

Using training effectively



Training can make a mediocre employee good at something, and a good person excellent. On the other hand, a person without training can be a brake on the business.

Whether you are aiming for increased sales, more efficient production, better use of IT, or simply a reliable team that can solve its own problems, training is often the best solution. By taking a systematic approach, you can achieve an excellent return on your training investment.

This briefing covers:

- Identifying your important training needs.
- Deciding on the training objectives.
- Creating a training programme.
- Monitoring and evaluating training.

1 Your training needs

As with any investment, target most of your training on the areas where you can reap the biggest, fastest and easiest rewards.

1.1 Is there an area of your business that is experiencing **problems**, or that is being held back in some way?

- Do you have a shortage of a particular set of skills, or a likely future shortage?
- Do you receive customer complaints? If so, what are the causes of these complaints?
- Is the performance of one part of your business slower, more expensive or more wasteful than another?
- Are people or teams under-achieving?
You can draw up a list of these problems by asking your employees (see **3**).

In each case, training may, or may not, provide the solution.

1.2 Employees often need training when your business is **changing**.

- When you launch any new product, train your team how to sell and deliver it.
- Each time you purchase new software, include training on how to use it.
- The Internet is changing the business environment.

Even if you have no website, allow time for your employees to use the Net and visit the websites of competitors, suppliers and customers. Keep building knowledge and skills in this crucial area.

1.3 Use training to safeguard the **critical** areas of your business.

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- Many businesses rely on one person to complete a particular technical operation. It is vital to document the process and train one or two other employees as a precaution.
- Some hazardous processes cannot be undertaken by anyone who is not trained.

1.4 When considering your training needs, compare training with **other possible solutions** (see box).

2 Training objectives

2.1 To keep training relevant and focused, set **SMART** (specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-limited) objectives.

- Doing a time management course 'to become more effective' is unlikely to achieve much as there is no outcome to aim for. Doing the course 'with the objective of clearing my in-tray by the end of every day' will focus you, both during and after the course.

2.2 Often, the objective will be to reach a specified **standard** for the performance of a particular task.

- Set the standard by assessing how well an experienced and competent person does the task in question.
- Try breaking the standard down into three components: knowledge (eg knowing your product range and price list), skills (eg being able to handle customer complaints), and attitude (eg helping to create a happy work environment).
- Set out the conditions under which the standard is to be achieved.
- When a new task is introduced, the desired performance standard may be less clear.

2.3 Keep training objectives in line with **business objectives**.

- For example, if one business objective is to computerise your accounts system, it is wasteful for a trainee book-keeper to learn paper-based accounting.

“All organisations are made up of two types of people, drivers (who make things happen) and passengers. If training funds are limited, there is a better payoff investing in the drivers.”

**John Leppard,
Leppard
Development
Services**

3 Commitment of employees

Successful training depends on getting your employees involved.

3.1 Win your employees' **support** for the training, by explaining the need for it and the objectives you plan to achieve.

- Explain the benefits for the employee as well as the business. Be enthusiastic.
- Initially, do not focus on those who are reluctant to learn.

Train those who are keen. Then let them demonstrate the benefits of the training to the doubters.

3.2 Ask employees what training they think would improve their **productivity**.

- If an employee asks for training, ask him or her to describe the benefits it will have for your business.

3.3 Find out how each employee **prefers to learn**.

- Some people may enjoy group learning, while others prefer individual study.
- Some people prefer steady progress through a training process. Others are keen to get hands-on experience as soon as possible.

“It is clear that the most effective training outcomes result from clients who first take the time to evaluate training needs against business goals.”

**Tom McCrimmon,
Centre for
Professional
Development**

When training isn't the answer

Training is not the panacea for every business problem. Before investing in training schemes, analyse what is really needed.

A If an employee is underperforming, they may be the **wrong person** for the job.

The solution may be a switch to another role, or, in extreme cases, dismissal.

B The problem may be caused by **inadequate systems** and policies.

For example, a jammed switchboard may be caused by a high volume of calls and inadequate equipment. The answer may be to add another receptionist, or to use different telecoms technology, such as Direct Dialling In.

C Basic training can often be achieved by putting together a **knowledge bank**.

- This explains where to find things (eg frequently-used forms), how to do things (eg how to send an email), office procedures (eg how to request stationery items) and other basics. People can then train themselves, updating each entry as necessary, so the knowledge bank remains up to date.

- Explain the different training options you are considering. Let people know their training preferences will be acknowledged.

3.4 Personal development plans are a systematic method of identifying training needs and agreeing the best way forward.

Buying training

- A** Choose a provider that addresses your **needs**, rather than trying to sell you a standard training solution.
- Business support organisations, such as Business Gateway, are a good starting point. As well as courses of their own, they can direct you to a range of alternatives.
- B** Establish **who** will actually perform the training and what relevant experience he or she has.
- Often the person selling the training is far more impressive than the trainer who turns up on the day.
- C** Look beyond the training event itself and agree what training **support** is needed.
- For example, training on a new database might be in three stages: agreeing objectives, completing the main training, and follow-up support to help people achieve agreed action plans.
- D** Compare the expected **benefits** of the training with the total costs involved.
- As well as the direct costs, allow for the lost work time of those attending, and the time spent setting up the training.
 - Consider the wider benefits.
 - When inviting quotes from external training providers, specify that 100 per cent of costs must be included, even if an exact estimate is not possible. Expenses are often a grey area. You may find yourself paying for items such as phone and fax, travel, design costs and the use of copyright material.
 - Consider how to reduce training costs.
 - The benefits of training will be lost if employees return to a workplace where they cannot use what they have learned.

