

On-the-Job Training That Works

On-the-job training is implemented often, but not always well. This case study describes a successful program that can be applied to any type of organization.

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One of the most frequently used training methods, on-the-job training (OJT), is also one of the most poorly implemented. The programs are seldom well-structured, seldom based on well-defined performance criteria and seldom time-efficient.

One organization, however, is enjoying favorable results from its OJT program. The structure of this program, although presented here for a bank, is generic and useful for a wide range of training situations. In fact, the same program has been used successfully in a major oil and gas corporation as well as a large steel manufacturer.

The OJT program was developed initially for ten recent college graduates hired by the bank. OJT was just one part of an individualized training program for each trainee. The target job was assistant office manager in a bank branch office. The line of progression for a bank office was as follows:

Teller	Head Teller	Platform Banking Advisor	Assistant Office Manager	Office Manager
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The time frame for the OJT training program was nine months. For six months, each trainee was to be assigned to various departments related to the target job. Three months were to be spent in an apprenticeship status as an assistant office manager. At the end of the training,

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the employees were expected to perform at "an above average proficiency level" in assistant office manager positions.

The OJT design sequence

There were seven major steps in the OJT program design:

- Obtain top-level executive endorsement and support.
- Identify departments in the organization relevant to the target job (assistant office manager).
- Develop performance competency lists and performance measures for each OJT area.
- Determine the training schedule for each trainee.
- Assign a mentor to each trainee.
- Design and develop an OJT training manual.
- Design and develop a trainee and supervisor reporting system.

The OJT program was a multi-departmental project requiring cooperation from 13 distinct areas of the bank. The first step was to enlist the support of the vice-president for human resources in obtaining a go-ahead from senior management. This was necessary due to the scope of the project, the time and effort required of many line managers and other employees, and the overall importance of the OJT training program. It was to be a model program for future use throughout the bank.

The rationale and goals of the OJT program were presented to upper-level executives at a monthly executive meeting. These executives then communicated the rationale and goals to their respective managers, whose involvement and support would be essential to the success of the program. The managers were in-

formed that they would be contacted shortly by the training and development unit staff.

When the training staff contacted these managers, they received an enthusiastic response. It was clear that top-level support and a "top-down" approach would be invaluable to the success of the program. It avoided the "nobody told us about it" reaction.

The second step was to identify departments relevant to the target job. Several office managers were interviewed. All of them were recommended by their vice-president based on their expertise in the banking branch system and on superior performance in their current positions. Current assistant office managers and former management trainees also were interviewed.

The data from these interviews were then analyzed, and the conclusions were confirmed with the personnel who took part in the interviews, as well as with their vice-president. The result was a consensus on the areas to be included in the OJT program. The areas were branch office functions, loan analysis, loan review, collections, consumer credit, branch office marketing, sales administration and support, trust sales and money management.

Next, tasks were analyzed so that lists of performance competencies for each OJT area could be compiled. The subject matter expert (SME) for each area—usually the area manager—was required to work with the training staff to help conduct this analysis. SMEs were asked to write a first draft of competencies. This draft would then be discussed in a meeting with the training staff and, possibly, with other SMEs. The competencies were to be written using the format of performance objectives. The following were to be indicated:

- the "skills/knowledge" (competencies) that the trainee would be required to attain in that OJT area;
- the "methods, activities and personnel" to be used to help the trainee attain those competencies;
- how (specifically) the trainee's performance regarding those competencies would be evaluated;
- the estimated completion time for each competency, as well as the total estimated completion time for that OJT area;
- the name of the "OJT coach" responsible for helping the trainee attain each competency.

The training staff worked closely with one OJT area in the bank to develop a model list of OJT competencies for one

area. This model served as a valuable time-saving reference for the other OJT areas in developing their competency listings. It also increased the accuracy of the other responses and ensured a uniform format for OJT competency specification. Each area was forced to think about issues such as training methodology, personnel to be involved, completion time and evaluation of trainees. Providing the OJT areas with a model from which to work also saved the training staff many hours of consultation with individual areas. As a result, the majority of the 13 resulting competency lists required little or no modification.

The training staff received all OJT competencies within the requested 30-day deadline for submission. It then began the task of scheduling the 10 management trainees for their 6-month OJT experience.

