

FEATURE

Commonality Unites Differing Skills and Multiple Perspectives at M^élange

Lana Jackman and Lorna Jones are identical twins, and yes, they're in agreement on today's pressing need for their consulting and training skills, but don't expect them to be carbon copies when it comes to the finer points they bring to their M^élange Information Services Inc.

"Don't make the assumption because we're twins that we have identical skill sets," Jackman says. "Our professional training has been somewhat different, though we have combined the commonality. What's primary is that we're on the same wavelength when we talk to clients and, where we have differences, we can offer multiple perspectives as opposed to one."

"We strategically use our defined assets," Jones adds, "as a means to assure that, whatever the engagement, we're providing a cohesive service for our clients."

Joining forces to begin M^élange in 2001, Jackman, as CEO, and Jones, as president, offer customized consulting and training services for work force development in information literacy, knowledge management, information and communication technologies, and cultural competence.

Their mission is to foster mastery of this new age of technology, embracing change and challenge from the ground up, from individual development to new practice integration within a company's operational fabric.

For more than 20 years, though, Jones and Jackman followed different career paths. Jackman applied her Ph.D. to higher education administration. Jones took her MBA to senior leadership positions in nonprofit health care and treatment service organizations.



Identical twins Lorna Jones and Lana Jackman join forces to address the digital divide.

They'd talk about their work but never got into the details until they began discussing the digital divide and its impact on their respective professions.

"Our concerns were basically the same, that people were not being taught how to think critically," Jackman says. "We decided we'd put our collective skills to good use."

"The similarities of the challenges for students and health care consumers were very much in harmony with a thing called 'information literacy,'" Jones says. "We say that information literacy is the path to being able to manage knowledge effectively within an individual's respective universe."

On the education side, Jackman would see students, faculty and librarians unable to connect on sharing information as well as overwhelmed by the explosion of information thanks to the Internet. Jones

noted the same challenges in her profession, particularly in the emerging trend of self-care management practices, necessitating an understanding of how to access information, understand the medical language and apply the information. The same difficulties, they say, exist at personal and corporate levels.

Information literacy works to identify, find, analyze, evaluate, share and apply necessary information, Jackman says, and can be used to enhance ROI, improve customer relationship practices, achieve company goals and, on an individual basis, develop a life-long learning perspective.

Knowledge management, Jones explains, builds on information literacy and can be summed by the business-planning acronym, SWOT — strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. By guiding staff through the process, they

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help employees develop the steps and strategies necessary to identify and meet goals, whether on an individual basis, within a division or companywide.

Cultural competence is not a black and white or Black and White issue but rather an appreciation and respect for the backgrounds and experiences others bring to the workplace.

"You have to look at sharing knowledge in a whole different light," Jackman says. "You have to be able to identify the problem, analyze your resources, collaborate with your colleagues and share that information across sectors."

Capitalizing on their contacts, they started with training seminars at the Santa Clara County Children and Families First Commission in California; their next client was the U.S. Telecommunications Training Institute in Washington, D.C. The Children's Trust Fund in Indiana, Project Hope, Behavioral Health Care Network of Massachusetts and the Iowa Library Association are other client examples. Still, their services proved too esoteric to grow the company as quickly as they envisioned.

"Information literacy has been around since the 1970s but people still don't understand what it means," Jones says. "We thought people would embrace what we were doing immediately, that this is the way to arm your staff, to work with a company's goals and objectives, and to get that mission accomplished. It didn't work out that way."

So M \acute{e} lange has a new, additional focus: videos. "Our business plan is a living document. We're constantly tweaking, refining, redrafting, honing the strategies we identified initially," Jones says.

What they're doing now is applying their technology-age philosophies to everyday life with the goal of mainstreaming the soft skills associated with defining, finding, analyzing, evaluating, sharing and applying information and knowledge in the workplace. Their first video, "Off the Hook, Workplace Fashion Secrets for All Ages, Shapes and Sizes," was inspired by Jones' previous professional role in welfare-to-work "after-care" and her 15 years as a full-figured model. Setting the video apart is the dialogue — done in information literacy speak — that accompanies the how-tos of developing a professional business image. Finished in January with an expected late July/early August release, the training video has already garnered two prestigious awards, the national Telly, for non-commercially produced videos, and the international Videographer's Award of Distinction.

"The rationale is we want to make a connection with a slice of life people can identify and then walk away with,

saying, 'I can use that. I've done that.' It's an introduction," Jones says.

In production now is a consumer version of the training video, with plans to expand into other topics, such as diabetic self-care management. Done with one other person, the video represents the way M \acute{e} lange has operated to date — collaborating when necessary on projects rather than hiring within. "We've liked keeping it tiny," Jackman says.

On the other hand, they're in the process of training other trainers around the strategies of the video with the vision of growing. Jackman has publishing plans. And they still see a dire need for their workplace services to filter on down from the senior executive level, where knowledge management is an accepted buzz word. Particularly troubling, they say, is today's trend toward global outsourcing. "Companies need to maximize our own home-grown resources and develop the skills of the people right in their midst," Jackman notes.

Like the good practitioners they are, Jones and Jackman practice what they preach. They represent the consummate communicator, in touch throughout the day, seven days a week, in person or on the phone and through e-mail. They've built their working relationship on identifying their strengths and challenges. And they're not afraid to broach problems but meet issues head on.

"Lana is the right brain and I'm the left brain," Jones says. "She's laughing, but I'm telling the truth. She's the creative, broad-stroke thinker. I'm the practical, keep it at the level everyone understands. Her left brain, however, comes in when it comes to our fiscal operations. I'm the marketing, meeter-greeter, press the flesh kind of person."

Neither Jackman nor Jones flinch from working out their differences or talking out their challenges. "If you're in a partnership and it's about the bottom line, you better define up front where the challenges are and how you can minimize them," Jackman says. "Some people don't like to communicate directly but that's our style."

At their most recent annual meeting, Jones and Jackman did some introspection through the SWOT principles they teach. "It's something I advocate when I'm working with boards of directors," Jones says. "Nine out of 10 times, people don't want to take that minute to look inside themselves to see if they're contributing to the overall goals of the organization. It helped us dramatically. The exercise was fun, though sometimes difficult, and informative and instructive."

"It was also eye-opening in terms of understanding one another," Jackman adds, "and we're twins."