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Aaron W. Hughey

Western Kentucky University, [aaron.hughey@wku.edu](mailto:aaron.hughey@wku.edu)

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# Corporate training programmes

## Lessons for colleges and universities

Aaron W. Hughey

*Employee training programmes have long been considered one of the keys to corporate success. The primary focus of this article is on what higher education professionals can learn from their counterparts in business and industry with respect to training in a collegiate environment. The elements of a successful training programme are discussed along with how the process can be adapted by colleges and universities. The distinction between training and education is explained, with a discussion of why 'soft skills' training initiatives are often less effective than skills-based approaches. The critical role of the training coordinator in facilitating a programme is assessed and other important considerations are set out, such as selection of the appropriate training topics and determining how long training should last and how many participants should be permitted to attend.*

*The author is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, TPH 417-D, Western Kentucky University, 1 Big Red Way, Bowling Green, KY 42101-3576, USA. Tel: +1 270 745 4849. Fax: +1 270 745 5445. E-mail: aaron.hughey@wku.edu*

Once upon a time, most individuals prepared for a particular career and then tended to stay within the same vocation throughout most of their lives. In today's competitive job market, this is no longer considered realistic or even desirable. Companies need employees who can adapt quickly to new situations by rapidly acquiring new competencies as circumstances evolve. This is one of the primary reasons for the current emphasis on employee training within the private sector.

Corporate training programmes are far more prevalent today than they were just a few years ago. The current proliferation of employee training programmes is the result of many factors, including the rapidly expanding use of technology and a heightened awareness of the intrinsic importance of quality and customer satisfaction. Many companies have also come to the realization that training can have a positive impact on job satisfaction, productivity, and overall

profitability. When carefully developed and appropriately executed, training can substantially increase the bottom line.

In many companies, training has become an integral part of the organizational culture, whether it is facilitated in-house or by outside consultants. It is seen as a way of keeping the workforce prepared to meet the constantly changing needs of a chaotic economic environment. The motivation for providing training varies considerably from organization to organization. Most companies are genuinely committed to enhancing the skills and competencies of their workforce. Others conduct training in order to meet job safety regulations. Some train their employees simply for the sake of appearance.

The truth is that higher education can learn a great deal from the corporate sector about the competitive advantage associated with the provision of ongoing

professional development opportunities. Obviously, training collegiate faculty and staff can be a very challenging proposition. Professional educators sometimes question the efficacy of training programmes targeted at them since they tend to consider themselves 'experts' when it comes to the creation and dissemination of knowledge and information. Part of the problem relates to definition.

## **Training versus education**

The tremendous power associated with learning through involvement has been recognized for some time in the business community, although admittedly this understanding has not always been acted upon in a consistent manner. While many companies do an exceptional job training their employees, others simply do not make it a top priority. In far too many instances, training still consists primarily of dispensing technical information and reacting to situations as they develop. But to be truly effective, training must transcend these relatively narrow parameters to include human relations skills such as decision-making and problem-solving within a team context.

When it comes to employee training, some companies still seem to favour a more cost-sensitive, albeit far less effective, approach. They turn to education instead of training. There is a significant difference between training and education, particularly within the context of adult learning paradigms. Education, in which colleges and universities traditionally excel, usually 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, although the acquisition of new skills and competencies designed to facilitate professional development and enhance customer service is usually not the intended outcome.

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. The perceived drawback is that this type of learning is also very time-consuming. Many companies sacrifice long-term stability for short-term gains. More information can be provided using the lecture format and many training sessions are lecture-based simply because of mandated time constraints. The reality is that most employees do not learn very efficiently when they are 'talked to'. They need to be more actively involved in the learning experience.

Most higher education professionals tend to be at least functionally proficient when it comes to facilitating student learning. But many could benefit

significantly from training in basic human relations, interpersonal communications, customer service, and conflict resolution skills. Training can provide faculty and staff with skills that inherently complement and support the institution's mission and goals. Training will become increasingly important in the academic arena as competition between colleges and universities continues to become more acute.

## **Technical versus human relations skills**

Employee development programmes tend to focus on two distinct yet equally important types of training: technical skills training and human relations skills training. Companies need employees who are technically competent – that is, who possess the skills necessary to perform specific tasks in an appropriate manner. Equally important are employees' 'people skills', which include the ability to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts efficiently, and work together productively for the good of the entire organization. An increase in technical problems is often symptomatic of underlying human relations deficiencies.