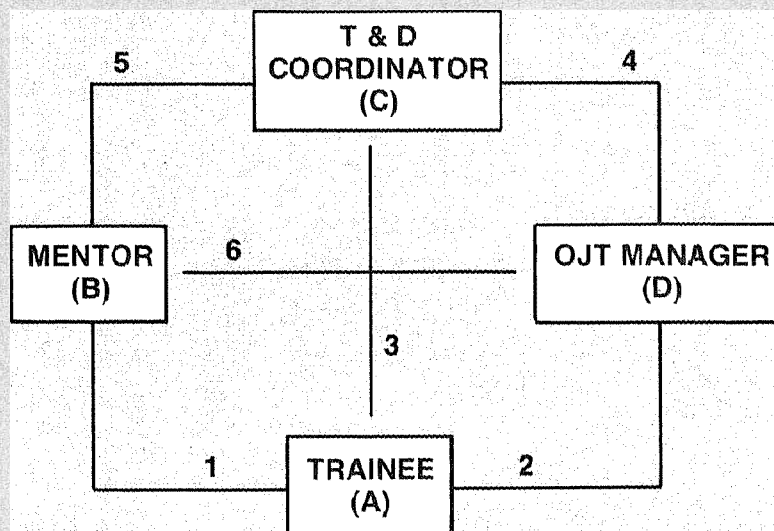
The length of time each trainee would spend in each OJT area was determined initially by the area SME. These timelines were modified later (usually shortened) as the trainees progressed. A deliberate decision was made to assign conservative timelines for the OJT assignments, since the SMEs believed shortening the assignments would be easier than lengthening them. In addition, all those involved in the project agreed that mastery of the critical competencies for each OJT area should take precedence over time considerations. If a trainee did not attain the competencies in a particular OJT area, he or she was given the opportunity to go back to that OJT area and try again.

There were five teams of two trainees each. Trainees were matched up by the vice-president and office managers who hired them. The matches were based on observations of the trainees during the interviewing process, the backgrounds of the trainees and the location of each trainee's residence (to make car pooling easier, for instance).

There were two reasons for this approach. First, scheduling was greatly facilitated since 5 teams rather than 10 trainees were scheduled. Second, this buddy system made the trainees' entry into the various areas of the bank easier. It allowed paired trainees to help one another. Also, the training staff held regularly scheduled problem-solving meetings with the entire group of trainees so that any problems could be addressed immediately.

Several weeks before the trainees arrived, all OJT areas were notified of the entire training schedule. Feedback from

Figure 1—Communication Channels in OJT Program



Communication Channels:

1. Trainee with Mentor
2. Trainee with OJT Manager
3. Trainee with Training & Development Coordinator
4. Training & Development Coordinator with OJT Manager
5. Training & Development Coordinator with Mentor
6. Mentor with OJT Manager

the OJT areas resulted in a few minor adjustments to the schedule.

Once the trainees began the OJT, they were responsible for monitoring their own progress through the training schedule, as well as informing the contact people in their upcoming areas when they would arrive. In the event that an OJT area was not ready for a trainee—perhaps due to priority projects—the trainee either was routed to another OJT area or was assigned to a project by his or her mentor.

Before the management trainees arrived, they each were assigned to a mentor—an experienced office manager who would guide the trainee through the program. In most cases mentors had helped in the initial design of the training program. In all cases participation of mentors was voluntary. There was an unspoken honor attached to being asked to be a mentor. Mentors were recognized throughout the bank as “the best we had”—a reputation which was backed by years of outstanding performance.

The role of the mentor was critical to the success of the overall OJT experience. Therefore, a special training session for mentors was conducted. Its purposes were:

- to let the mentors know that they were, indeed, chosen because of their outstanding performance records and for their positive attitude toward helping management trainees;
- to clarify the respective roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the training program;
- to establish a personal, friendly relationship between each mentor and the training staff;
- to describe communication channels, reporting procedures, and training program goals and target dates;
- to establish a forum for the exchange of ideas among experienced and talented employees for both this training program and those in the future.

