Effective Human Resource Training and Development: Examination and Application of Adult Learning Theory in the HR Management Context

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ABSTRACT

Adults learn differently than young people for many different reasons. These differences have triggered the implementation of adult learning theory in training adult professionals, a valuable tool when implemented in professional training and development programs. This paper deals with the core principles of adult learning theory and how these principles affect current and future training strategies. In order to effectively integrate adult learning theory, the elements of needs assessment, motivation, reinforcement, retention, transference, and evaluation all must be adequately applied to any Human Resource training and development initiative.

INTRODUCTION

Adults learn differently than young people for many different reasons. According to Ralph C. Kennedy, M.Ed., “Adults differ distinctly in terms of such factors as motivation, interest, values, attitudes, physical and mental abilities, and learning histories” (Kennedy, 2003). These differences have triggered the implementation of adult learning theory in training adult professionals. This paper deals with the principles of adult learning theory and how these principles affect current and future training strategies.

Important characteristics of adult learning include the following (Goad, 1982; Hanson, 1981):

1. Learning is a process—as opposed to a series of finite, unrelated steps—that lasts throughout the entire lifespan of most people.
2. For optimum transfer of learning, the learner must be actively involved in the learning experience, not a passive recipient of information.
3. Each learner must be responsible for his/her own learning.
4. The learning process has an affective (emotional) as well as an intellectual component.
5. Adults learn by doing; they want to be involved. Regardless of the benefits of coaching, one should never merely demonstrate how to do something if an adult learner actually can perform the task, even if it takes longer that way.
6. Problems and examples must be realistic and relevant to the learners.
7. Adults relate their learning to what they already know. It is wise to learn something about the backgrounds of the learners and to provide examples that they can understand in their own frames of reference.
8. An informal environment works best. Trying to intimidate adults causes resentment and tension, and these inhibit learning.
9. Variety stimulates. It is a good idea to try to appeal to all five of the learners’ senses, particularly to those aspects identified by neurolinguistic programming: the visual, the kinesthetic, and the auditory. A change of pace and a variety of learning techniques help to mitigate boredom and fatigue.
10. Learning flourishes in a win-win, nonjudgmental environment. The norms of the training setting are violated by tests and grading procedures. Checking learning objectives is far more effective.

Specifically as it applies to the HR training and development context, HR training initiatives that incorporate adult learning theory will focus on the following core areas of the training process: needs assessment, motivation, reinforcement, retention, transference, and evaluation. Each of these key aspects will be examined and applied in turn to HR management training and development context.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

An effective training program begins with an honest assessment of the needs of the organization and the individual employee. Needs assessments are designed to provide input on how to best structure training programs to enhance organizational performance. A recent study found that only 27 percent of state agencies use needs assessments to plan their training programs (Gray, 1997). The rest of the agencies employed less formal methods in deciding which training programs to implement. Most organizations rely on managerial expertise to direct training programs.

The best needs assessments occur on two levels: on a broad organizational level and on a personal individual level. The organization should first align training programs with organizational objectives. This requires the organization to commit to specific goals and critically analyze as to why or why not the organization is meeting those goals. Once the organization highlights specific objectives that its personnel need, it should conduct a careful analysis of individual needs. Not all employees within an organization may need training, while other may need significantly more.

Mary Carolan (1993) suggests three steps to needs assessment – Identify, Analyze, and Research.

- **Identify**- First, those in leadership positions should identify job specific skills that need to be improved within the organization.
- **Analyze**- Second, the audience should be analyzed. The training program should be tailored to fit specific needs of individuals and departments. Knowledge and ability should be considered as well as motivation.
- **Research**- Finally, managers and HR professionals should research to “develop specific, measurable knowledge and performance objectives.

One method of needs assessment is “training gap analysis.” David Chauldron (1996) proposed that human resource managers should define the gap between current employee knowledge and knowledge that the employee will need to know in the future. While Chauldron uses “training gap analysis” in the context of training due to corporate restructuring, this approach may be used in any training environment. First, the manager should let the employees know the organization is serious about training and development. The manager should take active involvement in the training process. Second, the manager needs to critically assess the informational needs of the organization. The manager should know how each position operates and have a general idea of what information operators of each position need in order to function. This assessment and implementation occurs before actual training in order to present the employee with a better understanding of his/her position. Finally, managers should know what skill sets and knowledge each individual needs to excel at his/her position. Training programs will focus on deficiencies in those areas (Chauldron, 1996).
The future of effective employee training programs depends first on successful needs assessments. Without this step in the training development process, managers will find themselves wasting valuable time and resources training employees in irrelevant areas. Needs assessment provides a foundation upon which managers and corporate leaders can build a solid and useful training program.

