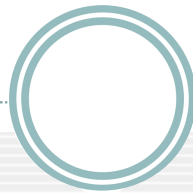


PRESENTS:

An excerpt from  
*Working with SMEs*  
by Peggy Salvatore

Working with  
**SMEs**

by Peggy Salvatore



# Working With SMEs



## MEET THE AUTHOR:



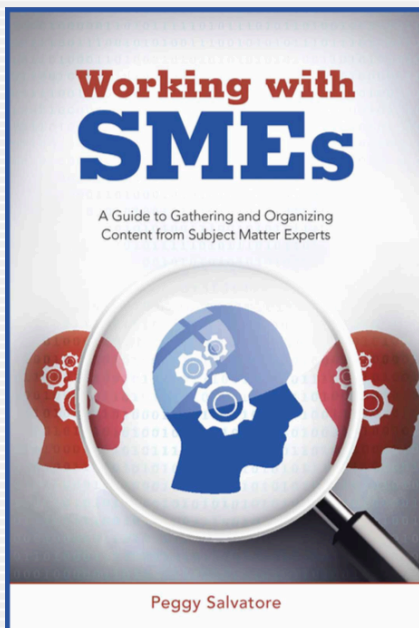
Peggy Salvatore is a strategist and analyst, training professional, and writer. Having started her career as a subject matter expert (SME), she developed an expertise in training, instructional design, facilitation and presentation to provide additional value to her clients. She has worked with many outstanding subject matter experts throughout her career who inspired and influenced the content of her book, *Working With SMEs*. Ms. Salvatore has a B.A. in journalism from Temple University and an M.B.A. from New York Institute of Technology. She also has a Competent Communicator award from Toastmasters.

## TO LEARN MORE:

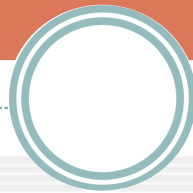
*Working with SMEs: A Guide to Gathering and Organizing Content from Subject Matter Experts* is available now from Balboa Press by visiting [www.balboapress.com](http://www.balboapress.com). You can order this title at your local bookseller or preferred online retailer.

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Visit [www.workingwithsmes.com](http://www.workingwithsmes.com) to read the blog.



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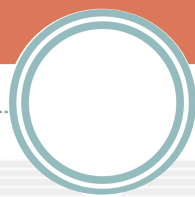
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The following content is excerpted from the book *Working With SMEs: A Guide to Gathering and Organizing Content from Subject Matter Experts* as a companion to the Webinar “Know Your Subject Matter Experts.”

This booklet is available courtesy of KnowledgeVision. Find out more about KnowledgeVision and using Knovio at [www.knowledgevision.com](http://www.knowledgevision.com).

For more information on working with subject matter experts and the role of knowledge management as part of a training program and succession management plan, visit [www.workingwithsmes.com](http://www.workingwithsmes.com).

# The Perfect SME



The perfect SME has three essential qualities. The perfect SME is:

1. The most knowledgeable and articulate person about that topic in the organization
2. One who has, or will be given, the time to work with you
3. Willing and possibly looking forward to being part of the training design process

If your SME is missing any of these three ingredients, you may have trouble. If that happens and you don't have an alternate SME, we offer tips and tools throughout this book to help you negotiate those issues effectively.

First, whether you've been dealt the perfect SME or not, you'll need to establish deadlines and clear lines of communication for fact-checking and sign-offs at the very beginning of your relationship. It is unlikely the SME will be tracking those things, and you may not have other supports in place to do it for you. Your project scope or project charter should include details about deadlines and lines of responsibility that can help define the relationship.<sup>1</sup>

As the instructional designer on the project, you will find yourself managing up, managing laterally and possibly managing outside your department to make things happen. Setting expectations and deadlines up front will make the process smoother and less harrowing for you.

Which brings us back to the trouble with SMEs...yes, even the perfect ones who meet all three of the essential qualities.

