involved officers using non-deadly force (Ross, 2000). However, some agencies do not regularly train on these topics. McNamara (2006) stated, "The court made it clear in Canton that training police personnel is a critical managerial responsibility and is not viewed as a luxury" (p. 1). In addition, some police agencies do not provide enough training and others train on the wrong topics (McNamara, 2006). From a liability standpoint, agencies must continuously evaluate and evolve to provide adequate training.

According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police 2011 survey, 60% of chiefs reported that as a result of the economic downturn, training would be reduced and 94% reported that this is the new reality for policing ("Policing in the 21st Century," 2011). The condition of the economy is directly linked to police agency budgets. For smaller agencies, whose training budget was already limited, the economic downturn will have even a greater overall effect. However, the requirements for training will not change. Law enforcement must do more with even less and this fact requires agencies to consider all possibilities to maximum funds.

Since the mid 1990's, online education has been available and has been used by many colleges and universities with success. According to the Babson Survey Research Group report (2011), online enrollment was over six million students in 2010. For the future, 65% of institutions included online courses as part of planning ("Survey Results," 2011). Leal (2009) relayed that private companies are more progressive than law enforcement. Although many law enforcement professionals have used online education to obtain higher degrees, there appears to be resistance by law enforcement agencies to use it regularly. The timing is ideal for law enforcement agencies to take advantage and apply this resource. Online police training courses are readily available and some technology systems provide in house training tools. In addition, a majority of young officers are tech savvy (Jennings, 2009). Whenever practical, police agencies should use on-line training.

POSITION

In comparison to the traditional training approach, online training has become a more efficient use of available resources. Regardless of the training method, law enforcement agencies must still act to ensure adequate and mandated training. The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement requires 40 hours of training and legislative updates within each two year cycle (TCOLE). Brown (2006) estimated the cost of one day of training for a police officer making \$35,000 per year to be \$1094.00. Brown (2006) included the cost of a replacement officer to cover the officer's shift, retirement expenses, and the cost of tuition, \$299. The estimate for one officer to obtain the required TCOLE training would be approximately \$5500 at the same tuition rate. Brown (2006) relayed that, "chiefs must simply ask the tough question, 'Is the possible benefit

worth the total cost?” (p. 4). In *Rethinking Police Training*, Chief Connolly (2008) stated that salaries are the most expensive part of the traditional class. In examining the wasteful process, Connolly noted that a break occurs every 50 minutes. During the class, the instructor provides unnecessary information to entertain instead of educate. Most class times are 8 hours when the subject matter could be taught in a much shorter time frame. In addition to this waste of time, most students would rather learn the lesson and leave (Connolly, 2008). Connolly (2008) stated, “Good fiscal management demands a measurable positive return on the training investment” (p. 5).

Police agencies should use online training due to it being cost effective and readily available. Online police training companies are growing in number and quality. Public Agency Training Council provides a long list of online courses for approximately \$49 each and available anytime (<http://www.patc.com/online/index.shtml>). OSS Academy, a TCOLE approved training provider, offers online courses from \$15 to \$63 dollars and available anytime (<http://oss.academy.reliaslearning.com/>). OSS Academy offers TCOLE mandated courses for approximately \$30. Even TCOLE provides some free online training. In addition to the initial tuition savings, agencies benefit from the officer being able to remain at work and on duty. Officers can stop the training course, respond to a call for service and continue with the training course when the call is complete (Quiroz, 2013).

In *Good to Great* companies, Collins (2001) noted that technology is considered an “accelerator of momentum, not a creator of it” (p. 152). Technology is considered clock building and not time telling (Collins, 2001). Collins (2001) explained the link as “Build an organization that can endure and adapt through multiple generations of

leaders and multiple product life cycles; the exact opposite of being built around a single great leader or a single great idea” (p. 197). Because some police technology systems provide the capability for online training, departments should incorporate it into the training options. Learning Management Systems (LMS), a software application, must meet the TCOLE Guidelines for Distance Education and require approval from TCOLE. The guidelines require that providers have a plan for the support of infrastructure and that the chosen LMS provide security measures as well as ease of use (“Distance,” 2011). PowerDMS, a record management system used by over 1400 organizations, meets the TCOLE requirements (<http://www.powerdms.com/index.aspx>). PowerDMS’ software allows agencies to use uploaded manuals to create online training in a convenient, efficient and secure manner. The system also allows agencies to upload classes from an outside source. GoToMeetings also provides a LMS system called GoToTraining. Some companies, such as Police One Academy, provide training assistance. Police One Academy assists more than 10,000 officers in over 20 states (<http://www.policeone.com/ACADEMY/about>). Police One Academy can report training credit directly to TCOLE. According to Corpus Christi Police Chief Floyd Simpson, Police One allows the department to reinforce training in a convenient manner (Quiroz, 2013).

