Field Training Officer Program: Beyond San Jose

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Abstract

Field Training Officer (FTO) Programs are an integral part of officer training and development in most departments. This paper examines the use of technology in the FTO programs to create real life situations that the recruit might have to handle and be evaluated on. With the development and implementation of technology in the FTO program, recruits can learn at their own pace and in real world experiences under controlled conditions.

Introduction

Traditionally, newly hired officers have been sent to formalized training academies where the recruit is provided with basic competencies to perform the job of a police officer. Through evolution, police academy training has vastly improved; however, there is still a gap between the academy training and that which is termed "real" police work.

It is now recognized that the field training programs play an important part in the training of new recruits. The field training program allows the officer to experience firsthand what has previously been only read or seen in the classroom. The effective field training program takes over where the classroom leaves off.

Some of the major findings in the National Institute of Justice Research Report (1987) indicate that with a properly designed and administered field training program, the results are better trained and qualified officers. The benefit to law enforcement agencies is a more efficient and effective organization. The report also concludes that the outcome of an effective field training program is, or should be, an overall improvement in the relationship between the police and the community. Field training programs are relatively inexpensive considering the reduction in civil liability complaints and lawsuits against departments.

Background

As early as 1931, the Wickersham Commission noted that there was no formalized training in more than 80% of the surveyed departments. At that time it was noted that smaller jurisdictions had no pretext of training at all.

Since then, three other commissions have generally influenced police training and field training specifically. These commissions are: the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration, 1967; the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, 1973; and the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies.

It was not until 1972 that the first formalized field training program was introduced in San Jose, California. The critical part of the program was to assign specially selected and trained police officers who would be responsible for the training of new recruits. These officers are known as Field Training Officers (FTO'S). The field training officer is responsible for on-the-job training, evaluating the recruit's performance, and providing

remedial training if necessary. The field training program has become an integral part of officer training and development in most departments.

The FTO program evolved from a need to have an organized training program for a newly certified officer once the officer has left the academy. Wilson and McLarne (1972) suggested that a field training program should be an integral part of recruit training and that training bridges the gap from the theory of the classroom to the practical application on the street. Some research has indicated that FTO programs have been very successful and provided a smooth transition from the classroom to the street. Even though the original concept of the San Jose FTO model has been refined, there have been no major revisions; therefore, it is time to look at changing the FTO program.

Most FTO programs are geared toward a specific amount of time that a new recruit is in training. During this period, the recruits are trained and evaluated on their performance as situations occur. An example of this might be an evaluation of a new officer working a traffic accident. The recruit would be evaluated on the following dimensions: how the investigation was handled; how those involved were dealt with; and if all of the paperwork was completed properly. This type of training and subsequent evaluation is incumbent on an incident occurring during the recruit's shift, within a specific territory or zone, and the recruit's availability to work the call. In most departments, the new recruit can be exposed to everyday calls of traffic accidents, burglaries, thefts, and non-crime type of incidents. However, it is a sit-and-wait game for the more violent type calls to materialize for the new recruit to be exposed for training purposes. A recruit in a large department can be exposed to all aspects of the job, but those in a smaller department might not have these training opportunities with the frequency that might be needed for training, so sometimes these areas are not covered very well.

One way to address these shortcomings is to look at changing the traditional FTO programs to proficiency based training without the limitation or restrictions of time. All personnel that are experts in their fields within and outside the agency need to be involved and give the recruit the most exposure to all the different aspects of the job. Those experts might be the departmental secretary teaching administration forms, or the evidence custodian teaching evidence preservation, processing, and chain of custody. The new recruit might be placed in dispatch for radio procedures or in records for learning required paperwork. The FTO base would be expanded to include non-sworn personnel. Traditionally, experienced officers with knowledge of all aspects of law enforcement have been selected to be FTO's. The focus needs to be shifted to those individuals that have expertise in their area of responsibility for the training of the new recruit. The traditional FTO would train in a particular area of expertise and oversee general areas to ensure that the other training areas are completed.

Research Questions

Several questions need to be explored:

1. Are our present FTO programs going to meet our training needs in the future?

2. Are we presently using the most effective and available resources in our FTO programs?

3. How can technology help us to more effectively train our officers?

4. What role should technology play in our FTO programs?

In order to meet our future training needs we will need to look at the role that technology will play. In a constant state of change, we need to explore what role technology will play in how we work and live. Whether we are purchasing a new computer, car or appliance, no sooner do we get it home than there is a new and improved model. The technology revolution is constantly changing how we work and live. The impact that technology has on our personal lives is usually understood, but the impact on our professional lives is not so readily seen. The most visible technology to us is that of the aerospace field and the military. Through the development of that technology, we, as the consumer, have become the beneficiaries. We sometime fail to see the relationship of technology and training but since the 1930's, the U.S. military has used Link Flight Instrument Trainers, flight simulators (Moshell, 1993).