<sup>1</sup>A sample project charter can be found in chapter 7 of *Working with SMEs*



# The Trouble with SMEs

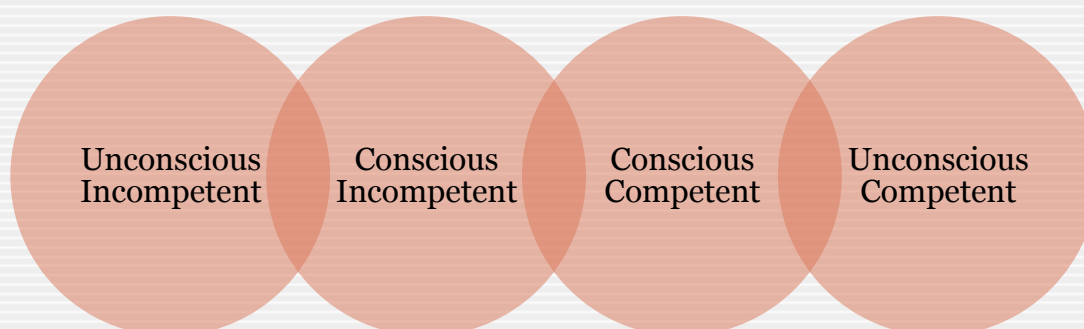
The trouble with SMEs starts when experts look up from the petri dish or financial spreadsheet and try to tell you what they are doing. So while they are rattling on about *HARP* and *bundling* and *translational research*, you are looking at them and thinking, “Huh?” They have reached a level of expertise in which they are Unconscious Competents – that is, they are so well-informed on their subjects they don’t even realize how much they know. It is likely that the SME you are working with has forgotten more than you will ever know about the content of the program you are writing.

This is a gift and a curse. Here’s why.

## The Four Stages of Learning Model and Your SME

In case you aren’t familiar with the levels of competence<sup>2</sup>, here are the types of SME competence you may encounter:

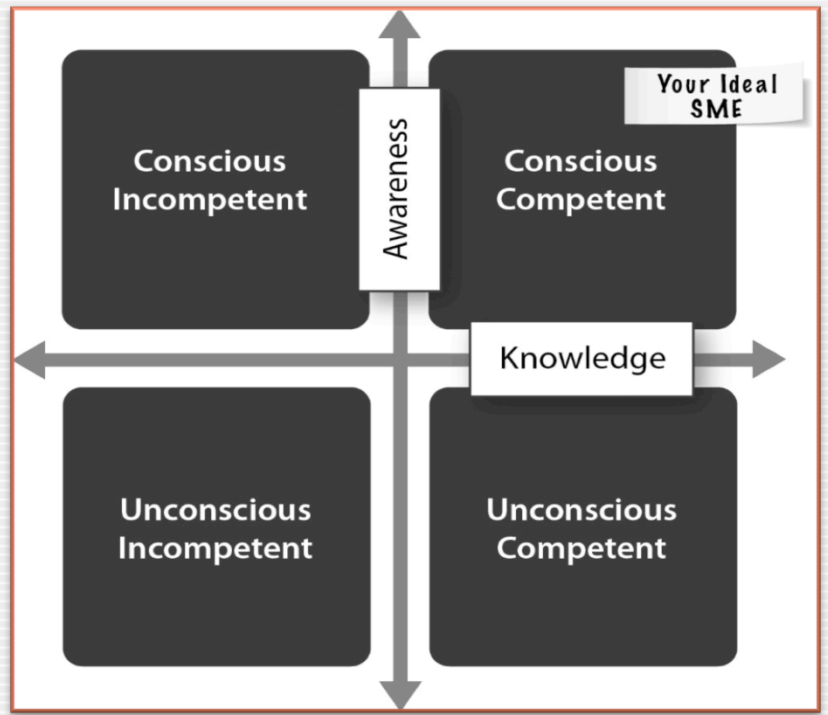
1. Unconscious Incompetent – doesn’t know what she doesn’t know
2. Conscious Incompetent – knows what she doesn’t know
3. Conscious Competent – knows what she knows
4. Unconscious Competent – doesn’t know what she knows



The Unconscious Competent is the highest level on an ascending trajectory of knowledge. For that reason, these very smart people are usually assigned the job of acting as your SME. However, when you look at these four stages of learning on a chart that tracks both *knowledge* and *awareness*, you can see where your SME might fall short of your ideal for the purposes of gathering information in a systematic way.

<sup>2</sup>The four levels of competence are known in training literature as The Four Stages of Learning. Noel Burch of Gordon Training International is credited with developing this model in the 1970s. Others, such as Abraham Maslow, have also been credited with developing it.

