TRENDLINES

The Employers' Association's monthly whitepaper on essential Business/Human Resources practices

The Employers' Association (TEA) delivers reports for businesses that contain relevant and up-to-date information based on our work with hundreds of employers each month. TEA is known to produce a number of essential benchmark survey reports every year and we also compile data and observations that provide organizations practical perspectives on important business trends.

Training as a Tool to Influence Organizational, Team, and Individual Results

What you should know

Focusing on virtual learning and employee well-being and retention during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, United States training investments exceeded $90 billion in 2019 - 2020, slightly up from 2018. (Training Magazine, 2020) These investments varied widely in their scope, type, and delivery method including the use of assessment instruments, job rotations, career planning, stretch assignments, and public or company-sponsored onsite training programs. During the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown, some companies reduced their investments in training, due to the uncertainty of the business climate, the implications of staffing reductions and the acceleration of virtual workers. As we begin to emerge from the impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions, companies are once again investing in their staff as an important and strategic choice.

In the last eighteen months, work has clearly changed for many workers. More employees than ever are working virtually while others split their time between the office and their virtual worksite. This trend has impacted both the business culture and the Learning & Development function within organizations. Virtual delivery of both public and onsite training programs is steadily increasing and is becoming the preferred methodology for many organizations – especially with younger, more technologically savvy employees. (McKinsey & Company, 2020, Shirsagar, Mansour, McNally, and Metakis) Well-designed virtual training sessions can be convenient and cost-effective while providing excellent value that can create new insights and knowledge.

Significant differences exist between public and onsite training programs. Public training programs are typically attended by one or more employees from the same company and regularly include employees from several different companies. As such, public training programs can provide a safe environment for employees to share openly without concern for who might hear their comments, encouraging participants to speak up, often positively influencing the learning outcomes for the entire training group. While some employees may be hesitant to share as openly during an onsite training program held at their own location, this fear can be minimized through instructional design of the training program and/or its facilitation. Learner hesitance can be lessened if the facilitator creates a safe environment for respectful and confidential sharing of information by all participants. (Training Industry.com, 2021)

Onsite workshops possess several advantages over public courses. These advantages can create additional value by encouraging the adoption and application of concepts important for an individual employee, teams, and the entire organization. Whereas public courses influence one or few employees, onsite programs can influence a much larger group or members of an organization.

What we know

Transfer of training is a term used to describe the desired outcomes of a training investment. While enhanced knowledge is beneficial, behavioral change applied to real business conditions and challenges is usually better. Transfer of training for onsite programs is driven by several variables. (eLearning Industry, 2018) The Employers' Association (TEA) has found that it typically involves a more rigorous or strategic assessment of the learning or performance "gap" the training is intended to solve. For most onsite training investments, key leaders provide significant input into the selection, development, and execution of training. Further, leader advocacy for and promotion of an onsite training program can send a clear message about the importance of the program and its business relevance setting the expectation that the skills and perspectives taught will be demonstrated by employees through their actions and modeled by all leaders regardless of their level in the organization. When onsite programs are rolled out to an entire organization, we recommend the "C-suite" leaders demonstrate their credibility by participating individually in scheduled sessions or they "go first" by scheduling an early instance of the program for their entire team.

Virtual and in-person onsite training programs often influence larger groups of employees thereby increasing the likelihood of effective transfer of training. In this way, learners are better prepared to use the skills and to hold each other accountable for doing so. This outcome can be missing when only one or two employees attend a public workshop and then "bring back" the key learnings to their team or organization. Well-intentioned employees can become discouraged from applying newly learned content and skills within a culture or environment that does not behave or think in ways that encourage change. In addition, we find that this frequently results in on-site training requests that could have been identified and implemented sooner than sending a couple employees to "test it out."

