



Employee Training: Getting Your Money's Worth

By Ira G. Asherman



In the 15 December 2008 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, Harry J. Martin, a professor at Cleveland State University, reported on a series of studies that suggested “just 10% to 40% of training is ever used on the job.” He went on to say, “It is clear that a big chunk of the tens of billions of dollars that organizations spend annually on staff development is going down the drain.”¹ This assertion should not come as any great surprise if you are a training professional. Training professionals constantly must prove to management that what they do is relevant and, in some way, enhances the bottom line.

In an earlier article on this topic,² I discussed the roles that employees and their managers can play in ensuring that training is reinforced and supported. In this article, I expand on the issue and look at the roles of human resources and training personnel in optimizing training investments.

Training is an expensive proposition. Not only do organizations pay the trainer, but they lose productivity when people are away from their jobs. To get full value from training, companies need to create a process and an environment that encourage and support transfer of new knowledge and skills to the job and the organization.

The Current Situation

Employees usually go to training with the best of intentions, hoping to learn some new skills they can apply on the job. However, if training is to make a difference, it must be seen as just one aspect of improving employee performance. Training is not an end in itself; it must be transferred to the work environment. If training is to achieve its desired objectives for the participant and the company, the HR professional, the instructor, the employee and the manager must play an active role in the process.

It is my belief that not much is being done to aid the transfer of learning to the employee’s work environment. In this era of tight budgets and lean departments, people have little time to think about how training will be applied. One of our clients highlighted this issue when she pointed out, “In our busy environments, managers barely have time to manage all the HR forms they need to complete... Managers need to get work done, and they can’t spend time thinking about what creative interventions would reinforce training.” If we are to enhance the transfer of the learning process, HR and training professionals need to rethink how they implement and contract for training.

Let me spell this out in more detail.

It is my belief that the manager has the primary responsibility for ensuring that the employee can apply on the job what he or she learned during training. Instructors can provide the best training that money can buy and employees can come committed to learning, but

if the manager has not developed an approach to reinforcing the training, the desired improved employee performance and organizational effectiveness are unlikely to result.

As Harry Martin suggests, if you want people to apply what they have learned, you need to create a workplace environment that actively encourages them to change. The key to doing that? Ensure support does not end when workers walk out of the training room door.

Improving the Process

As the company professional or consultant responsible for training, there is much you can do to ensure that the training achieves its objectives. Following are some of the steps you can take:

- Reinforce the importance of each manager’s role in ensuring that training works. Provide them with a job aid (see side bar) that outlines the steps they should take prior to the program and when people return from training. The job aid can be sent by the training professional via email as people register for a class. Make it as easy as possible for the manager to reinforce the training.

Larry Susskind of MIT, writing in the Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation newsletter, Negotiation suggests that participants should be required to report on what they have learned at some specific interval. To make this work, Susskind suggests a three-step process:

- “Focus learning. At the beginning and end of training, trainers notify participants that six to eight weeks after the program is completed, they will receive a follow-up email message requesting descriptions of at least two instances in which they intentionally used key ideas or methods presented in the training sessions.”³
- “Follow up on progress.” Send out the email no later than six to eight weeks after the program, asking employees for two short paragraphs describing their on-the-job efforts to apply what they learned along with any cost savings obtained.
- “Report results.” As a last step, the trainer should “compile a report for the company’s training director that not only describes individual achievements, but also attempts to tally the overall financial savings or benefits generated by the entire group.” Susskind points out that this amount “almost always totals at least 10 times the amount the organization invested in the training program.”³

A second option for reinforcing the training is to have employees develop an action plan

Reinforcing Training

Introduction

The true test of any training is how well participants apply on the job what they have learned during training. The role of the manager is critical to that process. To help you in that process we have prepared the following.

Take time when discussing the training. It is not something you should do in the hall or as part of another conversation.