# The Ideal SME Model



## Where is Your SME on the Continuum of Knowledge?

Ideally, your SME is on the third level of the four stages of learning continuum and is a Conscious Competent. That means she is aware of what she knows, and she is able to tell you. Since such a SME is still on the learning curve herself, not having reached the state where her knowledge is unconscious, she is closer to her own training and remembers what it is like to be a naïve learner. By remembering what it is like to not know, the SME will better remember how she acquired the knowledge or skill that is the subject of your training program, and by extension, how to explain it in a linear way to you.

## SMEs Are People Too

Even on our best days, we aren't always at our best. That is true for your subject matter expert, too. Whether it is part of their personality or a momentary temperamental aberration, sometimes your SME will not be wholly cooperative or informative. This is true for SMEs across the entire spectrum of competence.

You may have a highly conscious competent who is not communicating well or a conscious incompetent who is frustrated and doing their best. No matter the circumstances, like any of our relationships, it is helpful to have a few tools in the interpersonal toolbox to deal with temperament and situations.

On the following pages, meet some challenging SMEs and learn some strategies for working with them.



## SPEEDY SME

Pitfall: The SME becomes impatient with you controlling the pace of the session.

Strategy:

- Explain that less skilled personnel will complete the training process. You need to capture all of the details to make that possible.
- Reassure the SME that documentation will take less time if you move slowly and steadily so you can capture all the information the first time.
- Use humor, when appropriate, to help diffuse frustration.

## Speedy SME



## Scattered SME



## SCATTERED SME

Pitfall: The SME does not think sequentially and sees the process as so complex and variable that it cannot possibly be captured in the steps.

Strategy:

- Reassure the SME that it is your job to make sense out of a complex process and you have experience doing that.
- Guide the info-gathering session using a process map.\*see Chapter 7
- Encourage the SME to show you the steps so you can get a feel for the process





## SHORTCUT SME

Pitfall: The SME has been doing this so long that she uses shortcuts a novice could never follow and might not be best practice for the organization.

Strategy:

- Re-focus the SME by explaining that you are to document only best practices for the company that can be followed by the audience who will definitely include people not as experienced as the SME.
- Request the SME demonstrate the best practice process.

## Shortcut SME



## Defensive SME



## DEFENSIVE SME

Pitfall: The SME feels their job is threatened. If they tell you anything, they run the risk of losing their job.

Strategy:

- Reinforce the value of the SME's expertise.
- Use a non-threatening scenario like, "Imagine that starting next week I am going to be your personal assistant, and you want me to do this task for you."







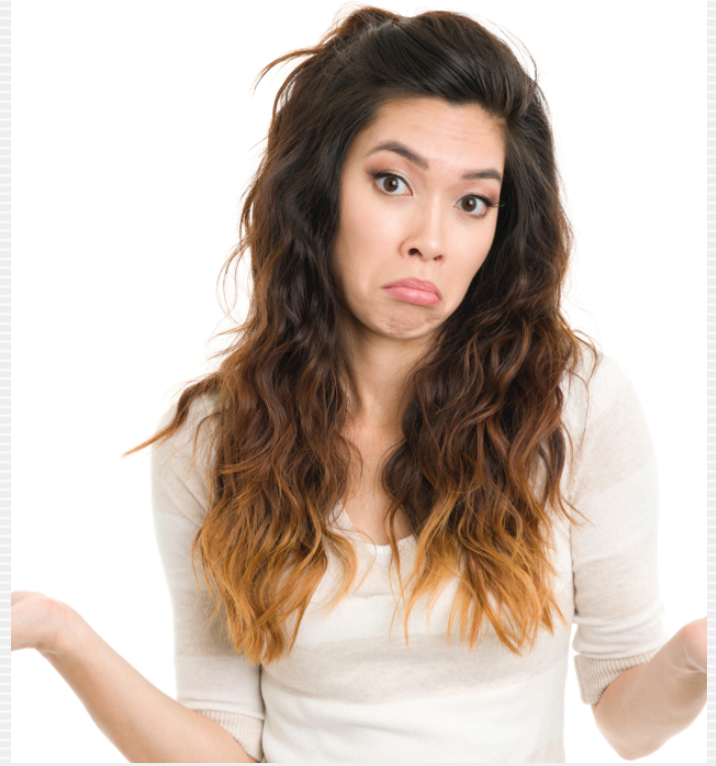
## NOT-QUITE-EXPERT SME

**Pitfall:** The SME does not really know the best practice or does not think they know the best practice

**Strategy:**

- Discuss the situation with the Supervisor. Identify an alternate SME who may know the process better.
- For some new processes, the best practice may not yet be well established. Reassure the SME that they are the most qualified person.
- Review the resulting information with other experienced personnel including supervisors as either an interim review or part of the final process.

