

Understanding Barriers to Training:

How to train resistant employees, trainees or students

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Research bulletin by:

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How to train resistant employees, trainees or students

Let's begin with the cold, hard facts - training isn't optional. Regardless of the career level, the industry or the experience, training your employees is absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, there's a lot of resistance to training, both on the part of employers and their employees.



For employers, it comes down to a number game. Many employers, particularly postrecession, are just not open to allocating the necessary resources required for adequate corporate training. According to a recently released study from *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, one of the biggest problems facing American industry isn't a lack of a skilled workforce. Instead, the problem is that companies have stopped investing in training.

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According to Cappelli, author of the Bureau's study, employers' expectations have changed. They're no longer willing to put the time and resources into training, and instead expect employees to jump headfirst into a new position. This lack of training is a relatively new phenomenon. According to a survey conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management,

38% of companies report cross-training employees based on skills not directly required of their position. In 2008 that number was 55%.

Additionally, according to data gathered by Cappelli during his research, in the 1970s, it was common for employees to receive over two weeks of training, on average, per year. What's important to realize though, is that employers aren't entirely to blame. Really, a lack of training is part of a perfect storm. After the economic woes businesses saw since 2008, they've been reluctant and cautious when it comes to investing in anything, but particularly something like employee training.

The reason? Many employees are completely resistant to training. They're unwilling to train, they're resistant to overall change, and if they do take part in training, they tend to lack engagement in the process.

The result is employers who don't feel it's worth their time or money, but the end result with this converging of negative feelings toward training is that employees are less skilled, less equipped to do their jobs and both their careers and corporations are suffering.

So why are today's employees so against training in the workplace?



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The Case Against Training

Before you can really understand how to train resistant employees, you first have to understand some of the underlying reasons leading to these feelings.

No Relevance

Many employees simply don't see their job training as directly linked to their job performance, their success, or their daily lives. This problem is further compounded when companies don't continue tracking the impact of the training on the employee's job performance in the future. This leads to the feeling that training is just a hurdle to get over—leading to the "just get it done" mentality, rather than a sense that the training has true value for the employee's life

The Punishment Perspective

Rather than seeing corporate training as a way to improve your job performance and your career trajectory, many employees see training as a type of punishment. It's often seen as the recourse taken by an employer when someone messes up on the job or isn't performing the way they should be. When training is used as a type of discipline, it's natural employees are going to be resistant to it, even if they're not being disciplined.

The Control Factor

Often a company's best employees, particularly those in leadership positions, or with the potential to become a leader, have certain personality characteristics that make them inherently resistant to training. For example, they don't like being forced to do something they view as mandatory, and they like to be in control of the situation. If your employees have these characteristics, it's going to be difficult to take away the feeling you're forcing them into training, and there will be a constant struggle for employees to remain in control of the situation.

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A Fluid Job Market

What is meant by a fluid job market is the tendency of today's employees to move from company to company relatively quickly. In the past, for example the 1970s, the general expectation was that an employee would get a job with a company whether it was straight out of high school or college, and then stay there for most, if not all, of his or her career.

That's simply not the case anymore. Employees bounce from company to company, are quick to look for new opportunities, and tend to have a short attention span when it comes to remaining with one company.

The result of this type of job market impacts employers, in the sense they don't feel it's worth their efforts to invest in training these employees when they'll probably end up leaving within a year, but it also impacts employees. They need to feel like there's a reason for them to stay within one company, and if they don't feel like that, they don't want to invest their time and energy into training.

Similarly, it isn't just an issue of employees who may be quick to leave their position employees also tend to see it as an employers' job market right now, and it's been that way for a number of years. The unemployment rate remains high, yet educated and skilled workers are abundant. Employees don't feel secure in their positions, particularly as corporations are continuously focused on cutting costs, streamlining their operations and maximizing efficiency. If employees don't feel secure in their positions, they're going to resist training, because they'll see it as something not worth spending time on if they could be fired at any moment.

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The Big Picture is Hard to See

As a corporate leader or company owner, you may have a very clear picture of where you want your organization and your employees to go in the future, but it can be more difficult for your employees to share that vision.

Many employers fail to lay out the big picture they have in mind, and this leaves employees feeling confused and unsure of how they can contribute. When there's no sense of the "grand scheme" it's challenging to convince employees to take part in training.

