Personnel Turnover: How to address the continual need for new training

Every retail organization has to deal with turnover in its personnel. It is important for teams and individuals to progress in their careers and grow professionally, which means people will leave and others will join the team. But this presents a continual training challenge, particularly when complex business systems and processes are at stake. What are the ways to mitigate this disruption? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

If on the job training is insufficient, static course materials are unwieldy, and instructor led training is expensive, what is the answer? The solution is a judicious use of all three of these options. Utilizing a combination of these tactics will have improved impact on the quality of work and – in the long run – save the company time and money.

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On the Job Training

For many teams, the default methodology is on the job training. Put simply, a colleague with the necessary skills sits with the new employee and does a "brain transfer," attempting to explain in as few hours as possible everything the new hire needs to know. The advantages here are obvious: time and money. Since there is no "trainer" involved, there is no additional monetary cost. The new employee may not even be able to do their job, so the cost of their time is minimal. The real cost is the time lost for the mentor.

The mentor in this situation is usually the lead user of the group, the one with the most seniority, experience and knowledge. This sounds like a perfect solution, but there are downsides. Since the lead user is extremely familiar with the material, he or she may speed through it. This is partly because it is second nature to that person, and he or she may not remember a time when they did not know everything while in the learning stage. Because the mentor is so critical to the department, that person's goal (and the goal of the manager) will likely be to turn the training around as quickly as possible. This is not a scenario conducive to complex system and process training, even if the mentor is a natural teacher.

An overreliance on this style of training can result in a "generational" problem, as misinformation is ingrained in the department, miscommunication leads to confusion, and the overall result is degradation of the team's knowledge base.

Static Training Materials

Some organizations create manuals or online courses that explain everything about a particular job. Theoretically, a new hire can sit with these materials and teach themselves about the new job. Creation of such course work by the members of the department is generally beyond the scope of the user community. They simply do not have the time and may not have the requisite skills in writing and organizing a training manual or online course. For companies with a dedicated onsite training department, this may be an efficient method, assuming the trainers have the time and staff to support all the training needs that exist.

Physical manuals are hard enough to create, but online coursework may require a huge development effort to build in order to meet a department's needs. Creation of static training materials of either kind requires not only the time and effort of the training department, but significant time from the lead user or users of the particular department. They will have to accomplish a much more thorough version of the "brain transfer" concept to give the training department the needed information to build the coursework, not to mention the additional time required to vet these materials before use.

After the training materials are completed, they have a limited shelf life. Eventually, there will be enough changes to require a restructuring of most, if not all, of the existing coursework and training manuals. It's imperative to keep these materials updated as systems and processes change. Even the simplest of tasks may change demonstrably when a system is upgraded, or when an organization adds a new step into the process. Failure to keep static training materials updated is just a different version of the same problem: perpetuation of outdated or simply incorrect information for job training.
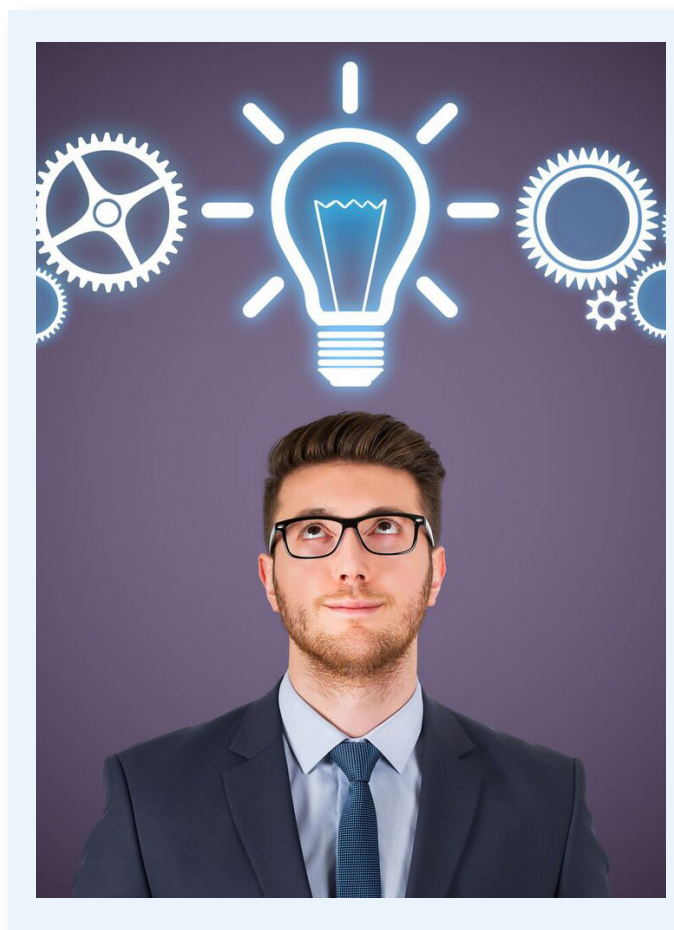
Instructor Led Training

At first blush, instructor led training sounds like the least cost-effective type of training. It is often the first choice to train a team on a new system or process, but it fades away as a primary option to maintain user knowledge. While managers are motivated to keep their teams well educated, it is generally not possible to provide classroom training for every new hire in a team. The cost of hiring trainers, the difficulty of scheduling, and the sheer amount of time a team is away from its day-to-day work is often daunting enough to postpone this kind of training indefinitely.

The advantages are, on the other hand, significant. A training session, even if only a few days, can reintroduce stale concepts to a user community, clear up misconceptions, introduce features of systems that were not well known, and bring to light process issues that may have languished behind the scenes for months or years. A classroom session not dominated by canned lectures, but which embraces discussion moderated by a neutral party, is often the best way to spark debate about process improvements that weekly staff meetings are not able to touch.

What's the Answer

A new user should have time to learn the ropes from a local expert, someone familiar with the ins and outs of the new job. The new user should also have access to well-maintained materials that document the minutia of a job that can't be easily remembered, or easily jotted down on a note pad. The user should also have access to outside training. They should not have to wait years to receive a structured classroom training to solidify and improve their knowledge and confidence in their job.