## Not-Quite-Expert SME



## Overcommitted SME



## OVERCOMMITTED SME

**Pitfall:** The SME consistently misses or is late for appointments or is overloaded with regular work responsibilities and is grouchy about making time for the documentation session.

**Strategy:**

- Do your best to empathize with the SME's situation and assure him you will not waste his time.
- Make sure the SME knows what you will be doing in the info-gathering session so he can have documents ready.
- Call and/or email the day before to confirm and remind the SME of the appointment.
- If the issue persists, review the situation with the supervisor. Often, the SME is trying to juggle conflicting priorities. The supervisor can intervene.
- Always thank the SME for their time and commitment.







## INTERRUPTED SME

Pitfall: The SME is constantly being interrupted during the info-gathering session.

Strategy:

- Reassure the SME that documentation will take less time if both of you are focused.
- Conduct the session away from the workstation (if documenting software, make sure the system functions the same in the alternate locations).
- If you cannot move, ask the SME to forward his phone and tack a do not disturb sign on his cubicle or office door.
- Let the SME select the meeting time. Be flexible and work at a time when interruptions are less likely. This may be very early or late in the day.
- Limit the sessions to 2 or 3 hours, at most, so it does not interfere with an entire work day and the SME can give you one-on-one, quality time.

## The Interrupted SME



## The Reckless SME



## RECKLESS REVIEWER

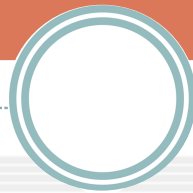
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Strategy:

- Set the expectations of a thorough review up front.
- Spend time with the SME to review the drafted data in your info-gathering session. Read each step and have the SME perform it, if applicable.



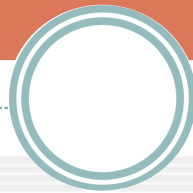
# Jill's Prepared Interview Questions



Here are the questions that Jill prepared in advance for her first general interview with Jack, the SME. After reviewing the current training and some of the new information, she will need to update the program. She assumes that after she has conducted this interview and written a first rough draft, she will have more questions and need more details to refine the program. She schedules a second interview with Jack a few days later so they can have the first draft in front of them as she gathers more detail. The results of this interview and her first draft will dictate the content of the second interview. Note to self: Check spelling of name, his organization, his title.

1. According to the latest study by your organization, you found that when you approach a situation with a positive attitude, you are likely to get a better result. Why does that happen?
2. How does this differ from what we are currently teaching our employees about customer service?
3. What changes can our employees make to provide better customer service based on your latest data? Specifically, can you give me some simple steps that people can remember to help them perform their jobs better?
4. Can you provide me with the details of the studies (some charts and graphs that I can use in the slide presentation)?
5. What are some exercises that we can do at the live training session to teach and reinforce these new skills and best practices? Specifically, let's record the activity step-by-step so I can recreate it accurately in the training materials.
6. Note to self: Confirm when and how you will receive the charts and graphs you have requested. Confirm date, time and place of next interview.

# Hiring a Dedicated SME



A dedicated SME is someone hired by a training firm so it has full-time access to topic expertise within the training firm's own organization. As the term implies, this SME is dedicated to helping you build the training program.

This term is relevant mostly to freestanding independent training consulting firms whose core expertise is performance and organizational development, not the area of the training topic. If you are an internal training department in an engineering firm, for example, the expertise you need is already your firm's core competency. It is expected that your SMEs are available, so there is no need to hire one just to work with the training department.

However, if you are a full-time training and organizational development company working on a training program for an engineering firm, you may find yourself hiring an engineering consultant to provide you with the kind of expertise you need to deliver a top-quality training program.

How to use a dedicated SME:

1. Analyze phase: the dedicated SME is present to ask questions and direct the conversations.
2. Design phase: the dedicated SME helps organize the content and clarify the objectives.
3. During data collection, the dedicated SME checks the client's materials for accuracy, clarity and gaps.
4. Development phase: the dedicated SME does the first "content dump" by putting the material in your framework.

5. Development phase: the dedicated SME validates your activities and assessment tests.
6. The dedicated SME serves as the liaison with your assigned SMEs during the review process.
7. Implementation Phase: especially in the case of instructor-led training, the dedicated SME may also serve as a facilitator for the program due to her expertise.
8. Evaluation phase: the dedicated SME can assess the program's effectiveness.

