

Competency development

Mining, Hazardous Waste, Health Care, & Others

No two industries and companies are the same. These are industries that are quite unlike each other in many ways, yet they all have many common problems and solutions. One common challenge is the training of their people, helping them build both competence and confidence while learning. These days, with pandemic isolation measures and travel restrictions, traditional training methods need some re-thinking. Whether located in a remote location, working in

secure facilities, being extremely cautious about workplace and environmental toxic risks, or other complications, training and some form of developing skills and experience is needed.

Situation

The baby boom ended in 1963 here in Canada. Now, in 2020, the youngest of that nearly 20 year population cohort is 57 years old. If not yet retired, the baby boomers, with all their experience, are retiring. The workforce is getting noticeably younger. Because there were so many baby boomers, there are relatively few in the middle age range and many with relatively little experience. Over the past 30 years, but particularly the last 20, many if not most companies have treated people as disposable commodities. Younger workers saw their parents getting laid off. Now, many of them have experienced it themselves. More are working in short term contract engagements – the “gig” economy. Technology has advanced a long way from the era when baby boomers were being hired. Nearly everyone in the workforce today is has a degree of computer literacy. Younger workers are very well versed and comfortable with it, but they lack the experience to know what the data doesn’t tell them.

With so much focus on costs and stock pricing, companies become short term focused. The window of opportunity to capture the knowledge and experience of those retiring is getting smaller by the day. That younger part of the workforce isn’t benefiting as it should from that experience, and they are destined to repeat yesterday’s mistakes, relearning the lessons of decade ago.

The workforce is well educated and skilled in computers (games, apps, social media, etc.) but lacks many of the skills, knowledge and ability needed in the workplace where the company depends heavily on its investment in capital assets – plant and equipment. So who prepares them for that environment? Who does the training? Who can coach and mentor them to become competent and confident in what they are doing?

Even younger managers seem to need this sort of help. They tend to be smart in the academic sense (many with advanced degrees), but lacking in practical application and skills at implementing what they know. Consequently, they are very conservative decision makers – risk adverse, rather than risk savvy. They are open to learning, but they have a short attention span, given all that bombards them daily. Some need to learn to slow it down a bit, some just need advice on what to do and how to go about it, and others have different needs.

Solutions

There is no magic solution to this complex challenge. Part of it is demographic, part is educational, part is motivational, part of it is a lack of experienced “elders” to learn from, and part of it is a result of short attention span and lack of interest.

To help, training is needed, but not just education as we have all had in school or university. It must be practical, aimed very well at solving real business problems that they experience, and they need help to get good at applying what they learn.

We’ve provided training, coaching and mentoring to a variety of customers. In fact, it’s probably fair to say that coaching and mentoring are often the most needed and used services we offer. They are not always called by those names, but that’s what we do. After learning something in a course, there is a need to put it into practice, or it goes stale and becomes forgotten.

When we do Reliability Centered Maintenance (RCM) programs, we usually start with training, then facilitate pilot studies (they get to see how it should be done), train facilitators and then mentor them through their first couple of projects. It’s like learning to fly a plane – there’s ground school, a few flights with the instructor handling the difficult stuff (landing, taking off), allowing the student to take control for parts of it, lots of advice and pointers. Then there’s mentored flying – the student is in control but the instructor is right there with a dual control (just in case). Finally, when ready, the student goes solo. That’s what we do with our clients, albeit not in aircraft. We do it with RCM, with Planning and Scheduling, with managing the department, with supervising crews, and more.

In Hazardous waste, mining, chemicals, pulp & paper, hospitals and manufacturing we have taught, mentored and coached. It begins quite formally as part of a consulting and transformation project, but often continues informally for a long time after. One superintendent at a Hazardous Waste facility we worked with using RCM, has long since left that job and had a few others. He is still in touch informally and still gets advice from time to time.

We’ve mentored and coached in all the industries where we’ve worked. So long as they’ve been open to it, those receiving the coaching and mentoring have all flourished in their jobs and careers. Where they’ve been closed minded to it and felt it was being forced upon them, they’ve generally not done so well. We all need mentors in our lives.

In my career I’ve had several, learned a great deal from them and applied what I’ve learned in a variety of situations. Today I share it with others and still learn from them. It never stops.

These days, companies are keeping costs down, restricting travel, minimizing on site work force and doing more from remote offices and even home. People are more isolated from each other and there is less opportunity to learn on-the-job from co-workers. There’s less money to go away for training and even training on site is becoming increasingly rare.

We are moving our training online as our primary delivery method. We still do it live with clients and even live virtual, those are probably superior, but less flexible and still require groups to be gathered. Flexibility seems to be what’s in demand. Online training offers that. We’ve probably even increased our

standards because we now include quizzes, assignments and exams that must be passed before we issue certifications.

Even coaching and mentoring can be done via remote means now-a-days. Technology is enabling face-to-face live, but virtual meetings. We've facilitated analysis projects in Pharmaceutical, Electric Utilities and Mining. We've coached and mentored new supervisors and managers in health care, hazardous waste, mining, pharma, chemicals, pulp & paper, and others.

Reflection and Results

Learning is a life-long process. The combined effects of demographics, short term business focus, excessively lean organizations, restricted travel and educational systems that don't quite hit the mark any more, and struggle to keep up, have made it difficult to become competent and confident in anything new. Fortunately we still have the benefit of very experienced people, albeit more often than not as consultants instead of co-workers. They are no longer competing with their co-workers and genuinely love to help, or they wouldn't be doing it. Some, have gone further and become professionals at consulting, training, coaching and mentoring. Our consultants are all professionals, with a lot of experience and varied backgrounds.

To learn more

Coaching and mentoring are necessary compliments to training if you truly want to build competency and confidence in new skills. Training alone will burn up budget and rarely leads to change. Talk to us about how we can help with competency development.

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