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Training need not be draining

Eyeing the future: Better companies build better workers

In addition to a myriad of other topics, one term continually bounced around this election season is "job training." What does job training mean to the average American? More importantly, how should it be provided and what good does it do? And finally, who's responsible for providing it? The answers to these questions aren't that simple, but most experts agree that effective job training provides a great service to both employees and their employers.

"Job training has traditionally earned its seat on the ballot of political debating whether candidates are discussing federal positions, the military or corporate America," says Craig Sawin, chairman and CEO of Novations Group Inc. in Boston. "Americans seem to be most interested in a better economy, and now, many are poised to seek out better jobs with better training, an opportunity virtually unheard of two years ago when job uncertainty hit markets with unforgivable force."

Serious business

Companies that take job training seriously have found it to be valuable in terms of keeping their operations successful. For example, AFLAC, a leading insurance provider based in Columbus, Ga., has plans to double in size over the next several years and knew job training would play a key role in that development.

"We knew we needed to train a world-class staff here if we wanted to keep our roots in the town where we started 50 years ago," says Dave Watson, spokesperson for AFLAC.

Two years ago, AFLAC partnered with a local college to train new workers to begin a career in customer service in their call center. The program lasts nine weeks and prepares people in Columbus and the surrounding area for a career at AFLAC. With more than 150 people completing the program so far, AFLAC is successfully training for its future.

Make it work

Determining the most effective way to reach people is at the center of the job training debate. According to Clark Swain, senior vice president for Nimbus Partners, a technology consulting company in New



York, good job training occurs when people actually adopt and integrate what they've learned into their daily business.

"You need to create a course that will allow them to understand what needs to happen, how it needs to happen and then give them some feedback on their performance," Swain says. "If you can't do that, job training is nothing more than a bunch of manuals."

If the thought of job training makes you think of classrooms and lectures, you may not be far off, and according to Ted Sun, president and CEO of Executive Balance in Columbus, Ohio, that's part of the problem.

"A study by Cornell University found that the typical lecture style of many trainers has only a 5 percent retention rate," he says. "Yet, so many job training organizations still lecture, lecture and lecture."

While lecturing may not always work, Mallery Tytel, president of Healthy Workplaces, a management consulting firm in Bolton, Conn., says that effective job training usually involves a little bit of creativity.

"I've seen people use e-learning

programs," she says. "But I think networking among peers and involving an environment with colleagues can be very valuable."

One of the biggest challenges employers face when implementing training is that more often than not, the undertaking is complex and difficult to integrate. Because of this, the real value most employees get from a trainer is when the people who are actually responsible for the process are doing the training.

"For example, if the change is directed toward manufacturing, then the training should be with someone from that organization," says Swain. "Often people in the sessions take information from peers better than an outside party."

Employee's role

There's no doubt that it's in the employer's best interest to provide effective job training. According to Sawin, a recent Gallup poll stated that workers who feel engaged in their job are more likely to stay in their current positions; 40 percent of U.S. employees said they plan to spend their entire careers with their current

company, but that number rises to 65 percent among those who feel engaged.

"Gallup states that to ensure a company's long-term success, workers must have a sense that they are working toward a greater purpose and that they are a valuable asset to the company," he says.

Yet regardless of this fact, employees still have a lot of responsibility in the overall effectiveness of job training.

"Today, a lot of it relies on the employees," says Swain. "Companies bring in professional trainers and flow them through the sessions and they assume once they've sat through them, the training is complete. While it's the responsibility of the company to provide training in an effective way, it's equally important for the employee to understand how everything impacts them when they're in the session. It's really a 50-50 split."

One challenge employees face is trying not to lose sight of the importance of job training during their hectic work schedule.

"A lot of people just want to get through the day and get their work done," says Tytel. "A lot of people don't want to have to leave the office to attend training."