



WHITE PAPER

How to Make
On-the-Job Training
Work for Your Organization



Being well-trained means you can train others.

Think about your first paying job. What kind of training, if any, did you receive before you began? Many of us recall jobs with structured training, while others had little, if any preparation. The On-the-Job Training (OJT) you may have received was likely memorable, because it was either good training or poor training.

OJT is a skill development where a worker learns through hands-on experience.

80-90%

of an employee's job knowledge and skills are learned through OJT



OJT generally gives the learner the opportunity to work in the same environment with the same regularly used equipment which makes it an efficient approach to learning new skills. Its advantage is providing continuous training of immediate need to the learner. Further, OJT can continue for the length of time necessary for the learner to achieve mastery. In general, OJT occurs when one person, most often the supervisor or lead person of a work area, passes job knowledge and skills to another person.

Training an employee on the job can be an effective teaching method because it gives the learner practical experience with the tools and equipment they will be working with each day. As such, OJT is one of the most common types of training used in the workplace, especially for skilled jobs. **Research shows that 80 to 90% of an employee's job knowledge and skills are learned through OJT.**

Structure Your OJT

OJT has some challenges, many of which occur because the training is often unstructured. The new employee is assigned to an experienced worker or supervisor who demonstrates how the job is performed. **Think of unstructured OJT as a tribal training process. This means information is passed down from generation to generation of workers.** It can be problematic because the content may be inaccurate, represent an accumulation of bad habits, spread misinformation, or include possibly unsafe shortcuts. To compound the problem, many experienced employees, or SMEs, are seldom able to communicate what they know and have learned in a way others can easily understand.

Certainly, OJT has its place and can be successful if it is structured. **Structured OJT is the planned process of developing competence by having an experienced employee train a novice employee in the work setting or in a location that closely resembles the work setting.** It requires organization and involves creating lesson plans, learning objectives, delivery methods, instructional tools, and an assessment/evaluation. To structure OJT, you go through adequate forethought and planning.

Unstructured:

Trained by an experienced employee, whose experience as a trainer may be limited. Training content, methods, and outcomes may vary across employees trained.

VS.

Structured:

Trained by an experienced employee who has appropriate competence in the work and in being an OJT trainer. Training content, methods, and outcomes are consistent across employees trained.

The training program tends to be more uniform, with all employees who do a specific task taught the same skills and activities in a consistent, standardized way. The ultimate goal is to design, develop, and implement reliable and predictable training. **The key to reliability and predictability is following a Systematic Approach to Training (SAT).**

Using SAT ensures your OJT has the structure, consistency, standardization, and documentation necessary to effectively train your employees to perform specific tasks. Just because OJT is done in a real working environment doesn't mean you can ignore the sound principles of instructional development.

OJT Advantages and Disadvantages

One major drawback of OJT is it can be time consuming. At least one experienced employee or supervisor has to take time out of their regular job to conduct the training. This can be challenging at times, especially if the instructor has work deadlines that must be met in addition to their training duties. Following SAT to ensure OJT is structured, requires additional time for analyzing, designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating.

Because the instructor plays a pivotal role in the quality of training received by a learner, it's important to find the right person to conduct OJT. The trainer must have knowledge and skills with the same equipment the learner will be using or they will not be effective. We often see experienced operators chosen as trainers forget to explain important steps or use technical words and phrases the learner doesn't understand. And, care must be taken not to pass on sloppy work habits or unintentionally teach irrelevant or inefficient work methods or processes to the learner.



The trainer's demeanor plays an important part in the instruction quality – as much as the lesson content and instructional materials. Since learners tend to model their actions after trainers, it's essential the trainers chosen to deliver OJT demonstrate leadership qualities and convey a positive attitude toward training. Good interpersonal skills is also the mark of an effective trainer.

However, advantages of structured OJT outweigh disadvantages. **OJT is often cost-effective for an organization because no outside teachers or programs are needed, and training is typically conducted as part of actual work shifts.**

The learner doesn't usually need to travel, eliminating potential expenses. Additional equipment isn't necessarily needed, and the learner trains by using the tools they will use for the job.

By training in the actual workplace, a new employee has the chance to interact and network with staff, which often means practical advice and experiences are shared to help link the tasks required for the job. Also, feedback during OJT is immediate, so the learner may experience increased retention of the skills practiced.

The ability to influence a learner's behavior is closely related to the trainer's motivational skills, personal stories and examples, and communication skills.



