
Designing effective employee training programmes

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Abstract

Describes the elements of a successful employee training programme. Explains the distinction between training and education, along with a discussion of why "soft skills" training initiatives are less effective than skills-based approaches. Discusses the critical role of the training manager in implementing a training programme, as well as important considerations when developing a strategic training plan. Finally, describes several key factors which determine how employee training programmes can best support company profitability.

Employee training is far more prevalent today than it was ten years ago. Today, almost all companies provide some type of training for their employees. For some companies, training is a very formal process. Entire departments are devoted to conducting both initial and ongoing employee training programmes. Other companies bring in outside consultants to conduct employee training sessions. The motivation for providing such training varies considerably from organization to organization. A few companies are genuinely committed to enhancing the skills and competences of their workforce. Other companies conduct training primarily to meet required job safety regulations. Sadly, many companies conduct training simply for appearance's sake.

Regardless of the reasons or level of commitment to the process, the need for employee training has increased significantly in recent years. This increase is directly related to the rapidly expanding use of technology within society in general and business and industry in particular. It has also been precipitated by a renewed emphasis on quality and customer satisfaction, and the non-traditional management philosophies which are driven by those emphases. Moreover, companies are beginning to recognize that learning truly is a life-long endeavour and developmental activities such as employee training have a profoundly positive impact on job satisfaction, productivity and, ultimately, overall profitability. The fact is that training, when carefully developed and appropriately implemented, can have a desirable impact on the bottom line.

The underlying aim of all employee training is to increase efficiency. Other outcomes are really auxiliary and/or incidental. While goals such as facilitating the personal and/or professional development of employees are commendable, they do not constitute the primary impetus for most training efforts. Companies exist to make money. The desire to optimize profitability drives most management decisions. Management consistently views employee training as simply an additional avenue for enhancing the total financial return on investment. Rather than detracting from the importance of employee training programmes, however, this view inherently provides the training manager with the kind of credibility essential to success.

Training vs education

The tremendous power associated with learning through involvement has been recognized and accepted for most of the past century. But, when it comes to employee training, especially when limited financial resources are available, many companies seem to favour a more cost-sensitive, but far less effective, approach. They turn to education instead of training.

There is a significant difference between employee training and education – particularly within the context of adult learning paradigms. Education typically takes place in a classroom and involves a transfer of knowledge through the use of formal methods such as lectures and directed discussion. Participants learn new and relevant information, but the acquisition of new skills and competences, designed to enhance profitability or quality is usually not the intended outcome; i.e. their ability to actually do something new is often not exploited. In other words, knowing about a skill is not the same as being skilful.

Adults learn more efficiently when they are allowed to talk about the subject, relate it to their own experiences, and discover the usefulness of the skills for themselves. But this type of learning is also very time-consuming. Many companies regularly sacrifice long-term gains for short-term convenience and economy. More information can be provided using the lecture format and many training sessions are lecture-based simply because of the time commitment involved. Yet most employees simply do not learn very well when they are “talked to”. They need to be more actively involved in the learning experience.

Training, on the other hand, typically entails personal involvement, commitment, and experiential gains. Training involves learning by doing. Competence, much more than knowledge, constitutes real power. True training occurs when skills that can be measurably defined are enhanced until the competence level is visibly enhanced. Training aims to provide employees with proficiency in the execution of given tasks. The outcomes of training should be tangible, in that they should complement and support the company's financial stability. Think about it. If you needed an operation, would you want a physician performing the procedure who is educated in medical theory or one who is trained in surgical technique?

Recently, a few training “gurus” have taken issue with the training model discussed here and have argued that teaching people to think is more important than teaching specific skills. The response of the informed training manager to such criticism is quite elegant. Thinking is a skill just like any other. It is self-evident that, in the future, employees will need better decision-making and problem-solving skills to survive and remain employable. But their need for highly specific skills and competences will only increase with the passing of time. For someone to be functional, they have to be able to do something.

