Keeping Record of What Counts in Job Training

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“Sounds good in theory, but my boss won’t let me do this.”

“That’s nice, but I already know how to do it my own way.”

“Why do I even go to these training sessions when this stuff obviously can’t be applied in my real job?”

These sentiments reflect a complaint frequently heard by employees in many industries. Often people who receive job or skills training perceive there won’t be support or reinforcement for their new competencies back at work, and therefore, what’s the use in learning? After all, if learners are so cynical, why even show up at training sessions at all? To enjoy a few days out of the office or add a certification to a resume?

Given the vast amount of money invested in learning and development today — $134 billion in the U.S. according to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) — organizations should make every attempt to create an environment conducive to learning. A key part of that environment is reinforcing the application and adoption of skills, and a sound, first step toward that goal is the use of pre-learning assessments (PLAs).

Why does application of a PLA model in the industrial maintenance field matter now? Because “cash is king,” and the currency of training is ROI … plain and simple. The pressure is on — now more than ever — to ensure plant personnel learn quickly and immediately apply the skills. One way to do that is to be aware of what learners already know before the training event. It makes it that much easier to measure just how much they gain as a result of the process.

The Silver Bullet: Buy-In

One of ESI Intl.'s learning partners — KnowledgeAdvisors (KA) — has developed a model of predictive learning that helps organizations better gauge the impact of learning even before participants return to work. More than a crystal ball, their research has identified three areas that bear a positive influence on learning: participant buy-in, the course materials and the instructor.

Interestingly enough, buy-in — by which learning participants are eager to complete PLAs, attend training and actually want to get something out of it — has the most weight in the success of learning. According to KA, buy-in is "almost 1.5 times more impactful on participant learning than producing quality course materials and almost six times more impactful than instructor effectiveness."

This is powerful evidence that learners who endorse their training programs are better poised to actually learn new skills and apply them on the job. Couple this with PLAs, and one can expect a higher probability of learning program success, which in turn translates into better performance.

PLAs: Assess, Verify, Ensure

The primary purpose of PLAs is to identify what individuals know about a given job-related skill, and to assess that skill level *before* any training occurs. PLAs can also reveal what individuals need to know in order to better perform their jobs. Moreover, by aggregating PLA results, an understanding of the collective knowledge of a group of people is gained. From a training perspective, the information gleaned from PLAs can better equip instructors to bring the session materials to life for the participants by drawing clear links between the content and their jobs. This, in turn, sets up the learning program to directly address specific skills gaps.

Training for training's sake is not the goal. Rather, the learner (and the manager) ideally wants to verify that the selected training is appropriate for learning requirements. For instance, does the learner need to update his or her technical skills, something specific to plant maintenance and operations? Or is there a soft skills gap, where an intangible skill, such as customer communication or business acumen, needs to be taught?

It is certainly easier to measure the absorption of technical skills than soft skills, because managers can utilize the existence of the PLA to take a before-and-after snapshot, and answer the question, "Did you learn how to do this or not?" Regardless of the type of training or measurement process employed, answering and asking critical questions in advance of the training program — using the PLA approach — is the fastest way to verify proper course selection.

Training is not an isolated event. In order to ensure a good return on an organization's investment, it's imperative that the individual is ready to actively participate in the training session — the previously mentioned buy-in phenomenon — and it's critical that the learner gets something out of it, evidenced by applying the learned capability when back at the job.

The best way to substantiate the application of learned skills is through the PLA practice of benchmarking. For instance, the learner's manager needs to assess where the employee is — in terms of the specific skill to be learned — both before and after the training session occurs. If large teams of employees are sent to training programs, then the executives need an understanding, at a collective level, of their skills comprehension and application.

The Right Training Resources

Understanding the exemplary roles and expectations of plant operations employees prior to the actual participation in any learning scenario is prudent, but let's get down to the most tangible, burning question: What is the best way to select the right training resources?

The optimal technique includes researching and identifying a learning provider with a track record, one who has provided the specific training before, preferably to a person or organization in the industrial field. These days, the organization — or individual — needs to possess both technical capacity and financial stability … In other words, does the training vendor have the financial capacity to deliver the training program in which you are willing to invest?

Another item on the checklist: quality and background of course materials, as well as instructors. Seek out organizations that can provide references, as well as program evaluations, because such valuable information are clues to customer satisfaction, a key component in effective training resources.

Benchmarking & Measurement

Not surprisingly, industrial plant trainees need to make a direct connection between the knowledge they learn and its application to their job before a change in performance can take place. As stated earlier, the best way to measure change is to establish a baseline of knowledge and skills prior to the training event. PLAs can better prepare the learner for any training session, are key tools to inspire buy-in, and show the learner where he or she stands relative to the training's objectives.

The process can also help emotionally and intellectually prepare the learner for the program. When participants merely show up for a course without adequate preparation, it is highly unlikely that self-directed learning will occur. Oh, they'll get a certificate of completion, but documentation is hardly confirmation that real learning has taken place. While buy-in is essential to success, benchmarking will track the progress of knowledge learned and measure on-the-job application.

Because training sessions are not isolated events, but are more a part of an integrated learning framework, it's not enough to only hold PLAs before training. Each training event should also be followed by 30-, 60- and 90-day assessments, building upon the initial baseline to measure how far learners have progressed, what they've learned and the extent to which learning has been applied. The concept of preparing people to learn, learning and then testing is an age-old adage that takes a new level of significance when learners are eager to continue

participation throughout the entire process.

Measurement is another means an organization uses to evidence learning. Technical skills can be measured by the previously mentioned before-and-after method to evaluate application. Soft skills are more difficult to measure, but one effective methodology utilizes survey tools. For instance, if the development session was on the topic of customer communication, then customer satisfaction surveys can be very telling. Multi-rater assessments or 360 evaluations that consider the impact the learner has on his or her colleagues are good measurement tools for abstract behaviors, such as interpersonal skills or competencies like writing.

Besides benchmarking and measurement, there are two additional steps an organization can take to ensure that their participants gain — and apply — training-related knowledge. First, the actual training event should happen around the time the learner needs to apply the information. If one is trained too far in advance of using the skill, he or she most likely has already lost the knowledge by the time they need to use it.

Secondly, it’s imperative that learned knowledge and used skills are put to work and reinforced on the job immediately. For instance, when plant operations workers are trained on a specific skill, the methodology that their organizations use needs to directly correlate to and support the messages communicated during the training session.

Final Thoughts

It’s evident that enterprising plant operations professionals ought to stay up-to-date on the latest skills in their field, but what is the ultimate end game for organizations seeking tangible learning and development benefits? Three words: application, adoption and improvement. In this context, the strategic use of PLAs can demonstrate the extent to which organizations are gaining quantitative benefits from their learning partners. In benchmarking, PLAs are a key part of the validation process enabling the learners to demonstrate — back to their leaders — overall improvement results and ROI once learning programs are complete.

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