

On-the-Job Training That Works

By [Elizabeth Black](#)

One day last week, while I was standing in line at a fast food restaurant, I observed the following interaction:

Rosa, who clearly was new to her job, was being given the following instructions by Robert, another employee, on how to ring up a special order:

"Press number 3, hit no onions, subtract medium drink, add medium chocolate shake." While explaining, Robert was standing in front of the register, hitting the buttons. Then he said, "Got that?"

Rosa said, hesitantly, "Yes," and I knew, at that moment, that she had no hope of replicating that sequence for the next "special order," nor did she understand what Robert had just done.

How many times, I thought, was on-the-job training performed in this way in countless businesses?

The sequence often goes like this:

Trainer explains how to perform steps while actually performing the tasks.

Learner observes from a distance.

Trainer asks if learner understands

Learner almost always replies affirmatively.

What's wrong with this picture?

Authors Jim Caple and Roger Buckley, in their book, *One-to-One Training and Coaching Skills*, call this method, "Sitting by Nellie." The thought is that simply by sitting (or standing) and observing, learning will occur by some form of "psychological osmosis." It assumes that just because someone is proficient in doing a task that he or she will be good at teaching it to others.

Not only is this usually not the case, but it also assumes that all learners learn in the same way. The reality is that there are multiple learning styles, and most people have preferred

ways of learning. Think about how you would like to learn a new software program. Would you like to read the accompanying manual? Would you prefer to take a lecture class where the computer screen was projected onto a large screen for everyone to see what the trainer was doing, or would you prefer to load the software onto your computer and work through it by trial and error? Each of these methods uses a different learning style, and the best training utilizes a combination of these to appeal to the broadest base of learners.

It was pretty obvious from the look on Rosa's face at the fast food restaurant that she was confused, and this is exactly what happens too often in most workplaces when on-the-job training is done without any thought to the best way to teach something to another person.

Ways to Improve OJT

The next time you are asked to train someone (or you are asking someone to train you), consider the following hints:

Explain the "What" and the "Why"

Take time to explain the job or task at hand. For example, suppose that you are training a new employee to do medical coding for a group of physicians. You know that if the employee does not input the correct code for each procedure, the laboratory will reject the paperwork and the patient will not be able to get the procedure or you will have to spend time on the telephone correcting the error. In this case, taking time, upfront, to explain not only what must be done to enter the data properly but the reasons you are asking the employee to do it in a certain way, could go a long way toward explaining the context of the job or task and the consequences of doing it improperly.

If you have time, you could provide some examples of times when the coding had not been done properly; examples or stories help solidify the learning. You might also do the explaining by asking questions rather than telling. Ask, "What do you think might be the result if a patient went to the lab with a form which had inaccurate procedure codes?" This type of training engages learners since it is really a dialogue rather than a one-way monologue where the learner has to listen and remember.

Now Teach the "How"

Research tells us that trainees learn only 16% of what they read, 20% of what they see, 50% of what they see and are told BUT 90% of what they get to practice doing. Additionally, in order to accommodate the various learning styles, you should provide time for observing, reflecting and doing.

In the case of the physician's office, the person doing the training, could enter a patient's data and the proper codes while the trainee was observing. In order to take it farther than "Sitting By Nellie," though, we would add the steps of reflecting and doing. Reflecting is

the opportunity for the learner to comment upon what she is observing (e.g., "So, you are going to the large green manual to get the codes for the Southeastern Laboratory, right? When you input the patient's date of birth and other personal information, you check with the patient to make sure this data is accurate.") It also provides the learner with time for every step in the task to sink in, and everything should be less of a blur than had he simply observed each step in the process.

Finally, the trainee should have an opportunity to practice doing the task while the trainer observes. The caution here is that the trainee will be slow to perform the steps since there will be someone "looking over her shoulder," but it is a good way for the trainer to observe each step. The trainer should provide feedback-both what the trainee did well and what could be improved-at the end of the task-in this case, the finalization of the medical form. If an error needs to be corrected immediately, of course, the trainer will want to do so, but if it is not critical to the successful completion of the task, the trainer should wait until the task is finished and then suggest ways to do it differently. After two or three practice tries, the trainer and the learner should have a brief conversation summarizing the "what" and the "why" and allowing the learner to ask any final questions he may have at this point.

OJT vs. Classroom Training

It seems to be a fact of organizational life these days that fewer people have the time or financial resources to go to formal, classroom-based training. That means that many of us are learning how to perform our job requirements from someone who has done them before or who has time to teach us the ropes. If you follow the steps outlined above, whether you are the trainer or the learner, OJT can be a very effective way of learning to do what is required of you on the job. Just don't try to get it perfect the first time-especially if there is a line up of hungry people in front of you!

Article Source: http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Elizabeth_Black