Note that the presence of a dedicated SME does not alter any of the process steps for *Working with SMEs*, but it gives the instructional designer confidence when wading in unfamiliar or intimidating topic areas by having a subject matter expert assigned solely to assist her in writing her training program.

When to use a dedicated SME:

- When the training designers are not confident that they can understand a complex or intimidating topic using the regular steps for *Working with SMEs*.
- When your client SMEs may not be available for the amount of time you need to fully understand your topic due to the demands of their regular assignments.
- When your client SMEs may not have time for thorough reviews of your material.
- When your client SMEs are in disagreement and differences in material need to be negotiated.

Things to consider when hiring a dedicated SME:

- You are sure that the subject matter is incomprehensible to you without one.
- The project price supports it and the client is willing to pay for it.
- The SME works well with the client's SMEs.
- The SME supports the firm's training mission and fits into the culture.
- You are certain that there are not enough SMEs with enough time in the organization you are working with to help you gather and review the content.

A dedicated SME can be a valuable asset in helping you create a strong product when those conditions exist. As an added bonus, after you've hired a SME in a specific topic area, you have now strengthened your hand in that field and can attract other clients with similar needs. It is a move you may consider when you are building competency as a single-topic training design house.

The cost and dedication to this effort is substantial, but if you are working with a client who is willing to pay for you to acquire this competency by paying for the expertise, you can yield the benefits without incurring the cost.

## APPENDIX

Here is a printable chart of the different types of SMEs mentioned in this excerpt and their common pitfalls and strategies to help overcome them.

SME	Pitfall	Strategy
SPEEDY SME	The SME becomes impatient with you controlling the pace of the session.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain that less skilled personnel will complete the training process. You need to capture all of the details to make that possible.</li> <li>• Reassure the SME that documentation will take less time if you move slowly and steadily so you can capture all the information the first time.</li> <li>• Use humor, when appropriate, to help diffuse frustration.</li> </ul>
SCATTERED SME	The SME does not think sequentially and sees the process as so complex and variable that it cannot possibly be captured in the steps.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reassure the SME that it is your job to make sense out of a complex process and you have experience doing that.</li> <li>• Guide the info-gathering session using a process map.*see Chapter 7</li> <li>• Encourage the SME to show you the steps so you can get a feel for the process</li> </ul>
SHORTCUT SME	The SME has been doing this so long that she uses shortcuts a novice could never follow and might not be best practice for the organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-focus the SME by explaining that you are to document only best practices for the company that can be followed by the audience who will definitely include people not as experienced as the SME.</li> <li>• Request the SME demonstrate the best practice process.</li> </ul>
DEFENSIVE SME	The SME feels their job is threatened. If they tell you anything, they run the risk of losing their job.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforce the value of the SME's expertise.</li> <li>• Use a non-threatening scenario like, "Imagine that starting next week I am going to be your personal assistant, and you want me to do this task for you."</li> </ul>



NOT-QUITE-EXPERT SME	The SME does not really know the best practice or does not think they know the best practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss the situation with the Supervisor. Identify an alternate SME who may know the process better.</li> <li>• For some new processes, the best practice may not yet be well established. Reassure the SME that they are the most qualified person.</li> <li>• Review the resulting information with other experienced personnel including supervisors as either an interim review or part of the final process.</li> </ul>
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INTERRUPTED SME	The SME is constantly being interrupted during the info-gathering session.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reassure the SME that documentation will take less time if both of you are focused.</li> <li>• Conduct the session away from the workstation (if documenting software, make sure the system functions the same in the alternate locations).</li> <li>• If you cannot move, ask the SME to forward his phone and tack a do not disturb sign on his cubicle or office door.</li> <li>• Let the SME select the meeting time. Be flexible and work at a time when interruptions are less likely. This may be very early or late in the day.</li> <li>• Limit the sessions to 2 or 3 hours, at most, so it does not interfere with an entire work day and the SME can give you one-on-one, quality time.</li> </ul>
RECKLESS REVIEWER	When presented with a draft of the training program, the SME just visually scans it rather than validating that it is correct.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set the expectations of a thorough review up front.</li> <li>• Spend time with the SME to review the drafted data in your info-gathering session. Read each step and have the SME perform it, if applicable.</li> </ul>