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Get your new employees trained without breaking the bank

Ever notice that 'deer-caught-in-the-headlights-of-a-fast-approaching-truck' look on the faces of the new people in your print business? Sure, they were excellent employees for someone else. But this is their first day at your shop. They don't even know where the bathrooms are located.

They may possess marvelous skills and years of specialized training. It is all just promises and potential until you integrate them as productive members of your staff.

Despite the rapid advancement in print technology, the print business remains both an artistic and a technological enterprise. Your new employees will not efficiently contribute until they are comfortable with how you run your specific operation.

There are two basic methods for training new personnel. The first and most popular is the sink or swim school of training. It consists of a senior supervisor leading the new employee to a large swimming pool

"We are very impressed with your credentials," the supervisor says. "Ask anyone if you have questions." Then the supervisor pushes the new employee into the deep end of the pool. The new employee - who doesn't want to look foolish - makes a valiant effort to hold his or her frantic splashing to a minimum.

This method of training is effective, eventually. Taking the plunge and making mistakes is a good teacher. Most of your new people will ultimately learn their jobs and settle into the company rhythm.

However, can your business afford an average of three mistakes for every step of the learning process?

Train on a budget

Large firms employ a dedicated training staff. They even allocate time for new employees to attend training seminars. New employees can make their three mistakes in a classroom setting. This is impractical for the majority of printing businesses.

Chances are good that your company offers some sort of orientation, maybe a handbook of some kind. But the day-to-day reality for most printing operations is lean and mean. The need is now and resources do not allow the time or money for elaborate training programs. Consider a marriage of handbook and training strategies; it's less likely to soak up limited resources.

When your new employee is lost in a sea of new information and everyone else is too busy to help, reference material can make the difference between success and frustration. And nothing is more fundamental than names and phone numbers.

Assign an experienced employee to compile a list of names, phone numbers and, if appropriate, addresses of the people and organizations important to the smooth operation of your business.

This should be a short list, no more than two or three printed pages. It is not a customer list, per se. Include suppliers, the people who fix the equipment, even the numbers of those three places that deliver food when everyone is too busy to leave the shop.

However, exclude company personnel at this point.

Especially during the first few weeks, your new employee will discover a need to contact someone and not know who or how. They will waste a few minutes considering the problem, a few more minutes deciding which co-worker to interrupt, a few more minutes to ... you see where this is heading. You can short-circuit the entire scenario with a simple list of frequent contacts.

Include a short paragraph explaining why this person is valuable to your business. Note the services and/or products this person provides, also what they expect from you. Omit any derogatory comments. This transforms what began as a phone book into a superb training tool and resource for your new employee.

Few employees will thank you for being assigned to compile this list. Too many important tasks already compete for their attention. For best results, be sure to stress the priority you place on the project and set a deadline for completion.

When completed, give the list to another employee for review. Instruct the second employee to add names and to refine the comments under each name, then return the list to the first employee, who has overall responsibility to format and polish the finished product.

Next compile a similar but separate list for names and phone numbers of company personnel. Replace the "comments" paragraph with short job descriptions.

You now have two reference tools that will benefit not only new employees, but also your entire staff. Both projects probably required less than two hours' total time.

Make procedures easy to learn

Are there other areas where you can provide written training material for your new hires? Consider training sheets to summarize important procedures and processes.

Most of your company procedures are fairly simple, at least to you. Still, your new employees must learn dozens of procedures and hundreds of simple steps.

In congregate this is intimidating. A good training sheet allows for efficient instruction and quick review.

Be warned that there exists a hard truth about training sheets, which you probably already know. Many are poorly constructed - confusing at best, and often nearly worthless. A "good" training sheet must clearly explain a specific process in such a way that your new employee could successfully complete the process in a locked room. Vague explanations, partial explanations and outdated information spawn frustration rather than resolve it.

In addition, a good training sheet must be short and to the point. It should consist of one page and only one page.

An elaborate explanation of some basic process that rambles for several pages will prove more detrimental than beneficial. Break down complicated processes into component parts that fit onto a single sheet.

Now for the good news. Most training sheets take less than 15 minutes to prepare. And the format is simple. Describe step one of the process, then describe step two, then step three and step four. Add a few bulleted explanations under each step and you are finished. Notwithstanding the previous warning about poorly written training sheets, keep in mind that a training sheet is nothing more than a basic outline with brief descriptions, not a master's thesis.

The procedure for developing training sheets follows the pattern you established for the phone lists. One employee writes the sheet; a second employee reviews the sheet.

The human touch

Reference material is great, as far as it goes. But sometimes the hand of an experienced employee on the shoulder of a new employee makes all the difference. The combination of personal instruction coupled with a training sheet for review is powerful.

In all likelihood, you generally appoint someone to shepherd new employees for the first few days and then function as an advisor until they become familiar with their specific job assignments.

This is excellent but creates some challenges for the shepherd. The shepherd must now do double duty - training the new person and their regular job.

You should consider assigning other employees to help with specific training exercises. Rather than expecting one person to do the heavy lifting, this spreads the load and allows the shepherd time to fulfill some of his primary responsibilities.

Everyone gains multiple benefits. Team spirit increases because more employees become involved in the training process. The new employee acclimatizes more quickly not only to the job, but also your company community.

If you limit these training sessions to 15 minutes, the time expended by busy, veteran employees is kept to a minimum. In this way, you secure many benefits of a training staff without the expense.

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