This may be a problem that's also bolstered by leadership within an organization. Often, it's natural to value the short-term more than the long-term, and if this is a cultural problem within your corporation, it's going to be difficult to get your employees to look beyond this way of thinking.

Generational Concerns

There are a couple of primary ways a multi-generational workforce can impact training and lead to resistance among employees.

First, older workers tend to be resistant to training because there's the sense their experience is enough, and they don't require training. Older workers can resist training because they feel insulted if it's asked of them, particularly if they're being asked by a younger leader in the company, who they see as inherently less experienced. Older workers also tend to be resistant to change in general and uncomfortable with approaching things differently.

With younger workers, there's often a "know-it-all" attitude that accompanies their performance in the workplace. Younger workers are often unwilling to see themselves as needing training, particularly when they come into a job with an extensive resume and a college degree from a top university.

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Feeling Underappreciated

This is a big issue in so many workplaces, regardless of industry. When employees don't feel like they're being listened to, or appreciated, they're not going to want to put in the work required of them for training. Why should they?

Often, employees are resistant to change when they feel like their leaders are constantly focused on getting them to do certain things, but when it comes time to listen to feedback, or allow them the opportunity to voice their ideas or concerns, those same leaders become unreachable.

The feeling becomes that if they don't care about us, we won't care about them. This cultural problem plagues not only employees' willingness to train, but their overall job satisfaction and engagement, and leads to a high turnover rate

Fear

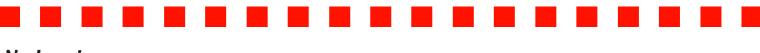
Fear is a big factor in why employees resist change, yet it's one of the most ignored reasons. Employees, like people in nearly all settings, often have a fear of things that are new or unknown. They may feel they won't be able to successfully master what's being asked of them during training, or they may feel uncertain about the possibility of taking on new roles and responsibilities in their job.

The fear may also come down to something as simple as being afraid of using the technology required of them during the actual training process. This can be a particularly salient concern if your workforce is older. Younger workers may be willing to embrace new training methods, such as eLearning and mobile training, whereas older workers may feel less comfortable and sure of themselves.



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No Input

Employees want to learn about things they find interesting. That's a natural inclination that doesn't just apply to corporate learning—it applies to learning in any situation.

Unfortunately, many corporate leaders still fail to ask for feedback or input when it comes to training, and there's where the resistance and disconnect comes into play. If employees don't feel like they had some say in what they're learning, it's difficult to engage and motivate them.

Timing

One of the primary, and simplest reasons employees are resistant to training? They simply don't want to do it in their free time.

Often employers ask their employees to take part in training on their lunch breaks, or during their free time, and they offer little flexibility in how that training is delivered. It's difficult, no matter how engaged an employee is, to have them complete training in their free time.



Overcoming Resistance

Despite the common reasons employees resist training, there's no doubt in its value. Companies who invest in adequate training for their employees, and really dedicate themselves to a culture of training tend to have more employee retention, more employee satisfaction, employees that are more confident and motivated, and a more efficient workplace.

Training and development isn't just something valued by employers—it's also something employees say they both want and value, despite their resistance.

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According to a survey conducted by Glassdoor for their Q2 Employment Confidence Survey:

72% of employees report feeling as though specialized training with the goal of developing a particular skill or skill set is more valuable than a degree in the workforce.

63% of survey respondents, which translates to 3 in 5, reported they felt learning new skills or receiving specialized training was the most important factor in their career advancement and their ability to earn more money

Only 38% of respondents said they felt changing jobs or companies was important to moving forward and making more money in their career

With all of these facts floating around, the question becomes why the disconnect? We can all agree training is valuable, and necessary, so why are employees still so resistant to it?

How can the cycle be broken of resistant employees and employers who are in turn unwilling to make the long-term investments in training?

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It really comes down to how employees are being trained.

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1. Identify the Reasons for Resistance

A lot of overcoming resistance to training, and just creating employee training that's effective, requires that you do the legwork in the beginning.

Rather than simply jumping into the creation of your training materials, and only focusing on what it is you want to convey to your employees, take the time to get to know them.

