

Using training effectively



Training can make a mediocre employee good at something, and a good person excellent. On the other hand, a person without training can be a brake on the business.

Whether you are aiming for increased sales, more efficient production, better use of IT, or simply a reliable team that can solve its own problems, training is often the best solution. By taking a systematic approach, you can achieve an excellent return on your training investment. This briefing covers:

- Identifying your important training needs.
- Deciding on the training objectives.
- Creating a training programme.
- Monitoring and evaluating training.

1 Your training needs

As with any investment, target most of your training on the areas where you can reap the biggest, fastest and easiest rewards.

1.1 Is there an area of your business that is experiencing **problems**, or that is being held back in some way?

- Do you have a shortage of a particular set of skills, or a likely future skills shortage?
- Do you receive customer complaints? If so, what are the causes of these complaints?
- Is one team or part of your business underperforming?

You can draw up a list of these problems by asking your employees (see **3**). In each case, training may, or may not, provide the solution.

1.2 Employees often need training when your business is **changing**.

- When you launch any new product, train your team how to sell and deliver it.
- Each time you purchase new software, include training on how to use it.
- The Internet is changing the business environment. Even if you do not have a company website, allow your employees to use the Internet. Keep building knowledge and skills in this crucial area.

1.3 Use training to safeguard the **critical** areas of your business.

- Many businesses rely on one person to complete a particular technical operation. It is vital to document the process and train other employees as a precaution.

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- Some hazardous processes cannot be undertaken by anyone who is not trained.

1.4 When considering your training needs, compare training with **other possible solutions** (see box below).

2 Training objectives

2.1 To keep training relevant and focused, set **SMART** (specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-limited) objectives.

- For example, doing a time-management course 'with the objective of clearing your in-tray by the end of every day' will focus you, during and after the course.

2.2 Often, the objective will be to reach a specified **standard** for the performance of a particular task.

- Set the standard by assessing how well an experienced person completes the task.
- Try breaking the standard down into three required components: knowledge, skills and attitude.
- Set out the conditions under which the

standard is to be achieved.

- When a new task is introduced, the desired performance standard may be less clear.

2.3 Keep training objectives in line with **business objectives**.

- For example, if you are setting up an online shop, train staff how to use the software so they can maintain the website.

3 Commitment of employees

Successful training depends on getting your employees involved.

3.1 Win your employees' **support** for the training, by explaining the need for it and the objectives you plan to achieve.

- Explain the benefits for the employee as well as the business. Be enthusiastic.
- Initially, train those who are keen. Then let them demonstrate the benefits of the training to the doubters.

3.2 Ask employees what training they think would improve their **productivity**.

- If an employee asks for training, ask him or her to describe the benefits it will have for your business.

3.3 Find out how each employee **prefers to learn**.

- Some people may enjoy group learning, while others prefer individual study.
- Some people prefer steady progress through a training process. Others are keen to get hands-on experience as soon as possible.
- Explain the different training options you are considering. Let people know their training preferences will be acknowledged.

3.4 **Personal development plans** are a systematic method of identifying training needs and agreeing the best way forward.

4 The training plan

A training plan is essential to define the structure and outcomes you want from training.

4.1 Draw up a **training brief**, setting out your practical training objectives.

- For example, you might list ten tasks and ten awkward situations a new credit

When training isn't the answer

Training is not the panacea for every business problem. Before investing in training solutions, analyse what is really needed.

A If an employee is underperforming, they may be the **wrong person** for the job. The answer may be a switch to another role, or, in extreme cases, dismissal.

B The problem may be caused by **inadequate systems** and policies. For example, a jammed switchboard may be caused by a high volume of calls and inadequate equipment. The answer may be to add another receptionist, or to upgrade your technology.

C Basic training can often be achieved by putting together a **resource base**.

- This explains where to find things (eg key documents), how to complete basic tasks, office procedures and other basics. People can then train themselves, updating each entry as necessary, so the resource base remains up to date.

controller should be able to handle.

Without this approach, there is a danger of the employee learning the theory, with no practical understanding of how to apply it.

- Draw up an achievable training brief with the trainer.

4.2 For each course, have a written training **programme** identifying the stages of the programme, the location, the training content and methods used and trainer.

Buying training

- A** Choose a provider that addresses your **needs**, rather than trying to sell you a standard training solution.
- Business support organisations, such as Business Link, are a good starting point. As well as courses of their own, they can direct you to a range of alternatives.
 - Train to Gain provides independent, impartial Skills Brokers who will visit your business, help you identify how training can help your business and how to source the right training provider (0800 015 55 45, www.traintogain.gov.uk).
- B** Establish **who** will deliver the training and what experience he or she has.
- Often the person selling the training is far more impressive than the trainer who turns up on the day.
- C** Look beyond the training activity itself and agree what **support** is needed.
- For example, training on a new database might be in three stages: agreeing objectives, completing the main training, and follow-up support to help people achieve agreed action plans.
- D** Compare the expected **benefits** of the training with the total costs involved.
- Allow for the direct costs as well as the set up time and the work time of those attending.
 - Consider the wider benefits.
 - Ask external training providers to quote for 100 per cent of costs, even if an exact estimate is not possible. Ask what additional expenses will be charged for — such as phone calls and travel.
 - Consider how to reduce training costs.
 - The benefits of training will be lost if employees return to a workplace where they cannot use what they have learned.

