

Increasing Employee Participation in Voluntary Training: Issues and Solutions

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Keywords: employee training, training participation

Introduction

In most instances, employee training is provided as either part of new employee orientation (“onboarding”) or to meet safety, legal, or other regulatory requirements (compliance). When training is mandatory, employees participate, willingly or not. However, many companies and organizations offer training that is voluntary (non-mandatory) with the purpose of increasing the knowledge and skills of employees. With the growing use of distance and online learning, offering voluntary training has become more cost effective and wider in reach, especially for larger companies with employees dispersed around the world. For this paper we define voluntary training as any training opportunity that is not required (non-mandatory) as a part of one’s continued successful employment within an organization.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize research findings about factors that influence whether or not an employee participates in voluntary training. We will describe key factors related to employee participation in voluntary training, and offer solutions for increasing employee participation in voluntary training. These topics are important because:

- Companies dedicate significant resources to voluntary training, and those finite resource must be allocated as effectively as possible.
- Companies expending these training resources want their employees to learn and grow by participating in learning and development opportunities.
- Companies need to know how to design and promote voluntary training so that employee participation increases.

Voluntary training is typically a part of a company’s strategy to improve employee knowledge, skills, and job performance. However, it can be difficult to get employees to participate in these programs because they are voluntary. Increasing participation in these training programs not only increases organizational effectiveness, but also is of benefit to the individual employee. Voluntary training can be a win-win situation. Also, if the company infrastructure for web-based training is present (networks, computers, learning management system, etc.), the cost of providing the training opportunity is relatively low.

Problem Statement

Problem: Companies desire to increase employee and organizational capabilities via voluntary training, but in many cases and for various reasons employees do not participate.

If the factors that influence voluntary training participation are better understood, then solutions can be implemented to address non-participation. By examining the needs and motivations of various categories of employees, it may be possible to increase participation in voluntary training programs. It also may be necessary to

conduct research studies that attempt to gain a better understanding of best practices in regard to training certain segments of the employee population.

Factors Related to Participation in Voluntary Training

Certain factors influence the likelihood of an employee participating in voluntary training. Some of those factors include one's organizational tenure, age, gender, education level, hierarchical position, employment status, and self-efficacy (Renaud, Lakhdari, & Morin, 2004; Noe & Wilk, 1993). Employers can examine these factors within their own companies, and determine how they influence the rate at which employees participate in voluntary training opportunities.

Organizational Tenure

Certain trends in training have emerged in the published research, and employers and human resources personnel should be aware of them. For example, training programs have the most benefit for employees who have been with a company for one to ten years and/or employees who are on the lower end of the pay scale (Heng, et al., 2006). One study found a positive correlation between organizational tenure and participation in voluntary training, but the relationship occurs with decreasing probability, meaning that the longer an employee stays with a company, the more likely they are to participate in voluntary training, but the correlation becomes weaker over time (Renaud, Lakhdari & Morin, 2004). The decreasing probability may be related to the age of the worker, which will be discussed in that section. Another study that examined gender, organizational tenure, and participation in voluntary training showed that there is no relationship between tenure and participation in voluntary training for men. For women, there was a weak, but significant positive correlation between years of service and participation in voluntary training (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008). This could be related to gender issues in voluntary training, which is discussed later in this paper.

Age

Another area of consideration is the age of the employee. Older workers tend to be less motivated to participate in training than younger workers (Maurer, Weiss, & Barbeite, 2003; Tharenou, 1997). This motivation leads to a negative correlation between age and participation in training (Renaud, Lakhdari & Morin, 2004). The research also shows that individuals over 50 years of age have a lower probability of participating in voluntary training. However, it is documented that employers expend more training resources to train those who already have a higher level of education (Frazis, Gittleman, & Joyce, 2000). Complicating things further is generational differences as they relate to views on training. It is possible for companies to employ people from four different generations, with each generation drawing from different experiences over the last fifty years (Hart, 2008). Workers from the different generations exhibit certain patterns when it comes to views on training. Generation Y employees (born between 1981-2000) prefer to learn by doing and to work in teams, while the Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964) and the Silent Generation (born between 1933-1945) look for the practicality of training, and learning from experiences. Generation X employees (born between 1965-1980) generally desire a lot of feedback, and prefer a casual learning environment (Cekada, 2012).

