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Professional Development Seminars: Scouting Out Your Best Opportunities

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Professional Development Seminars

SCOUTING OUT YOUR BEST OPPORTUNITIES

By Doug Swanson

While professional development seminars can be helpful, they're not a "cure-all" for every problem situation.

It's quite common for businesses, both large and small, to send employees to professional development seminars. Some of these seminars focus on a general business topic—improving management skills, communication or customer service. Others deal with a specific technical topic such as learning new equipment, improving existing production skills or mastering new ones. Still, attending a seminar does not guarantee an employee will come back with incredible skills and work habits.

Before sending your employee off for professional development, it's important to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of professional seminars—as well as the additional support you will have to provide to these workers. It's not as easy as writing a check for the seminar and sending your employee on his way.

On-the-job performance

Enrolling an employee in a seminar does not guarantee their work quality will improve. In fact, there are at least five variables that determine an employee's on-the-job performance. Ralph H. Kilmann, author of "Managing Beyond the Quick Fix" and a consultant who has worked with a number of corporate clients including AT&T, Eastman Kodak and Xerox, makes note of the different variables.

Those include:
- An employee's ability to perform the work assigned—this includes personal traits and skills,
- Their motivation to work,
- Cultural norms within the company—and the extent to which it supports or restricts employee motivation,
- An employee's control over his or her work, and
- Time and task management ability.

Professional development can be effective when its focus is narrow and the goals of instruction are clear—and to the extent the workplace culture will support the development effort. However, merely sending an employee to a seminar will not guarantee an increase in productivity, motivation or task management ability—regardless of claims made in a seminar brochure.

Building the right team

In his book "Team Building," author William G. Dyer discusses many of the personal, psychological and organizational variables that affect how people perform at work, both individually and in teams. Dyer finds that professional development can help improve productivity in three areas: mergers, new technology and task restructuring.

Acquisitions and mergers

In the case of a business acquisition or merger, professional development training can help your workers "come together and form one team with common goals and shared procedures." In other words, rather than splintering off into individual agendas, employees will work more as a cohesive unit.

New technology

The introduction of new technology into a workplace is daunting and many employees will resist the change. They may feel intimidated by the new technology or that it threatens their job security, thus making them reluctant to participate. Here, professional development seminars bring workers together in groups, enabling them to learn more quickly in a supportive, non-threatening group situation. Once employees feel comfortable, they will feel more free to open up to the opportunity, ask questions and take greater risks.

Task restructuring

Finally, in instances in which work tasks are being restructured, Dyer writes that employees who go through professional development training are able to deal better with "new, greatly changed conditions." Again, employees who have learned how to work together in a team environment will be better equipped to cope with the change.

And here too, a key to the success of a professional development effort is the employee's willingness to learn and desire to put the skills into use in the work environment.

Integrating development with existing policies, procedures

Before writing the check to pay
for employee training, think about what you want to accomplish as an organization—and consider how well the training will integrate with what’s already going on. Make sure you and the employee(s) involved understand what’s to be gained from the experience. Are the goals clear? How will the training integrate into your total business plan? Will there be management support at all levels for the employee—both before and after training is undertaken? How will the development clarify the worker’s role within your business?

Will the learning experience from the seminar really relate to the employee’s on-the-job work? It wouldn’t be wise to send your bookkeeper to learn plumbing skills; likewise, you shouldn’t send your installer to learn accounting software—that is, unless you foresee a big job responsibility change on the horizon!

Think, too, about the individual worker. Does the employee have a promising future with the company? Don’t waste your time—and perhaps the employee’s—by sending to training someone who’s going to leave within the next six months to take retirement, have a baby or move on to another job. If the employee is leaving the workforce, you will have spent money without any return for your business—and, possibly, you will have paid to bring about a more qualified worker for your competition.

Do you have the added resources in place to support what will be learned in the professional development seminar? For example, if you send your customer service manager to learn about the latest computer software, you better have the software and hardware in place—or plans to get it—to support the new knowledge. It’s frustrating for an employee to learn new skills, but not be able to apply them upon returning to work. And it could very easily result in the now-more-valuable employee “shopping around” for another job where he or she can put the newly developed skills to work.

**Shopping around**

Whether you’re considering team building or professional development of individuals, remember that training programs do occasionally fail. A recent article in *USA Today* cited no fewer than eight reasons for failure, including unclear goals, changing objectives, lack of management accountability, lack of role clarity and ineffective leadership (Feb. 25, 1997, p. B1).

