

Learner Support in Workplace Training

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“In the information age, knowledge and knowledge workers increasingly drive organizations. Because knowledge constantly makes itself obsolete, the pressure is on everyone to learn and continually apply new knowledge to problems and opportunities” (Schermerhorn & Chappell, 2000, p. 15).

Abstract

Cost efficient and effective delivery of learning in the workplace is a critical issue, particularly in today's information society with global competition for many organizations. Skills and knowledge of existing workers must be updated periodically to address competition, fast-changing technology, and organizational change, and talented new recruits can be difficult to attract and retain. Workplace training through distance means can help meet these needs, and support of the learner can be the critical component for success. Organizations are beginning to realize that the key to their success is learner success, and targeted methods of support for the learner are paramount. While there are common aspects to learner support in any environment, support in the workplace has its particular character and issues as compared to adult distance education in general. This article discusses the goals of workplace training, the trainee profile, challenges faced by the workplace learner, suggestions for addressing those challenges, and prioritization within the learner support plan.

1. Introduction

The traditional business model has been turned upside down. An emerging theme of the new management structure is support, particularly support for staff and staff learning. Along with corporations, government and education sectors are now seen as business entities in their own right. In the new order of things management is at the bottom of the pyramid as a support force that drives customer service. Schermerhorn and Chappell (2000) observe that every person in this new organization is viewed as a “value-added worker”, creating and innovating in the interest of best meeting consumer needs. A primary source of an organization's competitive advantage is innovation, and people must be learning in order to be creative. Thus, critical to an organization's success is a focus on building core competencies by developing the value-added worker who can produce and apply knowledge. Web-based training and education has quickly become a cost-effective and efficient solution to the growing demand for learning, but this virtual method presents unique organizational challenges. A rush to produce and provide online materials without specific regard to the audience has resulted in low-quality courses along with low learner interest and completion rates. Organizations are beginning to realize that the key to their success is learner success, and targeted methods of support for the learner are paramount.

Achieving this success is a significant challenge. Skills and knowledge of existing workers must be updated periodically to address competition, fast-changing technology, and organizational change, and talented new recruits can be difficult to attract and retain. Workplace training through distance means can help meet these needs, and

support of the learner can be the critical component for success. While there are common aspects to learner support in any environment, support in the workplace has its particular character and issues as compared to adult distance education in general. This article discusses the goals of workplace training, the trainee profile, challenges faced by the workplace learner, suggestions for addressing those challenges, and prioritization within the learner support plan. Where available, reference is made to literature that specifically addresses support of the workplace learner; however, as LaPadula (2003) found in seeking research concerning support of the higher-education student, research directed to the workplace environment is also scarce. For example, Berge's (2001) comprehensive book on distance training focuses more on organizational issues of implementing a training program rather than support for the distance learner. Similarly, the recent ASTD yearbook (Woods & Mantyla, 2001) covers a broad range of topics related to distance training, but does not specifically address learner support.

2. Goals of Workplace Training

On the employer side, training is linked to organizational performance objectives. Workplace training goals address three types of employee learning to meet those objectives:

- Information transfer
- Skill development
- Competency development

Information transfer provides learners with important knowledge about company policies, operating procedures, pertinent laws and regulations, and other matters of organizational concern. Key issues can include ensuring that all employees requiring the training complete it and retain the information.

Skill development involves teaching employees how to perform specific functions, use various technologies, or operate equipment. Key issues can include measurement techniques to determine that skills have been mastered and remain current.

Competency development may include an aspect of skills training (e.g., interpersonal skills development) but covers broader areas requiring critical thinking, the application of principles, and sound judgment. Examples of training areas are leadership, management, and analysis. Key issues can involve appropriate selection of employees and opportunities for exercising the competencies gained.

