

## WHY DO WE TRAIN

“The more you sweat in peace, the less blood you lose in war.”

**(Sun Tzu (Sun Wu) (544 – 496BC), Chinese Warlord, The Art of War)**

As we begin, or approach, this enlightened knowledge-driven age of the 21st century there are, apparently, some companies and organizations that still look upon training as a waste of time and financial assets. Indeed, some companies do not set aside a percentage of corporate profit to cover fundamental training and re-training programmes for their employees, new managers and new members of staff let alone to fund corporate-driven training programmes relevant to their employees. That is because some directors see their role, or function, as simply to increase the ‘bottom line’ and raise dividends to shareholders. However, given that most directors tend to be shareholders then concentrating on profit margins and not on people, products and plant is, perhaps, understandable.

That attitude and approach, to me, begs the following questions: ‘Why do people bother to learn and why do they train?’ ‘How do companies hope to increase performance and productivity, raise the level of motivation and commitment of their staff and maintain competitiveness in the global market-place without appropriate training programmes?’ and, ‘How do boards of directors think their company will fare in, say, 3, 5 or 7 years time if their vision is so limited that they fail to invest in research and development and training courses?’.

One answer might be that for the past decade, perhaps even longer, we have often been told that there is no such thing as a job for life. Indeed, research has, apparently, shown that many of us now will have between 6 and 8 employers during our working life, that we will tend to change jobs every 4 or 5 years, 2 to 3 years for younger workers, and that many of these career moves are not voluntary. Further, that there is no requirement for loyalty to a company or organization and that we are all, individually, responsible for arranging our own training courses. On this basis it is no wonder that employers can no longer be relied upon to provide or fund necessary training courses. The result is that some companies appear to have adopted this approach and no longer make much of an effort to bother to train their staff.

But is that what most people want or is it a case of like it or lump it? Is the casual approach to profession, career or work good for employers and employees and do directors not really care as long as they have sufficient staff to meet demand? And, is this ‘laissez-faire’ approach to business good for reputation and customer service? Somehow I think not.

Some 30 or 40 years ago many employees received their training through apprentice programmes that continued throughout their working life and usually within one company. Those in specific careers or professions upgraded themselves, with help from their organization, through further academic, professional and vocational courses. Many of our European neighbours, particularly Germany and Holland, still offer such programmes and provide practical technical courses for those less academically gifted; and, that most probably explains why artisans in Europe tend to have better skills and abilities than people in UK in, for example, the building trades, electricians, plumbers, painters and carpenters and perhaps even in the motor trades.

Gradually, since the 1970's, apprentice programmes disappeared, more often than not because they were seen as a financial burden and because increasing automation meant fewer requirements for skilled work in some areas. Many in-house and college courses and programmes were replaced by on-the-job training schemes.

Companies can get around a shortage of trained personnel and having to provide training programmes by concentrating on heavy recruitment programmes to hire skilled workers and often from other countries to meet an immediate shortfall. But this is only a short term palliative and it takes a lot of effort and buys up the time of the personnel department or costs a great deal of money to retain recruitment organizations. However, at some stage a company will need to organize and fund training programmes in order to improve working processes and procedures if it wishes to increase productivity. Besides, a great deal of emphasis is now placed on the concept of teamwork and you cannot have teamwork without commitment, on both sides employer and employee, in maintaining corporate and social skills as a way of increasing competitiveness.

Companies should also invest in research and development in order to improve product specification, to reduce failure rates and waste material and to reduce the cost of utility services by reducing overheads. The introduction of new production ideas requires investment in training programmes to reduce material costs and working on new modeling software programmes can speed up the manufacturing process again reducing costs.

Some organizations, especially the Armed Forces, emergency services such as medical, police and fire, need to conduct regular training programmes so that they know how to react and can respond to emerging situations or disaster scenarios. In fact without such training, as part of their advancement programmes most military and fire and emergency personnel could not really undertake their hazardous jobs.

In those organizations the objectives for the training are very clearly defined and usually centred around professionalism, competence and survival and not simply on performance and assessment. Without appropriate and relevant training how can a hospital 'crash' team respond to medical emergencies, how can a ship's company respond to distress situations with sinking ships and rescue other people from danger or how can a fire engine crew deal with blazing infernos?

So, is there a need to train? Why do we train? Why do individuals bother to learn? For many of us appropriate academic courses are a way of achieving recognition for developing the skill to absorb knowledge and understanding of specialist areas sufficient to regurgitate such information during examinations. Some academics become professional students in that they progress from Bachelor's degree to Master's degree through postgraduate training and sometimes on to a doctorate. That is fine providing they intend to work in academia, use their knowledge for research purposes or to work in a deeply specialized area of industry or commerce. In other words it is done, primarily, for personal recognition.

On the other hand people take training courses in order to improve their general knowledge and understanding of a particular work area relevant to the demands of the job or position they are filling and as a means of gaining recognition and possible advancement. So, training has a very personal meaning as well as meeting the demands of a company in terms of productivity, efficiency and competitiveness.

That is because our skills and competencies deteriorate over time and because new technology, new systems and new software programmes are being introduced at an alarming rate and we must try to keep pace with such equipment and systems if we are to remain employable and survive in the workplace. And, if people are sufficiently motivated and the opportunities are available they will often be prepared and will make the effort to take additional supervisory and managerial training courses to improve their chances of advancement. This is a two-way process where both employer and employee gain from the training.