A final note about learning by doing. Many training programmes focus on the modification of employee behaviour in a direction that is deemed advantageous to both the company and the individual. This may even be the primary purpose of the entire training programme. Unless these types of training ventures focus on specific skills and competences, however, the odds against them are monumental. The desire to change behaviour in a positive direction is, in and of itself, an admirable goal. But for behaviour change to be permanent, it must be linked to the acquisition of new competences. When employees learn new skills, their behaviour inevitably changes. Behaviour change is best realized as a by-product of other forms of training.

The fundamental question is always the same: What will the employees be able to do when they complete the training programme?

“Soft skills” training

As alluded to previously, the benefits of a learning-by-doing approach to employee training have been recognized for years. Still, many companies continue to focus on so-called “feel good” training programmes as opposed to those which target specific, utilizable competences. Such programmes typically involve training in soft skills, i.e. skills such as listening, communication, teamwork, leadership, etc. Although these topics are generally well received, the evidence seems to be that they are the least effective in terms of tangible gains. Most soft skills training is never put into actual practice – i.e. the information covered in these types of training sessions is almost never utilized in concrete, on-the-job situations.

For example, a lot of companies today are conducting “team” training without first

defining what the desired outcomes of the training are, or how the teams should be able to function at the conclusion of the training programme. Team training, especially in its early stages, typically involves various group decision-making exercises that centre on some hypothetical situation such as being lost in the wilderness or desert with minimal resources. Participants have to decide as a group how to establish priorities and proceed collectively. The idea is that employees will be able to see a connection between how they would handle a hypothetical problem and how they should handle similar on-the-job situations. But translating the classroom experience into specific skills that employees actually integrate into their job performance is extremely challenging. While these kinds of structured experiences probably have a place in employee training programmes, they should never be allowed to become a primary emphasis. They sometimes serve a good diversionary or stress-relieving purpose, but they are simply not in the same league with technical training that enhances the “how to” repertoire of employees.

As illustrated by the preceding scenario, training sessions which deal with soft skills topics such as diversity and quality are often quite entertaining but seldom involve the kinds of hands-on experiences that help employees translate awareness into action. Role-playing, games and simulations help to present the ideas in a more palpable context, but they seldom precipitate the acquisition of useful skills. Those who attend such training rarely get a real “feel” for how to implement what is presented in a realistic context. As such, this type of training routinely amounts to nothing more than a rather expensive waste of everyone’s time and money.

It is important to remember that training should only involve tangible, hands-on skills and observable behaviours. Training goals and objectives should not involve feelings and emotions. “To enhance the employee’s appreciation of quality” is not an appropriate training objective. It is difficult to explain what “appreciation” is, much less how it can be taught within a skills-based context. The purpose of training is to enhance behaviours, not attitudes. Keep training objectives focused on skills and competences – attitudinal changes will occur spontaneously with time. Employee training programmes simply

have no cause to delve into the affective domain.

The role of the “training manager”

“Training manager” seems to be a fairly common job title in any company of considerable size. Many smaller companies also have individuals whose key responsibilities entail some form of employee training. Furthermore, most large corporations have a staff of several full-time professionals whose sole function is to assess training needs and institute training programmes based on the company’s needs. While the length of time spent managing a training programme tends to be related to company size and other factors, all training managers share at least one common characteristic. Eventually, they have to demonstrate the effectiveness of their training pursuits and thus justify the need for their position. This is, after all, the age of accountability.

Few companies would seriously consider turning over their manufacturing operations to a person with no manufacturing experience. Yet many companies routinely entrust their training initiatives to managers who have little or no background, expertise, or formal education in the area of employee training. Management suddenly recognizes a need for training – or is informed of their need by corporate headquarters – and delegates the responsibility for implementing a training programme to someone in human resources or a related department. While the selection of an appropriate training manager is indeed a crucial first step, it is only a beginning. Unwavering management support must permeate all phases of the training process.

New training managers should make it a point to educate themselves about fundamental training concepts and techniques. Attendance at local or regional training conferences is a must. Consider taking a class or two at a local community college. Classes on teaching methods or establishing goals and objectives for training programmes would be appropriate. It would also be advisable to join relevant associations and other organizations that have employee training as their focus. Reading always helps, as does seeking advice from training managers at other companies. Pay particular attention to what has been successful, and what has not worked so well, at similar companies. Take a little time to prepare for

the challenges that lie ahead and to anticipate the inevitable difficulties that will be encountered. Training is a process that can only be mastered through experience and practice.