MOTIVATION

The next logical step in looking at the role of adult learning in the HR training context is the individual motivation of the adult. In order for the training and development efforts of an organization to be successful, employees must be motivated to learn and develop new skills and competencies. When employees have a high level of motivation they will be more likely to take in new knowledge and seek opportunities to apply it. At least six factors serve as sources of motivation for adult learning (Lieb, 1991):

- **Social relationships:** *to make new friends, to meet a need for associations and friendships.* When adults see social benefits to a potential training or learning experience, they will be far more likely to participate in a meaningful way.
- **External expectations:** *to comply with instructions from someone else, to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.* Authority can be a powerful motivator, and if employees feel like they have to participate because of their boss’s wishes, they will be more likely to enroll in training.
- **Social welfare:** *to improve ability to serve mankind, prepare for service to the community, and improve ability to participate in community work.* When adults have a clear perspective as to how the training will help society, they will be more likely to participate.
- **Personal advancement:** *to achieve higher status in a job, secure professional advancement, and stay abreast of competitors.* Not all motivations are altruistic, and if employees can see the tie between training and job promotion or the betterment of their work situation, they will be more likely to participate.
- **Escape/Stimulation:** *to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work, and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life.* When employees need some variety in their workday and to get away from the grind, they will be more likely to participate in training.
- **Cognitive interest:** *to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to satisfy an inquiring mind.* Some employees are life-long learners and love to learn. These individuals will take advantage of nearly all training opportunities presented to them.

The best way to motivate adult learners is simply to enhance their reasons for enrolling in a training program and decrease the barriers. In order to do this, managers must seriously consider employee needs in the design of the training program and learn why their employees are enrolled. Some common employee needs are advancement, maintaining job performance, and job security (Jurkiewics & Massey, 1997; Jurkiewics, 2000).

Additionally, managers and instructors can motivate employees in several possible ways (Lieb, 1991):
• **Set a feeling or tone for the lesson:** Instructors should try to establish a friendly, open atmosphere that shows the participants they will help them learn.

• **Set an appropriate level of concern:** The level of tension must be adjusted to meet the level of importance of the objective. If the material has a high level of importance, a higher level of tension/stress should be established in the class. However, people learn best under low to moderate stress levels; if the stress is too high, it becomes a barrier to learning.

• **Set an appropriate level of difficulty:** The degree of difficulty should be set high enough to challenge participants but not so high that they become frustrated by information overload. The instruction should predict and reward participation, culminating in success.

Furthermore, managers have to discover what is keeping their employees from being motivated to learn. Some of these barriers include lack of time, money, confidence, or interest; lack of information about opportunities to learn; scheduling problems; "red tape;" and problems with childcare and transportation. After identifying the barriers to motivation, the managers and training instructors must plan their motivating strategies to overcome the barriers, primarily by showing adult learners the relationship between training and an expected promotion.

Once entering the actual training scenario, if the training participant does not recognize the need for the information, all of the training efforts to assist the participant’s learning will likely be in vain. If a manager successfully identifies and understands employees’ motivators and barriers to learning, steps can be taken to help make the training a worthwhile and meaningful experience for all adult learners involved.

Additionally, it must be understood that the training facilitator is a change agent. The trainer’s role is to present information or skills or to create an environment in which exploration can take place. The participants’ role is to take what is offered and apply it in a way that is relevant and best for them. The trainer’s responsibility is to facilitate. The participants’ responsibility is to learn.

**REINFORCEMENT**

The next major component of looking at the role of adult learning in the HR training context is reinforcement (often referred to as operant conditioning) which is a mode of learning by which a human or animal learns to associate an action or behavior with an event. B.F. Skinner originally developed this research with rats. In his experiment, every time the rats pushed a lever they would receive a reward. This reinforced the rats’ desired behavior.

