



# 20 Ways to Engage Employees in **Mandatory Training**





Research bulletin by:

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It is rare to discover a subject so boring that absolutely no one is interested in it.



People who wouldn't describe themselves as astronomers turn their eyes skyward on a starry night and try to pick out the constellations. People who say they have no aptitude for math or logic are entranced by computer games that rely heavily on well-honed math or logic skills. Diehard rock fans are enchanted when they hear Bach played in a city park on a warm summer evening when they are strolling with someone they love.

The reality of human nature is that most people will step out of their comfort zone and embrace a new subject if it is presented in a package that engages their interest. Researchers such as Burgess (1997) and Wlodkowski (2003) who have studied the motivation of adult learners have all come to that same conclusion.

And yet, in most workplaces when managers announce that mandatory training is scheduled for next Tuesday at 2 p.m., there is inevitably a chorus of grumbles and groans from those who must stop what they are doing and attend.

Instead of focusing on what is wrong with the training program, the company manager sternly looks over a poorly attended session and asks in bewilderment, “How can we make our workers learn? This is important information. How can we make them participate fully?” The simple answer is: You can’t.

**“If people don’t want to sit through your program on their own accord, then there’s something wrong with your program, not your learners,”**  
**“Making it mandatory does not send the message, ‘This is important,’ but ‘This is so awful we have to put a gun to your head to make you attend”**

**-Jane Bozarth**, a training expert whose blog [bozarthzone](http://bozarthzone.com) centers on ideas for creating e-learning solutions



Nonetheless, there are essential skills and policies that have to be taught to employees whether they work in multinational corporations or small corner stores.

The average American company spends \$1,202 per employee on training, according to a study published by Bersin & Associates. The amount varies somewhat from industry to industry, with the biggest spenders the finance and insurance business and the lowest in the retail sector.

The bulk of mandatory training involves passing on information to people that is essential in helping them do their job. In other cases it relates to new technology, changing production processes or human resources training such as sexual harassment policies or hiring practices.

Another huge category of mandatory training relates to health and safety concerns in the workplace.

When employees are poorly motivated, the investment in training is wasted since essential skills and knowledge are not properly absorbed. How can employees be challenged to change their attitudes about mandatory training? This subject has been the source of a number of research studies spanning the last 20 years, spurred by the growth of the e-learning industry and increasing global reach of many companies striving for standardization and quality control.

# Two Important Themes

Two themes are evident in every study about mandatory training, regardless of what industry is being considered.

Starting with Knowles in 1991, studies universally dismiss the idea that people will only learn what they want to learn and there's nothing you can do about it. (As cited in Baldwin, 1991, p. 29)

Instead, each discovered techniques and approaches that made mandatory training more palatable and effective.

Secondly, researchers keep returning to the theme that, for adult learners especially, what is being taught must clearly be seen to be relevant if they are to give it their full attention. By relevance, they mean crucial to doing their job or enhancing their lives.

Tsai and Tai also pointed out that just because a course is termed mandatory it does not necessarily cause people to be disinterested. In fact, in certain cases, labeling something as mandatory training gave the knowledge being passed on an added perception of importance. Lee conducted one of the most conclusive studies supporting the importance of relevancy in mandatory training.

“To motivate employees to participate in blended learning, employees need to know that the content delivered by blended learning is both relevant and useful to their jobs,” he noted. (p. 367).



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Lee also discovered that when course material is delivered through e-learning programs, the course recipients will give up immediately if they have not been pre-trained to access the course on the appropriate technology. He suggested that employees being trained should have pre-testing first to ensure that they have the essential technical skills needed to participate.

Buehl & Alexander studied what motivated employees to better accept mandatory training and to learn from it.

**“If motivation is about desire, then it should be no surprise that learners are motivated by such things as intrinsic value (interest), extrinsic value (utility, promotion, goods) and important (personal value),” they concluded.**

With the rapidly growing popularity of e-learning, now is a good time strategically to consider new ways to think about designing and delivering mandatory courses.



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# 20 ways to Improve Mandatory Training

1. **Communicate the relevancy of the training** – Being relevant means training that directly and concretely affects the work the employee is doing. Whenever possible, base examples and group exercises on real life and work-related situations. “The leaders need to provide information that is meaningful to the learner and therefore relevant to the organization,” write Monica Gabriel and Sandra Longman, who conducted a study called Staff Perceptions of E-Learning in a Community Health Care Organization. “A program that presents information in an interesting, interactive way will make learning enjoyable and therefore memorable. The chances of learner retention will be increased and the willingness to learn maximized.”
2. **Content is king** –Content in your courses is the foundation of whether or not it will be interesting and easy to understand for participants. Ensure that whenever possible content is personalized to your organization and the nature of the employees and that it is role specific. Content and the form it takes, whether attention, attraction or usage of it, will make or break how well your learning management system is used, according to Learning Management System Blog. “No matter how many features you have with your system, and no matter what gimmicks are included to entice learners to into your system and stay, if your content is not good enough to capture their attention, your effort is all wasted,” they report.
3. **Encourage presentation creativity** – Some topics are duller than others, but there are things that can be done about that. Ensure that the course content is presented as creatively as possible, suggests learning blogger Bill Cushard.
4. **Secure buy-in from the top** – “Involving management is important, because the potential to build in and be aware of certain factors like rationale, incentives and consequences will affect the design and delivery of training,” says Matthew Hoff, who conducted a study on mandatory technology training when he was a student at DePaul University, School for New Learning.
5. **Ensure employee comfort** – Physical comfort is often considered, but emotional comfort is even more important. Gabriel and Longman explained the full dimensions of comfort. “The educator is instrumental in establishing an atmosphere where it is safe to ask questions or express concerns related to the program and technology,” they stated.



