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Why Corporate Training Programs are Failing

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So Much Training, So Little to Show for It

An expert on corporate programs reveals why they often are a waste of time and money

By Rachel Emma Silverman

Companies devote a lot of time, effort and money to corporate training—with little to show for it.

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U.S. firms spent about \$156 billion on employee learning in 2011, the most recent data available, according to the American Society for Training and Development. But with little practical follow-up or meaningful assessments, some 90% of new skills are lost within a year, some research suggests.

Eduardo Salas, a professor of organizational psychology at the University of Central Florida and a program director at its Institute for Simulation and Training, has studied corporate training programs for more than two decades. What happens before and after a training session, he says, is just as important as the actual instruction itself.

The Wall Street Journal spoke with Dr. Salas to discuss his research. Here are edited excerpts of that conversation:

Analyze Your Needs

WSJ: What was the most surprising thing you have learned from years of studying corporate training?



Eduardo Salas

DR. SALAS: How little organizations rely on the science of learning and training. I've been doing this for a long time, and many organizations are uninformed about what it is we know about learning and training and development.

There are a number of myths that organizations have about training. The first myth is if you send an unskilled employee to training, when they come back there is immediately a changed, improved, skilled worker. That is an erroneous assumption. It is much more complex than that. In this day and age, companies in general still have very simplistic views of training.

WSJ: What are the biggest mistakes that companies make in training?

DR. SALAS: First, organizations don't take the time to analyze what their training needs are. This is simple. The first step in doing training is to do a training-needs analysis, figuring out who needs training and what kind.

The next problem is many organizations don't evaluate how well employees have learned. Or if they do, they usually stop at the first level of evaluation—the reaction data. Companies think that if there is a positive reaction to the training, that people will learn. But what we know is that the correlation is very weak between reaction to training and actual learning.

Third, companies believe that technology will solve all training problems. They think that a mobile app or computer games are the solution to learning. A simulation by itself isn't enough. You also need very clear and precise learning objectives, clear feedback, a form of measurement or assessment and regular opportunities to practice and get feedback.

Fourth, you can have the best training in the world. Top-notch. But the organization may not be ready to receive the training and doesn't set the conditions so that when you go back to your job, you have the right supervisory support, the opportunity to practice and the conditions that allow you to apply the skills you just learned and to motivate you to sustain this.

It is paramount that organizations set the climate for learning. Employees are very good at reading what is critical. If the organization isn't setting signals, people don't use it.

Focus on Design

WSJ: What is the single most important element of an effective training program?

DR. SALAS: Design. It's the thing you do before, during and after. How are you going to allow employees to practice? How are you going to provide feedback? What sort of technology are you going to use? While this may seem obvious, very few organizations really pay attention to this.

[Many companies] just procure a vendor for a program—like four hours of a workshop to do interpersonal skills—and they assume that the design is incorporated into it. Many vendors make sure the training is flashy and engaging, with a lot of bells and whistles. While that may be a fun and interesting few hours, after you go back to your job, you ask, "What do I do now?"

WSJ: Is there something simple that most companies can do right away to improve their training?

DR. SALAS: One is to do your training-needs analysis. Make sure you have clearly defined outcomes for the learning—and identify who is supposed to be going through training and what kind of training.

Sometimes an organization sends people to training thinking that's what they need, and they come back wondering, "So why did I go to that training? I won't be able to use that for another three years when we get the new procedure." A training-needs analysis is critical so you don't waste time.

Follow Up

WSJ: How important is testing?

DR. SALAS: Testing is an integral part of training. It is paramount for recognizing skills decay. Assessment should be done on a continuous basis, both formally and informally. Your direct supervisor often has the most intimate knowledge of important skills and whether you need to go back to training.

WSJ: How big of a problem is skills decay?

DR. SALAS: The American Society for Training and Development says that by the time you go back to your job, you've lost 90% of what you've learned in training. You only retain 10%. If you don't use the skills very quickly, you will have big decay very quickly. That's why you need to reinforce, you need to assess. If you learn something and you don't have the opportunity to practice, eventually you are going to lose it.

WSJ: Training sessions often seem like cram sessions, full of information and facts. Are there effective ways to help employees retain all this information?

DR. SALAS: Companies need to teach employees how and where to access facts. If you are inundated with facts and concepts, you will forget 90% of it. What training ought to do is help you get access to that information—databases, manuals, checklists—when you need it on the job. They cannot memorize everything.

WSJ: How can workers be more motivated to focus on training, rather than seeing it as a burden?

DR. SALAS: Organizations must set signals that learning is important in this organization. It's about creating in employees the mental model that if I engage in this learning, if I know more, it is to my benefit. I will be more marketable.

The supervisor is very influential. If the supervisor cares about your future, you are going to be motivated.

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