Prior to the Meeting

Meet with the participants and discuss, as appropriate, the following:

- Your general support for the training. If you have been to the program, discuss your own experiences.
- What you hope they will learn during the training. Relate this to the work they do.
- Relate the training to any performance improvement objectives you and the employee have discussed.
- That you will meet with the employee after the program to discuss what he/she has learned.
- Your expectations that they will attend the complete program not arrive late or leave early.
- That you do not expect the employee to return to the office during lunch or breaks.

After the Training

As soon as possible after the program, meet individually with participants and review the following:

- What they learned during the program.
- How they can apply it to their work.
- How you can be of assistance.

If several people who work for you went to the program, consider doing the above at a staff meeting.

In addition:

- If you know someone has been involved in a particularly interesting situation that involved what they learned during training ask them to discuss it at a staff meeting.
- Approximately six months after the training meet individually or in a group to discuss whether the training has made a difference.

Conclusion

The goal of the above activities is to help people apply on the job what they learned in training. The message they need to hear is that as a manager you feel the training was important and that you want to do all you can to support them in using what they learned.

and present it to their managers for review and discussion. It can help if employees create and review their action plans with other workshop participants prior to the conclusion of the program.

To guide employees in creating the action plan, Professor Martin suggests a series of questions to be addressed:

- What will you do to implement a concept from today's session?
- When will you do this?
- What results do you expect and how will they be measured?
- When do you expect to see these results?
- What assistance or support will you need to implement your plan?

A spin-off of this approach is to have people write letters to themselves that would be mailed out by the instructor at some later date. These letters can serve as reminders of what employees should be doing to implement what they learned.

A third option is to contract for trainer follow-up activities, which can take many forms and need not be expensive or time-consuming, but do require support from management.

Typical approaches are:

- Telephone follow-up as a group. When participants sign up for the program, they are informed that a follow-up session via conference call will be conducted. Each call should have no more than 10 participants and last no more than 90 minutes. Each participant is asked to come to the meeting with examples of how he or she applied the training in the workplace, as well as any examples of plans, programs or initiatives that did not work.
- Telephone follow-up as an individual. Participants can be given the instructor's phone number or email address for individual discussion or feedback.
- Meeting follow-up. In this format, people come together for a meeting, usually three hours long, that includes discussions similar to those outlined above, as well as additional activities that reinforce the skills and information taught at the workshop. For example, a case study or role-play that relates directly to the training could be presented.

These follow-up meetings, calls and action plans are easier to describe than carry out. Even the telephone follow-up, which is pretty benign and should not take more than one hour, can be difficult to arrange. This will require a great deal of support, since for most organizations this will be a significant departure from the status quo. People are under so much time pressure

that they may resist even a one-hour activity. Management needs to make sure these activities take place. As Professor Martin suggests, "An actively involved and supportive boss greatly increases the odds that employees will apply what they learned in training. By assuming the role of coach or mentor, the boss can communicate expectations to trainees, keep them focused provide encouragement and help eliminate roadblocks to success." It is the responsibility of those of us training and human resources to help managers understand that their responsibilities to the employees they send to training does not start and end when they approve the employee's participation in a particular program. They need to help the employee apply what they have learned.

Conclusion

To achieve its objectives for the employee and the organization and to deliver full value for the investment, the reinforcement of training should continue after the training room door closes. Viewing a training program as self-contained is too limiting. The goals of training are to put skills and knowledge into practice in the workplace. Participants must be encouraged or even required to apply what they have learned, report on their success and discuss (with their boss or the instructor or both) the implications for their own jobs and for the organization as a whole.



References

1. Harry J. Martin, "Lessons learned," *The Wall Street Journal*, Monday, 15 December 2008:R11.
2. Asherman I. "Negotiation Training: Getting Your Money's Worth." *Regulatory Focus*. 2006: 11(5): 36-38.
3. Lawrence Susskind, "Negotiation Training: Are you getting your Money's Worth," *Negotiation*, Vol. 7 No. 8, August 2004, page 4.

Author

Ira Asherman is president of Asherman Associates Inc., a management development consulting firm in New York City, specializing in management issues in the pharmaceutical industry. He can be reached via email at ira@asherman.com or by phone at +1 212 243 0782.

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