Of necessity, training managers must continually focus on the effectiveness of their programmes. Continuous improvement is as important to the training process as it is to the more tangible (and visible) areas of manufacturing and administration. The good training manager is always cognizant of the fact that their efforts must support profitability in a demonstrable and unambiguous manner. Support from upper management is inherently linked to the training manager's ability to successfully illustrate such a connection. This can be especially difficult when economic conditions are less than favourable. When the balance sheet indicates that budget cuts may be necessary, one of the first areas to receive careful scrutiny is employee training.

In many instances, training programmes are severely limited or eliminated altogether, primarily because the training manager was unable to convince management of the long-term financial benefits often associated with training programmes.

Admittedly, new training managers are often anxious to get the ball rolling. They always seem preoccupied with instituting some type of training – any type of training – regardless of actual employee needs. While a few training successes fairly early in the training manager's tenure are certainly good from a credibility standpoint, it is imperative that all training endeavours be based on an overall training plan that has been carefully developed. Being able to say that X number of training sessions have been conducted is only part of the equation. Management will still need to be convinced of the utility of those activities; i.e. what improvements have been realized and what problems have been resolved as a direct result of training efforts?

The strategic plan

One of the training manager's primary responsibilities involves the perpetual justification of employee training initiatives. To substantiate the effectiveness of a training programme in relation to the resources that it requires, several areas must be addressed. First, it is imperative that the goals of training be in line with the company's strategic plan. How those goals reinforce the larger mission

of the company is also vital to the continued viability of the training programme. Equally important is the ability to track both individual and collective employee progress to show explicitly how the acquisition of new skills and competences has a positive impact on productivity and quality. Having a comprehensive strategic training plan is absolutely essential.

The strategic training plan should identify and detail any specific problem or problems that are currently impeding the company's potential for maximum profitability. These problems should constitute the core of the training programme. Moreover, the strategic plan should delineate the full implications of these difficulties and how they can be minimized or eliminated through the introduction of an employee training programme. The plan should also address how progress towards elimination of these problems via training will be assessed. Evaluation must be on both a microcosmic and a macrocosmic level; i.e. both individual sessions as well as the overall training thrust should be continually assessed as to their effectiveness and overall impact. Is the programme making a real difference?

On a more realistic level, the strategic plan for employee training should address departmental goals and outline the various objectives that will be employed in attempting to meet those objectives. Both a short-term (two-four months) and a long-term (three-five years) timetable are necessary to ensure meaningful results. The plan should be formalized and agreed by company personnel at all levels. The process of actually writing down goals and objectives helps to establish a favourable tone for the entire programme. The process of thinking through who, what, where and when as it relates to employee training is critical to programme success.

Other factors to consider include where each department fits into the overall company's organizational structure, along with the problems that can be anticipated in attempting to accomplish the goals and objectives. It is always a good idea to list and describe the resources (financial and otherwise) that will be needed to successfully accomplish training goals and objectives. Always bear in mind that the strategic plan is subject to constant updating and revision as new data are acquired. It is not an immutable document that drives the training agenda regardless of changes in internal personnel or structure, or external market conditions. As new information

becomes available, the plan must necessarily adapt.

Progress towards the attainment of training goals and objectives should be monitored on an ongoing basis. Accountability is a never-ending process. Detailed records must be maintained that provide evidence concerning the impact of training activities on the bottom line. The strategic plan should serve as a reference point for determining success or failure of the training programme. Several critical questions must be continually asked. Have the employees learned actually to do something new? Does what they have learned represent a better way of doing things? Do their new skill sets have a positive impact from a cost/benefit perspective? Are successes being documented/rewarded? How can training be more effective? Training managers have to avoid becoming so wrapped up in the details of day-to-day training functions that they forget to stop occasionally and assess the overall progress of the training programme. Time must be made for reflection and analysis.