Research has shown that age is negatively correlated with training effectiveness, and that older employees take longer to master training content, while also taking longer to perform the tasks they are being trained to do (Kubeck, et. al., 1996). Additionally, older workers tend to report more doubt in their ability to learn, and view training as less helpful for their career, when compared to younger workers (Guerrero & Sire, 2001). Age and self-efficacy are also negatively correlated, which could be one reason why training effectiveness decreases as employees age. (Maurer, 2001).

The same holds true for relative employee age. Employees in situations where they are older than their coworkers tend to receive less training support (Maurer, Wiess & Barbeite, 2003). Older workers also tend to view themselves as less cognitively able, and thus believe that training will not be as beneficial for them (Maurer, Wiess & Barbeite, 2003).

Gender

When looking for a relationship between gender and willingness to participate in voluntary training, the secondary factors associated with gender become important. The research shows that women with children and

spouses are less likely to participate in training (Tharenou, 1997). The primary reason for this is that time constraints lead to working less and/or not being able to dedicate more time for training. Women with spouses and children also received less support from employers for training (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008; Pocock & Skinner, 2012). This finding could hold true for men or women with time constraints brought about by family and spousal responsibilities. These gender-related issues are thus influenced more by societal pressures than with direct gender differences. This finding is confirmed by more recent research that documents women participating in training at higher levels, and for different reasons. Over time, participation in voluntary training by women has increased, and gender has become less of a factor (Renaud, Lakhdari, & Morin, 2004). The researchers suggest that this change has occurred because of gender equality changes in the workforce, and that the original disparity arose from a greater percentage of women occupying lower-tier jobs (Renaud, Lakhdari, & Morin, 2004).

A study of managers showed that women participate in voluntary training more often than men, and if women are not offered mandatory training, they are twice as likely to participate in voluntary training (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008). Researchers also found that this increased participation in voluntary training helps fill a training void brought about by systemic discrimination in terms of mandatory training (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2006). Interestingly, male managers, regardless of age, generally do not perceive participating in voluntary training to be beneficial (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008). This creates a paradox for organizations, because the more mandatory training they offer, the less likely employees will be to participate in any voluntary training opportunities. These results also highlight potential discrimination issues that can arise when subsets of employees receive a disproportionate amount of mandatory training (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008).

Education Level

A negative correlation exists between education level and participation in voluntary training (Renaud, Lakhdari, & Morin, 2004). With regard to mandatory training, researchers have also concluded that more educated employees tend to receive more training from their employers (Altonji, Spletzer, 1991; Renaud, Lakhdari, & Morin, 2004). There are a variety of reasons for this. Often, more educated employees are viewed as more capable of being successfully trained (Renaud, Lakhdari, & Morin, 2004).

In the case of voluntary training, some employers may perceive that employees with less education would be more interested in training programs because they have the most to gain from participation (Renaud, Lakhdari, & Morin, 2004). This also relates to the findings of Cloutier, Renaud and Morin, (2008), which found that employees will fill voids in mandatory training with voluntary training. Conversely, workers with higher levels of education tend to need less training, while they receive more mandatory training (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008), which shows that workers will not have a training void to fill if there are adequate levels of mandatory training.

