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ASTD offers tips for training on a shoestring

By Stephenie Overman

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With a little ingenuity, and perhaps the aid of some government funding, even a company on a tight budget can give its employees the benefits of training.

"Informal learning" is an especially effective way of providing training benefits without spending a lot of money, Jennifer Homer, vice president of communications and member relations for the American Society of Training and Development, told attendees at the organization's recent national conference.

Plus, Homer said, "informal learning methods such social media, mentoring and coaching are part of how people work and live. They're not going to stop to take a course. This type of learning can be woven into how people learn and how they get their work done."

She cited ASTD's white paper, "Keep Learning Mission Critical," which recommends providing systems that support informal knowledge-sharing, such as wikis, blogs and social networking tools.

The report calls for using short learning sessions to support interdepartmental knowledge management, deliver policy-related information and allow discussion of new marketplace trends. It recommends giving employees training on personal financial planning, stress management, personal and professional career development, and offering soft-skills training such as listening skills or the ability to motivate. "These skills will help support a more positive culture and maintain a more solid environment during unstable times," according to the paper.

Homer added that companies should encourage employees to network with colleagues and take part in professional development opportunities. Associations, professional organizations and affinity groups all can provide training and development for their members at low prices or even at no cost.

Among more formal strategies, web-based learning is an extremely popular way to provide all types of training, Homer said, because it offers timely, targeted information right at an employee's desk, saves the company on travel costs and doesn't take up an inordinate amount of an employees' time.

Most importantly, though, HR/benefits pros must make sure that any type of learning opportunity is specific and linked to the individual's performance plan or the company's overall strategy, Homer said, so that "it's not just training for training sake."

The personal touch

One-on-one coaching is an effective, but usually expensive proposition, according to Kathleen Stinnett, senior consultant and executive coach for Zenger Folkman in Santa Barbara, Calif. However, building an internal coaching team can be a relatively low-cost alternative.

"If a company is ready to really embrace a coaching culture, [internal coaching] is less expensive and still offers one-on-one training," Stinnett said. "We're seeing a lot of companies saying, 'Our managers should be developing employees,' because it's one interface that will not cost the company any more. It's an underutilized relationship that provides value to employees, but most companies don't tap into that."

That's probably because most managers are so busy, they haven't had much time to learn to be good coaches, Stinnett explained, whose work as a consultant includes training managers to be more skillful at coaching their employees.

Mentoring is another low-cost internal training method. The key difference between coaching and mentoring, according to Stinnett, is that mentors impart personal wisdom while coaches haven't necessarily been through the experiences themselves.

Trainers are locked in a debate over whether informal or formal mentoring is the better approach, Stinnett added. She has found that "there needs to be some sort of chemistry on both sides. If the mentor doesn't respect the mentee, he or she won't invest in the relationship. If the trust isn't there, neither party is likely to share."

When done well, mentoring and coaching benefits both parties in the partnership, Stinnett said.

In fact, the trend now is two-way mentoring designed to benefit both parties, according to Homer. The arrangement doesn't have to be a senior manager matched up with junior employee, she said. "Think about what your organization wants to get out of mentoring. Is it about technology? A new program, a new product?" The employee with the expertise in a specific area may not be the most senior.

With four generations in the workforce together and many employees becoming eligible to retire, knowledge transfer is critical to an organization, Homer said.

Individuals may take different approaches to learning, she said, but the important thing is "building a supportive culture so everyone understands why it is so important to develop critical skills and pass along knowledge."

With all types of training, keep supervisors and managers in the loop, Homer advised. Explain to them why the training is being done, how it will be measured and the value it brings to the organization. When learning has a positive influence on performance, it will be less likely to be cut from the budget.

Finding training dollars

There's help for companies that need help giving their employees better training benefits. Federal and state governments provide billions of dollars each year for job training and related services through the public workforce investment system.

The \$787 billion stimulus legislation, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, includes more than \$5 billion in training for a variety of programs across a number of federal agencies. The law invests heavily in new technologies, infrastructure projects and health care, said C. Michael Ferraro, founder of Training Solutions Inc., Chantilly, Va. An important part of the legislation allocates \$3.9 billion to the Department of Labor, and \$2.95 billion of that money will be used for training and employment services throughout FY 2009.

Federal programs used to focus on individuals who lacked market skills, according to Ferraro, but "now business is seen as the ultimate customer" and federal legislation has been rewritten to encompass business views and needs.

To find aid at the federal level, Ferraro recommended turning to the Department of Labor Web site, www.Workforce3one.org.

At the state level, he advised company representatives to meet with members of the state workforce board, and the state economic workforce and labor departments.

At the local level, company representatives can meet not only with local Workforce Investment Board members but also with area university and community college administrators to discuss grant opportunity partnerships.

Stephenie Overman is a New Jersey-based freelance writer specializing in workplace and health care issues.

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