Scheduled public training sessions (both virtual and in-person) provide employees with options for setting their training in advance. While this *ala carte* aspect is helpful, the available courses and their dates may not be convenient or may conflict with business priorities. Onsite training programs (virtual and in-person) provide training decision makers with more flexibility in determining the training topic and dates, both of which can improve the relevance, budget management, and convenience of training within the organization. Onsite programs may be tailored more easily to meet the business needs and objectives of an organization. (Advancement Resources, 2016)

What it means

Investing strategically in onsite training programs can pay dividends for an organization when compared to publicly offered programs. Typically, when a decision is made to bring a program "in-house" the training has more visibility, meaning, and commitment. Individuals and groups understand the purpose and need for the investment and may feel more personal commitment and interest in participating. In contrast, when an individual or small group of persons enroll in public training sessions, their decisions to participate may not be their own. They may have been told to enroll, or someone may have registered them without clarifying the exact reason and what they are expected to do with the content when they return to work. This can feel to the individual like a disabling proposition which may impede the desired transfer of training outcome due to various aspects of participant resistance. (Harvard Business Review, 2019, Steve Glaveski)

To encourage commitment to training, management should understand an employee's interests by communicating clearly about the individual, team and organizational needs such training may influence. Asking

employees if they would like to participate in public training sessions can increase an employee's understanding and commitment, which can have a direct impact on their learning along with their willingness to apply what they have learned.

While both public and onsite training programs appeal to employees interested in their own development and growth, the relationships generated within onsite programs is often more useful because work teams and groups attend and learn together. Further, everyone can generate insights and value to the entire group when onsite programs focus on key business competencies and skills. These insights can lead to actionable decisions that improve business challenges, capitalize on new opportunities or serve as "rallying points" and reminders for training program participants to apply what they learned when returning to work.

Organizations that are serious about employee and team development may also value working with a consultant or provider that fully understands their business. Learning & Development consultants often form deeper relationships with organizations who invest in onsite training programs. Pre-training meetings and organizational or department assessments positively enable the identification of the most appropriate training solution(s). These outcomes are often missing from publicly offered sessions since they are offered "as-is" and are facilitated in accordance with pre-determined course objectives, without tailoring content to address specific business needs. Onsite training program development and facilitation creates more opportunities for team and organizational success by directly addressing business needs and positively influencing business results. A more "intimate" relationship between the consultant and organization can enhance the dialogue and uncover the need for other, non-training solutions that can also develop employee capabilities. These other solutions include assessment instruments, coaching and mentoring services, group and organizational surveys, career planning processes and succession planning structures.

What you can do

Making the right choice for a training solution requires an understanding of the needs of the business and the needs of individual employees. Acknowledging that these needs are often highly interrelated can lead to the identification and execution of learning and development plans that are relevant to individuals and enable higher levels of team and organizational performance. The intention is to create "line of sight" so that employees at each level understand clearly how their goals and work influence broader and more strategic business results. Both public and onsite training solutions must address the "gap" (real or perceived) between a development or performance expectation and actual performance. (Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 2021) Each type of training solution must also reflect the organizational values and competencies considered essential for creating and sustaining the culture desired by top management. When employees understand the relationship between training program content and their own skills and performance, a valuable sense of purpose that encourages employees on the job use of the concepts and skills learned in the training program is created.

Some of the sources of data from which training needs and solutions can be derived include an analysis of organizational results, Performance Reviews, Development Plan conversations, Supervisor/Employee "one on ones," customer feedback, employee surveys and true "open-door" policies. Organizations must establish AND communicate the expectation that employee development is essential. Employees expect to be developed, to learn, and to grow in their skills and capabilities. (Gallup, 2016, Adkins and Rigoni) All methods previously addressed should be considered when seeking to improve employee capability, growth, and commitment. Needs assessments and training program selection practices must be executed intentionally to drive desired behaviors and to address suspected performance gaps. Proper resources including budget, time for learning,

frequent feedback, and a supportive culture for learning and development can engage employees and help to establish a learning culture "brand" that can differentiate organizations as they compete fiercely for the acquisition of new (and retention of their current) talent. (Shiftlearning.com, 2018)

The Employer's Association assists members in the key aspects of employee development and training including Compensation and Performance Planning/Management, Career Development, Succession Planning, Training Design/Development/Facilitation (including virtual and in-person training for public and onsite audiences), Culture/Employee Engagement/DEI Surveys and Executive/Management Coaching Services. When you need to influence organizational, team or individual results, give TEA a call…we are here to help.