

Training Technophobes

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PUBLIC SPEAKING and death currently top the list of Americans' greatest fears, but computers may soon displace them. Although organizations find computers indispensable, they strike terror in the hearts of many employees.

In teaching wordprocessing, spreadsheets, email, faxing, and document management, trainers who prepare people to use computers must find a way to keep their fear from paralyzing their learning. Trainers face the challenge of creating a curriculum that not only energizes technological learning, but also caters to technophobic employees.

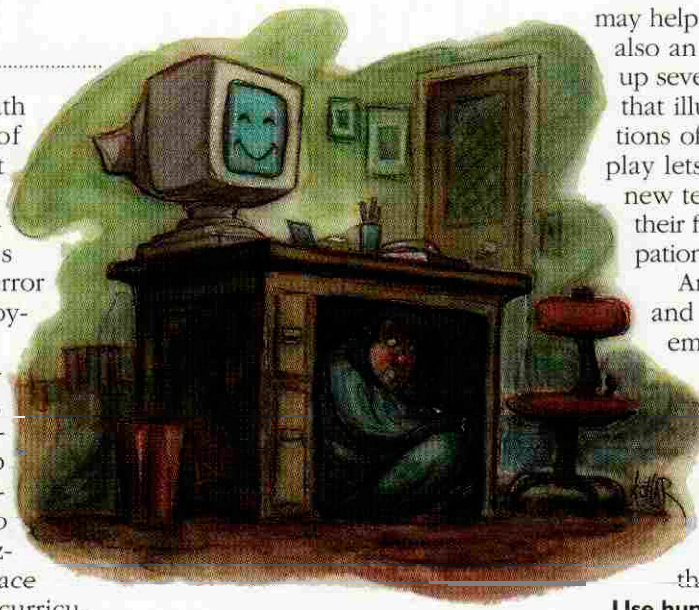
Most of us have experienced technophobia—the nerve-wracking moment when we first touched a computer or the realization that children understand technology more than we do. In the workplace, if those fears are not allayed, they can impede performance.

A technophobic employee is someone who fears technology and avoids it at all cost. He or she feels unqualified to use computers, and may feel displaced by new equipment and machinery. Veteran employees who are experts at their jobs may think that learning a new technology will take them back to a novice state. They may experience anxieties long forgotten. Often, veteran employees resist computer technology most.

Ignoring technophobia can be detrimental to an organization. It may result in lost revenue, high turnover, absenteeism, and decreased productivity. The transformation from technophobic to technocompetent should begin in training. There are techniques that can help overcome technophobia.

Conquering technophobia

There are several ways that trainers can help technophobes become comfort-



able with new technology. For instance, with company approval and at least one month before training begins, a trainer can begin using change management, an inexpensive and effective way to ease people's fears and generate excitement. The attitudes of employees who doubt their importance and role in the technological change tend to improve as a result of carefully planned change management.

To ensure the successful implementation of new computers, upgraded systems, or other technological changes, consider these suggestions:

Post signs regarding the imminent change. Postings bolster people's anticipation regarding an upcoming change. The wording should reflect a positive attitude and focus on ways that the change will improve unpopular or difficult tasks. Post signs in well-populated areas such as break rooms, cafeterias, and entrances.

Distribute a periodic newsletter. It should outline the changes that employees will see in the future. Contents may include management editorials, articles about ways that the change can empower employees, the training process, and approaches that employees can use to prepare for training.

Stage an event. This lets employees have a sneak preview of upcoming changes. In particular, an open house

may help diffuse their uncertainty. It is also an excellent opportunity to set up several computer demonstrations that illustrate the time-saving functions of the new technology. A display lets trainees see and touch the new technology. It also may abate their fear and replace it with anticipation.

An open house is inexpensive and a wise use of time. Because employees can browse the displays on their breaks, they aren't taken away from work. Open houses and displays emphasize management's concern and reassure trainees that they will receive help to ease their transition.

Use humor. This can be a good way to ease employees' tension. For example, during a technological conversion, a company staged a memorial service for the old computer system. Such events can transform a change from threatening to festive.

Create a mascot. Sport teams have mascots to encourage team spirit, unity, and camaraderie. A mascot can do the same thing for your organization. For example, a large midwestern company facing a major equipment change introduced a computer mouse mascot. Thus, Click was born. At a company-sponsored open house, Click reassured employees and answered their questions.

Organizations that follow those change management steps report marked improvements in employees' attitudes. By taking precautions before beginning training, trainers vaccinate employees against the contagious technophobia bug.