The current American workforce consists of four generations; Mature/WWII, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and the Millennials (“Generations in the workplace,” 2012). “Generations in the workplace” (2012) provided the following numbers of each generation as of 2010: Mature/WWII Generation: 40,267,984; Baby Boomers: 81,489,445; Generation X: 61,032,705; and, Generation Y/Millennials: 85,405,385. In

2012, Millennials ranged in age from 12 to 31 years old but comprised 25% of the American job force ("Generations in the workplace," 2012). Additionally, Millennials operate with high optimism and strive to achieve goals ("Generations in the workplace," 2012). Millennials have entered the law enforcement profession and the generation provides both a challenge and opportunity for police training. The new generation of law enforcement officers provides both a challenge and opportunity for police training. In a 2007 Police Chief Magazine article, the author noted that 90% of the new generation has been raised with technology (Leal, 2009). The tech savvy generation expects the access to technology and will readily search handheld devices for the answers to questions (Jennings, 2009). The generation is comfortable with on-line learning (Connolly, 2013). The police profession is becoming more complex and the Millennial Generation, which is more educated, is adaptive to a changing world. In addition, the Millennial Generation has different expectations about the learning environment (Leal, 2009). Leal (2009) explained, "They will expect online learning with interactivity, multimedia experiences, and rapid access to information" (p. 23). These expectations can be a challenge for police agencies that fall behind; "instead of employees having to quickly learn the ropes of a new job, now the employer is the one trying to catch up to the new hires" (Jennings, 2009). Jennings (2009) found that, "because of their thirst for learning and short attention span, administrators should seek out opportunities for this generation's officers to learn, train, and increase their knowledge in order to keep them motivated and stimulated" (p. 12). Through online training, police agencies have the opportunity to provide training in a format which meets the expectations and learning styles of this tech savvy generation while

conforming to agency limitations. This generation of tech savvy employees will be the future leaders of the profession.

COUNTER POSITION

Some police officers believe that online training lacks the ability to validate learning. Learning requires the ability to gain knowledge, interpret it and apply the information from the new point of view (Mikuska, 2011). Just relaying the information is not the same as teaching (Boyers, 2013). According to Mikuska (2011), although the technology allows for convenient and flexible access to information and courses, it also allows for students to quickly pass over information without even reading it. Today's search tools allow the reader to only search for the required bit of information needed and to avoid the rest. Mikuska (2011) stated that, "speed and multi-tasking can replace focused quality learning" (p. 1). According to Everson (2011), ensuring a student did not cheat can be difficult during online training. However, Everson (2011) admits that the same issue exists in the traditional classroom.

As with traditional training, online training requires a commitment from the instructor to ensure validation of learning (Everson, 2011). In reference to training methods, online training is just as effective as traditional training (Donavant, 2009). Everson (2011) explained that tests could be proctored, have restricted times, and could require short answer responses. In the police environment, validation of learning can occur when the officer returns to the work environment through the display of new skills and knowledge. According to Quiroz (2013), supervisors could recommend training if an officer displays deficiencies during work performance. TCOLE requires online training to have checks and balances to ensure validation ("Distance," 2011). Some

LMS systems, as mentioned earlier, allow the instructor to restrict access via a specific user name and password, to set a time limit for the course, and to set random questions. In effect, it is the instructor's responsibility to use the available tools and resources to ensure validation of learning.

Some police training, by its very nature, becomes problematic for online application. Topics such as pursuit driving, firearms training, and defensive tactics appear obviously difficult for on-line use. The initial decision to not entertain the possibility of online application for these topics appears reasonable. Donavant (2009) reported that, "respondents in this study felt that online education was not an appropriate delivery method in consideration of the hands-on component often found in police training" (p. 241).

