

The Cost of Security Training Courses - How Much is “Too Much”?

I must admit, I have never really given much thought to this question in the past. I do not know if this puts me in the majority or minority of thinkers when it comes to the cost of training. It is certainly NOT because I am independently wealthy and “cost is no object” as the rich and famous are wont to quote. The reason why I am somewhat forced to contemplate it now is due to an online comment made by a list serve member regarding the cost of our Executive Protection/Close Protection course.

That person thought the price was rather high. He had a right to his opinion and a right to voice it. The lingering question though must be; high compared to what and how does one define “high”? Security is an anomaly in that some places (Cities, Counties, States and Countries) have strict rules and regulations pertaining to training and licensing while others do not. If you work in a regulated jurisdiction, you have no choice in the matter of whether or not you are going to invest in training. If you do not and you engage in the trade, then you are committing a criminal act and leaving yourself open to prosecution.

On the other hand, if you live and work in a jurisdiction that does not dictate how, when, where or even if, you must be trained and licensed – then the decision to spend money on training is fairly much left up to the individual. This is where it becomes interesting. If the law does not require it, should you in fact spend money on training courses? There will no doubt be arguments both for and against. Many will feel that it is a waste of money if they are not forced to do it. Hopefully, those thinkers are in the minority. Experienced instructors and operators will know the value of undergoing frequent training – both new and refresher type throughout a security professional’s career.

Another way in which the security industry is unique is the way in which people (just about anybody) can enter into the field and after taking a minimal amount of training (compared to other professions), can seek and gain employment fairly immediately. No mention was made of previous experience on purpose. While the majority of practitioners will have previous Military/Police experience, this is not a prerequisite for being trained or employed as a security person.

Perhaps it is this “ease of entry” that has many thinking that the choice of training school is not that important or that it is best to spend a s little as possible. After all, one rarely hears lawyers, barristers, surgeons or scientists complaining about the cost of obtaining a degree from Harvard, Yale, Princeton or MIT. Not only are those hallowed institutes of higher learning incredibly expensive, but they do not open their doors to all and sundry. Maybe if our security training schools had higher entrance qualifications and charged more, would-be attendees might better appreciate the instruction and value more highly the opportunity being offered therein.

Are all security training schools created equal?

The answer is of course; “no”. When you visit a fast food restaurant in just about any country, you know what to expect and what will be the approximate cost. This is made all the more easy with the proliferation of franchising. A cheese burger in Mc Donalds, Burger King or Wendys will be of comparable quality and price wherever you travel. The same can not be said of security training. If we take two geographical examples; The U.S.A and The U.K., we will find that while there are many similarities, there are also as many, if not more, differences.

The U.K authorities have seen the need to regulate the security industry over the past couple of years and through the SIA, have brought in certain licensing and training requirements. The United States can not really be viewed as a single country in this regard but more as an amalgamation of countries (otherwise known as States) which border one another and may have similar laws or may have totally opposing views as to how the business of security is conducted.

On one hand you will find a State such as Colorado to have little or no licensing laws while the Commonwealth of Virginia dictates that every single security function requires separate training, registration, renewal requirements and associated costs in order to be compliant. It is not uncommon for a security professional in Virginia to hold separate registrations for; Private Investigator, Unarmed Security Officer, Armed Security Officer, Personal Protection Specialist, Personal Protection Specialist Advanced Handgun, Firearms Endorsement, certification as a General Instructor, Firearms Instructor, Security Training School, Director of Training, Compliance Agent and hold a Private Security Business License.

Both the U.K. and the U.S appear to have their fair share of security schools “mushrooming overnight” to take advantage of the growing concern and need for private security. Whilst it is true that the general public is now more aware of the need for security than ever before and the industry continues to grow at a fairly rapid pace, an unfortunate by-product is the prevalence of training schools whose main motto seems to be; “Churn and Earn”. The faster they can get a trainee through their doors, the faster they can fill that vacant seat and bank that student’s course payment.

So then, how is a student to know the difference? In two words – due diligence. It is up to the individual to check out the school, the instructors, their claims of excellence, job placement/assistance, or whatever else they claim or promise to do in order to get your money. Fifteen years ago a research project of that magnitude would have been a daunting, if not impossible, task for most. Today it is a mere stroll in the park. There are associations and list serves for every conceivable group on the face of the planet. The majority are free and take little more than a matter of minutes to complete an online application/membership.

Those interested in attending a training school to be a Private Investigator, Security Officer, Bodyguard or Security Consultant, should pose the question to the rest of the group (numbers vary from hundreds to thousands of members) and await their response. It should be stressed that those responses should not be considered as an all inclusive list. Still, it will familiarize the seeker with what is on offer out there and help with further research and assist them to make an informed decision.

One thing that should be kept firmly in mind when asking for this type of advice is that there are many people who have gone to a school and as a result, believe that school is the greatest thing since sliced bread. While in fact it just may be, it also may be that the person dishing out the recommendation has undergone very little training before or after taking that course and therefore has no real way to judge the quality of the school.