3. Profile of the Workplace Learner

On the employee side, organizations can no longer count on the loyalty of employees to dedicate themselves to training, particularly if that commitment extends to learning on their own time. From the employee perspective, learning must lead to the attainment of personal goals as well as organizational ones. Packer (2000) discusses the trend for employees to demand more than a job with a salary. He explains that employees often leave because they feel unappreciated and/or see no career path. He describes a growing tendency for talented employees to keep learning to maintain marketability. That includes a mobile perspective in which persons frequently move to better jobs that will support ongoing development. Employees who do not constantly update and improve

skills and knowledge are highly vulnerable in today's economy where downsizing, outsourcing, and even company failures have become common.

The need for training extends from entry levels all the way to top management and applies to long time employees as well as new hires. Today's workplace learner may be anyone from a recent high school graduate to a highly educated senior manager. S/he may be embarking on a first career or may have changed fields several times. In other words, developing a learner support program for workplace training means planning for a broad spectrum of needs, individual backgrounds, and personal learning styles.

4. Challenges for the Workplace Learner

There are obvious elements of success for workplace training, such as: well-designed courses and training materials presented by capable instructors; reliable technology for delivery of courses; and absence of an undue financial burden on the employee for participating in training. However, there are other areas in which learners can be challenged if support is not offered.

4.1. Learning about Training Opportunities

How does an employee find out about training options and needs? Learning about training opportunities goes beyond having access to a list of courses. Employees need information to help them determine which and how many courses they should take and when they should take them.

4.2. Motivation

Why should an employee invest him/herself in a training activity, particularly if participation extends beyond the normal workday or the level of effort exceeds normal job expectations? In a study concerning online training, Bonk (2002) found a lack of incentives common for organizations with poor course completion. Employees need a way to map training to career goals as well as organizational goals in order to find the motivation and energy needed to overcome other training challenges and to excel in learning. Performance assessment that relates training to improved job skills and potential for advancement can add to an employee's motivation.

4.3. Preparation for the Training Subject Matter

Is the employee ready for the training? Employees who are not prepared with prerequisite skills and knowledge are obvious candidates for failure.

4.4. Access to Equipment and Resources

Can the employee access the distance learning environment and course materials? Employees need appropriate equipment and facilities as well as sufficient time and schedule of availability.

4.5. Becoming Familiar with the Distance Learning Environment

Does the employee understand the distance learning environment? For many employees, the transition from a traditional classroom environment to a distance learning format can

be difficult and may require an orientation period. The distance learner must accept more responsibility for his/her learning progress, time management, and participation.

4.6. Understanding the Technology

Can the employee use the technology easily? Each distance learning technology has unique characteristics which users must understand for a successful learning experience. For example, learners in Web-based training may need to learn how to upload files and participate in bulletin board discussions. Video-conferencing learners may need to become accustomed to time delays in speech, limitations on movements, and color and pattern issues for cameras. Interactive video training may have unfamiliar keypad and other equipment to master.

4.7. Adapting to a Diverse Training Setting

Can the employee be comfortable in a course where there is diversity of culture, language, and/or thought? Few persons in the workplace today are assured of a homogenous environment. Large organizations and small may have a workforce from various cultures, countries and opinions. Even if the workforce lacks diversity, the customer base will almost certainly exhibit it. For courses offered by external providers, there is a potential for distance learning students to be located anywhere in the world. Acceptance and appreciation of diversity is important for today's learner.

4.8. Study Time vs. Job Responsibilities

Does the employee have adequate time to study? A conflict between study time and "getting the job done" often results in the job being the winner in the short term. Both the organization and the employees can be long-term losers, however. Bonk (2002) found lack of time as the chief reason survey respondents selected for learner attrition.

4.9. Assistance with Difficult Concepts, Training Exercises, Etc.

Where can the employee find help when s/he has problems with learning? The distance learning instructor may not be able to provide the full spectrum of support needed by the workplace trainee.

4.10. Peer Relationships

How does the employee relate to peers in distance learning? In a classroom, face-to-face experiences can offer opportunities for bonding, networking, and mutual support. Similar opportunities can benefit the distance learner.

