

Test, Then Train

By Michael Eisenstein

WHAT HAPPENS when you build a house without pouring a foundation? It collapses, of course, and you're left with a pile of rubble. It's a similar situation when managers send employees with low-level skills into advanced training sessions.

Each year, companies throw away millions of dollars on employee training that doesn't stick. Why? Participants don't have the fundamental reading, writing, and math skills needed to absorb advanced training. To combat that, trainers should determine the strengths and weaknesses of participants before constructing their training curriculums. The results from such skills testing provide trainers with the appropriate foundation for effecting lasting behavioral change.

Assessing and testing

By pinpointing learning gaps, skills testing helps trainers—and their employers—ensure that participants can comprehend the concepts behind what's being taught. A high school diploma or a four-year degree is no guarantee that employees have basic skills, regardless of whether they're fresh out of school or have been working for years.

The most vital part of skills testing, however, is knowing what skills to examine. Job analysis helps to create the targets at which trainers should aim. The process involves determining which skills employees need to learn and what new tasks they need to perform. Once that's accomplished, trainers can develop their own exam or search for an off-the-shelf system that reflects the skills needed in specific jobs.

A trainer can choose from many forms of job analysis, including observation, interviews, and questionnaires. Here are some basic testing tactics to meet your organization's training needs. **Gather information.** If the person conducting the analysis comes from outside the

Pretraining skills assessments secure a solid foundation for learning.

company or isn't familiar with the job, she should collect general information through position-specific training materials and job descriptions. Also, she should set aside some time for on-the-job observations to become more familiar with the skills needed to perform the job effectively.

If, for example, the analyst is studying a registered nurse's position, she might collect patient forms or screen shots of computer applications relevant to the R.N. job. Also, the analyst should observe tasks such as administering medications, following a doctor's written orders, and taking patients' vital signs.

Know the job. Next, the analyst should meet with one or more groups of subject matter experts. They can be the employees, their managers, or those familiar with the everyday tasks of the job. With the SMEs' help, the analyst creates a list of regularly performed activities. For the nursing example, common tasks include collaborating with other staff members to develop patient-care plans and thinking critically in emergency situations.

Prioritize. Once completed, the task list must be prioritized according to importance. That involves rating each task according to its significance and time spent performing it. This step helps the analyst stay focused.

Find skills that match tasks. This step gets to the core of the job and of what's needed to perform it successfully. Take, for example, how an R.N. collaborates with other nurses to develop a plan for patient care. If a trainer takes for granted that a nurse can do that, he will also overlook the many basic skills that go into the task, including math, writing, teamwork, and observation.

Identify skill levels. It's vital for trainers

and job analysts to determine skill levels because it helps them design a curriculum that's effective for all participants. In this step, analysts and SMEs use the information gathered in previous steps to identify the necessary levels of skill proficiency.

Because nurses must watch for changes in patient conditions, reactions, and comfort levels, they need to focus on and remember various details when observing patients. Those abilities constitute sharp observation skills, and the trainer needs to find a skill test that assesses those needs.

Use test results to create targets. Once the job analysis is complete, trainers can conduct a pretraining skills evaluation to uncover participant skill gaps that need to be filled prior to the training session.

For example, the job profile concludes that a registered nurse should be most proficient in math, reading, listening, and teamwork skills. If an employee tests and scores low, the trainer can design a specific program to help boost those skills. That way, the upcoming training session is more likely to stick and have a lasting effect on performance.

The determining factor

Conducting skills analysis and testing prior to any training session determines if all participants are on the same page. If they're not, it pinpoints the weaknesses that they should work on before attending the scheduled training. By ignoring that vital step, trainers gamble that all participants are operating on the same skill and experience level.

In grade school, it's common for students to take tests at the end of a unit or chapter. Trainers, however, can't afford to wait until after a session to evaluate participants. Testing before ensures that participants have the skills to learn advanced concepts. In fact, companies that use skills testing have found that it boosts the bottom line through reduced

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Companies that use skills testing have found that it boosts the bottom line through reduced training time and turnover.

training time, as well as reduced turnover and lessened costly worker errors.

Basic skills might not seem as important as the ability to insert an IV, drive a forklift, or build a database, but trainers must keep in mind that those skills are the foundation of understanding. Building upon basics is critical to workplace development. Without the proper foundation, any learning structure will fall.

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