

Planned OJT Is Productive OJT

On-the-job training is one of the most important components of learning in the workplace—yet it's often unplanned and ineffective. A new study looks at OJT and suggests some practical ways to improve it.

Janet is starting a new job as a clerical employee in a large service firm. After completing the usual paperwork in the personnel department and attending a brief orientation, she is introduced to her new supervisor and co-workers. Eventually, Janet's busy supervisor pairs her up with an experienced employee for an extended period of on-the-job training (OJT). That means Janet will be observing the employee for some time before she is ready to do the work herself.

But Janet's OJT has not been carefully planned to make her productive as quickly as possible. She has been placed in a new work environment where she must observe unfamiliar tasks and interact with people she does not know. She feels anxious because she is not productive, and she thinks about quitting to work in another organization.

In the meantime, Janet's supervisor complains to others about the time it takes to "break in" a newcomer.

Let's face it: the situation is not unusual. Problems with unplanned OJT happen in too many organizations every workday.

OJT is a vitally important yet frequently overlooked component of workplace learning. Employers spend between \$90 billion and \$180 billion

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annually on informal OJT, but only \$30 billion on formal job training, on or off the job. (Those figures come from research conducted by the American Society for Training and Development with the U.S. Department of Labor, and are described in ASTD's 1989 report, *The Learning Enterprise*.)

The federal government has made OJT the centerpiece of the Job Training Partnership Act, the premier federal program aimed at helping disadvantaged workers enter the mainstream labor market. But surprisingly little research has been conducted to determine how OJT can be made more efficient and effective.

What is OJT?

OJT typically means training that occurs in the workplace rather than off the job. It is usually unplanned. Employees learn from experienced co-workers or supervisors while they work. Such learning occurs through observation and imitation of others, feedback about how work is done, and (less frequently) through procedures manuals and other job-reference material. While OJT is often associated with the process of orienting newly hired employees to their work, it may also be used for the following goals:

- to upgrade the skills of experienced workers when new technology or new work methods produce on-the-job changes
- to cross-train employees within a

work unit or department

- to orient transferred or promoted employees to their new jobs.

How can OJT be planned?

Any discussion of OJT is incomplete without mention of Job Instruction Training (JIT). JIT is a planned approach to OJT that was introduced in manufacturing firms during World War II—with dramatic results in productivity improvement. JIT begins with a thorough analysis of each work task. Then supervisors or experienced co-workers systematically introduce an employee to each task through seven simple steps:

- 1. Showing a worker how to perform a task
- 2. Explaining to the worker key points about the task
- 3. Letting the worker watch the supervisor or co-worker perform the task again
- 4. Letting the worker perform simple parts of the job
- 5. Helping the worker perform the whole job
- 6. Letting the worker perform the whole job—but watching to identify what was done right (which should be followed up with praise) and what could be improved (which should be followed up with corrective feedback)
- 7. Putting the worker on his or her own to perform the task.

JIT is sometimes called structured OJT to distinguish it from unstructured OJT, which is not planned.

Status of OJT

In an effort to find out more about OJT, the authors prepared and mailed to 500 ASTD members an exploratory

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survey on issues and practices of OJT. The survey study sought answers to such questions as these:

- How many and what kind of organizations are training supervisors or other employees to conduct structured OJT?
- What employee groups are most frequently targeted to receive in-house training on methods of conducting structured OJT?
- What tools, aids, or methods are

used to improve structured OJT?

- What attitudes are prevalent among human resource professionals about structured OJT?
- What attitudes about structured OJT do HRD professionals perceive among top managers in their organizations?
- What special issues on OJT are worth considering?

The survey generated a 26 percent response rate: 127 completed re-

sponses were returned. Since most respondents represented manufacturers and organizations with 5,000 or more employees, the results may not truly reflect the state of OJT practices in service firms and smaller organizations.

