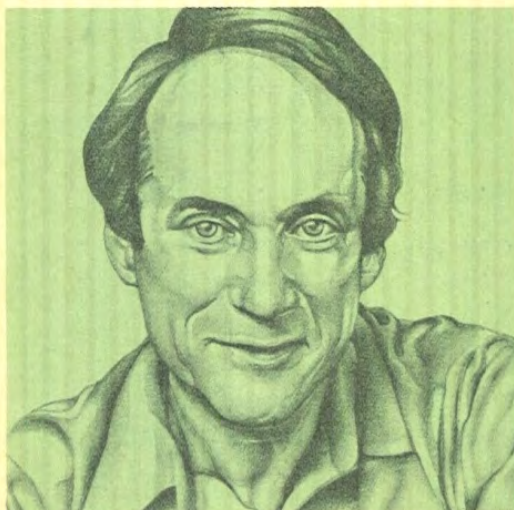


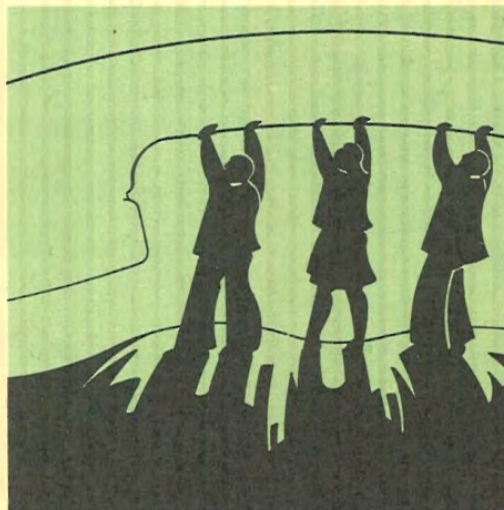
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exchange

**CELEBRATING OUR
25TH ANNIVERSARY**
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**BUSINESS TAPS INTO
TELEMARKETING**
page 2



**BUILDING SUCCESSFUL
TRAINING**
page 4



**Now our new
name has
a new home:**

Learning International (formerly Xerox Learning Systems)
200 First Stamford Place
P.O. Box 10211, Stamford, CT 06904

Learning International Celebrates a Silver Anniversary

WITH PRIDE IN
THE IMAGE REFLECTED

It began 25 years ago. Noted psychologist B.F. Skinner promulgated revolutionary ideas for changing behavior through programmed instruction. Columbia University psychologist, Francis Mechner, immediately saw merit in Skinner's principles — but foresaw a different methodology.

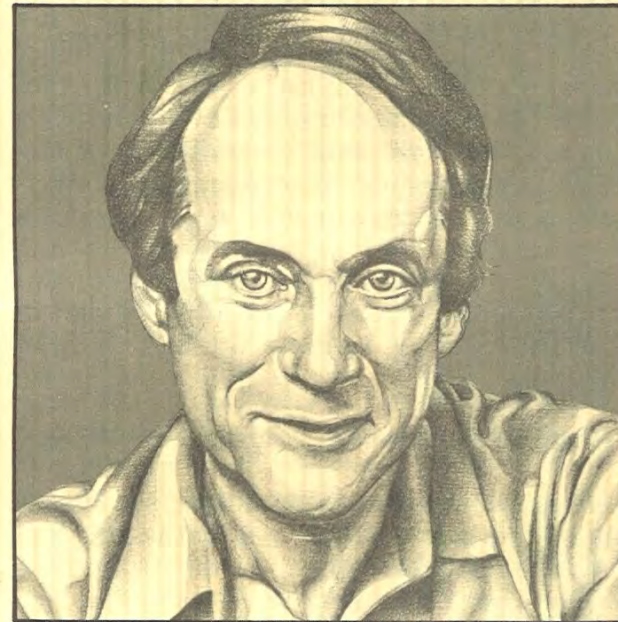
Mechner was convinced that the design of the program and the behavioral analysis preceding it, were the keys to unexplored horizons in learning. He pioneered the application of Skinner's principles to teach practical skills to business people, and Basic Systems was born.

As Mechner's story unfolds, it reveals the strength of Learning International's original charter. It's still intact today as the company remains dedicated to the principles of sound behavioral analysis and the foundation of research and testing described here in Mechner's own words.

