Know the Gap Before Attempting to Bridge It: How to Effectively Deliver Training to Employees of All Ages

Shane Austin, CSP
Director of Safety & Risk Mgmnt
PureSafety
Nashville, TN

Introduction

Have you ever sat in the middle of a crowded public area, maybe a mall or a sporting arena and watched the wide variety of people passing by. All shapes and sizes, skin tones, hair colors and clothing styles. You will inadvertently hear multiple conversations taking place. Children are oohing and aahing at the surroundings, teenagers are conversing with a lot of slang that makes you scratch your head and retirees are debating the ineptitude of our government officials.

It's really not much unlike our workplaces. The "Great American Melting Pot" is simmering right in the middle of your office, your factory, your construction site. Everybody brings their own little bit of flavor to the mix. As an employer, manager, supervisor, safety director, etc. you have the task of communicating effectively to individuals of all ages. A great deal of the information you need to convey involves specifics do's and don'ts that are vital to the safety of the employee. Have you given much thought to "how" you are getting your message out? Are you mixing things up a bit? Have you really considered your target audience?

Our discussion today will focus first on identifying your target audience and trying to understand them a little bit better. That's right…….you may indeed be well served to know that different "generations" of people actually respond to training methods in different ways. Hopefully, when we are finished, you will take some time to reevaluate the way you are currently managing your training and perhaps make a few tweaks here and there to better serve your workforce.

Learning Objectives

During this presentation, you can expect to learn:

- Common age-related learning traits of both younger and older employees
- Ways traditional training fails to bridge the "learning-difference gap"
- The pros and cons of videos vs. PowerPoints vs. hands-on vs. online
- The importance of establishing clear learning objectives
- The balancing act between methods and the secret to finding the right "blend"

- Strategies for involving both older and younger employees in the online training implementation process, ensuring wholehearted participation and enhancing course completion rates

Like Sands Through the Hourglass

There is a long running soap opera that uses that cliché. The thing is that some people have had a lot more sand run through their hourglass than others. The workforce ranges anywhere from know-it-all teenagers to set-in-their-routine "silver hairs". They are often as different as night and day. Why should we expect that they would gravitate to the same methods of training? These generational groups have been broken down in different ways with different buzz words over the years. For the purpose of our discussion we are going to slice the workforce up into four groups. The Veterans, the Baby Boomers, Generation X and the Millennials. You have undoubtedly heard of other variations… (Nexters, Generation Y, Traditionalists, etc.). Out of respect to our elders, let's talk about the Veterans first.

Veterans

The Veterans represent the segment of our workforce that was born between 1925 and 1942. This time frame included the great depression. A great many of them came from humble beginnings and were taught to work hard and appreciate what they have. With regards to their learning preferences, Veterans generally prefer the following:
- A traditional classroom structure
- To avoid being singled out for questions
- Working alone as opposed to in groups

Baby Boomers

Typically thought of as those who were born between 1943 and 1964, there were approximately 80 million people born in this time frame. Because there were such a large number in comparison to the preceding generations, they were often the center of attention. Some of their learning characteristics include:
- Prefer interaction and time to talk
- Somewhat sensitive to criticism
- Somewhat resistant to authoritarian instructors

Generation X

Those born between 1965 and 1980 were tagged with the title Generation X and been known to be more self-reliant than the Boomers. Often referred to as "latch key" kids, they are comfortable in informal settings and like to have fun. Their typical learning styles include:
- Like to have regular feedback
- Impatient
- Want to understand the relevance of their work
- View themselves to be technologically savvy

Millennials

Individuals who were born between 1981 and the turn of the century are categorized as the Millennials. They have typically been catered to more than any generation before them and as a result are extremely confident. They are physically and medically more well-cared for than in other generation in history. Their learning characteristics often include:

- Strong ability to multi-task
- Goal oriented
- Enjoy active learning
- Technological experts

Traditional Training Methods

Training methods have evolved on a multitude of levels through the years. Early on you would expect to see traditional classroom settings with an instructor and a piece of chalk. One day, someone showed up with multi-colored pieces of chalk and the students almost went into sensory overload. As time progressed flip charts were utilized, overhead projectors were brought in, videos were shown and LCD projectors were used. Finally, computers have gotten thrown into the mix of options. Each of these have merit in their own right. I think that it's important to say that there is no "magic bullet" that will address everyone our training needs. So let's consider the fact that we need to convey our information to people in each of the four generations that we mentioned. The Veterans will want to see the information, avoid excessive group interaction but have an avenue to pose a question later on if need be. The Boomers will want to absorb the information without having it thrust upon them. They will want review it heavily and then offer their commentary on the material. Generation X will want to have it given to them quickly and then want a process in which to determine if they are "getting it". The Millenials will want to be given a goal and will then engage themselves in the learning process.