Then there are those who will speak poorly about a particular school. This may stem from personal knowledge and be well-founded or it may be a case of “sour grapes”. A reasonable person would think it prudent to only speak from personal experience, yet there are those who spread gossip or pontificate just to see their name appear in print.

Another useful method is to utilize search engines such as; Yahoo, Google, etc., entering relevant phrases such as; “Executive Security Training Schools” or “Bodyguard courses” and so forth. Checks can be made with regulatory bodies, the Better Business Bureau, the office of the Ombudsman, etc. While longevity is a good sign, do not be fooled into thinking that it is the “be all and end all”.

It has become common practice for many endorsers to focus mainly on the fact that the “big three” schools have been around for 20, 25 or 30 years. There are a few problems with this school of thought. Firstly, older successful training schools that have been around for several decades and no longer need to advertise (as it becomes word of mouth at that stage), are not “hungry” for new business and may become lazy and arrogant in their ways. I know of one such school in the United States.

A school like this is liable to rest on its laurels. There is no incentive for the owners to be inventive or come up with new methods when the old ways are doing just fine bringing in a steady revenue stream. Another area where an older school can offer less value is in the area of employment assistance. That same school referred to earlier has a name of being a great hub of networking. Alas, it is all an illusion. It is the members themselves who are responsible for posting possible job openings and passing along information. Because it has been around for decades, lucrative assignments do come in, but the owner has little interest in giving out those opportunities to anyone other than his top lieutenants.

So then, the question remains; “how much to pay”? Before putting a Dollar/Pound/Euro amount on the training, much thought should be given to what is actually needed. If a person is seeking PSD work in a hostile region, they will need training that is geared toward that environment.

Spending money learning about convoy escorts and IEDs in Iraq will be a waste if you are looking to protect investment bankers or real estate tycoons in London or New York. If you see yourself working with high net worth Middle Eastern clients overseas, then you might not need to undergo the SIA course that is necessary for those working in the U.K.

At the end of the day, there is no magical number that will satisfy every pocket. While it is highly unlikely that the cheapest course will be the best, there is no guarantee that the most expensive will be the best either. If you have done your proper due diligence and are satisfied as to the legitimacy of the school and the instructors, the more expensive school is most likely going to provide you with a superior training program. Keep in mind, that you are the best judge since you will have investigated all options before parting with your cash.

Do not be swayed by someone who says; “\$3,000 is too much to pay for training”. That is like saying that \$40,000 is too much to pay for a car. Yes, it may be for those who would never spend more than \$22,000 for a car but it would be cheap to those who normally spend \$80,000. Always be wary of those who are quick to criticize without having the benefit of any direct or inside knowledge about a particular school. If they have not taken the course, how could they possibly know what was taught and then judge the value of that teaching? If you were to tell someone that you had a meal last week that cost 50 Pounds or \$90.00, that could either be a very reasonably priced meal or a very expensive one. It all depends what you were served, right? If all you got was a piece of chicken and a spoonful of mashed potatoes, it would seem to be outrageously overpriced. If on the other hand however, two of you had a five course meal that included a bottle of wine, then you would most likely consider it a bargain.

It all depends on what you are getting and what you are expecting. Some schools do not include accommodation or meals. If you are training for 7, 10 or 14 days, that can make a big difference. If school “A” charges \$1200.00 for a ten day E.P. course but you are responsible for finding your own hotel and transport to and from the course each day as well as all of your meals, it may work out as expensive (if not more) than school “B” who charges \$2300 but everything is included and you do not have to worry about anything.

There are plenty of people who look upon a training course as a break away from work and home and they prefer to go to a more exotic location. If you live in a cold climate or a cold part of the country, you might very well be interested in a course that is held in the sunny south where you can sit on your hotel balcony at the end of the day and sip a cold drink as you watch the sun going down over the ocean. There are many great advantages associated with training and one of them must surely be the fact that you can improve your skill set, professional reputation and CV/Resume, while spending money on yourself that might have gone to the tax man at the end of the year.

Many security persons fail to look at training as an investment in themselves. To the enlightened, TRAINING IS NOT A COST, IT IS AN INVESTMENT. It is understandable that

people try and keep costs down. Thinking that reduced costs will put more income in your pocket is not a flawed notion, but there are all kinds of ways to cut down on expenses that will achieve this goal. Employers who receive a constant intake of resumes from job seekers can tell you the importance of documented training.

There are those who get out of the armed forces after a four year stint and believe that their time in the military will give them everything they need to gain a comfortable living in security. Worse still are the ones who spent a few years in the military 20-25 years ago and decide that they don't want to work on a construction site anymore so they'll send around their resume/CV and wait for the lucrative offers to come pouring in. What these folks do not realize is that they are competing with many others who have far more to offer and this is reflected in their resumes.

It is a well known fact that there are more training schools and students attending/graduating from these schools than there are well paying assignments. What does this mean to those job seekers setting out to make a career in security? Well, for starters, not everyone will land the job of their dreams. People will have to learn to settle for a bit less than they expected. Landing a job will become more important than landing a "dream job". Another aspect will be tougher competition. Employers will be able to pick and choose and will no doubt look for candidates who have substantial experience and training. It is going to be very difficult to convince an employer that you are the perfect fit for a position if it calls for overseas experience and you have none or they are looking for someone with a military or police background and you have neither.