History in the Making: A Conversation with Francis Mechner, Founder of Basic Systems

Exchange: *How did you first get involved in the training field?*

Mechner: While I was teaching psychology at Columbia University, I became interested in Skinner's ideas for programmed instruction. Skinner's main focus of attention was the teaching machine hardware, but my immediate reaction was that the machine is su-



Francis Mechner, Ph.D.

perfluous or even limiting. I thought that the important thing was the design of the program and the behavioral analysis that goes into developing it.

I was the first to apply Skinner's principles to practical problems, such as teaching doctors how to diagnose, salespeople how to sell better, or computer personnel how to program computers. I emphasized the correct analysis of behavior and skills before breaking these into the steps to which the learner is to respond. I also stressed the vital importance of having the learner *do*, during learning, the kinds of things he or she is supposed to learn — the things that will be considered evidence of mastery.

Exchange: *What was the reaction of your colleagues when you left the university to form a corporation?*

Mechner: They were horrified. They viewed forming a company as a betrayal of my profession. I decided to use a commercial vehicle to develop my concepts because I believe that business is a good way to give an idea a life of its own that outlasts its originator. This may yet be the case with Professional Selling Skills.

Exchange: *How was Basic Systems formed?*

Mechner: David Padwa, a young lawyer working at the United Nations, and I formed Basic Systems in 1960. Our original idea was

**Basic Systems, Inc.
formed in New York**

**Basic Systems acquired
by Xerox Corp. and named
Xerox Learning Systems**



1965
• PROFESSIONAL SELLING SKILLS
• READING AND EVALUATING
FINANCIAL REPORTS



to use the instructional methods I had developed to teach literacy to people in underdeveloped countries. Within weeks we abandoned that concept and decided to concentrate on the business and school markets here in the United States.

Exchange: *Who were your first clients?*

Mechner: Our first client was Schering Corporation, a major pharmaceutical firm. We developed a self-instructional program to teach their salespeople product knowledge about oral antifungal agents. I promised them that I could teach their people faster and better using my programmed instruction methods.

Schering rigorously validated the program using a control group and found that programmed instruction reduced the learning time between 50 and 60 percent, while dramatically improving mastery of the information. Word of the success spread quickly among pharmaceutical firms, and we soon received contracts from Pfizer, Ortho, Bristol, Upjohn and Merck to teach product knowledge. We also expanded beyond the medical market to develop programs for AT&T, IBM, DuPont, Sperry, Dow and Shell. Because Basic Systems was so successful, we attracted top people from Columbia and Harvard to develop our programs.

Exchange: *How did your original sales training program come about?*

Mechner: The story is that I developed the program in a ski lodge one weekend in 1962 while grounded with a dislocated shoulder. And that's true as far as the program concept is concerned. However, it took five people two years to identify the skills, develop the program and refine it. The idea for a selling skills program began when Frank Walsh, the training director at Pfizer, suggested that the real problem his salespeople had was not so much that their product knowledge was inadequate, but that they weren't good enough at selling.

So I conducted behavior observation research: I went on sales calls and observed Pfizer people interacting with clients. I discovered that one key problem was that salespeople

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were not listening. When a customer asked a question or raised an objection, the typical salesperson would listen politely, but then barrel on, ignoring the customer and continuing the sales presentation, without any attempt to uncover the doctor's needs. In fact, when a doctor spoke, the salesperson would wait out that little interruption of the presentation, and then proceed as though the interruption had never occurred.

From these observations, I developed programs called Needs Benefit Selling, which were the forerunners of Professional Selling Skills and Strategies for Effective Listening. Pfizer, Merck, IBM and Union Camp jointly funded the development of these programs.

Exchange: *What skills did your first sales training program teach?*

Mechner: The two-and-one-half-day program taught:

- Diagnosing the customer's needs
- Getting the customer to reveal his or her needs
- Presenting the features of the product or service as benefits
- Eliciting the customer's objections to the product
- Overcoming the customer's objections
- Closing the sale

Exchange: *What media did you use?*

Mechner: I decided that the program should be audio-lingual to be closer to the reality of a sales call than printed matter alone. I wanted people to learn to *use* the skills of listening and probing and be so comfortable with them that they would use them in actual sales calls. By using audio tape, the program simulated actual selling situations in which participants practiced using the skills by forming their own responses throughout the learning process. The original program was self study — just one person with a tape recorder. In testing it, we found that people benefitted from the feedback of others in a group situation, so we changed it to a small group seminar. That was in 1963. By 1965 we had developed a generic version and added role plays as a way to customize the content for each company.