The first part of getting to know your employees, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for more successful training, relies on understanding why they're resistant. Perhaps it's a cultural issue, where employees don't feel appreciated and don't feel there's any value in taking the time to train.

Maybe it's a time concern, where employees already feel overwhelmed and don't feel they have the time to dedicate to training.

Perhaps your employees don't understand how training fits into the long-term picture. In order to gauge why your employees are resistant, you're going to have to create an

environment where they feel like their feedback is both welcomed and useful. Give employees opportunities to express their grievances in a constructive way, and this will help guide the training process and let you find new windows to introduce training while simultaneously breaking down the barriers of resistance.



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2. Empower Through Input

As mentioned above, a huge roadblock to employee training comes from the fact that employers simply don't create training that speaks to what employees are interested in.

After you've worked to identify the primary reasons your employees are resistant to training, go a step further and ask for their input. Understand what your employees find valuable, where they feel their skillset is lacking, and what they feel would bring the most value to them in the workplace.

When employees feel they have a say in the training they're receiving, engagement is improved, and employees also feel more empowered and in control of the process, versus simply feeling as if they're at the mercy of their employers and have to trudge through training to check off a completion box.Add subheading

You may feel as if your employees need more training in one area, but they may totally disagree. You may be completely out of the loop when it comes to where employees feel their knowledge and skills are lacking, but you'll never know until you ask.

Don't assume you know where training is needed until you've opened up the lines of communication and asked for input from your employees. Otherwise, you could end up wasting your time creating training where it's not needed, and overlooking valuable training opportunities in the meantime

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In order to motivate your employees to want to learn it's important to create a bigger picture concept of not just how the training will impact everyone, but also your overall company's goals and culture.

• Before you begin training for specific skills, have all of your employees do initial training that really gives them a glimpse of your company's impact on the world as a whole, where you see the company going in the future, how they can fit into those goals, and of course train them on your corporate identity and culture.

• A good way to train resistant employees is to make them feel they're part of something greater. While you might move toward customized and specific training in the future, initial training should always be consistent with the grander scheme of things.

• You can then continue promoting that big picture concept in your day-to-day efforts.

Use initial training as an opportunity to lay out the plan you see in your own mind, or the plan your leaders have in mind to convey that your employees aren't disposable, and there is a place for them in the future of the company, if they're willing to put in the necessary work, and continue growing and developing.

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4. Be Flexible

Employees, particularly employees poised for leadership roles or with strong leadership qualities, want to feel as if they're in control of every aspect of their job, including their training.

While they may not be able to dictate every detail of their training, you can provide flexibility in training that will leave employees feeling empowered and in control. eLearning provides prime opportunities for flexibility, because you can design training that lets the learner decide how they'll receive the information, whether it's through a video, through a scenario or through slides of bullet-ed information, and you can also let them learn at their own pace and on the device of their choice.

In the past it was often difficult for employers to provide this level of flexibility in their corporate training, because of logistical and cost constraints, but eLearning provides a simple and inexpensive way to let employees make some of their own decisions.

For example, employees can also decide whether they'll learn on their mobile device, or on a traditional desktop, and they can work at their own pace. When you allow employees to make some of their own decisions, you're taking away a bit of that mandatory component that makes resistance so common, and you're instead giving them a sense of independence and autonomy.



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5. Motivate

There are different components of motivation, whether it's extrinsic or intrinsic, but part of overcoming resistance relies on understanding how to motivate your employees. It may be employees find the most motivation in competing with others in the workplace, whereas other employees may feel motivated by a desire to achieve and succeed on their own career path.

Regardless of how your employees are motivated, you need to tap into that and create training materials that speak to their sense of motivation.

For example, if you speak with your employees and find they're motivated most effectively by competition with others, you can include social or gamification components in your training. If your employees are motivated by an internal desire to succeed, you can issue certificates of not just completion, but accomplishment after certain levels of training are successfully completed.

Additionally, it may become necessary to recalibrate your attempts at motivation. Unfortunately, many corporations discontinue the bulk of their training efforts because they don't see them as working, but in reality, you may need to look at your training, determine what isn't working and then change it. If motivating your employees through competition isn't working, change your tactics until you find a form of motivation that does work.

You can't always expect that every type of training you utilize is going to work right away.

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This is an extremely important component of overcoming resistance, but also just creating effective training in general.

