
Down in the trenches: learning in a learning organization

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Abstract

Based on the argument that employees cannot be empowered until they are competent performers, illustrates how on-the-job training (OJT) is essential to operationalizing learning organization concepts. While not a lost art, OJT needs to be revisited as a cornerstone of training theory and practice. Outlines the steps in OJT, therefore, within the learning organization context.

Introduction

The concept of the learning organization has spawned an immense body of literature. Like any relatively new idea, its proponents are struggling to define the parameters of what might become a distinctive discipline. The result has brought into existence a plethora of highly articulate papers that approach the subject from a high level of abstraction.

We propose to take the opposite track, arguing that one of the key pillars of the learning organization, empowerment, cannot be taken from philosophy to action, unless the employee has solid, practical on-the-job training. Thus we wish to revisit the craft or the art of workplace training for, without on-the-job competence, employees cannot be empowered to do anything. We argue, further, that the development of a learning organization requires a top-down/bottom-up approach and that the latter has been sorely neglected, especially if learning organization concepts are to be acted on. This article, then, will concentrate solely on developing the essential skill base on which empowerment depends.

Why workplace training?

The focus here is on face-to-face encounters in the workplace that necessitate individualized on-the-job training (OJT). With the introduction of technology and sophisticated job aids, the face of training has changed drastically, but there are still many situations in which a trainee has to perform a task or series of tasks. OJT, therefore, cannot be ignored, although these activities are only one element in a package incorporating a suitable mix of formal training methods, support systems and technologies[1,2].

OJT is important because the responsibility for results lies with the trainer. In academia, if the students do not learn it is their fault; the professor is rarely chastised for his/her poor performance. By contrast, in industry the trainer is held personally responsible for results. Trainers, then, are forced to create learning experiences that work.

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From an employer's viewpoint, there is ample evidence to indicate that OJT affects both organizational and individual performance and the ability to take responsibility. Among factory employees, for example, those who have had on-the-job training and longer experience tend to receive better performance ratings than those without training and with less experience. Younger employees who have experienced some formal OJT appear to be less likely to switch jobs, show improved morale and are easier to cross-train, often an essential part of the empowerment process[3-5].

Empowerment, then, is difficult to achieve without OJT and, with approximately 30 per cent of a new employee's time spent in a learning mode, the human capital investment during the critical first days at work is substantial. Lest the enormous expenditures on workplace training (between \$90 and \$180 billion in North America) lull one into a sense of security, however, it must be realized that North Americans and Europeans are falling behind Asia in terms of human capital investment. Also much of what we do takes place in large companies; the small business sector – where most new employment is being created – does a spectacularly poor job of training employees[6-8].

The challenge that lies ahead includes the integration of an increasingly more culturally diverse workforce into an increasingly more competitive workplace, in a manner that leads to employee "buy-in" or commitment. Managers will need to develop creative approaches to OJT as employees exhibit more language, attitude and cultural barriers. It is likely, however, that people with the most education and access to on-the-job training will be the most successful and traditional concepts of learning-by-doing are fast gaining respectability[9-11].

On-the-job-training

What is OJT?

Although OJT has been practised since at least the Middle Ages, for our purposes the concept was formalized by the US Army during the Second World War. OJT is the design and application of a series of steps that enable the trainee to perform a job while either working on the job, or preparing to work on the job in the immediate future. Thus, for the new employee, OJT is part of

the orientation process, while for the experienced person OJT updates present job behaviour or cross-trains for flexibility[12,13].

Sloman[2] studied three British National Training Award winners that paid particular attention to the OJT delivery. From their programmes he developed a set of rules governing "good" on-the-job-training:

- (1) In terms of planning and preparation, OJT should not be managed differently from other types of training.
- (2) OJT should be integrated with other methods.
- (3) Ownership must be maintained, even when consultants are used.
- (4) OJ trainers must be chosen with care and trained properly[2].

Who trains?