So far, we have only talked about schools in broad, general terms. If we look more closely at a school we will find that they do not all necessarily have a "license to print money" that some like to think. There are way too many aspects to consider ranging from licensing costs to insurance, but one of the major factors for some of us, is the cost of having world class instructors on the payroll. Once again, the aforementioned "mushroom" schools that have scraped a few army buddies together and pass themselves off as a top notch training school will not have these costs.

For a training school to be credible, it must have a cadre of first class instructors with a mixture of real life experience, and formal instructor credentials. The instructors should not be baby faced twenty year olds (actually saw this happen at a now defunct training school in the U.S.), neither should they be crusty 70 + year olds (know of a "big three" type of school where this is currently the case). A twenty year Marine veteran who joined when he was 20 years of age and who has worked all over the world and supervised hundreds of soldiers is likely to be a very credible instructor as is a 25 or 30 year police veteran who also joined in their early 20's.

Someone who has served their country honourably for two decades or kept the streets safe to walk on while others got on with their daily lives or protected a country's President should not be expected to work for minimum wage. These instructors who pass on their accumulated knowledge need to be fairly compensated and anyone who is fortunate enough to be trained by them needs to recognize this is what makes a course cost what it does.

The Liability Factor

Liability is, or should be, a major concern to all of us. Surprisingly, there are still clients – most visibly in the entertainment industry who do not seem to realize the risk they take when employing Personal/Close Protection personnel who are not adequately trained for the position. An example of this is *any* celebrity who is “protected” by someone who pushes a fan or worse yet, grabs their camera to stop them from taking pictures of their Principal. These so called “protectors” are liable to be charged with assault & battery and Grand Larceny (if the camera is over a certain monetary value).

If you are looking to cut corners and to save money on a course by taking your training from a school that does not give out their business card (since they do not have a license or insurance), then you are playing with fire as far as your future career and reputation are concerned. If you are EVER involved in an incident where a complainant has the ability to file a criminal charge or a civil law suit against you, it is a sure bet that some legal eagle is going to put you on a stand and ask you where you received your training and how the course prepared you for what you are doing today. That is not the time that you want the whole world to know that you got into the business as a result of paying “Big Tony” a couple of hundred for a certificate with coffee stains on top of his signature.

You want to be able to show that the training school you attended had highly experienced and qualified staff to impart the required knowledge. By all means stick out your chest when you proudly announce that you spent several thousand on the course and you consider it the best investment you ever made. Do not think that is only the legal profession who will recognize the value of a school and be aware of the associated costs. These days, clients are becoming more and more knowledgeable as to the schools that are out there and the certificates being awarded.

That should all be part of your fact finding/gathering. You should not hesitate to ask a school where you are considering attending to give you a copy of the instructor’s resumes/CV’s. Ask for a copy of their certificate of insurance while you are at it. Check with the various agencies and boards to see if there have been any complaints filed. Ask them for contact information of some of their graduates so you can find out directly what they thought of the course (hint; when you get those names, ask the graduates in turn for the names and numbers of others they know. More than likely the school director will give you the name of someone he/she knows will give them a glowing testimonial). If they won’t give you that information, find out why not. Are they possibly hiding something? (we post testimonials with full names on our website).

Even though the initial investment might seem like a huge step, consider it just that – a step. You wouldn’t stand on the first step of a stairway and expect to automatically be transported to

the top of the stairs. I have taken some training courses because I had to and others because it was what I wanted. After being in the security industry for nearly thirty years I can guarantee you that you will never find one course that will teach you everything you will ever need to know.

You know you are on the right track when you can recognize this fact and view it as the cost of doing business. It goes back to what was earlier said about building reputation, knowledge and overall expertise. The fact that you take five different course over a four year period does not mean that you wasted money on three courses or that you should have found “the one” that would have sufficed. It shows that you are serious about furthering your education and willing to seek out the information that is available out there as you know it will not only be of benefit to you but also your subordinates, client and future students if you decide to become an instructor or business owner one day.

Soak up all of the information that you can. Take away the good from a course or an instructor and if there is something taught with which you disagree or know to be incorrect, leave that part behind. You will always learn something and that new idea or piece of knowledge that you just learned might be the one thing that will make all the difference. Training is a life pursuit. The more you pursue knowledge and the more you accumulate, the more of an expert you will become and the higher your personal stock will rise.

That is purely from a personal point of view. If you are interested in one day having your own firm or agency, you will want to know different styles and schools of thought. By learning from various instructors, you can take away knowledge that you can later use in your own training. Do not worry about stealing someone else’s course. Your course will be unique since it will be a compilation of everything that you have learned over the years.

The best instructors and teachers share the belief held by the Native American Indian. They believe that the greatest gift is the gift of learning and that gift is not complete until it is passed on. Hopefully those of you who seek the knowledge needed to practice our noble profession will cross paths with those who truly believe they are passing on the gift of learning to you.

Gather that learning about you and use it well. Perhaps one day you too will be a passer of knowledge and those who wonder if the cost is worth it will find their answer as you did yours.

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