- Sign and date items as the employee progresses through the training. A copy of this record can then be added to the employee's personnel file.
- Documentation is essential for most formal qualifications, such as NVQs and to satisfy health and safety requirements.
- Note the cost of each element, so you can evaluate which stages are worthwhile.

'Off-the-shelf' training courses address many of these issues automatically. Many are designed to achieve, or count towards, a particular recognised qualification.

List all the training activities for the year in your training plan. Confirm that the budgets, resources and timing are all viable.

5 In-house training

All businesses automatically carry out in-house training when a new employee arrives, sometimes without realising it.

The challenge is to get everyone's performance up to standard, as quickly and cheaply as possible, with minimal disruption.

5.1 Most in-house training takes the form of **on-the-job training**.

This lets people learn at their own pace and apply new knowledge immediately.

- Take care when deciding who will provide the training.
- The trainer must be technically able to do the task.
Provide relevant training for trainers, including how to set goals, how to break information down into small steps and how to progress at the pace of the trainee.
- If the trainer has bad work practice or a bad attitude, these will be passed on.
- Consider using the Train to Gain service. Training is carried out on site ensuring minimum disruption to the employee or your business.

5.2 Job shadowing involves one person showing another all the aspects of a job.

- This is especially suitable for new employees, as part of their induction. Shadowing is a painless way to cover a lot of ground in a short space of time.

5.3 Once a person can do the job, continue **coaching** the employee.

“The question is not just how much your training will cost, but how much it will cost if you don't train.”

**Peter Neall,
Neill Scott
Partnership
training
consultants**

“If you work as a team, train as a team. One person attempting to carry out 'best practice' in isolation is doomed to failure.”

**Toby Peyton-
Jones,
Siemens**

- Periodically review progress. You can give feedback and guidance on how further improvements can be made.
- 5.4** Consider finding a **mentor**, especially for senior employees whose performance has a major impact on the business.
- Mentoring is usually carried out by someone outside the immediate team, or even by someone from outside the company.
- Mentoring can be extremely effective in helping to unleash the potential of your more dynamic (or difficult) employees. People can open up to an outsider in ways that are impossible with a line manager — not least because the line manager can be the biggest obstacle to progress.
 - A good mentor is a good listener, with the experience to suggest practical solutions. He or she should also set an example and challenge the trainee's ideas.

6 External training courses

- 6.1** The main advantage of using external trainers is that they are **specialists**.
- The trainer may have spent years refining a training course.
 - The trainer can bring you up to date with current best practice.
- 6.2** Training comes in a wide range of **forms**.
- Lectures and conferences typically thrust a mass of information at a large audience.
 - Seminars help people acquire knowledge in a more interactive way.
 - Workshops give people information and let them practise working out problems.
 - Distance learning may make use of workbooks, videos or DVDs, while e-learning is computer-based.
- 6.3** E-learning offers a number of key business benefits.
- It is a powerful and cost-effective way of introducing new ideas and approaches. It can also be used to monitor progress and assess learning.
 - It is especially useful when you need to train a large number of staff across different locations (eg to demonstrate compliance with health and safety regulations).
 - Trainees progress at their individual pace.
 - The course can be completed at home or in the workplace.
 - There are a wide range of courses available. Interactive courses are also available to

support behavioural training.

- 6.4** External training can bring **fresh ideas** and energy into the learning process.
- Mixing with trainees from other businesses can be an opportunity to discover how these other businesses do things.
 - A good trainer may challenge the way your business currently operates.
- 6.5** Train to Gain Skills Brokers offer impartial advice to employers. They can help you identify and source the training you need to support your business objectives, increase productivity and improve overall performance (0800 015 55 45, www.traintogain.gov.uk).

7 Did it work?

You know your training has worked if it delivers the objectives outlined in your training brief.

- 7.1** Review the **impact** of the training on performance, as part of a regular appraisal process.
- Any additional training needs can be discussed at this point.
- 7.2** Evaluate **training** by asking your employees to review their training experience.
- Was the training relevant to the job and appropriate to their level of expertise?
- When employees complete any training, discuss how their learning will be put into action.
 - Training assessment forms may help you discover more about the course and establish what worked and what did not. But be aware that what the trainee sees as a 'positive' training experience is not necessarily valuable to your business.
- 7.3** Monitor improvements in the performance of the **business**.
- Measurable performance indicators include sales, production costs, output, attendance levels and staff turnover.
 - Qualitative improvements may include higher quality goods or services, better teamwork, fewer customer complaints and more innovation in your business.
 - Has the training added value to your business?

Expert contributors

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