Personalizing the setups

Even when time constraints don't allow for a change management program, conquering technophobia is within reach. Although trainees may have seen a computer and even touched one, this is likely to be their first exposure to accomplishing familiar tasks with new technology. Teaching trainees to personalize their desktops is one way to overcome their

resistance. For instance, they can change screen colors, backgrounds, and screensavers, and they can place their monitors and keyboards where they want to. Give them time to play with the alien technology. At first, the new technology may not appear to boost productivity. Still, personalization may help increase employees' feelings of control and comfort.

Ultimately, employees who feel a sense of control will be proud and become more adept. That can lead to positive results for the entire organization. Satisfied employees will be more productive and miss less work than their technophobic counterparts.

Eek—a mouse!

A computer mouse should be non-threatening and touchable, unlike its hairy namesake.

Mouse skills are difficult for some people to develop because of the coordination skills necessary for precise movement. Even employees who are familiar and comfortable with computer keyboards may have never experienced the capabilities of a mouse. A trainer's challenge is to demystify how to maneuver it.

Although trainees may be awkward at first, a trainer must create a non-threatening learning environment. First, encourage them to move around the computer screen using a mouse.

After giving trainees time to play with a mouse, explain its different buttons. Then, you can use colorful visual aids, distribute guides for trainees to use at their desks, or place stickers on the mouse buttons to remind trainees of the functions.

After introducing basic mouse concepts and terms, give trainees time to practice the mouse button functions. Next, explain the concepts of clicking, dragging, scrolling, and highlighting. They may find clicking and dragging challenging. Discuss the terms, definitions, and correlating actions. Remind trainees that mouse skills develop over time and hand-eye coordination will improve.

When training technology as opposed to soft skills, trainers should beware of several pitfalls. It's tempting to compare functions, but don't let trainees know that one function may be more difficult than another.

Use reassuring language that reflects the fun in learning each function.

In addition to avoiding negative phrasing, a trainer can send positive messages to employees. Research shows that once something is repeated several times, it becomes truth. Place positive phrases into your lesson plan. When you first tell trainees to remember that computers are their friends, they may perceive that as silly and untrue. But eventually, with your help and persistence, their doubt turns to belief. A trainer must never let words become barriers to the learning process.

Even the most difficult functions can be simplified with a well-thought-out analogy or example. That will put the material on a level that will reach any trainee.

For example, at a training session about computer networks, a speaker made an analogy between a computer network and a phone network. Using that example let the speaker go into depth about computer networks and compare them to something that most people in the room understood. Your analogies should compare a difficult function or technological concept to something with which every person can identify.

Sometimes, trainers who don't use analogies lose trainees' attention early on. Trainees may feel overwhelmed, become discouraged, and not retain information.

Continue using the analogy after the introduction. Unfortunately, after capturing trainees' attention with the clever analogy between a computer network and phone network, the speaker dropped it and then delivered more difficult concepts. Having no further reference point, one by one, the audience lost interest. Although some members of the audience may remember your initial analogy, many may need to be reminded.

Whether trainees' reference point is a radio, map, nickname, or tree, make your analogy suitable to the demographics of the group. Use humor. If the material is funny, there is no question that the information is more likely to be remembered.

Use examples that relate present action with past methods. Use your knowledge of previous job methods

to explain new technology. For example, Julie used to pick up a document and manually place it in the correct file. Now, she will click on a document icon and drag it over to a correct file icon. In other words, relate a task that workers have been doing to a task that they will now do.

If you try to relay information without fostering a fundamental understanding, the training will take longer than anticipated.

Is it safe yet?

When learning new technology, many conscientious employees will be concerned about breaking a computer or wreaking havoc on an important business file. Combat that technophobic barrier by developing a safe "training region." Take information out of a business database, transfer it to a training database, and freeze it. Then, the frozen information can be manipulated without fear of consequences.

If it isn't possible to have a training region, be sure to create plenty of exercises and allow ample practice time. To conquer technophobia, employees must be given free reign to experiment with technology. Beware of testing trainees on real business accounts. If an error occurs, employees' technophobic feelings may escalate. Losing ground at this crucial point is detrimental to training. You will find that employees are more comfortable and overcome their technophobia more quickly when they aren't worried about real or imagined implications of their actions.

With new technologies, trainers are continually confronting new challenges because they must learn how to teach both soft and technical skills. Visible on the horizon is a new technological frontier; trainers have no choice but to adapt quickly. They can neutralize employees' technophobia by taking proactive steps.

Trainers who help squelch technophobia will ensure that technology never surpasses public speaking or death as Americans' greatest fears.

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