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ABSTRACT

A knowledgeable staff is very important to any operation.
However, few organizations have a systematic approach to
training their staff. This paper and presentation will
talk about why continuing education is important and its
benefits. We will talk about what is available, how to
choose from among the various options, and when to train.
We will also discuss how to attract and keep staff with
training.

1. IS IT NEEDED & WHY?

I have a quote from Susan Boyd of PC Concepts. She said,
"Training is the investment you make in people so hardware
and software pay off".

Staff training should be a continuing program for every com-
pany. Without a training program employees become stale,
complacent, and frustrated. An employee's lack of knowledge
can hurt an organization by costing money and time. Lack
of training can waste an employee's time. It can waste the
investment made in equipment, systems, and software.

Most people want to learn more about their job. They want to tackle new challenges. They want to do things correctly and efficiently. They want to be proud of their work. Training makes it possible for people to do these things.

For a company, employees who know their jobs thoroughly will be more effective participants in reaching the goals of the organization. It can cause morale to be and remain high. Employees are more willing to take on new assignments knowing that training will be provided. There is more efficiency. Goals are met or exceeded.

2. WHEN TO TRAIN

When should a company train? For new employees when they start. No matter what level of expertise the new person may have all new employees should be given an extensive orientation. This orientation should cover department and company standards and procedures. The employee will then be comfortable with following them.

Employees coming into a situation where the equipment or system is new should be trained. The training should begin as soon as possible after the start date. On the job training should be discouraged.

All companies and departments are starting new projects or bringing in equipment. A lot of these things need the employees to learn new skills. Training is very important in this area for a smooth integration of equipment and completion of the project.

Another area where training is needed is when an employee's performance is poor. Training may give the employee the boost to get the job done efficiently and effectively.

Some employees ask for training. They have perceived a lacking in their own knowledge. Or they have glimpsed at a new technology that might benefit the organization. These

requests should not be dismissed out of hand. Rather man-
agement should evaluate each request and act on its merits.
The employee just might be right.

A final area where training is essential is when an employee
is given a promotion or a new assignment outside of their
current expertise. Training will help give the company the
payback it is looking for with this change.
The effectiveness of the employee will be improved if the
employee understands what is being asked of him/her.

On the job training should be discouraged. This is the
costliest way to train. On the job training is a very slow
way to learn. The employee is frustrated and or discour-
aged. The employee feels unproductive and is unproductive.

If, per chance, on the job training does work, the employee
learns enough to function adequately, most plateau. It
takes a lot of initiative on a persons part to self train
themselves. When this happens usually only what is abso-
lutely necessary for the job is learned.

Are we saying that no self-training or on the job training
should be done? No. There are times when this method is
very appropriate. It depends on the individual employee.
If allowed it must be monitored.

3. WHAT IS AVAILABLE

There are various method for getting employees trained. In
our HP 3000 environment the biggest place to look for
training is from Hewlett-Packard. Another place is the
software developer whose package a firm is using.

For other public classes there are two more organizations to
look into. The first is independent firms local and na-
tional. If on a HP related subject, many times these firms
are more cost effective than HP or the large software sup-
pliers. Most have worked with the subject matter for many

years. They may even be more "qualified" to teach than the supplier. Non HP related seminar companies would be more generalized. But most of the instructors used are considered experts in their field.

The other place to look is colleges. For generalized training they can be excellent. Elapsed time is longer with a college, however.

Many of the same above will provide in-house training. The benefit of this type of training is that it can be tailored to an organization using their own data. Easy follow-up and monitoring of employee progress are two other benefits of in-house training. For large numbers of employees it is also very cost effective.

Also for companies with on going internal training hiring a staff trainer is very effective. A staff person gets to know the staff and the company very well. Training can then be tailored to both the company and the employee.

One caveat though; treat an in-house training session as sacrosanct. Meaning do not interrupt unless sickness, death, or public safety forces you to. If you do the investment in training will be lost. And all lose.

In electronic training there are video, audio, computer based training, and interactive video a combination of video and computer based training.. Although generalized, these are self-paced; the employee can move forward when ready. Also time away from work is limited and the courses can be reused saving money.

However, with electronic training, an instructor is usually not available. As a result questions can not be asked. The hand holding support is not there to help smooth rough areas.