A large percentage of OJT is performed by either more experienced employees or by immediate supervisors. Regardless of the approach, however, the prime prerequisite is that the trainer should like people! Just as Disney Corp. finds it easier to teach friendly people the art of customer service, great training begins with a fundamental attitude of friendly helpfulness and caring. Also employees or supervisors who are required to train must want to be trainers, be good communicators and be experts in their skill area. Concurrently, patience and respect for differences in the ability to learn are important, as the trainer sets the initial mood or climate of the learning experience. Once suitable individuals are found, they need training-the-trainer training and rewards for OJT activities. It is little use adding training responsibilities to an already busy employee, for example, without restructuring his/her job to include a training element. Nor is increased pay always the most sought-after reward (although it does not hurt); recognition, the chance to add variety to the work day, respect from new employees, training certificates and the prospect of either promotion and/or cross-training all help to make OJ Training worthwhile for the individual[13,14].

How to do OJT

Given that OJT is a chronic, long-standing weak spot in Western training practice, it is not surprising that little seems to have been written specifically about how to "do" on-the-job training. Even some of the classic examples of training literature have remarkably little to say on the subject[15-17].

There are two notable exceptions: Martin Broadwell's fine little book (*The Supervisor and On-the-Job Training*) [18] written in 1969 along with Rothwell and Kazanas' 1990 article published in *Training and Development Journal* [5]. The latter updates the steps, but Broadwell's work is unique in its emphasis on the trainer and employee preparation. Bearing in mind that OJT will be but one element in the training plan, job analysis and objective determination already will have been completed. Also the essential psychology about how and why people learn should have been taught as part of a training-the-trainer course [18,5].

Preparation phase

Building on this background, the OJT process consists of a preparation phase and an activity or doing phase. As nothing can destroy learning effectiveness faster than an unprepared instructor, Broadwell begins with self-preparation.

Any face-to-face encounter in business needs to be planned but, when training, "prep" becomes especially important. Aside from routine precautions about using the most up-to-date job analysis, manuals and other information, i.e. knowing what you are talking about, the key activity is to develop a communications strategy that fits the trainee (do not forget to find out what the trainee already knows) or the situation. A lecture, for example, would not be an appropriate method for training groups in the art of lift truck maintenance. Even when a lecture might be the right approach, support materials like overhead projection and hand-outs have to be carefully constructed to fit the audience.

As Renner's (1989) *The Instructor's Survival Kit* [14] and other publications contain detailed information on this phase, no attempt will be made to reproduce these data here. Instead, an abbreviated "Techniques Chart" is included to illustrate some of the many ways in which OJT can be accomplished:

- *On-the-spot lecture*: Gather trainees into groups and tell them how to do the job.
- *Viewed performance/feedback*: Watch the person at work and give constructive feedback, e.g. the sales manager makes a call with a new salesperson.
- *Following Nellie*: Supervisor trains a senior employee, who in turn trains new hires (showing the ropes).

- *Job aid approach*: A job aid (step-by-step instructions or video) is followed, while the trainer monitors performance.
- *The training step sequence*: The trainer systematically introduces the task, following a planned sequence.

Each one of these communication techniques requires a different type and level of preparation. The instructor needs to understand the background, capabilities and attitudes of his/her trainees, as well as the nature of the tasks to be performed, before choosing a technique or combination of techniques [14].

Note that trial and error has not been included. There are very few circumstances that justify throwing an employee into a new position without proper training. Learning from one's mistakes not only is inefficient, but also can be humiliating, dangerous and lead to poor customer relations. Similarly, being asked to take responsibility for one's actions and to innovate, in a climate of rapid change, activities often associated with empowerment can be daunting indeed, if an employee does not have the confidence that stems from competent performance.

