

To Train or Not to Train?

No One Builds a Great Business by Cutting Corners

The only thing worse than losing a good customer is letting a good employee slip away. And next to marketing, training is usually the most under-funded budget in the rental & staging business plan. Why is this? Employees are your greatest asset — isn't that what your website says? I have discovered that there are three key obstacles to training and they all rest with management. Let's listen to a typical discussion on the topic:

Q: Tom, my technicians want me to send them to rigging school because they say it is an important part of their jobs. My concern is that I will spend a ton of money just to train them so they can leave and work for someone else. Can I make them pay me back if they leave? What do other companies do?

A: The training question answers itself. If you do not train your employees, they can't do their jobs as well as they could or should. What we need to explore here is [1] Why are you so cheap? and [2] What else are you doing wrong that loses employees?

Employees will leave from time to time, but generally to accept a better job or follow a spouse. Studies show that good employees are motivated by

opportunity, work environment, benefits, and fun — with pay being a distant fourth or fifth criterion. One promise that is working to lure employees away is training. If you treat education and certification as a benefit instead of compensation, then

the obligation shifts to the employee to make the best of it instead of to the employer.

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Here is what has worked for me: Pay for optional training liberally, but require the employee to take it on his or her own time. This separates the motivated from the greedy. If the training is required for the job, then pay for the employee's time and materials, but also make it a condition of the job. In other words, complete the ongoing training or take a cut in pay. Certification is one way to validate that the worker has learned what you pay them to know.

Q: I am committed to training, but there don't seem to be any definitive courses that will turn my junior techs into lead techs.

A: There still isn't a replacement for OJT (on-the-job training), but training will accelerate the process. Doctors spend years studying, but still have to intern in order to have experience in a controlled environment with mentor support. Skipping ahead to internship

without the book learning is not going to make a great doctor in a shorter amount of time. Those who say there isn't any AV training out there simply have not looked or are setting unreasonable expectations. Today's young techs want online courses, hands-on experience, and more responsibility, sooner. Employers have to provide for this or risk losing good people.

We can divide training into four schools:

1. Self-paced, no validation. This applies to the thousands of YouTube and manufacturer videos you can find online. Any motivated individual could learn a lot by sitting at their computer.

2. Self-paced, certificate of learning. InfoComm is a source for generalized online training with certificates awarded to those that prove they understand the content. If you want more technical training, then check out my website (trstimson.com/services/training) for a link to an online training portal with 60 inexpensive technical courses that come with online certificate tests.

3. Classroom, no validation. Conventions like InfoComm or LDI have plenty of these courses. Ask your learner to bring the education back to your team in a summary. The best way to really learn something is to teach it.

4. Classroom, certificate of completion. There are many professional providers that offer courses on useful topics. Some require the learner to demonstrate some knowledge to prove they were awake. A few elevate the requirements to prove mastery. You may have to send the tech somewhere, but good education is worth it.

Q: I am afraid that if I provide the training, everyone will want a raise. I



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think this is part of their jobs.

A: If you do not have a disciplined compensation review process, then you are probably plagued with employees maneuvering for merit raises. The long view of running a business would suggest that employees have a job description with career path expectations. For instance, new hires have to earn credentials to become junior techs. Junior techs have to complete certain courses and pass associated tests to become

lead techs. Each job level comes with a pay scale. The challenge for the employer is to define requirements for each level and identify the training sources. There is no one-stop shop for training.

Your takeaway today is that training is more accessible than you want to believe, can be applicable to your needs, and is mission-critical to retain employees and provide top-notch customer service. Your commitment to training has a price. On occasion

you will need to replace a staff technician on a show with a freelancer so your employee can attend a training seminar. Classes have fees. Certifications have fees. Sometimes you may invest in an employee only to lose them to a competitor. Ask yourself, “Who did I pay for the skills that came with my employees?” Make training part of your budget. Consider it required *Repair and Maintenance* for personnel.

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> Software is Replacing Hardware as Subject Matter and Inventory

One of the biggest deterrents to AV training is that it is difficult to recognize. Managers that grew up turning knobs and carrying a tweaker in their pockets struggle to understand why a computer is now a tech's primary tool. However, most of the vital AV technology today has a user-interface instead of a control panel. Employees must be proficient at using computers and operating software instead of pushing buttons and turning knobs.

Another aspect about the available training that makes it seem in accessible to some managers is that so much of it revolves around developing and managing multimedia content. AV Stagers in particular seem to keep content development at arm's length. This hurts the customer, who is often ill-equipped to create content that meets the needs of the hardware or presentation medium. AV staging managers need to understand that knowing *how* to develop content means being able to *help* clients achieve the desired outcome. Let's face it. If the image is bad, it may be the fault of the content, but who is going to take the blame?

This brings another trend to bear. More and more stagers are purchasing expensive software licenses and

depreciating the assets as inventory. Products that come with software “keys” that allow the program to work on a computer have been around for a while. The key becomes the trackable item while the software is open on multiple computers. In the world of multimedia software, products like Adobe CS6 (a suite of tools for content development) have strong serial number licensing tools. There are group software licenses that companies can purchase, but they require centralized asset management. In other words, it is time for stagers to upgrade licensing best practices to reflect the importance of software.

When it comes to training, software products may be the outlet that managers are looking for. Any product worth its download has some sort of tutorial, and popular products elicit lots of training courses — almost exclusively online. (I found over 50 videos for CS6 training in about five minutes.) Rather than bemoaning the lack of training to make someone a top-notch projectionist in a weekend, managers could produce experts in content and multimedia production, who happen to be projectionists. Food for thought, but hurry up. This *trend* is not all that *new*.