Law enforcement has also been exposed to technology in radio systems, computers, firearms training, and interactive computer programs; all have had limited success. We are on the cutting edge of what the future holds in the realm of using technology in training applications.

In Staten Island, police officers no longer take five hours of their patrol time to travel into Manhattan for meetings, depositions, reports or trials. Instead, a radio message directs the officer to head for the local precinct's video booth, where, over two way I-NET video, the officer can often attend to business and return to the beat in less than an hour (Newcombe, 1993). The next generation of recruits are those of the technology era. Even the educational community sees the benefit in new teaching technology. As Elliot Soloway (1991) states, "if technology can facilitate those intrinsic motivators and if the cost of that technology is within the budgets of the school system, then the implications are obvious." One day, telemedicine may bring back the old-fashioned house call. Right now, it links doctors and patients through technology such as through videoconferencing (Heather, 1994). Even in law enforcement, Sergeant Fred Rayner (1993) points out that police departments must be progressive regardless of hard economic times; if not, they will become inefficient and ineffective.

Use of Technology in Training

After researching the role that technology would play in the FTO process, this research found that since the initial implementation of the San Jose FTO program, there has been no evaluation of the success or failure rates of the program or what constitutes success. Neither has anyone attempted to gather the basic information which could affect so many law enforcement agencies, their employees and ultimately, those that are served. There has been no systematic description of the problems involved in formulating, implementing, or improving field training programs (NIJ, 1987). No data is

available that indicates that any new technology is being used in FTO programs. There are indications that some new technologies (particularly interactive multimedia and virtual reality) are being used in addressing training issues in the private sector. Educational technology is a fast-developing industry that will expand the learning options available to us.

The next generation, the "Nintendo Generation" of officers that are now being hired, are part of that technology revolution. The interactive multimedia training is an example of what has been used for law enforcement training such as in the firearms and driver training. Interactive video could be developed and implemented into the FTO programs in such areas as accident investigation, burglary investigation, and report writing that would allow the recruit to work at his/her own speed until proficient in that area.

Most of us have heard about virtual reality, but do we really know what it is? Virtual reality presents a synthetically generated environment to the user through visual, auditory, and other stimuli (Pausch, 1993). In layman's terms, it is creating an illusion that one is able to interact with. In order to create this, the perception must be created to the users that they are actually inside the scene. This is done by a head mounted display which creates a circular theater within the helmet. The user's movements are tracked by a computer which generates a different view for each eye providing an illusion of depth in the scenario, a 3D scene. In order to have direct manipulation in 3D, the user must wear instrumental gloves. The gloves allow the user to interact with virtual objects in three-dimensional space.

To date, there is much enthusiasm surrounding the use of virtual reality. In fact, the National Research Council (NRC) committee in a new report, "Virtual Reality: Scientific and Technological Challenges*",* issued September 20, 1994 points out that if the federal government pursued research in this area, the results could lead to many cost-effective applications that would go well beyond those now available in entertainment. Additionally, the committee found that the use of virtual reality would be practical in the use of training, hazardous operations, medicine, and health.

A virtual reality scenario might walk the recruit through a crime scene, a major traffic accident, or a conflict with an armed suspect. These types of real world applications are only a few examples that could be created with the use of virtual reality. As part of the virtual reality program scenarios, a number of specific performance standards could be included in the program so that the computer would be able to track and give immediate feedback to the recruit. As the technology continues to evolve, the only limitations of the program would be that of the programmer**.**

Future Directions

The National Institute of Justice (1987) concluded that the FTO programs were excellent means with which to bridge the gap between classroom and the street. The FTO programs have proven to be assets in the development, training, and evaluation of new officers that most, if not all, departments have realized.

The standard FTO program, which almost all programs were modeled after, has provided a good foundation. Another hard look needs to be taken at our programs and how they can be made better by making them more proficiency based and creating

scenarios using all of the experts in a department. This can further be implemented with the use of technology. The development and use of interactive computer and virtual reality will enable training to occur when the need arises and not wait until a training opportunity happens. According to Training Aids Digest (1994), the National Research Council (NRC) recommends that the federal government undertake major unified research for the development of software programs.

It is time for traditional FTO training programs to shift as much as possible to a proficiency based environment. Until the technology becomes available, departments are going to have to become creative in their programs and create scenarios to achieve this transition. One day, just as it has been in the past, what now seems unthinkable will become real. With that in mind, it isn't hard to believe what we see on television today such as the "Holo-Deck", an interactive artificial environment seen on "Star Trek - The Next Generation", could one day be the ultimate FTO training tool. If these initiatives in technology are realized, the law enforcement profession needs to embrace the new technology which will allow us to step into the next era of training.

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