• There needs to be a direct link that employees can see between the training they participate in, and their job performance. This doesn't just mean an internal tracking of job performance either—employees are more interested in training when they can see a direct, causal link.

• For even more effectiveness, internally track the job performance of employees and create methods of comparison for before and after new training, but also ask them to track their own performance.

• Employees tend to appreciate training more when they're taking a look at their day-to-day performance and seeing how their training has had a real impact.

• An easy way to do this is to ask employees to complete daily or weekly performance charts, asking them how well they think they did on a particular task, as well as how comfortable they felt. They can then continue keeping these charts and look at their progress.

7. Establish the Concept That Training is a Reward

A lot of overcoming resistance to training relies on a total overhaul of corporate thinking, and that's difficult, but important to recognize.

• Rather than reinforcing the idea of training as a punishment or disciplinary action, create the concept that training is actually a reward that's helping propel your employees forward.

• Show employees that mediocre or subpar performance isn't tolerated, but the response to this type of performance shouldn't automatically be more training.

• Instead, people who are recognized as exemplary employees should be offered training, and you should then outline how this training will benefit them both in the short-term and the longterm.

• Rather than making training a requirement, make it something that an employee can participate in once they've met certain other milestones. Of course this isn't going to work for all training, such as OSHA or regulatory training, but it can work well for specific skills training, as well as training that focuses on leadership and development.

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8. Be Respectful of Employees' Time

While many of the steps you can take to break down walls of training resistance require a real shift in thinking on the part of corporate leaders, being respectful of your employees' time is a simple and functional way to address resistance, and it pertains to how you structure and create your training materials.

Too often corporate leaders don't really consider their employees from a personal, human perspective when they create training materials.

This leads to boring, long, redundant and unnecessary training—so it's only natural employees become resistant.

- Instead of trying to compile as much information as possible into training sessions, think from a human perspective when you're creating training.
- Think about how to make the most of the time spent training, keep it as short and concise as possible, and keep it on a need-to-know basis. If something isn't absolutely vital, leave it out.
- Don't try to be long-winded for the sake of doing so, and instead only focus on how you can add value to your employees' lives and your organization in the absolute shortest way possible.
- Also, keep it conversational and easy to follow. Don't approach the creation of training materials from a robotic standpoint. When you create training, really try to speak to who your employees are, and keep it as if you're standing face-to-face with them just having a conversation.
- Chunk information, which means you're presenting it in small, manageable segments. No one wants to feel overwhelmed with what seems like a textbook of information, so make your training as streamlined, easy and non-intimidating as possible.

Employees will begin to see you're making every possible effort to simplify training, and that you view their time as important and valuable. They'll appreciate your effort and are more likely to be receptive to future training if they feel like their time isn't being wasted, and is instead being taken into consideration.

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9. Be Open and Communicate Frequently

One of the big reasons employers encounter resistance to any type of change in the workplace is the feeling of anxiety that accompanies it. Employees may not know why they have to train, or they may feel blindsided by it.

To reduce anxiety it's important to maintain a climate of openness and honestly. Communicate with your employees as frequently as possible about upcoming changes, new training that may be happening, and corporate goals, particularly as they change.

When you're honest and communicate with your employees, they not only feel less anxiety about training, but also about their job security in general. When employees feel more secure, and like they're getting honest information from their leaders, they're more likely to feel like it's worthwhile to take part in training.

There are a number of methods you can utilize to keep lines of communication open, from employee newsletters and emails, to face-to-face interactions, and you can also provide ample opportunities for employees to give you feedback and share their concerns as well.



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10. Formulate Methods for Frequent Feedback

Just like asking for employee feedback is important to overcoming training resistance, so is providing feedback. Don't be afraid to provide feedback to your employees, both during training and during the day-to-day.

Employees value feedback because it makes them feel as if their employees are interested in helping them become better at what they do.

When creating eLearning training, there should be ample opportunities for employees to assess how they're doing throughout the training.

This should then be translated to the "real world," but don't assume feedback means only focusing on the negative.

Employees need to feel appreciated in order to find value in training, so if they're doing well, let them know. Give praise whenever possible to encourage training in the future.

