

8 Tips for Training Employees on a Budget

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Well-trained employees are essential to the success of your business. Unfortunately, in a bad economy, a business' training budget is often the first thing cut. It may make sense at the time, but the long-term implications can far outweigh the immediate costs saved.

Over time, a lack of training may reduce motivation levels and business inefficiencies and, most detrimentally, result in staff turnover - which in itself can be costly. According to a 2008 article in HR Management, replacing a worker costs on average 100-125 percent of an employee's annual salary in lost productivity, recruitment costs and new hire training.

But how can you train your employees well without breaking your budget? Here are eight tips.

1. Join Associations or Trade Groups

Many industry associations offer training programs for members at annual events, online, and at seminars. Check out your trade association website or newsletter for training opportunities that may be included in your membership.

2. Find Trainers Within Your Organization

Got someone in your organization who has strong communication and interaction skills and the patience to help others learn? Consider appointing them as a trainer. Have them attend classes and come back prepared to share what they've learned. You can also buy training materials and use them to equip your trainer

3. Host Weekly or Monthly Brown-Bag Lunches

These are a great way for team members to get involved in new things and help educate the wider team about how each employee contributes to the business. Ask employees to come prepared to talk about a topic. You'd be surprised how little the different teams know about what the others do and how it benefits everyone. A sales rep might present an overview on the sales process, and how important each business function and individual is to ensuring a happy customer. An employee who is exploring a new way of doing business can also share it over lunch.

4. Use Online Training Courses

Online courses are a great way for employees to learn at their own pace and select from a wide variety of courses, some of them free or at low-cost. Organizations such as Learning Tree, Dale Carnegie, BizLibrary and the Business Training Institute all offer a large selection of online classes.

5. Cross-Train Employees in the Workplace

This is common practice in businesses that need an agile workforce ready and equipped to take on other roles should business requirements change. You can do this by looking at different jobs in your organization as hands-on training opportunities for others. Give employees new roles or responsibilities. Have them shadow someone who is already doing these tasks for a few days, until they are ready to try the new role on their own. Rotate roles frequently so your employees are continuously learning and challenged to achieve new things.

6. Start a Mentorship Program

Consider partnering new or less experienced employees with mentors. For example, an up-and-coming sales rep might benefit from sitting in on sales planning sessions or attending important off-site customer meetings with a more senior employee.

7. When You Need to Bring in the Pros

These options can all be fulfilled at a low cost, but what if you need to solve very specific problems? You may need to invest in an off-site training program where employees benefit from fewer distractions and an interactive class room environment. If you are training multiple people, a more cost-effective and time-saving option might be to bring a trainer on-site.

Ask other business owners or your local Small Business Development Center or Women's Business Center about courses and classes that fit your needs and your budget.

8. Set Goals and Measure Success

Lastly, before you embark on any training or mentoring program, be specific about what you and your employees want to achieve. Use annual performance reviews to gauge competency gaps as well as your employee's desired areas of improvement. Then put specific training goals in place for each employee. Let your employees know that you will assess the impact the training has had on their overall job skills and performance on a six-month and annual basis.