The benefits of a learning-by-doing approach to employee training have been recognized for years. Still, many companies continue to champion 'feel good' training programmes as opposed to those that target specific competencies with a practical use. Such programmes typically involve training in soft skills (listening, communication, teamwork, leadership, etc). Although these topics are generally well received, the evidence seems to be that, unless they are skills-based, they are not very effective. Most soft skills training is never put into actual practice; that is, the information covered in these types of training sessions is seldom realized in concrete, on-the-job situations.

Many companies, for example, conduct 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 programme. Team training, especially in its early stages, tends to involve various group decision-making exercises that centre around 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 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

workforce development programmes, they should never be allowed to become a primary emphasis. Training sessions which deal with soft skills topics are often quite entertaining but seldom involve the kind of practical experience that helps individuals to translate awareness into action. Role-playing, games, and simulations help to present the ideas in a more palpable context, but they do not always precipitate the acquisition of useful skills.

Higher education professionals need to learn that training involves tangible, hands-on skills and observable behaviour. Training goals and objectives should not involve feelings and emotions. 'To enhance staff appreciation of student development' 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. Arguably, higher education strives to transform human beings on a more comprehensive scale, which includes the affective domain. At the same time, the purpose of training is to enhance behaviour, not attitude. Training objectives should always focus on specific skills and competencies: corresponding attitudinal changes will occur spontaneously with time.

### The training coordinator

'Training Coordinator' seems to be a fairly common job title in any corporation of considerable size. Most large corporations have a staff of several full-time professionals whose sole function is to assess training requirements and institute training programmes based on individual departmental needs. Many smaller companies also have individuals whose key responsibility is to facilitate employee training sessions and programmes.

While the length of time spent managing an employee training programme tends to be related to organizational size and other factors, all training coordinators 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. Good training coordinators usually make it a point to educate themselves about fundamental training concepts and techniques. Their attendance at local or regional training conferences is a must. Many take formal classes at the local community or junior college; classes on teaching methods or establishing goals and objectives for training programmes are obviously appropriate. Many join associations and other organizations that emphasize training efforts.

Of necessity, training coordinators must perpetually assess 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 market share and profitability. Perceptive training coordinators are always cognizant of the fact that their efforts must support the mission of the company in a demonstrable and unambiguous manner. They pay careful attention both to what has been successful and to what has not been successful within the industry. They take time to prepare for the challenges that lie ahead and anticipate the inevitable difficulties that will be encountered. Training is a process that can be mastered only through experience and practice.

Few companies would seriously consider turning over their manufacturing operations to a person with no manufacturing experience. In higher education, however, many colleges and universities routinely entrust their training initiatives to coordinators who have little or no background, expertise, or formal education in the area of training and development. The department head or leadership team suddenly recognizes a need for training, or is informed of this need by either front-line staff or someone in middle management, and delegates the responsibility for implementing a training programme to the individual who seems to be most in need of something to occupy his or her time.

What about academics as trainers? Unfortunately for many professors, training differs significantly from college teaching. In a traditional classroom, instructors usually have a captive audience over whom they can exert a substantial degree of control. Strategies that seem to work well with traditional college students – lectures focusing on specific content, objective tests, etc – are not particularly effective for training purposes. If faculty members are called upon to conduct training sessions, they must be acutely aware of their personal strengths, weaknesses, and limitations. They should always determine what skills they need to enhance before initiating a training programme.

### Selecting the right topics

Successful 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 other aspects of job performance. Upper management is often acutely aware of these factors and therefore tends to question the necessity of training programmes when revenues are scarce and/or during peak production times.

In most concerns, support from upper management is inherently linked to the training coordinator's ability to illustrate successfully a connection between training activities and the overall health of the company. This

can be especially difficult when economic conditions are less than favourable. When the financial statement indicates that budget cuts may be necessary, one of the first areas to receive careful scrutiny is employee training. Training programmes may be severely limited or eliminated altogether primarily because the training coordinator is unable to convince management that the long-term benefits associated with training outweigh the short-term inconveniences.

One of the training coordinator's most important responsibilities involves the perpetual justification of employee training initiatives. In order to substantiate the efficacy 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 are 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 in order to show explicitly how the acquisition of new skills and competencies has a positive impact on productivity and quality. Having a comprehensive strategic training plan is absolutely essential.