4 The training plan

A training plan is essential to define the structure and outcomes you want from training.

4.1 Draw up a **training brief**, setting out your practical training objectives.

- For example, you might list ten tasks and ten awkward situations a new credit controller should be able to handle. Without this approach, there is a danger of the employee learning a lot of theory, but with no practical understanding of how to apply the theory.
- Draw up the training brief with whoever will deliver the training. The trainer can tell you what is achievable.

4.2 For each course, have a written training **programme**.

This records the stages of the training, the location, the training content and methods used, the trainer and the administrator.

- Sign and date items as they are covered and as the employee progresses through training. A copy of this record can then be added to the employee's personnel file.
- Documentation is essential for most formal qualifications, such as SVQs and to satisfy health and safety requirements.
- Note the cost of each training element, so you can evaluate which stages are worth while.

'Off-the-shelf' training courses address many of these issues automatically. Many are designed to achieve, or count towards, a particular recognised qualification.

List all the training activities for the year in your training plan. Confirm that the budgets, resources and timing are all viable.

5 In-house training

All businesses automatically carry out in-house training when a new employee arrives.

The challenge is to get everyone's performance up to standard, as quickly and cheaply as possible, with minimal disruption.

5.1 Most in-house training takes the form of **on-the-job training**.

This lets people learn at their own pace and apply new knowledge immediately.

- Take care when choosing the trainer.

“Effective training is not about rewarding your workforce. It is about addressing critical business issues in a thoughtful and systematic way.”
Paula Grayson,
CIPD Recruitment Forum

“The question is not just how much your training will cost, but how much it will cost if you don't train.”
Peter Neall,
Neall Scott Partnership training consultants

“If you work as a team, train as a team. One person attempting to carry out 'best practice' in isolation is doomed to failure.”
Toby Peyton-Jones,
Siemens

Provide relevant training for trainers, including how to set goals, how to break information down into small steps and how to progress at the pace of the trainee.

- The trainer must be technically able to do the task, but unless he or she has teaching skills, too, the results can be disastrous. Too often, a trainer gives a full explanation and then walks off, assuming the person can now do the job — which, of course, to the trainer, seems straightforward.
- If the trainer has bad work practices or a bad attitude, these will be passed on.

5.2 Job shadowing involves one person showing another all the aspects of a job.

- This is especially suitable for new employees. A new recruit may need to know everything — from who your customers are to how to operate office equipment. Shadowing is a painless way to cover a lot of ground.

5.3 Once a person can do the job, continue **coaching** the employee.

- Periodically review progress, give advice and agree a higher standard or additional tasks for the next period. But recognise people may want to do things their own way.

5.4 Consider finding a **mentor**, especially for senior employees whose performance has a major impact on the business.

Coaching is usually done by a line manager. Mentoring tends to be done by someone outside the immediate team, or even by someone from outside the company.

- Mentoring can be extremely effective in helping to unleash the potential of your more dynamic (or difficult) employees. People can open up to an outsider in ways that are impossible with a line manager — not least because the line manager can be the biggest obstacle to progress.

A good mentor is a good listener, with the experience to suggest practical solutions. He or she should also set an example and challenge the trainee's ideas.

6 External training courses

6.1 The main advantage of using external trainers is that they are **specialists**.

- The trainer may have spent years refining a training course, while training thousands of people in different companies.

- The trainer can bring you up to date with current best practice.

6.2 Training comes in a wide range of **forms**.

- Lectures and conferences typically thrust a mass of information at a large audience.
- Seminars help people acquire knowledge in a more interactive way.
- Workshops give people information and let them practise working out problems.
- Distance learning may make use of workbooks or videos, while e-learning is computer-based. Both allow the trainee to progress at their own pace.

6.3 External training can bring **fresh ideas** and energy into the learning process.

- Mixing with trainees from other businesses can be an opportunity to discover how these other businesses do things.
- A good trainer may challenge the way your business currently operates.

7 Did it work?

You know your training has worked if it delivers the objectives outlined in your training brief.

7.1 Review the **impact** of the training on performance, as part of a regular appraisal process. (See **Performance appraisals**).

- Any additional training needs can be discussed at this point.

7.2 Monitor improvements in the performance of the **business**.

- Measurable performance indicators include sales, production costs, output, attendance levels and staff turnover.
- Qualitative improvements may include higher quality goods or services, better teamwork, fewer customer complaints and more innovation in your business.

7.3 Evaluate **training** by asking your employees to review their training experience.

Was the training relevant to the job and appropriate to their level of expertise?

- When employees complete any training, discuss how their learning will be put into action.
- Training assessment forms may help you discover more about the course and establish what did and did not work.

Expert contributors

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Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name.

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