Pro's & Con's of Current Training Options

Traditional classroom lectures are great opportunities to engage in discussion about the subject at hand. The success of these sessions is solely dependent on one thing… the communication skills of the trainer. There has never been a truer statement made than "All trainers were NOT created equal". Some people have the natural flair for it, some have worked very hard to hone their presentation talents, and others sadly just simply don't have "it" when it comes to standing in front of others and conducting training.

PowerPoint presentations are everywhere today in school and in business. They are cheap and easy to prepare. Presenters who have a bit of a creative flair can incorporate some graphics and charts that can help paint a very clear picture. However, it has been shown that student's preference for PowerPoint tends to decline with age. One study demonstrated improved post-test scores in students attending a course offering a "traditional lecture" format compared to those attending PowerPoint lectures. Some of the student quotes included:

"Sometimes my instructors don't use PowerPoint to make a point; they use it instead of a lesson plan."

"If a lecturer is just reading me a PowerPoint presentation I can read for myself later, I will just do something else during the presentation."

Over the past 25 years, videos and DVD's became a real "easy" way to provide training. Pop in a video, push play, and "presto" your training is complete. They are often an entertaining way to present information could even make learners feel like they were on the couch at home. On the down side, videos can be expensive to create and often appear "dated" after a couple of years. Additionally, it can become easy for instructors to start a video, dim the lights and leave the room. Over the years, more than a few workers have enjoyed some nice "nap time" during these type of sessions.

The most recent type of training being utilized is computer-based and online training. Early versions used fundamental software techniques and provided basic information to individuals who had access to a computer. Within the past 4 to 8 years, the majority of working Americans have obtained access to both a computer and internet access. Well-designed programs can engage learners on an individual level. Tests and assessment can be given at the end and all of the activity can be automatically tracked. The down side is that there is still a segment of the workforce……mostly Veterans and Boomers….who shy away from the technology involved.

The Common Denominator

Let's take a moment to establish a critical point. Regardless of what type or combination of types of training you utilize, the core element that each one of them need is a clearly defined set of Learning Objectives. Whether you are writing on a chalkboard, conducting group discussions, showing a video, or "whatever", you need to clearly communicate what key points are to be conveyed to the learner. Examine all of your existing training materials for those fundamental facts. There is in fact an entire science devoted to proper instructional design. Have you ever taken a class and earned "Continuing Education Units"? There are a handful of national and international learning associations that will accredit programs or training organizations hence allowing them to issue CEU's to people who take part in one of their training events. These associations don't take their role lightly. Their team of professionals will examine the instructional design methods being used and will verify that the objectives of each training experience are clearly communicated and that each are indeed addressed during the event. At the end of the day, you want to be able to look back and confidently know that you covered x, y & z.

Strategies to Consider

We'll start by getting one item off the table right now. There are NO substitutes for personal one-on-one interaction when it comes to some training issues. For example:

- Donning and doffing PPE
- Demonstrating how to properly operate a powered industrial truck
- Conducting mock emergency response scenarios

It's easy for us to understand the importance of the human interaction involved in matters such as these. As far as most subject matter goes, the key is that the learner be provided a clear way to pose questions about the subject matter and receive feedback from a knowledgeable source.

It is my opinion that the one method of learning that best bridges the generational gaps is a well-designed online learning tool. Let's take a look at the upside. The Millennials obviously gravitate toward a technology based solution. They are comfortable with active learning and require more structure and mentoring. The electronic format provides them the structure and the ability to email and chat with an instructor online is right up their alley. The Generation X crowd consider themselves technologically savvy, are often impatient and may lack personal skills. With online training, they can work at their own pace and not have to contend with group interaction that they are not fond of. The Boomers are said to enjoy working in an independent manner and Veterans do not enjoy being singled out in a group setting.

Keep in mind that while online learning engages response and interaction from each student, it still provides the opportunity to engage a group of students if shown from a projector. In other words, it can work for people who prefer groups as well as those who enjoy working individually.

Here comes the best part. How do we ever know if the employees learned anything? If you have attempted to quiz or "test" students on any of your curriculum recently, you will have undoubtedly found that it can quickly become a paperwork nightmare. **IF** everyone actually attended the course…and **IF** they were given a test….and **IF** their handwriting was legible…..and **IF** you were able to grade the tests…..and **IF** you were able to file them in a manner that could be easily retrieved if OSHA ever inquired of you, you might have a system that could match an online learning management system.

In short, identify what needs to be done one-on-one. Take a look at the online training options that are available. Use your most technologically confused Veterans and Boomers and simply pose them with the challenge of completing an online course. Can they handle it? Or will they throw the computer out of the window? You may be surprised at what happens.

References

Baker College. 2005. *Teaching Across Generations* (http:// www.baker.edu/departments/etl/resources/Teaching%20across%20Generations%20with%20note sv4.ppt)

FDU Magazine. Winter/Spring 2005. *Mixing and Managing four Generations of Employees* (http://www.fdu.edu/newspubs/magazine/05ws/generations.htm)