WILL POWER!

Will Hopkins, CEO of driver developers and Intrinsic Dev, offers his thoughts on getting your training mix right.

I am a firm believer in training – if the professional CI industry wants to standout as being different from other trades, training is pivotal, however, training itself is not enough. Training needs to be coupled with experience to really hold and have meaning. Over the years, we've employed some very qualified people (for example one employee held two master's degrees and a PhD). Having that sort of theoretical knowledge in a company is a great asset, but similarly, without the experience element, that knowledge cannot be applied. Therefore, training has to go hand in hand with experience and application, which is something our industry isn't always the best at. Historically, many certification courses haven't taken onboard the 'coursework' approach that is often found in external training programmes of a more vocational nature.

Having been in the CI industry for considerable time, originally as an installer and now as a driver developer, I've been on my fair share of training courses. I've trained across all the main control platforms including Control4, Crestron, ELAN, RTI and Savant, along with many lighting control platforms and several other brands that are no longer in the market. I have certainly been on courses that are more, 'death by PowerPoint' than educational. Conversely, I've been on courses that are structered at many levels, that require practical experience in between levels, and some where the commitment in between is more arduous than having a full-time job. Getting the right

balance is always difficult and sometimes a little too often the balance is tilted more heavily towards increasing sales and hitting targets than it is skills. Personally, I think this is unwise, not only as it has the potential to leave the installer high and dry, it also risks damaging the brand name and putting the customer off investing in smart home technology in the future. I recently learnt from one of our US customers, of a major control platform running a half day certification course to open up their product to a new distribution channel. This cheapens the industry and undermines the skill set that many of us have built and developed over the years. If we are to be a professional industry, then distinguishing ourselves as professional installers and discouraging manufacturers from cheapening our industry is critical.

Aside from these clearly financially orientated courses, industry training providers face a difficult challenge. Often companies (understandably) send both sales staff and installers on the same course. For the trainer, this presents a bit of a problem, as you have two very different skillsets (and often mindsets). You also frequently have very different abilities; someone who programs systems every day and is already familiar with other control platforms will typically pick up a new system much quicker than a newcomer to the industry, or a sales rep who rarely has the opportunity to get hands on with kit. It's to these ends that we're seeing some of the more established training providers introducing different types of courses. Here, online training plays a big role. Having online courses as a pre-requisite for hands on, practical, training courses helps ensure that everyone is at a suitable level; if

someone struggles on some concepts, they also then have the opportunity to undertake a further online course to ensure they don't feel comfortable. Moreover, basic product knowledge can be covered here, so that an in-person training session can focus on practical application, rather than discovery of the product range. Several training providers have adopted this approach, with online courses giving a general overview before training. Furthermore, some trainers have also added basic networking training and general smart home courses to help boost the overall competency level, prior to system specific training.

It's important to understand that you can't train in a day. I always recommend that installers purchase and use kit themselves – it's only through doing and playing that one truly learns. The more practical experience you gain as an installer, the more useful you will find the later, more advanced training courses; to go to a course looking to solve a specific problem, or with a specific query, is always going to be much better than rote learning set up and configuration options. Similarly, when choosing what courses to undertake, it's important to make sure that trainers provide you with your own training rig – every textbook on learning theory points to the importance of actually doing something in order to learn it. Often people are fearful of having their weaknesses exposed and some trainers will just have a single set up that is shared (or even no physical kit at all). This is the wrong approach to training – everybody is learning, so it's ok to make mistakes – having your own setup during training means you have the ability to work things out for yourself and cements the knowledge you are being given.

Book knowledge is all well and good, but we need practical skills training too