Five weeks of the training program were devoted to “mentor weeks.” During

those five weeks, mentors assigned their trainees to whatever type of activity they thought most appropriate at the time. In most cases this involved working on various projects under the direction of their mentors. Typical projects included taking part in a telephone promotion of a new bank product or service, accompanying the mentor on sales calls, reviewing specific banking office procedures in order to make recommendations for improvement, and others. The office location of the mentor served as the home office of the trainee.

The next step was to design and develop an OJT training manual. Trainees, mentors, the training and development staff, OJT personnel and others involved received the same manual. The manual was divided into the following sections: table of contents and introduction; Gantt chart (for scheduling) and list of OJT areas with OJT manager shown; communication/responsibilities matrix (see Figure 1 and Table 1); OJT training specifications for each OJT area; employee-supervisor conference reports (for assessment of trainee's performance in each OJT area; and trainee OJT reports (for trainee's own assessment of each OJT area upon its completion.

The final step was to design and develop a reporting system. Upon the trainee's completion of each OJT area, the OJT manager submitted an employee-supervisor conference report. This assessment of the trainee's performance was completed in much the same manner as an employee performance appraisal would be done—based on a meeting with the trainee. Basically, the form included comments from the OJT manager regarding the trainee's overall performance, a list of competencies attained, a list of competencies not yet attained and any recommendations for further action.

Within two business days of completing each OJT area, the trainee submitted a trainee OJT report. This was a self-assessment of performance. The form also asked for the trainee's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the OJT experience and suggestions for improving it.

Responses from the trainees, the branch offices to which they were assigned after the OJT program, their mentors and the OJT areas involved were extremely favorable. Managers who had been less than enthusiastic about "another gimmick" readily admitted that the OJT program was anything *but* a gimmick. They liked the fact that while the program

Table 1—Communication/Responsibilities Matrix

WHEN: WHO:	DURING EACH OJT	AFTER EACH OJT	BIMONTHLY	AS NEEDED
TRAINEE (A)	Keeps track of all activities, accomplishments, strengths and weaknesses of OJT Informs mentor and T&D coordinator of progress and expected completion date ASAP	Submits report of OJT to B, C and D	Meets with T&D coordinator to discuss progress, etc.	Communicates with B, C and D
MENTOR (B)	Stays in touch with trainee Makes trainee aware of relevant seminars and coursework Acts as trainee's "first line of appeal" in conflict or problem situations	Discusses OJT with the trainee and passes relevant information along to T&D coordinator	Meets with trainee to discuss progress (could be more often)	Communicates with A, C and D After one year, conducts performance appraisal for trainee
T&D COORDINATOR (C)	Informs trainee and mentor of courses, seminars, etc. that will be offered during the OJT program Informs next OJT manager when trainee is likely to arrive (phone call and memo)	"Records" trainee's successful completion of OJT	Meets with individual trainees to discuss progress, problems, ideas for improving OJT, etc.	Communicates with A, B and D
OJT MANAGER (D)	Oversees trainee's activities throughout OJT and supervises evaluation on all competencies Informs mentor and T&D coordinators ASAP when trainee will be ready to go to next OJT	Completes a conference report for trainee, with copies to A, B and C		Communicates with A, B and C

was highly structured, it was very flexible. The managers also thought that the hard work involved in specifying the competencies for their areas gave them (and their subordinates) better insight into what their areas *really* were doing. Most had never undertaken such a detailed self-analysis.

The structured use of mentors established a model for the rest of the organization. The training staff was approached by several managers, while the training program was still in progress, with requests to organize similar programs for their division or departments.

While the long-range effects of this program are yet to be seen, there have been measurable and significant indications of its impact upon performance. Performance appraisal ratings for the trainees have been higher than normal for new employees in the position of assistant of-

fice manager. The "halo effect" notwithstanding, these trainees had little or no banking—or even business—experience prior to entering the training program. In less than nine months, they were performing at an above-average level for employees in that position, including experienced employees. Since mentors assigned trainees to projects which fit their abilities and interests, several trainees made valuable suggestions for improving procedures in the banking office system—suggestions which saved considerable time, effort and money.

The key ingredients of this effective OJT program were well-defined performance criteria, thorough planning, careful monitoring and sensitivity to the needs of employees as human beings. These sound so obvious. Unfortunately, however, they are too often absent from our training programs.