Hierarchical Position

Managers receive more training than non-managers (Renaud, Lakhdari, & Morin, 2004; Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008). Since managerial positions often require advanced degrees, managers have often received extensive formal education in their field. These two factors combine to create a smaller gap for managers between the training needs and the mandatory training that is offered (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008). There is also evidence that as employees receive training, they are more likely to enter into higher paying positions, and are also less likely to find themselves sliding back into lower wage positions. (Pavlopoulos, Muffels & Vermunt 2009). Lower-wage employees feel less supported than higher-wage employees when it comes to training (Pocock & Skinner, 2012). Lower-wage employees also indicate that they participate in training often at the request of employers, and that job security is perceived as the primary benefit (Pocock & Skinner, 2012). Also, voluntary training can cause strain on a worker's time and resources when it is not integrated into work processes. These work-life strains caused by training increase with low-wage workers in a way that is not seen in higher wage workers (Pocock & Skinner, 2012). Lower paid workers have also been found to show less interest in participating in training (Pocock & Skinner, 2012).

Self-Efficacy

Studies have shown that a worker's self-efficacy, or one's belief that one can handle challenging situations, influences one's attitude toward training. An employee with high self-efficacy is more likely to take personal responsibility for his or her development as employee (Noe & Wilk, 1993).

Self-efficacy also influences intentions and behaviors. Employees with higher self-efficacy are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to use voluntary training for self-development (Maurer, Weiss & Barbeite, 2003).

Extrinsic factors such as increased compensation or recognition are also important motivators (Maurer, Weiss & Barbeite, 2003).

Increasing Participation in Voluntary Training

Information Delivery

One strategy that has been shown to improve participation in training is providing employees with the correct information regarding training opportunities (Noe & Wilk, 1993). As self-evident as this seems, the way in which employees are notified can influence how well that message is received. Investigation into the best methods for delivering information about training would be of great benefit to anyone wanting to increase participation in voluntary training opportunities.

Focusing on the Benefits

Promoting training by highlighting the benefits of the training, and tapping into employee self-efficacy is also important (Guerrero & Sire, 2001). Employees will voluntarily participate in training opportunities if they perceive that they will be rewarded by participating (Guerrero & Sire, 2001). Higher wages, recognition (especially from the employee's direct supervisor), and devoting resources (time and money) to training are all potential benefits that can be promoted, and lead to increased participation in voluntary training (Maurer, Weiss & Barbeite, 2003; Pocock & Skinner, 2012).

Supporting Employees

Creating a culture that encourages participation in training programs is also important, and there should be a system that recognizes and positively reinforces achievement and personal development. Specifically, an employee's direct supervisor should emphasize and encourage participation in voluntary training (Tharenou, 2001). Also, there is a positive correlation between voluntary training participation and an employer supplying funds and fostering a positive learning climate (Tharenou, 2001). This is particularly true for lower-wage employees. These employees benefit from employers that encourage participation in training, provide time and funding for training, and provide training that leads to job-security (Pocock & Skinner, 2012). Some companies have gone further and allowed employees to take training sabbaticals, allowing in some cases for a partial reduction in work hours to accommodate training, and in some cases, up to two years of leave to dedicate to training (Pocock & Skinner, 2012).

Support from a direct supervisor, supplying funds for training, and providing time for employees will help create a positive work environment, which has also shown to be an important factor to increasing participation in development activities (Noe & Wilk, 1993). Allowing employees to choose specific training programs is also important. When an employee chooses to participate in training, the employee is more highly motivated to learn (Tomlinson, 2002).

Participation Expectations

Since having a strong mandatory training program can lead to lower levels of participation in voluntary training, participation rates in voluntary training programs need to be put into perspective. Having a high rate of voluntary training participation may indicate a problem with the levels of mandatory training (Cloutier, Renaud & Morin, 2008). This is especially true if certain demographic groups show a disproportionate participation rate when it comes to voluntary training.

Conclusion

There are a multitude of factors that will influence an employee to participate in voluntary training. It is important for a company to identify the demographics of their workforce, and use the strategies mentioned above if they wish to increase the rates of participation in voluntary training. Companies should also recognize the downfalls of striving for 100% participation in voluntary training, and how high rates of participation in voluntary training may indicate deficiencies in the mandatory training programs.

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