Getting On-the-Job Training Right: Four Strategies to Start Using Now

By Kate Zabriskie

"I learned so much during orientation. It's too bad I won't use most of it for six months. I took some notes, but I'm sure I won't remember half of what they told me to do."

"I'm overwhelmed. I learned a new piece of equipment today. The person showing me what to do knew everything. The problem I had was the deep dives. He spent so much time on troubleshooting techniques. It was just too much for my first day."

"I can follow the steps, but I have no idea why I'm doing what I'm doing. I sort of feel like a trained monkey. I hope nothing goes wrong because I will have no clue how to fix it if something does."

Despite our best efforts, it's not as easy as it looks to get the training equation right. We train too early, we train too much, or we make a host of other errors. While some of us learn from our mistakes, many of us practice a cycle of rinse and repeat as we make the same blunders year after year. The good news is it doesn't have to be this way. With some careful planning and follow through, you can avoid problems many people will encounter again and again.

Strategy One: Keep Training Relevant and Immediately Applicable

Countless onboarding programs attempt to teach everything a person would ever want to know or need to know about a job in the first few hours, days, or weeks. The information is important, but it has no immediate value. Subsequently, learners become overwhelmed in class, and then they don't have opportunities to apply or reinforce what they've learned for months or even years.

Good training designers know the value of careful pacing, and they practice just-in-time training when they can. Ask yourself, what does my learner need to be successful in the first day, the first week, and the first month? Teach to those needs as much as possible, and save the more in-depth information for a more appropriate time. What do you need to prioritize?

Strategy Two: Connect to Why Again and Again

When people don't know why they are doing something, they don't understand the big picture. While they get the process at a surface level, their limited understanding potentially keeps them from following procedures later.

For example, if someone is learning how to use a print/copier/scanner/fax machine and part of the process is putting the guard up on the paper tray with jobs over 100 sheets, without explaining as to why that's important to do, that learner might take it upon himself to skip that step back on the job. Only when papers are scattered all over the floor and have to be re-collated does the learning know the importance of raising the guard.

Great trainers make connections. They repeatedly explain why they're doing what they're doing, why procedures are written as they are, and so forth. Are you connecting the dots as well as you should, or could you do a better job?

Strategy Three: Use Multiple Channels to Cement Learning

I showed her how to do it, she did it, and now she's trained. Maybe that's true for the simple stuff, but for the complex processes and procedures, multi-channel encoding reigns supreme.

For example, show learners in real-time how to complete a process. Then do it again, at the same time providing a narration track while the learner takes notes. Next, have the learner read aloud the notes she's taken. Finally, have the learner demonstrate the procedure.

The multi-channel approach allows learners to see, to hear, to write, to speak, and to do whatever process they are learning. Depending on the learner, some senses may be more powerful than others. And in rare cases where there is no preference, repetition wins the day. What can you do differently to engage more senses?

Strategy Four: Teach with Reference Tools

It's one thing to conquer a task during class or one-on-one job coaching, but it's entirely another to reproduce those results on the job.

People who have mastered the training function know to develop and teach reference tools in addition to processes themselves.

Ask yourself what kinds of support you need to develop. Decide where you need to incorporate them in your training plans. Those who learn how to solve problems themselves are worth their weight in gold. In addition to strong productivity, these people are also usually happier and more motivated than those who don't have the tools to stand on their own feet.

Four strategies and none hard: make training relevant, connecting to why, repeating information using different channels, and incorporating the tools learners should use to solve problems back on the job. If done deliberately and with routine, you will almost certainly get a good result.

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