

all aboard?

IN TIMES OF WHIZ-BANG TECHNOLOGICAL change, new versions of software and equipment are available almost before the company gets used to using the old. Both software and hardware upgrades now hit the market on a regular basis, offering companies plenty of incentives to adopt new technology or improve their systems. But once you've decided to take the plunge, you have to get your staff ready for the change. Though this can be almost as tough as making the original decision to move forward, it helps to handle this as a three-phase process.

Step one: Getting the buy-in

In general, humans don't like change, even if it is for the better. When something changes—say, the company installs a warehouse management system (WMS)—it is disruptive and disconcerting. The staff may experience feelings of confusion and discomfort, which can lead to resentment, which in turn leads directly to a big drop in productivity. Too often management forgets the psychological aspect of preparing employees to accept this tremendous change. But failing to get that buy-in will most certainly show up on the bottom line.

Before the installation begins, take the time necessary to resolve all employee issues, no matter how simplistic they seem. Schedule a meeting to promote the new system and all of its features. The staff, at all levels of usage, needs to be excited about the change and receptive to the technical training.

You already know that technical training will shorten the time necessary for the staff to become fully productive. However, if they are not mentally open to learning, their resistance will show, and the company will suffer.

Step two: The technical training

When it comes to training, you have a lot of choices: You can provide a classroom setting, using a lunchroom or conference room. Or you can use videos and computerized programs as well as Internet- and intranet-based training programs to provide round-the-clock availability, enabling third-shift employees and new hires to participate.

Speak to your software and equipment vendors. They can often provide personnel to come in and set

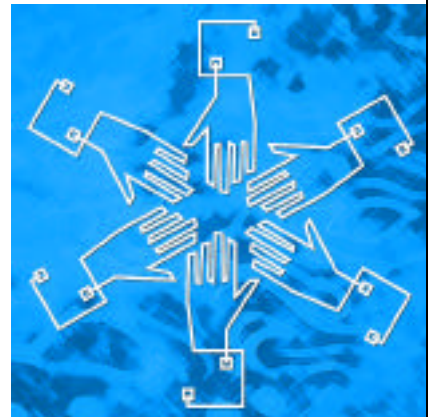
up a "Train the Trainer" program. The graduates of these programs, in turn, can become your company trainers for specific areas. You can videotape a training class and create your own training library for staff use. Veteran staff members are an excellent resource for ongoing training, as well. Use them in a mentor program or underwrite occasional working lunches for less-formal training sessions. These veterans can also work with online educational companies to create customized Internet, intranet and CD ROM-based programs at a relatively low cost.

Step three: Offer encouragement

Unless your staff is made up entirely of six-year-olds, some of them will have a tough time adapting to new technology. This is bound to frustrate them, particularly if your group is of mixed ages and the forty- or fifty-somethings see the younger set learning more quickly.

Therefore, be sure to make liberal use of positive feedback. Our grandmothers said it, and it still applies: A kind word goes a long way.

Proper training does take time and money. However, it has been shown that even the most sophisticated training program costs less than recruiting and hiring. High turnover and low productivity are both expensive indicators of poor management and poor training. They permeate the entire company, destroying morale and extending the payback time for the new system. Investing in motivation and training will undoubtedly cost you money, but not doing so will most assuredly cost a lot more. □



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