11. Create an Environment of Safe Failure

Often, employees are resistant to training because they're afraid of failure. Humans, by nature, are often risk averse, and this leads to job performance problems because they're afraid to take the chances in their job that could actually lead to success or solve problems.

Utilize training as a way to establish an environment where it's safe to fail, and this will help employees not only learn for the future, but also become more empowered and less risk averse.

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Failure doesn't have to be seen as an automatic negative, and if failure is fostered as part of learning, employees are going to be less averse to training in general.

A great way to establish safe failure in training is through the use of scenarios where employees are given the resources to make a decision, and then they choose from the available options. Scenarios are great because they let an employee determine what they would do in a situation, without the potential risks that come from making the "wrong" decision.

Another great way to create a safe failure environment in eLearning training is through the use of case studies.

Lay out the details and background of a particular situation faced by your company, ask employees to determine how they would handle it, and then show them how it was actually handled. Employees can then assess their own choices, without fearing the outcome of what they've decided to do.

When employees feel like it's okay to fail, they're not so afraid to try new things, including training.



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12. Connect the Dots

As mentioned earlier, part of making training effective and welcomed among your employees relies on showing them the big picture.

For example, show employees how you see them as part of your corporate future, and how taking on even the simplest of training is going to better prepare them for that future. Along with long-term and big picture connections, however, you need to also make the short-term connections.

Employees need to see the big picture, but also the small, day-to-day picture. With your training efforts, connect the dots from A to B and then eventually to Z. With each training module you introduce, be very clear and show them how it will impact their job that very day or the next day on a micro level, and then connect that to the macro level.

This kind of connection is important because employees can't always guess why they're having to participate in training, so take that guesswork out of it and just let them know, directly, how this training is going to have a positive and immediate impact on their job, and then you can move toward the greater long-term picture.

13. Make it Enjoyable

This is such a basic concept, but it's so overlooked. You want your employees to be more receptive to training? Don't make it a dreaded chore, but instead make it something they can have fun with.

There's no rule that says effective training has to be dull and miserable, so why make it that way?

Try to think outside the box and find creative ways to make your training fun, and your investment will pay off in the form of employees who are more willing to tackle training, as well as more overall employee engagement.

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eLearning provides tremendous creative opportunities to make training fun—primarily in the form of gamification.

If you're unsure about gamification and how it will fit into your corporate culture, you can also make it fun by encouraging collaboration between employees so they can share their ideas with one another and work together to solve problems during training



Other ways to make it fun include:

• Using social components in your training. By incorporating social elements, your employees can interact, share blog posts or research they find interesting and just feel like they're more connected on a human level to their training.

• Get quirky. Develop fun characters that your employees can follow through their training, or have punchy little jokes and questions throughout the training.

• Use videos. Videos are a great learning tool because most adult learners are visual, and videos in your eLearning are easier to comprehend, and they also tend to be more enjoyable than reading page after page of text.

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14. Address Individual Differences

One of the common reasons we mentioned above that may make employees resistant to learning can rely on their individual differences, particularly on a generational level.

Keep these differences in mind when you're designing training.

For example, older learners tend to be more linear, so make your eLearning customizable where your older employees can learn by progressing through a set of material in a logical fashion, where one concept builds on the next.

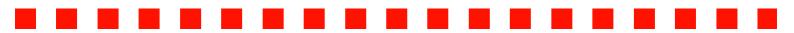
On the other hand, Millennials are not as linear and appreciate the opportunity to be able to learn in the way they're most comfortable with, which often involves skipping around through information and then revisiting concepts when they feel it's necessary.

eLearning is a simple and inexpensive way to provide this level of customization, without having to create individual content for every employee. You can develop a variety of choices they can take throughout the training, so that it best speaks to their learning style.



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Tying it all Together

Undoubtedly, encouraging resistant employees to train and to continue the learning and development process is a difficult one, particularly when we're in an employment environment where they feel unappreciated and as if they can easily be replaced.

While eLearning provides new, innovative and highly effective ways to train employees in ways we haven't seen before, what's first important to do is assess your corporate culture and highlight ways you can start from the top to approach training in a way that's going to be more effective.

The facts are there—employees both want and value training, and it's up to employers to foster that desire to learn and grow professionally, by working to create training that's valuable, relevant and creates a link between both short and long-term goals and benefits.



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