Exchange: *How did Basic Systems first get involved with Xerox Corporation?*

Mechner: Xerox hired Basic Systems to help launch its Xerox 914 Copier. We developed several programs to teach xerography to customers, product knowledge and selling skills to salespeople and equipment maintenance to technical reps. At approximately the same time, the educational technology industry exploded. IBM, CBS, Litton and other major companies wanted to diversify into education.

Xerox thoroughly researched the indus-

try and acquired Basic Systems in 1965 for \$6 million because it perceived Basic Systems as the leader in the field, with the best people and blue-chip clients. Xerox also acquired a number of other educational and publishing firms during the early 1960s.

Exchange: *What programs did Basic Systems offer?*

Mechner: We had an extremely broad product line, from preschool education to medical training to technical training, including such titles as *Binary Arithmetic*, *Bobby Fischer Teaches Chess*, *How to Read Blueprints* and *Electrocardiography*. The sales training and listening skills programs were by far the most successful, and have lived on.

Exchange: *What was it that made your programs so effective?*

Mechner: The most important requirement for an effective program is that it be based on a sound behavioral analysis. By that, I mean identifying the critical skills and concepts and

We built quality programs because we spent the time and money to do the up-front behavior analysis and because we had a sound development process of repeated cycles of testing and revision.

breaking them into pieces, or skill steps that can be learned easily. Few people, even today, take the time and effort to do this thoroughly, or know how to do it.

Hundreds of training companies sprang up after our success, but most were gimmicky and focused on media rather than behavior and skills. Only now are the computer and video-disc sophisticated enough to add real value to the learning process. The continuing allure of hardware has worked to the detriment of quality because it has diverted attention from the importance of program design.

Behavioral analysis is the hard part: It is time-consuming, expensive and requires skill. But that is what makes the difference between a program that works well, like PSS, and one that doesn't.

Exchange: *What other concepts did you pioneer that are important in developing strong programs?*

Mechner: When I first began to think about how programs should be developed in 1960, I decided that the first step had to be the formulation of behavioral objectives. I called

them “terminal behavior specifications.” Before you develop a program, you must specify what behavior you want the learner to exhibit at the end of the training.

Many people resist doing this because it creates accountability for the program developer — it permits measurement of the effectiveness of the program. If you never specify an objective — never have a goal — then you can’t fail to meet it. Many people in the 1960s said that teaching is an art; that it can’t be measured; that it can’t be broken into specific steps and codified. That’s a convenient attitude for a person who prefers to not be held accountable for the learning outcome.

Exchange: *How important is validation?*

Mechner: When Basic Systems first started out, we *had* to validate programs. People are skeptical of anything new, so we had to be able to offer quantitative proof that our programs worked.

But there has always been a confusion between testing after the program is completed and testing as part of the developmental process. Most people emphasize testing or validating the program after it is completed. But that doesn’t create quality. What is developmental testing — the testing-revising, testing-revising done *before* the program is completed. It’s expensive and time-consuming to do, but it’s the only way to achieve high effectiveness. Unfortunately most people cut corners and don’t do adequate developmental testing. We built quality programs because we spent the time and money to do the up-front behavior analysis and because we had a sound development process of repeated cycles of testing and revision.

Exchange: *How do you feel today about what Basic Systems has become?*

Mechner: Even though I haven’t had any contact with Learning International since 1967, I take great pride in the phenomenal success of Professional Selling Skills and Effective Listening. These successes make me feel that my original contributions have been amplified and now have a life of their own.

Many of the concepts that seem so obvious today were breakthroughs in the early 60s. For example, “Successful selling often requires ascertaining the customer’s needs.” “Listening doesn’t come naturally, and it can be taught.” These were new ideas. That they have stood the test of time is an indication of their validity.



About Dr. Mechner: **Francis Mechner** earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University, where he taught experimental psychology. His work focused on how skills and knowledge are acquired, retained and forgotten. In 1960 he formed Basic Systems, which was acquired by Xerox Corporation in 1965. The company then became Xerox Learning Systems. Upon acquisition by The Times Mirror Company in 1985, the name was changed to Learning International.

Today Dr. Mechner is president of Behavioral Science Applications, Inc. He is currently developing a system of learning and practicing for performing artists to make their performance highly stable and impervious to disruption.