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Training: The Fundamentals You Need To Know

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Training may be defined as any organizationally planned effort to change the behaviour or attitudes of employees so that they can perform to acceptable standards on the job. Training and development can increase organizational effectiveness by helping to raise many employees' performance capabilities beyond merely acceptable levels, thus impacting the bottom line. Training can even be marketed as an employee benefit and a recruiting and retention tool.

Training and/or learning can be developed internally or outsourced through an external provider such as a training organization or post-secondary institution. Many factors should be considered when choosing whether to customize a learning solution, to buy a pre-packaged program, or to outsource the learning by partnering with a training consultant or organization. These factors may include, for example, time for development; expertise; training content; costs; trainee characteristics; volume of trainees; organizational culture; need for just-in-time training; and need for customized learning solutions. If external or pre-packaged programs are selected, one must be careful that the goals are consistent with the training objectives and culture of the organization. Some organizations rely on several options, dependent upon learning needs.

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Regardless, all training should incorporate the principles of adult learning. Furthermore, all training and development programs should ideally follow the four basic processes of training and development: needs assessment; design of training, including learning objectives; delivery or facilitation; and evaluation.

A formal needs analysis identifies specific performance weaknesses, or opportunities for improving effectiveness. Needs assessment techniques may include some of the following: observation, questionnaires, key consultation, print media, interviews, group discussions, tests, records and reports, and even work samples. One must be careful to diagnose if training is the right solution for a problem. Often, management will identify a performance deficiency and request training before considering other potential contributory factors. As well, employees may be taught skills they already know, or sometimes an existing popular training program is purchased that may not be suitable to satisfy an identified training or development need. Training should not be the only solution considered to solve business problems, as other alternatives may produce better results.

The second process in training and development is referred to as instructional design. Based on the information obtained from the needs assessment, the learning objectives (that is, what specific behaviours will be achieved) can be developed as a framework for the training itself. Learning objectives should be both measurable and observable, and should relate directly to performance on the job. To design the content of their training programs, instructional designers can use a variety of methods. Learning can be acquired through lectures, semi-

nars, conferences, role play, case studies on the job training, coaching, video sessions, experiential games, internships and job rotation, videotapes, e-learning, and blended methods. When choosing a training method, consideration should be given to feedback, reinforcement, practice opportunities, motivation, transfer of learning, accommodation of individual learning styles, and costs. There are many training methods available and the advantages and disadvantages of each should be considered carefully.

Delivery of training can take many formats. Depending upon factors such as costs, trainees' geographical location, expertise in-house, and training facility availability, training may be delivered in workshop format with a face-to-face instructor, through e-learning methodologies or distance learning techniques, through self-directed learning opportunities (reading and workbooks), or through a combination of methods (known as blended learning).

Training is an investment and thus should be evaluated within the organizational context. Training can be measured as a return on investment (ROI) or by using Donald Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation. The latter model suggests training can be evaluated on several levels, including the reaction of the learners, knowledge of learning and skills, transfer of learning and behaviour back on the job, and results or impact on organizational effectiveness. Evaluation is critical to the process of linking training to previously defined organizational strategies.

To improve learning within the organization and to supplement training, organizations sometimes provide other non-formal activities and strategies such as self-development, coaching, mentoring, performance aids, electronic performance support, and organizational development interventions aimed at system-wide change. Training initiatives should result from strategic planning, and should always be integrated within an organizational context dedicated to improving performance.

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