

Making Training Stick

By Dr. Barbara Carnes

Company X ordered a new computer system. While they were waiting for it to arrive and be installed they put all their employees through a two-day training class offered by the vendor so they would be ready to use it when it arrived. When employees returned from the two days of training, they complained that the class was confusing, and the instructor had never worked with the software in the "real world", and they didn't really understand what the new system was going to do and how they would use it in their specific jobs. Two months passed. The system was finally ready. But the employees weren't. Not anymore. They had forgotten most of what they had learned. The company had to pay to send everyone through the class again. Management, naturally, was not happy. "Why can't these people learn things right the first time?" one of the senior executives was overhead saying.

Situations like this are unfortunately all too common. In fact, according to many sources only 10-20% of what is learned in training is never used on the job. The rest is forgotten, or not seen as relevant. Without knowing it, this company did all the wrong things so that the training didn't "stick". The mistakes cost the company a half a million dollars.

What will make training stick? Recent research has found many factors that increase training transfer, which is the formal term that means on-the-job use of skills learned in training. The most important of these are:

- 1 Opportunity to use.** It may have been convenient for the computer company to train the employees before the system was installed, but when they couldn't use it upon return to the job, they soon forgot most of what they had learned. Recommendations are not only that people be able to use what they have learned immediately upon return to their jobs, but that they be able to use it 2-3 times more often than normal during the first week after training.
- 2 Boss support.** Before the training, the manager of the trainee should discuss the purpose of the training, and how it can be used to help do the job easier, faster, or better. During training,

the boss should arrange for coverage so the trainee does not have to do work before or after the training day or deal with urgent issues unless absolutely necessary. Research has shown that when trainees have to deal with job responsibilities, they are less likely to retain what they learn and transfer it to the job. After training, the boss should provide or help the trainee identify opportunities to use what they have learned (see above). The boss should also debrief the training with the trainee, and discuss specific ways that it can be applied.

- 3 Company culture.** Cultures that encourage people to take risks, to try new ideas, and to make mistakes while learning will see their employees retain and use more of what they learn.
- 4 Competent trainers and training materials.** Trainers need to not only know the training content, they must also be able to present it in a way that is understandable to the trainees. In addition, they must instruct in a way that engages the learner and inspires confidence and respect. The training material itself should be organized in a sequence that is best for learning, and it should include opportunities for supervised practice.

By following these and other relatively simple guidelines, organizations can expect to see retention and use of training increase dramatically, to as much as 80-90%.

If Company X had followed these guidelines, no doubt they could have eliminated the need for repeat training, and saved themselves a half a million dollars. □

*Editor's Note: Dr. Barbara Carnes is President of Carnes and Associates, Inc., a human resource development firm that provides training design, instruction, coaching, and off-the-shelf materials that "stick". She is the co-author of the books *Making Training Stick* and *The Making Training Stick Field Guide*. She can be reached at: Bcarnes428@aol.com or phone: 314-569-1213*