In order to more fully understand reinforcement, it is also important to understand Thorndike’s Law of Effect. This law states that “if a consequence is pleasant, the preceding behavior will become more frequent, and if a consequence is unpleasant, the behavior becomes less likely to occur”(Kodat, 2002). Many managers are taught to use this tactic with their adult employees. In fact, positive reinforcement has been sited as “The single most important factor in maintaining the behavior of trainees once they return to their jobs…. Positive reinforcement from immediate supervisors is the most powerful maintenance system” (Michalak and Yager, 1979).

However, reinforcement is only powerful if used correctly. The two major problems with reinforcement are inappropriate rewards and/or lack of consistency.
Inappropriate rewards

It is important to be aware of the type of activities that are being reinforced. If the task seems menial, such as busy work, motivation may be compromised (Jenson et al, 2004). For example, an individual who was rewarded for doing a simple task would not feel the need to progress. Another example of inappropriate rewards is the trivially rewarding an individual for doing a great amount of work when in fact the individual did little or nothing.

Lack of Consistency

Like inappropriate rewards, lack of consistency can also cause problems. A study was conducted by P.L. Gunter in which he reported that when a teacher’s praise appeared to be a random event unrelated to the students behavior, it was sending the message of “curriculum of non-instruction” (Gunter et al., 1993). Essentially, this means that if the students were to act as they should, they would receive inconsistent positive reinforcement. However, when they were to act incorrectly, they would always be punished. The confusing actions of “non-instruction” mislead the adult learners. In addition Jenson (2004) said that inconsistency in positive reinforcement affects a learner’s optimism. According to Jenson, optimism is very important to learning because it is “linked to positive mood, perseverance, effective problem solving, and academic success.”

Reinforcement, the power of praise, is a very powerful tool and quite possibly the “single most important factor” in adult learning. However, this will only be the case if it is used appropriately. Positive reinforcement must include appropriate rewards and consistency; then it will truly become an essential element to learning.

RETENTION

Another key element of looking at the role of adult learning in the HR training context is retention. People commonly learn a piece of information, like a person’s name, and then soon forget it. Although people typically forget many things, training sessions should be designed so the employees can retain and use the knowledge and skills they learn. If employees forget the information they learn or do not practice the principles learned in their jobs, training sessions would be useless. Thankfully, there are many things that can be done to help adults learn and retain new information in training. For example, building on established knowledge, repeating information, and practicing new skills all help in retaining new information.

Adult learners have a wide variety of life experiences that shape their interests and learning abilities. When developing a training session, a trainer should build on the learners’ experiences and established knowledge. By building on what the employees already know, the teacher provides a familiar context, which helps in retaining knowledge. Ralph C. Kennedy (2003) explains how to involve previous knowledge in training sessions:

Instructors should use teaching techniques, such as group discussions, symposiums, debates, demonstrations, role-plays, and group projects, where learners have an opportunity to draw upon their previous experiences and to share them in cooperative interaction with others (p. 2).

So, training sessions should build on the collective knowledge of the group to enhance the learning and retention of the entire group.

Most people do not remember information after only being told once. To make the problem of forgetfulness worse, adults’ abilities to retain information decline as they age. Therefore, repetition is
vital to retaining information. The rule of three states that a person only hears something after it has been said three times (Berman, 2001). In training meetings, important concepts and facts should be repeated many times to ensure that employees will hear and retain the information. Repetition is also important in practicing skills. The rule of seven states that a person must practice a skill seven times in order to master that skill (Berman, 2001). Repetition slows down the learning process for those people who do not understand the concepts quickly. Repetition also reinforces the knowledge of those who already understand the knowledge. Repetition aids people in both understanding information and retaining it.

Practicing new skills is important in retaining knowledge and skills. According to Kennedy, “Recall shortly after learning reduces the amount of forgetting, and spaced or distributed practice further facilitates retention” (Kennedy, 2003, p. 3). The more a skill is practiced, the easier it becomes and the more likely a person is to remember how to perform it. Therefore, training sessions should provide multiple opportunities to practice what is being taught. Opportunities to practice what was taught in previous training sessions should also be offered to provide more repetition. Practice opportunities should be placed directly after learning a concept or skill because the sooner a person practices the skills after learning them, the better that person will retain those skills. Practicing new skills is imperative in retaining the learned abilities.