4.11. Applying Learning to Achieve Job Performance Goals

How can the training be tied to employee job performance? While difficulty in relating training to outcomes on the job is not limited to the distance learning format, it may have its own problems, especially if the training environment looks and feels very different from the employee's job setting.

5. Addressing the Needs

In considering ways to support the workplace learner in overcoming obstacles, attention must be given to how, when, and where the employee works and learns. Although the traditional office still exists in many places, Wentling, Waight, Strazzo, File, La Fleur, and Kanfer (2000) anticipate e-learning being integrated into a work environment where telecommuting, flextime, and self-direction are commonplace. Generally, those directly involved in training support include corporate trainers, instructional designers, training managers, and Chief Learning Officers (Bonk, 2002); however, learner support responsibilities extend throughout the organization and can include supervisors, higher level managers, peers, and other knowledgeable employees. Phillips (2002) reports that the American Society for Training & Development ranks managerial and peer support as lead factors in promoting successful e-learning outcomes. Included in the following discussion are examples of what some organizations are doing to support learners in their distance training programs.

5.1. Information Sources

There is a variety of information needed by the workplace learner. First, employees need to learn about the organization's training program. Hipwell (2000) recommends using three stages of a marketing and promotion approach with a launch that introduces the program, internal marketing that promotes it and registers users, and maintenance marketing that maintains and increases usage over time. He sees this as critical, especially in organizations that are just beginning to incorporate distance learning in their training programs. Other suggestions he offers are to: distribute business cards with help-line contact information; send brochures to employees via email; and hold an online "open house" to provide information, register new users, and link e-learning to solving business issues and problems.

The U.S. Navy offers a Distance Support Anchor Desk online to provide connectivity and information via a single, integrated network with access throughout the world (<http://www.anchordesk.navy.mil>). Through this site, training officers and personnel can identify required and optional training, access training courses and materials, locate and participate in user communities, find professional and personal development resources, and track training and education accomplishments, status, qualifications and certifications. Ford (2000) uses the acronym PRIORITY to discuss how to make training "stick," and key within the principles the letters represent is the communication of other important information. Employees need to know organizational goals, expectations for training outcomes, and feedback on the results. She notes that training will not be a priority for employees unless they receive the clear message through behavior as well as written and oral communication that it is a priority for management.

5.2. Identifying Training Needs

Step one of identifying individual training needs is counseling to evaluate an employee's position in the organization and what training is necessary for him or her to meet performance goals. But as Short and Opengart (2000) explain, limiting training plans to achieving immediate goals can result in a loss of employees and a waste of available talent. Many employees are seeking employability rather than job security. Personal growth and career development, then, may become key components of an

employee's individual development plan (IDP). The IDP is a "living document" that provides a roadmap to the employee's future. Short and Opengart recommend that organizations link audits of learning, skills, and knowledge into the business planning process. Ongoing development and promotion of talented employees can provide the career paths they desire and the competent workforce the organization needs.

5.3. Pre-Training Assessment

Pre-training assessment is needed both for individual employees and for what the organization needs to consider regarding its workforce. Individuals require skill and knowledge assessment to determine their need and readiness for specific training. Both individuals and the workforce should be assessed regarding language and diversity issues. Distance training that crosses international boundaries or includes recent immigrants may require assistance to learners having difficulty with the common language of the course. Diversity must be addressed both in terms of a learner's ability to interact successfully with a diverse group (whether the diversity is of culture or opinion) and the trainer's ability to address cultural differences and expectations. Weech (2001) describes four critical dimensions that highlight variation in cultural expectations: egalitarianism versus hierarchy; individualism versus collectivism; achievement versus relationship orientation; and loose versus tight structure. Appropriate support cannot be provided without understanding cultural expectations (See Spronk in this volume on cultural diversity).

5.4. Orientation to Distance Learning

Distance learning, particularly in asynchronous formats, requires an independence and discipline unfamiliar to many persons. Employees can be introduced to the distance environment by handbooks and online tours. Orientation materials should include information on how to obtain tutorial and technical support. However, there is also a need for companion materials to these orientation tools to evaluate how well prepared students are following their use. Self-assessment tools that test independent learning skills and tutorials for addressing deficiencies would be valuable components of the orientation package.

