



## IN PRACTICE

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## How Do You Train When There Is No Trainer? A Small Business Training Solution

by Jeffrey E. McElyea

Small businesses owners and managers (less than 100 employees) face special challenges when training their employees. The owners and managers in businesses of this size are often counted on to participate in the delivery of the company's products or services and train new employees at the same time. They do not have human resource departments or training departments. Consequently, any training that employees receive usually occurs entirely in an on-the-job (OJT) format. This makes it very difficult to properly train new people that join the company or improve the skills of the existing staff.

This situation creates quite a paradox. On one hand, having well-trained, fully competent employees is vital to the continued growth of the company. On the other hand, there is neither the time nor money for the owner/manager to abandon their day-to-day duties to focus on training a new employee. Typically, this results in new employees learning their position "on-the-fly", which causes inadequate and incomplete training.

Our company, Lucid Business Strategies, has what we believe to be a unique approach to solving this common situation - we create a customized OJT program that allows the employee to literally train themselves. This approach allows the employee to deeply into topics that interest them, and lets them move quickly through the topics they already understand. Since the employee is doing most of the work, the amount of training time required from the owner/manager is greatly reduced.

## IN PRACTICE

The training we create is designed to put the new employee in charge of their own learning. The new employee is given a participants manual that leads them step-by-step through their training. This "guided learning" includes specific learning activities to complete with their supervisor, on their own, with SMEs, company resources, vendors, and customers. Each learning activity includes step-by-step instructions and an explanation of what they are expected to be able to do on the job after completing that activity. We include multiple methods of learning to ensure that the new employee acquires every skill and learns every task that is required of them on the job.

The participant's manual includes exercises, case studies, quizzes and formal tests which the employee must complete and review with their supervisor. This provides a built-in evaluation process to ensure the employee is competent in each task or skill, an opportunity for the owner/manager to provide additional training and feedback, and evidence that they will be able to apply the skill on the job.



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Obviously, we cannot eliminate the need for the owner/manager to be involved in at least some of the training. We reduce this time involvement by including formal training exercises in the participant's manual that the owner/manager must be involved in. This allows the owner/manager to provide consistent training with every employee, and keeps them focused on the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities they are trying to impart. This approach has the added benefit of providing the employee with the way of knowing when they need their supervisors assistance, and guidance about what they need to learn when are in training with their supervisor -- they can actually direct the training session themselves!

We also provide both the owner/manager and the employee with a method of tracking their progress towards the completion of their training. We condense all of the topics, exercises, activities, and evaluations into a checklist. Both the owner/manager and the employee checks off the activities that has been completed, which provides a visual cue of how much progress the employee is making in their training, and a way to know how much of the training must still be completed. This checklist doubles as a method of ensuring that the training stays on a reasonable schedule.

When the employee completes all of the exercises in the participant's manual, they are fully trained and qualified for their position. Both the owner/manager and the employee have full confidence that they have learned everything they will encounter on the job, and that they have the ability to apply that learning in their day-to-day work.

This approach has benefits for existing employees as well. If there is a particular knowledge, skill, or ability that they are struggling with, they can use the participants manual and checklists to guide themselves through the additional training they need. The employee is assured of receiving very targeted training in a one-on-one setting with the owner/manager, because the assignments and exercises in the participant's manual require it. Once the training is complete, both the owner/manager and employee are then confident that they have learned that particular skill correctly, and that they can apply it on on-the-job.

## Results

One client we have used this approach with is a small company that sells cutting-edge technology products. The training teaches new hires in-depth product knowledge, an understanding of their marketplace, and basic sales techniques. Prior to this OJT training, it took a new employee six to nine months to acquire enough product knowledge to be effective in their sales process. Preliminary results show that we have reduced this time to two to three months. Furthermore, the salesperson's that have completed the training have become some of the company's top producers within six months time.

Interestingly, new employees have rated the training as "outstanding", even though they have done the vast majority of the work. The previous training approach resulted in 100% of the employees saying that the company's training was "poor or non-existent."

## Summary

Small business owners and managers have a very difficult time providing quality training for their employees. Using traditional instructional design techniques, it is possible to design an on-the-job training program that puts most of the training



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responsibility on the employee. This approach ensures that the employee learns each skill they need, and greatly reduces the amount of time the owner/manager must invest in the training. It is also greatly reduces the overall training time, and can improve the contribution of the new employee.