TRANSFERENCE

Very related to retention is the aspect of transference. Transference refers to one’s ability to use the information and skills attained through training in a new environment, ideally the work environment. Transference can be categorized into two types: positive and negative transference.

Positive Transference

Simply put, positive transference occurs when trainees actually put into practice the techniques and procedures learned in the training. An example of positive transference would be an electrician practicing safety techniques in a lab and then going out into her job and implementing those safety techniques.

Negative Transference

Negative transference, which is also a positive outcome, occurs when trainees avoid doing what they are trained not to do. An example of negative transference would be an employee at a movie theatre who refuses to let his friends in for free after been specifically trained not to do so.

Occurrences of Transference

Several factors affect how much transference actually takes place in the workplace. Some of the factors that increase the likelihood of transference are (Lieb, 1991):

- **Association**: This refers to trainees being able to associate newly received information with something they already know.
- **Similarity**: Like association, when trainees receive information that is similar to information already attained, they are more likely to benefit from transference.
- **Degree of Original Learning**: This refers to amount at which the trainee was able to engage in original learning, meaning trainees participated in learning original to themselves.
• **Critical Attribute Element** - When the elements learned are extremely critical to the successful completion of the job then transference is more likely.

• **Reinforcement** - If desired behavior is reinforced, then the likelihood of transference from training to performance in increased.

Idealistically, the goal of training programs is for the highest possible amounts of transference to take place. If the factors above are taken into consideration and implemented when training adult learners in the organization, then the results will be positive.

**EVALUATION**

In order to insure that adults are learning effectively, training programs must be evaluated. Evaluation is to assign value to an object or process. In evaluating training then, it is important to know one's audience -- the person or persons for whom the determination of value is to be made. There are several possible audiences for evaluation results. These include the trainees, their managers, the trainers and their managers, the executives of the organization wherein the training is taking place, members of the training profession, and even members of the larger community in which the organization is embedded.

Evaluation is often looked at from four different levels listed below. Note that as more levels are completed, the more valid the evaluation becomes.

• **Reaction** - What does the learner feel about the training?

• **Learning** - What facts, knowledge, etc., did the learner gain?

• **Behaviors** - What skills did the learner develop, that is, what new information is the learner using on the job?

• **Results or Effectiveness** - What results occurred, that is, did the learner apply the new skills to the necessary tasks in the organization, and if so, what results were achieved?

Although level 4, evaluating results and effectiveness, is the most desired result from training, it's usually the most difficult to accomplish. Evaluating effectiveness often involves the use of key performance measures -- measures one can observe (i.e. faster and more reliable output from the machine after the operator has been trained, higher ratings on employees' job satisfaction questionnaires from the trained supervisor, etc.). The following of such sound principles of performance management can be of great benefit to the organization (Kirkpatrick, 1998).

Different evaluation approaches may be distinguished based on the nature of the evaluation process. Ideally, managers should assess employee skills against a control group of those workers who did not receive training. When such control groups are not available, then the use of pre and post-training should be done. One example of post-training is the usage of role playing and simulation. Simulation allows managers and employees to replicate on-the-job scenarios without disrupting the actual work environment. Simulation also helps trainees learn new technological advances and allows manager to assess the trainees' performance under real-life situations. Effective simulation requires imitation of real-life conditions and problems with ample time for trainees to acquire and learn new skills required for the job (Paddock, 1997).
Simply put, managers need to evaluate the training in one form or another to assess their employees or perspective employees. By doing so, managers will ensure that these adult learners are meeting the standards that are set by an organization.

CONCLUSION

Adults learn differently than young people for many different reasons. Since adults learn differently than do younger people, adult learning theory can become a valuable tool when implemented in professional training and development programs. This paper has dealt with the core principles of adult learning theory and how these principles affect current and future training strategies. Additionally, in order to effectively integrate adult learning theory, the elements of needs assessment, motivation, reinforcement, retention, transference, and evaluation all must be adequately applied to any Human Resource training and development initiative. Only when previsions are made to ensure the successful application and implementation of each of these areas will training various organizational training programs and initiatives have the opportunity to succeed.

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