Common OJT Instructor Errors

As with any training delivery, there is always room for improvement. Level one evaluation, part of a systematic approach, enables trainers to improve areas of the training session. Students evaluate their overall training experience (instructor, content, materials, location, session objectives, and relevance to job). Comments and suggestions can then be considered for future program enhancements. Common OJT instructor mistakes include:

- **Trying to teach too much at once.** Tasks often need to be broken down into parts. Develop enabling objectives so content can be chunked and taught in steps, building knowledge and skills over time.

(More information on learning objectives is available in our [Writing Learning Objectives white paper](#).)

- **Attempting to teach too fast.** Give the learner some time to process new concepts and skills. Make sure they are ready to progress to the next level before moving on.
- **Not giving the big picture.** Instructors should include an introduction and overview of the training that is about to take place. Explain how the task fits into the overall job responsibilities for the learner and how their job fits into the organization.
- **Not adjusting to individual differences.** Adults have different learning preferences, aptitudes, prior knowledge and skill levels, and mental and physical abilities. Instructors should consider these differences and adapt the OJT format to create the most effective learning experience for each student. Not everyone learns the same way or at the same pace.
- **Not providing sufficient practice time.** Telling isn't training. Watching an instructor perform the task and actually performing the task doesn't necessarily mean the learner is competent. Instructors should plan for lots of practice time when introducing a new task. Asking open-ended questions allows the student to explain why they are doing the task and helps with retention. Repeated practice builds proficiency, confidence, and job knowledge transfer.

- **Failing to motivate.** Motivating learners helps to build confidence throughout the training process. It's important that instructors give feedback often. Learners want to know how they're doing. Feedback motivates them to learn more and progress.
- **Intimidating the learner.** Instructors should recognize the difference between demonstrating confidence in their experience and knowledge and intimidating the learner. They need to differentiate between being demanding and being demeaning.

Common OJT Instructor Errors:

- Trying to teach too much
- Attempting to teach too fast
- Lack of an overview
- Failure to recognize individual differences in learners
- Failure to provide practice time
- Failure to show the learner the overall objective
- Failure to give reinforcement
- Intimidating trainees

Make Your OJT Successful

As with any delivery method, the decision to implement OJT involves an analysis of the current training situation, budget, resources available, and time constraints. OJT may be the solution when training a small number of learners, provided experienced instructors are available to lead the training. Effective OJT requires an SAT approach so the design, development, implementation, and evaluation stages ensure adequate preparation for trainers and learners.

Structured properly, OJT can be a dynamic delivery method for organizations – one that enhances both the instructors' and learners' working experience.

Tale of Two Companies

Two companies recently hired a group of system operators. Both companies provide six months of classroom training covering Power System Fundamentals and NERC Standards. At the end of the six months, the system operator trainees are certified by successfully passing the NERC System Operator Certification Exam. The training program for both companies continues with on-the-job training (OJT) which places the operator trainees on shift with experienced operators to learn how to perform the required tasks of a system operator. However, the two companies have different philosophies of how OJT should be administered.

Company One...

does not have a structured program. They assign each operator trainee to a different experienced operator with marching orders to “go learn the job.” The company doesn’t have OJT trainee guides, trainer lesson plans, or procedures specifying the specific tasks. In addition, knowledge, skills, and steps required to perform those tasks are not available to the operator trainees or the experienced operators. The experienced operators administering OJT to the operator trainees have not received any training or guidance on how to effectively train on the job. After six months of OJT, the operator trainees are considered qualified, without any required testing, and placed on shift as operators.

As a result, Company One’s new operators perform their job functions inconsistently, and often incorrectly. Each learned different ways to do tasks based on the experience of their assigned trainer. Often, they learned their trainer’s bad habits. Additionally, the new operators are unfamiliar with how to perform some of the required tasks because they did not experience the task during the training period. No checklists or guides exist to ensure all tasks are covered in the training.



Company Two...

understands the importance of having structured OJT as part of an initial training program. Their program consists of detailed OJT trainer guides and trainer lesson plans which describe the tasks required of the system operator position, as well as the steps and knowledge to perform the tasks safely and effectively. The operator trainees' progress is tracked monthly to ensure the OJT is effective. Occasionally, operator trainees are assigned to different operators to hear their experiences and get a feel for the strengths and expertise each possesses. The company requires train-the-trainer instruction for those system operators conducting OJT.

At Company Two, the training is considered finished when the operator trainee completes a qualification card for each required job task and successfully passes a written and oral exam administered by management.

Because of their structured OJT program, Company Two places on shift a group of new system operators who learned the correct procedures to perform required job tasks. In addition, those tasks are performed consistently across shifts. The structured OJT program at Company Two led to considerably fewer operator errors than Company One in the first year after the new operators qualified.



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