OJT in manufacturing firms

According to respondents in this study, manufacturers are significantly more likely than other businesses to conduct in-house training on principles of structured OJT. In all, 52 of the 127 respondents (41 percent) indicated that their organizations offer in-house classroom training or "train-the-trainer" programs on how to conduct OJT; 74 respondents (59 percent) reported that their organizations do not offer such training.

Of the 52 respondents who say their organizations offer training on principles of structured OJT, 23 (42 percent) work for manufacturing companies. The industries next most likely to offer such training are in the categories of finance, insurance, and real estate (15.3 percent) and transportation, communication, and electric and gas (13.4 percent).

Why are disproportionate numbers of manufacturing companies conducting in-house training on structured OJT? One explanation might be that JIT was required of defense contractors by the federal government during World War II, and many manufacturing firms have continued to conduct it. Another possibility is that the results of improved OJT in manufacturing firms—increased output of products—are simply more tangible than in service firms.

Who is trained in OJT?

First-line supervisors are the most likely to receive training on principles of structured OJT. Twenty-five percent of the respondents indicated that, when such training is given, between 91 and 100 percent of all supervisors attend.

Those results suggest that first-line supervisors are the primary audience for in-house training on structured OJT in most organizations. That finding matches published descriptions that portray supervisors as primarily responsible for employees' on-the-job training.

Most organizations use various tools, aids, and special methods to

Steps You Can Take for Better OJT

Based on our research and on recent writings about structured on-the-job training (OJT), here are some practical steps that HRD professionals can take to improve OJT in their organizations:

1. Establish policy. Prepare a written description that puts the organization "on the record" as supporting structured OJT and makes a commitment to devoting attention to it. Make sure that the purpose of structured OJT is spelled out and is related to the company's other HRD efforts.

2. Establish accountability. Make clear who is primarily responsible for OJT. Write it into job descriptions for supervisors and all employees. Then ensure that part of people's performance evaluations is based on how well they carry out this responsibility. If necessary, write questions about OJT into performance appraisals so that supervisors and employees are formally held accountable for it.

3. Review precedents. Make a few calls to find out what other organizations in your industry are doing about structured OJT. Do they provide training on the subject? If so, to whom? For how long? What is the course content? What cost savings can be traced to it? Use this information in efforts to design your program. It will also be useful if your attempts to improve structured OJT in your organization come under attack. Nothing quiets critics faster than pointing out that "our competitors—or excellent firms in the industry—are doing it!"

4. Design and routinely conduct training on the principles of structured OJT. Supervisors and experienced workers are the most likely ones to conduct structured OJT in the workplace. In most organizations, they do not know how to do it. Teach them how—and then sit back and take credit for the fantastic results!

5. Provide specialized support for line managers who use structured OJT. In most organizations, certain jobs are common entry points for employees. Design "off-the-shelf" lesson plans, job aids (checklists, procedures manuals, and training manuals), individualized learning contracts, and individualized training progress report forms for those jobs. They will save time and effort while improving the quality of structured OJT.

Making that kind of support available enhances OJT by providing users with the tools to do it—and makes the HRD department a real partner with line management in improving structured OJT.

6. Avoid turf battles. Begin efforts to improve OJT on a small scale, in work units in which supervisors or managers are supportive. Use your successes there as a springboard to other units and to additional resources.

7. Consider literacy skills. Do not assume that employees—or, for that matter, supervisors—are highly literate. Indeed, take advantage of efforts to improve OJT to assess performance problems that can be traced to literacy issues in the workplace.

improve OJT, even when they do not offer in-house training on principles of structured OJT. The most popular aids for OJT appear to be procedure manuals, employee checklists, training manuals, and supervisory checklists (in that order). Additional research on each of these aids is warranted, since little is known about how they are used in OJT.

How HRD professionals see OJT

The attitudes of HRD professionals about structured OJT are worth considering. After all, it is unlikely that HRD professionals will sponsor efforts to improve structured OJT in their organizations if they perceive no need to do so.

Most respondents (80.9 percent) agreed that "OJT is important, and structured approaches to it work better than unstructured approaches." A sizable minority, however, (12.8 percent) indicated that "OJT is important, but there are other issues that are more important to this organization." Only 2.2 percent said that they believe "unstructured approaches to OJT work better than structured approaches."

