

## **Cost Effective Employee Training Programs**

By Jessica Richardson

If you are fortunate enough to have an approved budget for employee training and development programs, you probably already have some great ideas for 2010 and perhaps have started implementation. Granted, in today's business economy, everyone needs to remain flexible and recognize that those funds may "go away," but now is the time to get started. It is more important than ever to make sure that you use those training dollars wisely.

Jumping on the latest and greatest training bandwagon usually isn't the most effective way to use your training dollars. Before you design a program, send people off to seminars, hire in a trainer, or purchase a bunch of videos and workbooks, learn what is needed specifically in your organization. This isn't as difficult as what it may seem and even the smallest of organizations can make a good plan based on good information.

Training around products and services is often part of the plan, but what about those other things, like teamwork, communication, leadership? Maybe you have noticed an overabundance of negative competition among employees and you believe teamwork should be encouraged. Or maybe the CEO has indicated a desire to improve internal communication. Perhaps the executive team feels that people are not productive enough. Some of these things can be quite nebulous, so find out exactly what it is about teamwork that your team needs training on. What is meant by communication problems, and what productivity issues need to be addressed exactly?

Your organization probably already has some great information available for you to sort through and analyze. A good place to start is to examine the feedback gathered from employee performance appraisals completed during the past 12 months. Look for trends, commonalities between departments, functional areas, or organizational levels. Another source to consider is any type of data gathered from surveys conducted with customers. This feedback may show where skills are lacking and where you have an opportunity to help employees improve in those "gray areas" like communication and teamwork.

Conducting an internal survey to better assess where improvement opportunities exist is essential to gaining the buy-in and the support you will need to have a successful year of training and development. The "survey" can be as simple as interviewing your internal customers. Remember to ask open ended questions, use non-defensive interviewing techniques, and listen very well to what is said. Beginning an interview with pre-conceived notions won't help anyone. Other options include a written survey that can be distributed by hard copy or electronically. Planning in advance how the results of the survey will be used can be helpful in designing the questions. When you learn what is important to your management team and where the weaknesses lie, you will have some important tools to build a great training program.

Training programs play a big part in the annual budget and often are one of the first areas cut when revenues have diminished, yet training is widely recognized as an important step to achieving organizational goals. In the 2009 State of the Industry Report, released by the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD), key findings show that in 2008, U.S. organizations spent \$134.07 billion on employee learning and development. This is an average of \$1,068 per employee. Learning expenditures as a percentage of payroll increased in 2008 to 2.24 percent, up from 2.15 percent in 2007. Completing some research and gathering information prior to spending money will help to ensure that you get a return on your investment.

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