

Research to Practice



Effective Implementation of a Basic Skills Training Program: Lessons Learned

Dr. Patrick J. O'Connor, Kent State University, Associate Professor

Author Biography

Dr. O'Connor is an associate professor of education at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. He has also served on the faculty at the University of Georgia, Indiana University of Pennsylvania and New River Community College. His teaching and research emphasis is on workforce development and adult training/education. Dr. O'Connor can be reached at poconnor@kent.edu. His address is 316 White Hall, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242-0001.

Introduction

Managers want employees who can be players in the high-performance workforce. Employees want interesting, secure employment. Managers want workers to be part of the competitive equation of the organization. Employees want to grow and learn. Managers want employees who can grow with the organization. How do both groups achieve these goals? The answer is rooted in basic skills training which is the foundation for developing knowledge workers and learning organizations.

Organizations now and in the future must evolve into learning organizations in order to be competitive and profitable. To achieve this goal, organizational leaders and managers must prepare their workers to be successful in a high-performance workforce. The basis for this preparation is a solid foundation in basic skills.

The Work in Northeast Ohio Council partnered with Northcoast Educational Services to pilot a basic skills training project to determine the impact the training would have on the employees and the organization. Nine companies in Northeast Ohio participated in the project. The impact was evaluated by employee self-assessments, supervisor assessments, trainer feedback and monitoring of effectiveness factors such as scrap rates, employee attendance, profit, accident rates and workman's compensation claims.

The primary finding was the training had a positive impact on employees both at work and at home. Also, the organizations were impacted positively by the training. Mainly, the employee and organizational capacity to grow, change and compete were enhanced.

The project leaders learned valuable lessons from the project for successful implementation of basic skills training programs. The following guidelines for effective implementation of a basic skills training program resulted from the project. Anyone interested in establishing a basic skills program should consider these implementation points.

1. Class content, curriculum and instructional activities should be customized for each organization. The employee's education level, the culture of the organization and the support of supervision/management are all unique and affect the success of the programming. One size does not fit all when it comes to effective basic skills training.
2. Classes, especially math, should be organized by ability level. Some employees are very self-conscious about their ability level and feel threatened. It was very evident in the project that math was harder to teach when participants had varied levels of math ability.

3. Training should be conducted at the beginning or end of a shift. In some cases, training was done in the middle of a shift which created a number of problems for participants as well as supervisors. Some participants were tardy or left early while others just remained at their work station.

4. Supervisors should be included in the planning and organization of the training. The supervisor is a critical person in the success of the training program. If supervisors are supportive the program will be more successful. Programs that trained supervisors prior to implementing basic skills training had more success than the other companies.

5. Training needs to be flexible and adjusted to the needs of the company as it progresses. Regardless of how well planned the training program might be adjustments are usually needed. A sudden surge in business or conflicts between trainers and participants may require changes in the program.

6. Reduce resistance by conducting extensive orientation to the training process. The companies that provided effective orientation for workers, supervisors and upper-management had the most success. The orientation should describe the purposes of the training, length and format, instructional approach as well as the instructor and the expected outcomes.

7. The basic skills training provider needs to have a wide assortment of trainers available to meet individual company and learner needs. Each group of learners is different as is each company. After training starts, some instructor changes may be necessary and the provider should be able to accommodate this need.

8. Plan for additional training after the basic skills so employees can continue to progress. In this project, after completing approximately one third of the course, employees began to inquire about the training that would follow their current course. Success breeds success and employers need to be prepared to continue employee development.

Summary

Training in basic skills has both a quantitative and a qualitative impact on employees and organizational effectiveness. The primary benefits to both appear to be in the capacity for change, growth and development. This training lays the foundation for employees to be successful in the high-performance workforce. It also enables organizations to compete and prosper in a global marketplace.