A final area for training is conferences. Much information can be learned from these meetings. Not just from the lecture sessions but also from the informal discussions during breaks. Also local/regional professional groups can offer a learning experience. (User groups, ASM, DPMA, etc.)

4. HOW TO CHOOSE & WHO TO CHOOSE

Training is only a good as the people providing it. The criteria listed below comes from research Lotus Development Corp. did prior to setting up their Authorized Training Center Program.

4.1. Price

It should go without saying; cost versus value needs to be evaluated to get the best return. It makes no sense to spend a lot of money on training if the people doing the training are not knowledgeable in the subject or are not comfortable making presentations. This also applies to the major software suppliers and HP. An inexperienced person should not be teaching others.

4.2. Commitment

Will the firm doing the training be around for the long run? (This is also important for software houses but that is another issue.) It is very important the firm doing the training not be a "fly-by-night" firm. The company needs to be committed for the long run. The company should have a proven track record for training.

For the in-house programs, again the commitment to stay in the marketplace is important. If the seminar is going to be tailored to the client, the client should expect the development of the course to take time. Also the client should insist on confidentiality.

4.3. Strength of Relationship

You should not be afraid to call on the firm giving a seminar to discuss content, ideas, methods, or subject. A good relationship will ensure better programs, more success for the employee/firm attending a seminar, and, of course, increased productivity.

If the relationship between the trainer and trainee is not good, the value for the attendees goes down. This is not to say that it is necessary to know the firm doing seminars or the instructor completely. Just that the opportunity to discuss ideas, etc. is there.

For in-house seminars, the willingness to customize a seminar to the clients environment may well show a willingness to develop a strong relationship. Customization may not be applicable to every course offered. But if it is, the use of a clients own data, environment, and/or vernacular will help them get the most out of the course.

4.4. Training Off- or On-site

For those attending a seminar it is usually better to have the training off site. This is true even for the "in-house" seminars. The reason is that the students are away from interruptions. They can concentrate on the subject being presented to them. It matters not whether the firm giving the seminar has there own facilities or use public facilities. For that matter space on the client site is acceptable if the client management refrains from interrupting. The only immediate reason for interrupting is for death, sickness, or safety. Any other interruptions should be thought out carefully before being done.

4.5. Timing

Naturally, the best time to train is before the need is critical. The scheduling of a training session should be made with this thought in mind. It makes no sense to train someone in tax preparation after the tax season. Unless it is in preparation of the next season.

4.6. Resources

Resources is a broad category. Here we mean class size and equipment for student use. Resources are also determined by how "hands-on" the class is to be.

The number of students per instructor depends on the type of program being taught. Very "hands-on" should be less than ten students. A very interactive session with questions should be kept below thirty. A lecture has no limit other than what the facility can handle.

If equipment is being used in the learning process, i.e. a PC or terminal, it is best to have a one-on-one situation, one student to one PC/terminal. That way they can learn from there own mistakes. Certainly no more than two students per PC/terminal should be allowed.

4.7. Product and Industry Expertise

The expertise of the instructor is very important. Is the instructor well known in the field? This does not necessarily ask if the instructor has published a lot of papers; but what is the instructor's reputation.

Length of service in an area is also important. But while evaluating the number of years experience, keep in mind how new the technology is. For example, MPE-XL classes will begin in another year. No one has more than two years experience with it. In this situation it is better to look at the instructors overall experience and if they have taught before.

Teaching experience is very important. One maybe an "expert" in a particular field but be unable to teach.

4.8. Levels of Instruction

While it is not advisable to have different level of expe-rience in a class, sometimes it can not be helped. It is, therefore, necessary to insure the instructor can handle experience levels. It is also necessary to look at the level of experience the seminar is being aimed at. Prereq-uisites may preclude various levels from attending a class.

If multi-level experienced students are allowed and the in-structor can handle them, it is necessary to have appropri-ate material for all the levels.

4.9. Materials

For any type of educational session, presentation materials should be made available. Vendor specific sessions should provide the presentation, tutorial, workbook and a reference guide. Additional support material such as glossaries, ar-ticles, and technical tips are helpful.