6. **Eliminate the fear factor** – In the same vein, researcher Hoff suggested that confidence levels of learners could be increased when training involves complicated subjects like technology by ensuring one-on-one help is available especially in the start-up stage.

7. **Pace the course** – If the subject is complicated, break it down into smaller modules rather than subject people to information overload. “Use a chunking strategy while determining the content hierarchy of a course. Determine how modules, lessons and topics will be organized into a logical and progressive order,” suggests Connie Melamed, blogger and e-learning coach. “Start with large chunks of conceptually related content and use these as your modules. There are numerous organizational strategies, such as simple to complex, cause and effect, sequential, etc.,” Melamed suggests.

8. **Offer extrinsic rewards** – Schedule the training to begin or end around a meal-time (or at break time) and invest in nourishing, tasty food. It will be money well spent in terms of heightening employee motivation to learn, suggest Baldwin, Magjuka & Loher. It wouldn’t hurt to hint that those taking the course would also be rising to the front of the line when promotions are being considered.

9. **Be prepared to extend consequences to those who don’t attend** – Saying something is mandatory but then doing nothing when employees refuse to attend weakens the message. From the beginning, Hoff suggests it should be communicated that the training is essential and if not taken, there will be consequences and these are some of the things that could happen. For example, if the company is about to take on a new project but additional safety training is needed, make it clear that only those who take the training will be considered to work on the new project.

10. **Break the ice** – You can use humor or an engaging guest speaker or even a group exercise that makes people team up and talk to others taking the course. For example, if you are presenting training on proper recruitment and job description procedures, have teams interview each other about what they do and then write a job description to cover each other’s jobs.



11. **Intermingle e-learning with real-life staged illustrations** – “When creating a theme and a script for your training program, grab employees’ attention and surprise them,” suggest trainers at Designing Digitally Inc. “Incorporating pop culture references or even inside company jokes adds an unexpected twist to the material.”

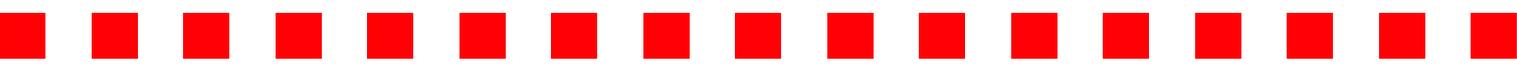
For example, when mandatory cardio pulmonary resuscitation techniques are being taught, one fire station arranged in advance for a student or instructor to stage a heart attack. Watch what happens when the students are suddenly confronted with a real-life situation. When the ruse becomes clear, it will still be a memorable moment and a way of re-enforcing the importance of what was taught.

12. **Be prepared for criticism and counter it from the start** – When announcing mandatory training, Hoff says you should ensure that any emails or postings about the courses provide clear explanations about why employees need the training, how they will proceed if they don’t get it, and its relevance to their day-to-day work.

13. **Provide adequate breaks** – Determining how long your course should be centers on content to be covered and depth of difficulty. As a general rule, e-learning expert Dr. Tony Karrer says a one-hour course could be broken into two 18-minute modules and one 24-minute module. “Test it with members of your target audience and then fine-tune each module until it’s just where you want it,” he suggests. No course should go more than an hour without a break. If there is a lot of material to be covered, consider breaking it down over several days or weeks.

14. **Change the atmosphere** – If training normally takes place in your boardroom, meet employees there but then suddenly change locations. If you are learning safety techniques, for example, you might want to be out on the factory floor. If it is soft skill training, you might want to move to an outdoor location where there is Wi-Fi for a change of pace. “When isolated together in a setting apart from the traditional classroom, students can focus more readily on the subject matter at hand,” suggests Karen Smith of the University of Central Florida Faculty for Teaching and Learning.

15. **Ensure that course content is regularly updated** Nothing looks more outdated than references to fads that are long passed or people who have fallen out of favor or sight. Words like “unfriend” didn’t exist before Facebook, as trendy blogger Eliana points out, and “tweet” had a completely different meaning.

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16. **Focus examples on employees not on the corporation** - Rather than explain that sexual harassment policies are being taught because the corporation could be sued if they are not followed, note that they are being taught because employees deserve a fair and equal opportunity workplace.
  17. **Add interactivity and videos to e-learning segments** - Don't make it easy for people to sleep. Add games, videos and characters, whatever works for you, suggests Kristen Marshall, a writer for the ELearning Industry Website.
  18. **Let learners skip ahead** –Hoff suggested in cases where mandatory training is delivered individually, give employees a chance to skip content they already know. At the start of each module ask three questions that highlight the key points to be taught. If the employee answers correctly, let them move on.
  19. **Allow instructor access** –Hoff said that post-training follow-up should include employees having access to “an instructor with resources to answer questions and the ability to follow up after the training is complete.”
  20. **Conduct learner interviews**- Hoff also suggested “including learner interviews and critical incident journaling as employees progress through a mandatory training program.” This can be used to assess programs in the aftermath of delivery and to plan new approaches.



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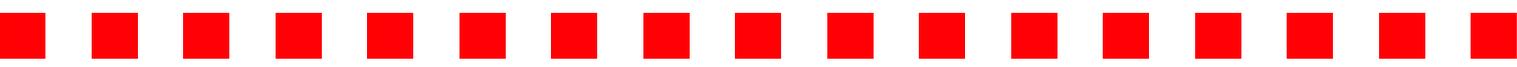
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