

## The Employee Training Puzzle

by Jeff Turner

According to a Gallup Poll, 80 percent of employees said the availability of company-sponsored training programs was a factor in deciding whether to accept a new job or stick with a current one. And yet the Bureau of Labor Statistics says that the average number of hours of formal training per employee per year is only 10.7.

More companies are starting to realize that it's smart to invest in training, but faced with so many choices, how can you defend your choice of training to management, so they feel confident that you're getting the most out of the educational investment?

### What do you need?

Training can take several forms, from simply encouraging subscriptions to key trade magazines to reimbursing tuition for degree programs. Before you decide where to put your training dollars, it's vital to do a full needs assessment. This might involve polling general employees one-by-one during evaluations or en masse via e-mail polls. It could even mean asking customers where they'd like to see your company improve in areas such as customer care, product innovation, communications technology or billing.

Another piece of needs assessment weighs training outcomes against big-picture strategies and operational requirements. It's relatively simple to evaluate individual progress, but if the company as a whole doesn't gain a competitive edge by saving money, processing information faster, serving customers better, decreasing harassment complaints – or whatever the goal is – then another training method should be considered. HR can coordinate the process of gathering this information from all the departments and evaluating it as one entity.

### Which Type of Training?

After the needs assessment, you need to analyze which type of training is best for your company. Below are the most common training formats and the pros and cons of each.

#### *Online Training*

There are literally thousands of online options available; some involve weekly e-mail correspondence with a teacher, while some are automated, set-your-own-pace programs.

Pros:

- Describe the project and the results expected;
- Access to world-class instructors and institutions, without travel costs.
- Flexible scheduling for participation at home or during lunch hours.
- Generally less expensive than traditional classroom courses.

Cons:

- Requires self-imposed discipline and focus.
- Little social interaction with other students and teachers.
- Flexible scheduling for participation at home or during lunch hours.
- Generally less expensive than traditional classroom courses.

Cons:

- Requires self-imposed discipline and focus.
- Little social interaction with other students and teachers.
- Assumes some level of technical competence.

*Onsite Training by Consultant*

If many people in the company need to be trained at once or if training is for onsite computers or equipment, then bringing a trainer to the office may make the most sense economically. This method also works well for personalized subjects, such as supervisory skills, fair hiring practices or anti-harassment.

Pros:

- Travel time and costs for employees are negligible.
- Curriculum can be customized for company's specific needs.
- Equipment or computers they're learning on are the same they'll be working on, so there's no time wasted on irrelevant information.
- Third-party trainer brings teaching expertise and a non-biased approach to the classroom.

Cons:

- People may find it hard to stay away from their offices to attend classes for the time required, which defeats the purpose of training.
- Consultants may not be familiar with your company's equipment or computers, or you may not have adequate facilities for lectures or interactive education.
- Expense for high-quality instructors is relatively high.

*Onsite Training by Company's Own Management*

Many companies send a few employees to training, then they rely on those people to come back and spread the knowledge to the team. Or, they create their own courses and enlist employees to impart their wisdom on colleagues.

Pros:

- Less costly to send just one or two people to training.
- Encourages employees to educate others about their expertise, often resulting in greater awareness and communication among departments.
- Allows facetime and open discussion among colleagues.

Cons:

- Teaching abilities vary greatly; there's a high risk that some instructors will not communicate information well.
- Planning and teaching take away time from core responsibilities, which may hinder overall productivity.
- Employees may feel inhibited to ask questions or challenge information.

*Offsite Classes at Training Center or Community College*

Nearly every metropolitan area has a community college that offers adult or continuing education classes. Some cities also have learning centers that offer courses taught by successful entrepreneurs or industry gurus.

Pros:

- Standard agendas every semester ensure some continuity in the information learned.
- Courses are taught by professionals with industry experience and teaching ability.
- A mixture of on- and off-line classes is often available.

Cons:

- Courses may span several weeks, too long to hold some employees' attention.
- Unless prerequisites are required, students at any level may participate, forcing the teacher to pace the class for the lowest-common denominator.

*One-off Seminars*

For specific or motivational topics, employees can attend one-shot "celebrity" seminars, given by professional speakers or executives. Several non-profit and professional organizations also hold development courses, designed for busy people who need fine-tuning in one area.

Pros:

- Easy to evaluate the quality of the presenters based on testimonials and past reviews.
- Poses an opportunity to network with industry colleagues.
- Introduces outside-the-company-box ways to approach challenges.

Cons:

- Some seminars are mainly venues for authors/speakers to sell books and other products.
- One-time events encourage new thinking, but unless employees act on their ideas immediately, there may be no long-term behavioral change.

*Degree Programs*

For employees who want to get to the next level or change their career focus, offering to cover all or some credits towards a degree ensures that they stay at their jobs as they increase knowledge and enhance skills. Many companies require that employees stay with the company or repay some of the tuition money if they decide to leave after receiving the degree.

Pros:

- Encourages employees to continue their core education and contribute more to the company's general knowledge base.
- Attracts motivated, dedicated employees who want to learn.
- Prompts employees to work towards their dream jobs, fostering a happier and more productive workforce.

Cons:

- Programs can be intense and may exhaust employees to a point that detracts from their on-the-job performance.

Regardless of the type of training that you decide to offer, it's important to gather constant feedback, to make sure you're always spending your money and time wisely. Perhaps you'll find that you need to offer more than one type, so employees with different learning styles can get the most out of the training. And don't forget to sign yourself up—employees at every level can benefit!

For more information on training that ensures more productive and smarter employees or to sign up for our short monthly e-newsletters, visit [www.praxishr.com](http://www.praxishr.com), e-mail us at [info@praxishr.com](mailto:info@praxishr.com), or call 206.262.8133.

Copyright 2004, Praxis HR. All rights reserved.

---

Author Jeff Turner:

Mr. Turner is a unique blend of educator, trainer, consultant, and lawyer. He has extensive experience in all aspects of human capital management and has worked with firms in the U.S. and Canada in the areas of recruiting and retention, employee relations, corporate training, risk management, and organizational and management effectiveness. Turner is an accomplished facilitator and a frequent keynote speaker on human resources and employment practices topics. His energetic style and bottom-line focus has created a high demand for his services.

Prior to co-founding Praxis HR, a human resources and organizational development consulting firm, Mr. Turner served as vice president of human resources for a multi-state healthcare company. During his tenure there, he helped position the company as a recipient of *Seattle Magazine's Best Places to Work* and *Washington CEO Best Places to Work For*. He is a former Associate Dean of Business and an Assistant Professor of Management for a Texas university where he taught management, strategic human resources, and entrepreneurial management. Mr. Turner has also worked for Fortune 500 companies such as Motorola and the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies.

Turner serves on the Board of Directors of the Seattle Society for Human Resources Management and is a member of the Labor & Employment Law section of the Washington State Bar Association.

Mr. Turner did his undergraduate work at the University of Texas at Austin, earning his B.A. in Economics and Plan II, the university's interdisciplinary honors program. He did his post graduate work in management at the University of Dallas and received his law degree from the University of Texas at Austin, School of Law.

Mr. Turner can be contacted at 206.262.8133 or by e-mail at [jeffturner@praxishr.com](mailto:jeffturner@praxishr.com). The company's Web site is [www.praxishr.com](http://www.praxishr.com).