Should you decide it’s appropriate to send a worker or group of workers to professional development, the next step is to match available training program opportunities with your specific needs. Are your training needs general or specific? Are you looking for an immediate return on investment as with an employee sent to learn a new computer software program, or are you expecting to see results over a long period of time as with general management skills training? How much knowledge does the employee need to pick up to reach your objectives? Customer service personnel, for example, may just need to spend a few hours brushing up on their current skills—or they may need to spend a day or two learning entirely new strategies of dealing with customer complaints. Consider, too, how well the training period fits in with your business routine. It may not pose a problem to have your bookkeeper gone for professional development training for a day or two—but losing that person for a week might be a great hardship.

You also must consider the bottom line in all of this. How much are you willing to spend to increase the potential for improved productivity? While some local seminars could cost you as little as $50 or $100, other professional development opportunities can cost thousands and may involve sending a worker to another part of the country. You must determine how much you are willing to sacrifice for this potential opportunity.

**Seminar sources**

There are literally thousands of professional development opportunities available on an innumerable amount of subjects. The first place you might look for assistance is the municipal and state chambers of commerce. Professional development offered in conjunction with chambers is much more likely to address the unique characteristics of doing business in your region of the country. These seminars also are more likely to be offered at a reasonable cost and do not involve the added cost of traveling and lodging.

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**The SBA**

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) also has information on a multitude of seminars available across the country. In addition, there are more than 600 Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) that offer no-charge counseling and low-cost seminars on a myriad of topics. SBDCs, funded by a combination of state and federal money, also are a terrific source for information on low-interest loans, business planning and tax assistance. A complete directory of SBDCs around the country is available from the SBA or in James Halloran’s valuable book, “The Entrepreneur’s Guide to Starting a Successful Business.”

Opportunities for technical skill
development can be found through any one of the dozens of industry, trade and professional organizations that serve the water industry. Technical skill development is also available through local community colleges or vocational-technical schools, often at a very low cost to you and without the added cost of travel and out-of-town lodging.

Last but certainly not least, don’t overlook the many hundreds of firms offering professional development seminars in the private sector. Everything from accounting to computer software skills, personnel management to telephone etiquette and lots of subjects in between are offered in the private sector. A quick search of the Internet brought more than 200 home pages and home page entries posted by professional development firms seeking your business. So there are plenty of opportunities out there.

Before you invest
You wouldn’t spend a lot of

money on office equipment or a delivery truck without checking out the competition—or talking to other business people about their experiences. The same is true for professional development training. Don’t spend any money on a training program until you’ve checked it out thoroughly.

By researching a seminar, you can determine what types of programs they offer. Some are highly interactive while others are presented in a simple lecture format. It’s important to find the right “fit” between the seminar and the employee. Everyone is different. Some people can sit through a five-hour lecture, no problem. Others get fidgety after 10 minutes. So, aside from what’s going to be covered (the curriculum), thought should be given as to how the material will be presented.

Next, you have to ask yourself how your employees learn best. The answer will most likely be different for each. Is the employee a morning person? Then an eight a.m. seminar would work out fine. Does the person socialize well? Then a group environment might benefit her. Is he willing to give up a Saturday to attend a development workshop? Be careful—that he might be there in body, his mind could be absent. In addition to the seminar’s content, the format should be chosen carefully.

And don’t skimp. If you want your employee to learn a specific skill, pay for it. Sending an employee to a seminar in the hopes he will come back and illuminate the office is a risky venture. Many seminars prohibit audio and videotaping and even taking notes is frowned upon. After all, they want people to pay for the information they gain. Besides, some employees, though they may take prolific notes and learn much from their experience, are simply not capable of accurately disseminating the information when they return. They may not write well enough to put their notes into an easily readable format and they may not have the speaking and presentation skills to verbally communicate their learning.

If sharing knowledge is the goal, you’re better off by pairing up the employee with a person who did not attend the seminar. Let’s say you send John, an installer, to a seminar on reverse osmosis (RO) membrane technology. Rather than counting on John to deliver a dissertation on RO technology, pair him up with another installer and have them work together for a week or so. By the end of the week, both can make use of the new learning and you, as employer, have two people with new skills.

Summary
To effectively select a professional development seminar, one must be cognizant of who learns best, how they learn best and what type of information they need to learn.

If you decide to seek out professional development opportunities, make sure the rewards go along with the program—this is necessary to make your employees feel valuable to your firm. Remember also that the best rank-and-file employee is only as good as the management system under which he or she works. Don’t expect stellar performance from a worker if you’re not managing effectively, communicating honestly and doing your best to plan for their future and the company’s.

References

About the author
Doug Swanson has 16 years’ experience as a journalist, broadcaster and educator. Founder of the public relations and marketing firm The Swanson Group, Swanson is an assistant professor and director of the journalism and public relations program at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Okla. He formerly worked in management for the Rayne Corp. in its company-owned water conditioning businesses in San Jose, North Hollywood and Glendale, Calif.