5.5. Orientation to Training Technology

Phillips (2002) recommends that organizations never assume learners will know how to use a training technology platform. Everyday use of email and word processing software does not guarantee understanding of how to upload files, use multi-media resources, diagnose technical problems or perform the full range of activities that might be found in a course. An orientation program that includes explicit instructions and ready access to ongoing technical support are crucial.

5.6. Access to Resources

Access to resources can be more difficult in a work environment than for the at-home distance learner in higher education. For example, the organization must evaluate the impact of networks and firewalls on access and system performance for online learning. The availability of an employee's workstation for study rather than job activities must be considered. Conflicts in access time or competition between job activities and study time might require a separate area where employees can use equipment uninterrupted for course participation. Zimmerman (2001) cites a study by the ASTD that found people

preferred working at a training center rather than their cubicles. Bonk's (2002) study reported that over 20 percent of responding organizations relied on employee access at home. Issues regarding responsibilities for providing equipment must be addressed. Some technologies (e.g., video-conferencing or interactive video training) require that the learner have easy access to particular equipment locations at specific times for course participation. In addition to ensuring access to appropriate equipment, access to digital libraries, glossaries, field-specific Web resources, book and Web-link recommendations, and online newsgroups can be useful (Bonk, 2002).

5.7. Mentoring

The value of mentoring in career development is well-established (Woodd, 1999). Mentor support can be offered through several models: apprenticeship; mentoring to achieve professional qualifications; and reflective practitioner. Woodd examines whether an effective mentoring relationship can be maintained when the primary form of contact is through telecommunications media. In her case study, Woodd found that telementoring could be used effectively as a supplement but could not replace the full spectrum of in-person mentoring functions, which include providing the direct social contact that many students prefer and perhaps need.

Stokes (2001) describes UK research in which a telementoring model developed in the Netherlands was studied to determine the effectiveness of providing online consultancy by trained mentors and academic experts. Mentors are accessed through posting questions on a Web site. Replies are sent by email and stored on a knowledge base for general reference. While the study addressed training support for small business managers, the concept could be adapted for a variety of training settings to expand the availability of mentors if the limitations found by Woodd are considered.

Hamilton-Jones (2000) describes another kind of mentor who is an educational counselor. This tutor mentor provides a broad range of ongoing personal support functions throughout an in-house degree program.

5.8. Peer Support

Workplace learners can receive peer support both within and outside of their courses. Phillips (2002) recommends that organizations begin introducing e-learning programs by selecting employees who have demonstrated an ability to learn independently and who are comfortable trying new things. She describes company successes in promoting distance training when these e-learning leaders have served as training ambassadors to their peers by giving presentations and encouraging co-workers to approach them with questions. For peer support within courses, Bonk (2002) reports that tools for learner online collaboration and sharing can be highly useful.

5.9. Incentives

Motivation is important not only in getting employees enrolled in distance training, but to complete courses and excel in applying the training to enhance job performance. Bonk (2002) reports that pedagogical principles were found to be most important for motivation in Web-based learning situations. Specific useful motivational techniques within a class included: cases or reflections about jobs; brainstorming or idea sharing; group projects; and visiting experts. However, work-related incentives, such as wage

increases, rewards, etc., were cited as highly important to 31 percent of respondents. Hipwell (2000) recommends recognition programs that can be as simple as providing certificates of achievement or completion, notices in internal newsletters or bulletin boards, or notes to managers. An ASTD study acknowledges the importance of such incentives to motivate employees to take and finish courses (Zimmerman, 2001). Others suggest more substantial rewards, such as compensation for training taken outside working hours, salary increases, time off, gift certificates or added job responsibilities for successful completion of training. Phillips (2002) recommends a menu of rewards to accommodate different motivational choices.