The second part of the preparation phase concerns the trainee. There are three stages: putting the individual at ease; guaranteeing the learning; building interest/showing personal advantage [18]:

- (1) The trainer must remember that the trainee may be apprehensive. Therefore it is unwise to begin too abruptly. Some small talk may be appropriate to relax the trainee and set the tone for the training sessions. Most individuals learn more readily when relaxed. A short conversation concerning any matter of interest – the weather, sports, a work-related item – should be effective. Obviously, the topic chosen must be suitable for the situation.
- (2) When the conversation does turn to the training session, the trainer needs to guarantee to the employee that learning is possible. Again, a simple statement, "Don't worry about this machine, Sally; in about three hours you'll be operating it almost as well as everyone else. I've trained at least ten people in this procedure." The trainee now knows that it is possible to learn (i.e. learning will take place) and the instructor has the ability to teach the process, adding to his/her confidence.

- (3) Although the instructor may be interested, the trainee might be apprehensive or may not understand the effect OJT will have on quality of work life. Developing enthusiasm is sometimes difficult, but pointing out some personal gain helps to create interest. The idea that the training activity will lead to something positive creates opportunity to design rewards: more self-esteem, easier work, higher-level work, less routine, more control over work, greater opportunity or security. Once the appropriate reward is found, provided that it can be obtained, most employees will respond to OJT.

There often will be some resisters, however, as training is change and individuals accept change at different rates. This trainee preparation phase will identify those who are not responding. As the trainer is responsible for meeting measurable objectives, it is important to evaluate the likely level of co-operation among trainees, so that individual remedial action can be taken.

One way to defuse resistance, for example, is to train employees in order of their perceived enthusiasm. When the resisters see others reaping the rewards, they usually agree to be trained, albeit grudgingly. As the instructor does not own the trainees' attitude, only their behaviour, training objectives still can be met, even though the work situation is not ideal.

The steps in OJT

If the trainee is to perform a task or an operation, he/she should be positioned slightly behind or beside the instructor, so that the job is viewed from a realistic angle. Then the step approach to the OJT process can be utilized (see Table I) [19].

While these steps may seem elaborate, they have to be applied with the complexity and possible safety hazards of the job in mind. Very simple tasks may require only one demonstration. Also each employee brings different skills and background to the workplace. Competent preparation, therefore, will eliminate over-training and the resultant boredom and inattention.

OJT is not a lost art, but the process has been severely neglected. The purpose of this "how to" article is to reinforce the concept

Table I The steps in OJT

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- (1) *Show the trainee how to perform the job*
 - Be sure to break the job into manageable tasks; present only as much as can be absorbed at one time; remember, too, that individuals learn at different speeds, so some trainees, for example, may be able to learn six or seven sequences at once, while others can absorb only four or five. *Repeat step 1 as necessary; be patient.*
 - Don't forget to tell why as well as how.
 - Point out possible difficulties as well as safety procedures.
 - Encourage questions.
 - (2) *Repeat and explain key points in more detail*
 - Safety is especially important.
 - Take the time to show how the job fits into any larger systems.
 - Show why the job is important.
 - Show why key points are more important than others.
 - *Repeat step 2 as necessary; be patient.*
 - Encourage questions.
 - (3) *Allow the trainee to see the whole job again*
 - Ask questions to determine level of comprehension.
 - *Repeat step 3 as necessary; be patient.*
 - Encourage questions.
 - (4) *Ask the trainee to perform less difficult parts of the job*
 - Try to ensure initial success.
 - Don't tell how; if possible ask questions, but try to keep frustration low.
 - *Repeat step 4 as necessary; be patient.*
 - (5) *Allow the trainee to perform the entire job*
 - Gently suggest improvements where necessary, i.e. keep feedback positive.
 - If needed, repeat Step 4 until the trainee feels comfortable.
 - *Repeat step 5 as necessary; be patient*
 - (5) *Trainee begins to work alone*
 - Tell when and where to find help if necessary.
 - Supervise closely, then taper off as the employee gains in confidence and skill.
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that practical training, supported by sound theories and philosophies, should be made part of our deliberations about the learning organization. To neglect this element is to mire ourselves in an unending circle of argument that will alienate line managers. It is time, then, to put more substance to our thoughts about learning organizations and to move from the abstract to the concrete.

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