Time and other critical factors

Successful employee training programmes demand a significant investment in terms of both financial and human resources. They can also take up a great deal of time which can adversely affect production schedules and deadlines. Management is usually aware of these factors and therefore tends to question the necessity of employee training programmes when revenues are scarce and/or production demands are at a peak. Moreover, some companies decide on training topics based on session titles and/or other arbitrary considerations and predetermined time allotments. These are critical mistakes, but they are characteristic of many companies.

Some companies make the critical mistake of trying to fit the topic to the time slot. In other words, the amount of time allotted for training is determined by factors independent of the nature of the material to be covered in the session. Time should be allocated based on the value placed on the skills and competences that are to be transferred through the training programme. Selecting a training topic solely by the length of time employees can be permitted to leave their regular job responsibilities often dooms the entire effort

without ever giving it a legitimate chance for success.

Once a training need has been identified, the training manager, working closely with other concerned parties, should decide how much time will be realistically needed to endow employees with the new competences. The desired outcome; i.e. the specific skills that the employees are to obtain, should be instrumental in establishing the length of an individual training session. This is another reason why training programme goals and objectives are of critical importance.

Many of the more progressive companies have also recognized the prudence of changing the focus of their training programmes away from the trainer and more towards the trainee. Trainers, often out of sheer necessity, tend to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to decide how best to fit a given topic into a particular timeframe. Their preparation is concerned more with staying within the established time constraints than with the actual development of usable skill sets. The proliferation of available instructional technologies has helped to put the employee back at the centre of the training process. The length of the training session (and the entire training programme, for that matter) should be determined solely by the amount of time anticipated to achieve the desired outcome. In other words, the time devoted to a given training topic should be determined by how long it takes employees to master the skills that the company deems important.

When exposed to skills-oriented training, it has been shown repeatedly that adults do not tend to acquire new competences overnight. Time is needed between training sessions for reflection and practice. In general, employees can absorb only about two or three hours of meaningful content in any single training day. Moreover, that rate tends to decrease exponentially as the number of consecutive training days increases. It only makes sense that training is most effective if it is conducted over the course of several days or weeks. Despite these realizations, some companies persist in concentrating their training efforts into lengthy, intense marathon sessions to “get it over with”.

Another critical dimension in the development and implementation of employee training programmes concerns the number of people in each individual training session. Employees learn more efficiently in small

groups. Conducting skills-based training with large groups of employees may be financially advantageous, but such an approach seldom produces any meaningful results. Furthermore, larger groups are more difficult to coordinate and usually force the trainer to rely more heavily on the lecture format. True, larger groups can often be divided into smaller groups for some training purposes, but having too many small groups can lead to anarchy. Most training sessions should be limited to no more than 20 employees and less is always better.

On the surface, having large numbers of employees in each training session seems cost-effective. The company appears to be getting “more bang for the buck”. But this perceived benefit is only an illusion when the participants in those sessions fail to obtain the required skills and competences. Large groups are appropriate only for the dissemination of information. They are not practical for most training purposes. Short, multiple training sessions carried out over a considerable timespan with minimal numbers of trainees in each session seems to be the most successful way to conduct training.

Concluding thoughts

Finally, a well-designed training programme has built-in reinforcement. It is not necessary to reinforce learning if the skills and competences emphasized during the training really assist employees in the performance of their

job duties and responsibilities; i.e. if the employees are able to actually use what they have learned. External reinforcement only becomes necessary if the skills acquired are not instrumental in enhancing job completion.

Successful employee training programmes result from thoughtful and serious planning. A great deal of attention must be paid to detail and desired outcomes. Difficulties arise when there is a lack of a coherent foresight regarding what training is expected to accomplish and how those accomplishments will be measured and rewarded. If these preliminary considerations are not given careful thought and the programme is not implemented in a logical, systematic and sensitive manner, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to execute successful employee training.

There are legitimate reasons for many of the problems currently associated with employee training programmes. If training outcomes are not fulfilling initial expectations, it may be time to rethink how it was conceived, implemented and managed. In other words, it may be time to pause, step back and make sure that the company's reasons for engaging in employee training are legitimate and responsive to actual company and employee needs. Training requires a great deal of commitment; it is very time-consuming and demands relentless, ongoing support. The dedication needed to conduct good employee training is substantial. But so are the potential rewards.