It would seem that efforts devoted to improving structured OJT are influenced by the HRD professional's available resources and sense of priorities in the organization, rather than the perceived value of structured OJT.

In most respects, HRD professionals' perceptions of their top managers' attitudes on OJT can best be summarized by the phrase "lack of awareness."

Indeed, the largest number of HRD professionals (47.7 percent) felt that their top managers' opinion on the subject could be characterized as follows: "Top managers believe that OJT is important, but are not aware of how people can be trained to improve their methods of conducting OJT." The next largest number (26.2 percent) agreed with the statement, "Top managers believe OJT is important and that structured approaches to it work better than unstructured approaches." Only a few (2.5 percent) expressed the belief that "top managers don't believe it is important."

Other OJT issues

Finally, several special issues emerged from essay responses written

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at the end of the survey.

One respondent noted, "We have instituted a training branch with full-time OJT people to supplement classroom instruction. Remarkable results after OJT week. Trainees perform at 85 percent capacity for their job tasks."

Presumably, then, combining structured OJT with classroom training can help ensure effective transfer of learning from classroom to workplace, increasing the impact of off-the-job training on job performance.

Another respondent wrote about methods of implementing a program to improve OJT:

"We found it helpful to target groups that would readily accept our assistance and, then, when they experienced success, we invited a few other groups to assess the program and discuss possible application to their areas. So far, so good. Some areas are beginning to receive badly needed assistance, but we have not been seen as invading their areas; we have just been viewed as helpful."

In this way, success in one area spreads to others—and HRD professionals are not caught in turf battles.

Finally, one trainer pointed to a relationship between OJT and the so-called basic skills crisis: "Often-times identifying an outline or struc-

ture for OJT is time-consuming and difficult, especially when basic literacy skills are weak."

It may thus be necessary to combine structured OJT methods with functional context training. In this way, literacy instruction can be integrated with on-the-job training focused on work tasks.

OJT for the service sector

We have all heard the frightening statistics: the U.S. will experience a decline in the standard of living over the next decade if productivity is not improved. While U.S. manufacturers have been making progress in improving productivity, the growing service sector of the U.S. economy has been making a dismal showing.

Could it be that manufacturers are making progress, at least in part, because they are generally doing a better job of structured OJT than are their service firm counterparts? The results of this study indicate that it is possible.

To improve productivity in the service sector—and at the same time reduce unnecessary expenditures on employee training—HRD professionals should direct their attention to structured OJT as one method to reduce employee turnover, improve employee morale, and cut training time. ■

Where To Learn About OJT

If you set out to improve structured OJT in your organization, you may search in vain for recent books or articles on the subject. Despite the billions spent on OJT by employers and the federal government each year, very little information is available about the status of OJT in the workplace. Writings on the topic are relatively limited to a few important sources:

■ Martin Broadwell's *The Supervisor and On-the-Job Training* (Addison-Wesley, 1986)

■ J. Connor's *One-on-One/Step-by-Step* (TRC Press, 1988) and *On-the-Job Training* (International Human Resources Development Corporation, 1983)

■ Leon Gold's "Job Instruction: Four Steps to Success" (*Training and Development Journal*, September 1981)

■ R. Jacobs and T. McGiffin's "A Human Performance System Using a Structured On-the-Job Training Approach" (*Performance and Instruction*, November 1987)

■ Alice Bird McCord's "Job Training" in the *Training and Development Handbook* (McGraw-Hill, 1987)

■ Robert F. Sullivan and Donald C. Miklas's "On-the-Job Training That Works" (*Training and Development Journal*, May 1985)

■ M.A. Pulich's "The Basics of On-the-Job Training and Development" (*Supervisory Management*), January, 1984.

Only Jacobs and McGiffin's article in *Performance and Instruction* reports on research, describing a case in which implementation of structured OJT produced noticeable cost savings in one organization.