Perhaps the most powerful motivational force is for employees to see a clear linkage between training and their personal career goals, including their marketability for better jobs within their organization or externally if they need to seek a new position (Packer, 2000). Employees may elect to take courses that are job-related outside of working hours. The Distance Education and Training Council (1996) describes techniques to motivate employees by providing tuition aid, such as: advancing tuition at time of enrollment to be repaid by wage deductions which can be reimbursed at course completion; reimbursing tuition in full or part upon course completion; or reimbursing tuition by a scale based on grades.

5.10. Time Management

Time management must be addressed both by the supervisor and the employee. On the supervisor's part, s/he must support the employee by allocating adequate time away from job responsibilities to engage in study. To avoid interruptions by co-workers, trainees may be allowed to post a sign indicating "study time" and forward phone calls to another employee or answering service. Phillips (2002) recommends that workplace learners be encouraged to set up a regular study schedule at the beginning of their training to help them manage the relatively unstructured environment of asynchronous courses. She gives examples of effective uses of reminder systems based on pop-up calendars for scheduled tasks or automatic emails that notify learners that they have not worked on a course for a specified period.

5.11. Post-Training Application

Tarr (1998) points out that distance learning does not mean the employee works in isolation. She emphasizes the need for opportunities to apply new skills and knowledge in the workplace with the reinforcement and ongoing support of managers. While this situation is the same for classroom learning, management may need to pay attention to planning for and scheduling such opportunities in the context of the more flexible time frame of distance learning. A reward system for applying new skills may also be effective.

5.12. Training Evaluation and Remediation

Evaluation should be an ongoing activity by both the learner and management. Self-assessment tools can help the learner monitor progress, and management should maintain awareness of employee progress in order to determine the need for coaching or mentoring (Tarr, 1998). Bonk (2002) recommends that organizations evaluate completion rates and add time to competency measures.

6. Prioritizing in the Support Plan

Learner support for workplace training requires a significant commitment of time and resources. Bonk (2002) recommends that organizations develop strategic plans related to e-learning, including guidelines for acceptable levels of student course completion, skill retention, employee satisfaction, and return on investment. Planning will be an ongoing activity. Berge, Muilenburg, and Haneghan (2002) note a difference in the perception of barriers during the initial stages of organizational maturity in distance education and training and advise that ranking which obstacles are most important to solve will change as distance training and education within the organization gains importance.

Neither individual learner support nor organizational progress can be maintained effectively without an information system that tracks training history, skills and competency mastery, and course completion. Individual employees, supervisors, and training planners need appropriate access to a training database for the many management information functions it can serve.

Support for learners may be affected indirectly by supporting their managers. Packer (2000) recommends rewarding managers' performance, in part, on their record of staff development. Similarly, Phillips (2002) recommends holding front line managers accountable for their staff's e-learning course completion. Tarr (1998) suggests a manager's guide that outlines training goals, courses their employees may take, and the manager's role and responsibilities. Management guidance in training issues, assurance of access to resources, and provision for study time are key elements of success.

While initial infrastructure for e-learning may be modest, orientations, mentoring, and incentive programs also must not be neglected. Prioritizing among the various kinds of support may be more a determination of the degree to which they can be implemented rather than which ones can be excluded.

7. Conclusion

Several major themes emerge in books and articles addressing workplace learning. First, no organization is likely to develop a learning culture unless management from the top down supports it in communications, resource commitment, and acknowledgement of achievements. Second, distance training requires orientation programs to ensure learner comfort with the environment and delivery technology. Third, ongoing involvement of supervisors, peers, mentors, and technical assistants will reduce learner attrition and help ensure employee progress. Next, incentive programs, whether they are simple or substantial, are important in motivating employees to seek and complete training. And finally, organizations need to track progress of their employees' learning, course completion rates, and training effectiveness.

While many of the learner support features sound like obvious contributors to success, there is little research available to provide hard data regarding the return on investment potential. Larger organizations as well as academic researchers may want to include studies of both the short and long term benefits of providing support to the workplace learner.

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