This leads, correctly, onto the subject of Continuous Professional Development (CPD), which, we are continually advised, rests firmly with the individual and not with companies or organizations. But, the cost of pursuing such programmes of development also rests with the individual. Since most of us have to work to exist and to maintain any kind of moderate lifestyle setting aside funding for academic, professional or vocational courses can be a drain on personal income and places additional pressure on family life. Time is also a constraint, especially when there are family members to consider.

Nonetheless, the primary objective of CPD is, or should be, to ensure individuals not only remain competent in their chosen profession but that they enhance their knowledge and expertise throughout their career. That seems, to me, to be eminently sensible and is most appropriate particularly when a person has a recognized profession with a career pattern, for example, doctor, dentist, lawyer, architect, nurse, teacher, pilot or naval officer to pursue in order to achieve excellence in their profession. As Thomas H Huxley suggested,

“Perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not; it is the first lesson that ought to be learned; and, however early a man’s training begins, it is probably the last lesson that he learns thoroughly.”

**(Thomas H Huxley (1825 – 1895), English biologist and supporter of Charles Darwin)**

People in most professions, including general and administrative management, have representative professional bodies and Institutions to turn to for information on the latest thinking and techniques and to provide guidance on direction. These Institutions, in the main, arrange and promote conferences, exhibitions, trade fairs, seminars, study courses and symposiums and they publish relevant professional documents and papers to keep their members informed. All these facilities exist not just for students but also for all their members to increase and improve their knowledge and competence. Attendance at such events is not compulsory but is part of the package of CPD.

But, what happens in the fields of commerce and industry where there are no careers and where a job, as such, might last for only few months or perhaps a few years? Where do employees get the necessary support, personal as well as financial, advice and guidance if they do not belong to a professional Institute? How do people gain advice if they are unemployed and wish to improve or upgrade their professional and vocational qualifications or have professional, academic and degree qualifications but cannot get back on the ladder, or even the treadmill, of employment? It seems that governments have abrogated their social, moral and ethical responsibilities to provide institutes of further and higher education to provide courses for training and re-training and opportunities for re-skilling such that people can find alternative employment.

Somehow I also get the feeling that companies and organizations have abrogated their professional responsibility to maintain the competence and ability of their employees. Far too many companies complain about the skills gap but far too many fail to provide practical and technical training necessary to improve productivity and performance and provide appropriate courses to enable employees to understand their products and communicate with customers. As David Rockefeller suggested,

“Success in business requires training and discipline and hard work. But if you're not frightened by these things, the opportunities are just as great today as they ever were.”

**(David Rockefeller (1915 - ), US Banker)**

No two companies, even in the same line of business be it retail, media, radio communications, computers, telecommunications and associated IT sectors, electrical or mechanical engineering, recruitment or transport or in other service sector industries operate in exactly the same manner. That is because whatever charge they levy for their products or services is based, to some extent, on 'adding value' and the value cost added is based on overheads and employment costs and is calculated differently.

When you recruit a bricklayer, carpenter, driver, engineer, fitter, sales person, supervisor, manager or consultant they have to be trained to know and understand the company culture and traditions and recognize the way the company conducts itself. They have to be introduced to the company, its structure, organization, administration, ethical, environmental and social policies, customers and customer service set-up and the way that business is conducted internally and externally.

That is because despite such universal management programmes as 'benchmarking', 'quality assessment', 'quality assurance', international standards designed to measure quality and quality procedures and Master of Business Administration (MBA) courses there is no such thing as a standard company, a standard strategy or a standard manager. And, managing people, and other company resources, is of paramount importance in a global environment and more especially when there are safety issues to consider.

It is widely accepted that companies and countries are slowly but inexorably moving to knowledge-based societies with increasing reliance on information technology equipment and software programmes and given that knowledge and knowledge management are deemed to be invaluable for survival in the information age then how do people, how do employees, gain that knowledge and experience without training?

Understanding what is required and how to carry it out in the most efficient and effective manner are fundamental to improving internal processes and procedures, motivating people and encouraging innovation and making change happen. Therefore, in my view, companies who will succeed are those that:

- Train people to understand the demands and requirements of their job.
- Teach people to understand the market and their customers.
- Train people to make the best use of internal and external systems and procedures to meet customer demands.
- Train people to get the most out of IT systems and associated hardware and software programmes.
- Teach people to understand the fundamental principles of marketing.

- Relate training programmes to the everyday demands of the business.
- Train people to know what happens in other divisions and sections and who to deal with to resolve problems.
- Train people to understand the responsibilities and demands of the position above them.
- Train and motivate people to succeed with the possibility of promotion
- Train supervisors, junior and middle managers to get the best out of their team.
- Encourage a programme of continuous professional development (CPD).
- Allow employees time and support to pursue academic, vocational and professional courses.

Education and training is not just an individual responsibility but also a company or an organizational responsibility and also a national issue for the fundamental reason that in the growing global village the UK will not be able to compete unless successive generations are not only taught but trained to meet the needs of industry and commerce. If we continually fail to understand and appreciate the need for training then the competence of employees will continue to decline as will productivity leading to a decrease in competitiveness placing additional pressure on individual national economies. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle suggested,

“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

**(Aristotle (384 – 322BC), Greek critic, philosopher, physicist, & zoologist)**

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