4.10. Follow Up

Follow ups run in many formats. The very least should be a willingness to send answers to questions that remain unan-swered at the end of a session. The offer of a subscription to a newsletter or information reporting service is helpful. Also helpful is a follow up session to advance students along.

Another area in follow up is a willingness to ask for ses-sion evaluations and critiques. This is a very important indicator of a trainers commitment to a long term service.

5. HOW TO PICK A COURSE

5.1. Audience

Picking a course is as important as picking who to teach the course. The first criteria to look at is what audience the course is aimed for. This does need careful attention because the nomenclature used can be vague. Just as it makes no sense to send a person to an advanced system manager class if they have never been to a system manager class. It is equally wrong to send a person to a class titled "New MPE Issues" if it is really an intro to MPE. Above all, avoid the general good for all types of attendees. No one benefits from these classes.

5.2. Prerequisites

Audience prerequisites should be measurable. Actual skill levels should be stated clearly. Statements such as 3 months experience or if familiar with such and such are not clear enough. Measurable means can the attendee can perform at this level or do a particular task after taking the class.

5.3. Performance

The sessions performance oriented objectives should be clearly described in measurable new skills. The objective should list who learns, what will be learned. It should be explained under what conditions the student can accomplish the goals; what level of performance the student can achieve. Particularly helpful is a statement on how to measure for the goals.

Measurability will be shown if the class brochure states clearly these issues in action words rather than passive words. For example, words such as do or write are action words. A passive word is understand.

5.4. Support material

When choosing a course look at the outline of content. One
should always be given. It may be concise. But the outline
should be descriptive of the course content. If case histo-
ries are appropriate their content should also be de-
scribed.

5.5. Practice and feedback

Practice sessions can be a very important aspect of train-
ing. Some classes by their very nature and brevity preclude
them.   But it may be something that fits your situation.
If practice sessions are included check on whether testing
is a self test or a proctor given test.   Also check on
whether the results of testing is immediate.   Immediate
test results should mean quick correction of errors.

Question answering is also important.   Most questions
should be answered immediately. If the question was ahead
of an issue then reference should be made again about the
question.   Questions should be encouraged even in self-
paced classes.

5.6. Review

We mentioned review earlier in terms of evaluation as a
whole. Here we what is asked is if the material can be re-
viewed easily by the student after taking the class. If a
case study is provided can it be used for later review.
5.7. Self-paced training

For self-paced training you need to know if the student can
focus in on the material quickly after being away from it.
Also, the course should be designed in a modular manner to
allow for frequent and easy review of material before going
on.

5.8. Other

For on-site classes customization should be readily available.

6. HOW TO GET TO A TRAINING SESSION

Justification is the key to getting to a training session. One must prove the benefit of going versus not going. If the training session meets the criteria stated above, there should be no problem in justifying.

For some other tips on how to get there. If a potential student proves to him/herself that the session is valuable they ought to just go. Invest in his/herself; take the time off and attend. The student will get the benefit and it makes no sense to deny oneself because an employer won't spend the money. (An employer might actually have more respect for the person for going on his/her own.)

Another way which is good when getting in new equipment or a new system is to build it into the purchase order. If possible, note the dates of the session on the PO so that all is approved at the same time. Having the training in the original PO avoids the chance of refusal.

7. WHEN NOT TO TRAIN

Giving classes out as an award for job performance or any other reason actually negates the reason for training. Everyone wants to do a good job. They want to grow. Training should be looked at as an investment with benefits and long term saving being reaped by the company.

To give someone training in an area in which they are already skilled makes no sense. And yet it is done by well meaning people. There is no benefit to the company or the employee. It would be better to just give the trip without the class and call it an incentive award.

It could be argued that sending a person to conferences and local/regional user group or other professional group meetings should be an award. And sure there are social activities at these meetings and conferences. But there is also valuable information available which when brought back benefits the company. At the very least a rotating schedule of employee attendance should be arranged so that all can grow. This also ensures that the company gathers all the information from all points of view.

8. CLOSING

Training is a luxury no organization can afford to be without. Training stimulates employee growth and company growth. Training causes a synergism by the sharing of ideas and knowledge. An exponential factor comes into play when there is an on going training program benefiting all as a group much more greatly than by themselves.

The education process must never stop. It has a much shorter life-cycle in today's fast changing technical world.