However, according to Leal (2009), police agencies should consider blending the traditional classroom with online learning. 'Blended' training would allow officers to attend online training for a portion and then attend a practical portion at a later time. Private companies currently provide some blended courses. Taser International, for example, has scheduled an instructor recertification course where the officer takes the online course first and then attends a practical portion at a later time (Taser, n.d.).

Online training courses fail to meet the need for interaction between instructors and students. Boyers (2013) acknowledges the general benefit of online training but fears "a backlash" (p. 1) because of the lack of interaction. Online students have expressed missing this interaction (Boyers, 2013). Some online courses, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), have extremely large numbers of students and virtually no interaction between the professor and students (Boyers, 2013). According

to Mikuska (2011), the process of learning includes the vital aspects of social interactions and discussion. Learning requires that students be able to discuss topics, ask questions and explore understanding of the topic.

Personality styles and learning styles should be considered in this discussion because Donovan (2009) indicated little difference between the two methods. Introverts, people who are thought of as being shy, may not contribute to the discussions in a traditional classroom. The lack of open contribution does not conclude that the student does not have something of merit to share. In contrast, the extrovert controls the discussion in the traditional classroom and may limit the amount of views discussed. The online format allows the introvert to share a point of view without interruption and controls the extrovert's ability to control the room. However, the extrovert may not prefer online courses due to a lack of energy. Learning styles; visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, must be considered. Visual learners learn best by seeing things written down, auditory learners learn best by hearing the information, and kinesthetic learners learn best by doing things. In the traditional classroom, the instruction style adapts to meet the learning styles of students.

In response, online education courses have evolved to meet the need for interaction. According to Boyers (2013), courses at Champlain College have limited the number of students to a manageable number for each professor. The courses use chat rooms, video conferencing, and personal advising with professors. Police training providers, such as the East Texas Police Academy, use GoToTraining to offer virtual classrooms. Michael Ferguson, the executive director of the East Texas Police Academy, provided a basic police officer academy online. During the 2013 TCOLE

Training Coordinator's Conference, Ferguson (2013) explained the pros and cons of the program. Ferguson had face to face contact via the internet during the instruction of the topics. Of course, technology and outside influences limited the overall success of the program. But, Ferguson relayed the benefit by pushing the boundaries and learning what works and what does not work.

RECOMMENDATION

It is time for police agencies to take advantage of online training, if feasible. The law enforcement profession is slow to change and behind other professions in most advancement, but agencies must remember that the courts will not offer a pass for failing to train officers. The current economic turndown and the projection is that it will remain low ("Policing in the 21st Century," 2011). Through a survey, police chiefs across the country have acknowledged that training budgets will be reduced, so police agencies must adapt and do more with less. The cost of officers' salaries while attending training is the single most expensive part of training and in some cases; the traditional classroom process is wasteful and should be changed. Online training courses are readily available at a reduced cost and allow officers to start and stop the course when it is convenient to the individual officer.

Technology is also readily available. Numerous learning management systems are available to allow police agencies to provide online training at a reduced overall cost to the agency. But remember, that the provider must obtain approval from TCOLE to provide this training. The Millennial generation of employees is more educated more technology savvy and more able to adapt to change. The employees expect technological advances in the workplace and desire an opportunity to learn.

However, some police officers believe that online training lacks the ability to validate learning and lacks police application. Some students perform better in the online environment. Just as the traditional classroom teaching techniques have adapted over the years to include different learning styles, the online classroom is adjusting. In reference to the concern of limited uses of online training for some police topics; some topics, such as firearms cannot be completely trained online. However, blending online training with practical training maximizes resources. Another complaint of online training is the lack of face to face interaction. Research shows that complete learning involves the interaction and communication between students and teachers, which also provides an opportunity for students to clarify information. Online training programs have included conference sessions via the Internet, chat rooms, and emails as a means to communicate with others in the class.

In conclusion, police agencies should incorporate online training in a blended application as much as possible. With the vast amount of required training agencies conduct each year, this method of blended courses takes full advantage of online courses and maximizes the benefits. Additionally, certain topics are ideal for online training; such as legal updates and human trafficking. If the police agency has obtained authorization through TCOLE to provide online training to its officers, then the agency could include agency specific training to the online format. As a caution, police agencies should always evaluate the quality of online courses and ensure the courses meet agency standards.

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