*Max Messmer, Editor*

# Training Programs That Get Results

Having employees with just the right skills at just the right time is critical to the success of your accounting operation. A new database application or enterprise resource planning system, for example, is of minimal use if no one on your staff knows how to maximize it.

Training programs focused on current accounting and finance skills can make all the difference in maintaining team productivity by keeping your employees' knowledge and abilities relevant.

In recent years, budget cuts in many companies have reduced or removed funding for professional development programs. Today, new regulations and an improving economy have prompted organizations to once again take a good look at their training initiatives. Even those who still have limited resources are finding ways to provide meaningful and effective ongoing professional development for their employees. In addition, the expected loss of retiring baby boomer accountants in coming years is causing businesses to ensure they continue to have a well-trained workforce in place.

Let's look at some key considera-tions when assessing and upgrading your training initiatives.

## Target your needs

Before you enhance a training initiative or launch new ones, you need to carefully define the anticipated outcome. Is there a true need for the training you are planning? What do you expect to change as a result of the investment? For instance, recent emphasis on business ethics and the integrity of financial data might prompt you to consider providing staff access to classes in fundamental forensic accounting strategies so they can help detect and prevent corporate financial fraud.

Identify key business drivers and specific weaknesses within your group, and concentrate training in those areas. Evaluate larger projects and developments on the horizon to help determine whether your em-ployees might benefit from preparatory classes or instruction. For example, if certain staff members are in line for promotions into management in the next year or two, you might focus on soft skills and leadership training.

Also take note of emerging trends within the accounting profession. New research by our company shows that knowledge of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), enterprise risk management, fair value accounting, and fraud control, among other areas, will become increasingly critical in the coming years. By adapting your training to support these demands, you not only ensure your employees have what it takes to keep your firm on the leading edge, but you also show strategic foresight as a manager, which can enhance your own career prospects.

## Evaluate training techniques

Give careful consideration to the training method employed; each has its pros and cons depending on your particular topic and goals. E-learning—where employees receive instruction through the Internet or company intranet—has become a popular training option.

According to the latest research from the American Society for Training and Development, training delivery via learning technologies grew from 15% in 2002 to 24% in 2003. Many organizations are turning to e-learning because it offers staff the flexibility to train at their own pace 24 hours a day, seven days a week. While e-learning works well for mastering certain skills such as financial software applications, the fact that there's no personal interaction with an instructor or other students makes it less effective than classroom training in areas such as business communication and team building.

In-person classroom training isn't always the ideal solution either. Keep in mind that not everyone learns equally well through formal training or instruction. Often you can achieve better results by partnering employees with coworkers who already possess the desired skills or knowledge. For example, you might assign a new accounting manager to work with someone experienced in this position for insights on how to supervise and lead accounting staff successfully. Or you can have people in different areas of the department participate in cross-training, such as assigning a new credit manager to shadow his or her counterpart in the collections department to gain a better understanding of how their roles support each other. The sharing of firsthand expertise also can supplement seminars or courses on a given topic.

Regardless of which training method you choose, make sure your staff can realistically take advantage of it. Be willing to reallocate workloads and make special scheduling accommodations to support your team's professional development.

## Critique the outcome

Once training is completed, analyze the end result to make sure there has been a quantifiable benefit. Just because people attend a training program doesn't mean that they learn anything from it, so you want to make sure you are getting your money's worth. What did employees think of the program offered? Are accounting staff who participated applying the knowledge to their daily work? Are you seeing noticeable changes in their skills and knowledge? Be sure you are giving your staff opportunities to demonstrate their newly enhanced abilities. For instance, if someone has attended a course on fair value accounting, allow him or her to put this training into practice the next time a key valuation initiative is planned.

Ongoing professional development is vital to your accounting department's ability to thrive under changing market conditions. Just be sure you select the best training program for your needs, give your employees the time to attend, and evaluate the end result. ■

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