

## Careers

By Max Messmer, Editor

# Building Employee Knowledge: A Look at Training Programs

Despite common perception, training today is definitely not just for beginners. Even the most accomplished accounting professional can benefit by continually updating his or her knowledge base—whether it's mastering the latest version of a financial software application or developing management skills to work toward a promotion.

By giving your employees access to an effective training program, you can help them grow professionally and, at the same time, improve your group's overall performance. But how can you be sure the classes or subject matter you select will be the most valuable? As companies demand more and more from their accounting departments, you can't afford to waste your team's time on training that's not targeted to their most pressing needs. With a little research and assessment, however, you can help your staff find ideal professional development options.

### What are your needs?

As a first step, clearly define which skills your employees need most to help the department

achieve its goals. Consider soliciting input from your staff through written surveys and questionnaires. Ask employees to comment on the relevance of specific areas of expertise to their jobs and long-term company objectives. You should also assess the various skills levels of your

staff members and identify opportunities for skills enhancement.

Monitoring daily job performance can also help you

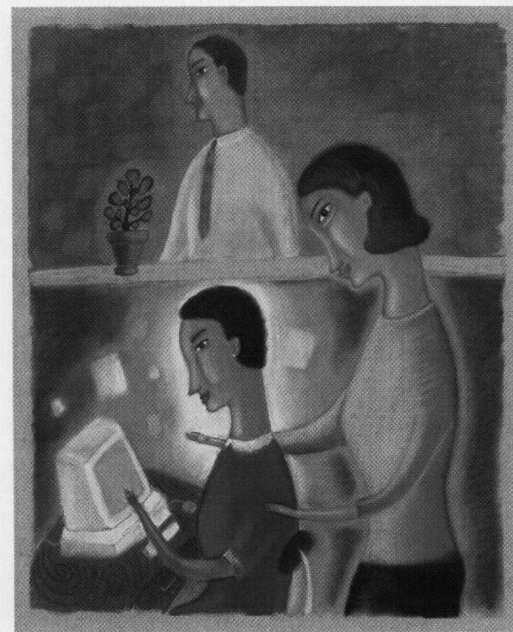
determine training needs. But be careful not to jump to conclusions as soon as you notice a problem. Someone who is having trouble meeting deadlines may not necessarily benefit from a time management class. He or she may simply need additional support during workload peaks. Always speak directly with an employee who may be falling short of expectations. Together, you can then determine whether training will provide a solution.

### Evaluate the options

The traditional model of corporate training was an instructor-

led program delivered in a classroom. Today, that's just one choice to consider. Here are some others:

- **Topic-specific workshops** can be a useful way to help your team members build their skills. These seminars are typically presented by training companies and



frequently are held at a public site, such as a hotel or conference center. The main drawback is that they can be too generic, not offering the industry- or company-specific training you may require.

- **Off-the-shelf nonclassroom training programs**—such as CD-ROMs or videos—are very inexpensive when compared to other options. They provide an opportunity for individualized strategies for learning but may not be effective for those who aren't self-motivated or who would benefit most from direct instructor involvement.

- **Executive education seminars** are offered by universities and business schools and are targeted, in most instances, to middle and upper-level managers. They offer an excellent opportunity for attendees to network and share ideas. But courses at the more prestigious schools can be expensive—as much as \$5,000 for a four- or five-day class.

- **Interactive distance learning** is delivered via the Internet, company intranet, or teleconferencing. These programs can be effective for employees whose schedules or locations don't permit travel to training sites. Unlike CD-ROMs or videos, this format can be interactive. Such programs are very cost effective and offer a great deal of individual flexibility, but they share the same drawbacks as off-the-shelf training.

### Make it easy to participate

It's one thing to schedule a training session and quite another to actually have employees attend. Deadlines and demands can make it challenging for staff members to devote time to professional development. Make sure you emphasize the importance of any program—how it will help

staff achieve individual goals and benefit the team as a whole. Then demonstrate your support by providing flexible formats and any additional assistance that will allow more employees to participate. You should also consider reimbursing your staff for participation in formal continuing professional education programs that lead to credentials such as a CMA designation or that allow them to keep their CMA or CPA status current.

### Gauge the results

Regardless of which training option you select, you'll want to set up a system for monitoring its success. Keep in mind, however, that learning can be difficult to assess, given the number of variables at play. Some people may prefer one training format over another; some may need to work on skill sets that aren't easy to learn.

Giving tests both before and after a training program can help you gauge the results. This is particularly effective with well-defined skills such as knowledge of a software application or an accounting specialty. For broader topics, such as leadership or communication skills, you'll

want to evaluate their impact on job performance. Make sure you provide an opportunity for employees to demonstrate their new abilities after they've completed training. For example, you might let someone who's taken a course on delivering effective presentations lead a discussion at your next departmental meeting.

Also, solicit feedback on the program from staff members. What did they think of the instructor? Were the topics covered in the course relevant to their jobs? How soon can they put the information to use? Would they recommend other employees receive the same training? This information will help you better evaluate particular training formats and topics.

Continuing education isn't just a good idea—it's a necessity in accounting and finance. By making professional development a high priority in your department, you're not only investing in your employees' individual growth, but you're also contributing to the ongoing success of your company. ■

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