New training coordinators are often anxious to get the ball rolling. They always seem preoccupied with instituting training classes and programmes, regardless of actual or perceived employee needs. And while a few training successes early in the training coordinator's tenure are certainly good from a credibility standpoint, it is imperative that all training is based on an overall 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 still needs to be convinced of the utility of those activities. In other words, managers will want to know what improvements have been realized and what problems have been resolved as a direct result of training efforts.

Many companies seem to select training topics based on what the latest 'hot' topic in the industry seems to be. Higher education professionals are equally notorious for being somewhat trendy in their approach to training and professional development. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, race relations were in vogue. Anyone attending a professional conference could expect several sessions dealing with the promotion of tolerance and diversity. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a marked trend toward HIV/AIDS. Currently, the hot topics seem to be security, affirmative action, and privatization/outsourcing. While these are all important areas in which training is critical, they should receive consistent and continuous attention rather than over-emphasis for a short time.

## Logistical considerations

Regardless of whether the setting is a company or a university, once a training need has been identified, the training coordinator, working closely with other individuals, should determine its priority status. It should then be decided how much time will realistically be needed to provide employees with new competencies. In general, the time devoted to a given subject should be determined by how long it takes the recipients to master the skills that the organization deems important. The desired outcome – the specific skills that are to be obtained – should be instrumental in establishing the number as well as the length of the appropriate training sessions.

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 may be 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 competencies that are to be transferred through the training process. 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 of success.

In the business world, companies have slowly come to the realization that training is much more effective when the focus is shifted away from the trainer and towards those being trained. It has been demonstrated conclusively, for example, that adults do not tend to acquire new competencies overnight. Time is needed between training sessions for reflection and practice. Despite this obvious reality, many companies persist in concentrating their training efforts into lengthy, intense marathon sessions in an effort to be more efficient. But employees can absorb only about two or three hours of meaningful content in any single training day. And that rate tends to decrease exponentially as the number of consecutive training days increases. It is common sense that training is more effective if it is conducted over the course of several days or weeks.

The number of people in each session is also a critical consideration in the development and implementation of training programmes. Human beings learn more efficiently in small groups. Conducting skills-based training with large groups may be convenient, 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. While it may be true that larger groups can often be divided into smaller groups for some training purposes, having too many small groups can lead to anarchy. Most training sessions

should be limited to no more than 20 participants, as fewer is almost always better.

On the surface, having large numbers of employees in each training session seems cost-effective. But this perceived benefit is only an illusion when the participants in those sessions fail to obtain the required skills and competencies. Large groups are appropriate only for the dissemination of information. They are not practical for most developmental purposes. Multiple training sessions that are relatively brief and carried out over a considerable period with minimal numbers of individuals seem to be the most successful way to conduct training.

At a college campus, it might indeed be appropriate to have classes consisting of 200–300 students meeting in large auditoriums. But even with the advent of online and distance education initiatives, the ability to do something new is often not accentuated in such situations. In short, it is never appropriate to use this type of model for training purposes. The propagation of available instructional technologies has also helped to put the participant back at the centre of the training process. There is a fundamental difference between delivering content within an educational context and fostering the development of tangible competencies. Knowing about a skill is not the same as being skilful. If you need an operation, do you want a physician who is educated in medical theory or one who is trained in surgical technique?

## Conclusion

When higher education professionals consider implementing training programmes, they stand to learn a great deal by studying their counterparts in business

and industry. With only limited exceptions, successful training is the result of thoughtful and serious planning. A great deal of attention must be paid to desired outcomes and details. Difficulties arise when there is a lack of coherent foresight about what training is expected to accomplish and how those accomplishments will be measured and rewarded. If these preliminary considerations are not given sufficient deliberation and the programme is not implemented in a logical, systematic, and sensitive manner, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to execute effective training.

Successful training requires a great deal of commitment, is very time-consuming, and demands relentless, ongoing support. A well designed programme has built-in reinforcement. It is not necessary to reinforce learning if the skills and competencies emphasized during the training actively assist individuals in the performance of their job duties and responsibilities – that is, if they are able to use what they have learned consistently. External reinforcement becomes necessary only if the skills acquired are not instrumental in enhancing job completion.

There are legitimate reasons for many of the problems associated with training programmes, whether those programmes are at a company or an institution of higher education. If training is not achieving its intended purpose, it is probably time to re-think how it was conceived, implemented, and managed. In other words, it may be time to make sure that the reasons for engaging in training are legitimate and responsive to actual organizational and individual needs. The dedication and perseverance needed to conduct successful training is substantial. But so are the potential rewards.