



Building the Case for EH&S Training

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Organizations under financial constraints usually cut the travel budget first. The training budget is often the next to be slashed. In some respects the two are interrelated because travel is involved in many external, and even internal, company-sponsored training programs.

The ideal time to make a strong business case to support training is before the cuts come, a proactive rather than a reactive approach. In this article, we examine some of the strategies you can use to build a strong professional development program for you and your employees. Even if the budget is already at bare bones, the approach may be effective in maintaining or expanding current training programs.

Training is not the same as education. If you ever get confused over the distinction, just ask yourself, "Do I want my children to receive sex education in school or sex training?" Students coming out of universities may be very well educated but still lack essential skills to do their jobs. For example, my son recently graduated with a degree in forensic chemistry, but he is still not allowed to directly manage crime scenes. He is undergoing a two-year, on-the-job training program by federal and state specialists. Murderers can walk (or play golf) if mistakes are made.

While the stakes may be less immediate and dramatic for environment, health, and safety (EH&S) professionals, the long-term consequences can be enormous in both financial terms and protection of human health and the environment. Training is considered so important that industry spends an estimated \$50 billion training workers.¹ This amount approaches the total spent on public education each year.

These statistics are impressive. If training is so important, why are training budgets for EH&S professionals so often cut? The answer may be in our failure to communicate the value of this training. Management may lump EH&S training into only one cost category: discretionary spending. In fact, EH&S training can be strategic, mandatory, and essential. Your challenge is to build a business case to management on what is necessary and why.

BUILDING THE CASE

Don't assume anything. Management may not realize that there are very specific training requirements for EH&S professionals and for hourly employees who work on related issues such as waste handling. The easiest case to build is the need to maintain or develop specific certifications or qualifications for EH&S staff members. A number of publishers have compiled extensive listings of EH&S training requirements (for example, Government Institutes, Inc., <http://www.govinst.com>; (301) 921-2323; *CFR Training Requirements*, 3rd Edition, ISBN: 0865875871). You can build your own customized list by obtaining CD-ROM or electronic versions of the Code of Federal Regulations and local/state/national regulations, if available. These are available from such information services as the Bureau of National Affairs (<http://www.bna.com>; (800) 372-1033) and Government Institutes. An even less expensive option is to directly search state and federal regulations online (for example, <http://www.epa.gov/epahome/rules.html>). Search for key words such as "training" and identifiers related to your process operations or industry.

The next step is to identify the training requirements needed to gain or

maintain professional certifications or qualifications. These requirements may vary by location (state or country) and are usually tied to some specific minimum of continuing education unit hours (CEUs). Professional associations and certifying organizations usually list their requirements on their Web sites.

Required training forms the absolute base level of training needs. You should then consider training for (1) competency and efficiency improvement; (2) development and retention; and (3) strategic and competitive advantage.

IT'S NOT JUST TRAINING, IT ADDS VALUE

Existing regulations change or new ones are added. Issues and emphasis points shift. Attempting to maintain a comprehensive understanding is difficult in a vacuum. Training improves competency, and it can do this very efficiently. Management understands this, but what should also be pointed out is that many training programs allow access to nationally recognized experts who are willing to share their opinion on key issues. It may be possible to leverage this point by picking courses for which key experts will be available during the breaks or after hours.

National or regional conventions such as those conducted by the Air & Waste Management Association offer both training opportunities and a tremendous opportunity to network among peers and leading regulatory, academic, non-government organization, and industry experts. Unfortunately, these might be discounted as "boondoggles," especially if located in an attractive area during prime tourist season. Be specific with your management as to what courses are being taken and why, as well

as whom you plan to consult with and why. In other words, you are not going to a convention; you or your employees are being trained on certain issues and meeting with specific individuals.

HOLD ON TO THE BEST


Attracting and keeping the “superstars” is a challenge, especially with today’s mobile work force. Having an organized, formalized EH&S training program is another factor employees consider in their willingness to join and stay with a company. A word of caution: if you set up a formalized system (as discussed later in this article), you will need to maintain it even in the face of intense cost-cutting pressures. For example, Apache Corp., a Houston oil and gas company, held a series of employee value-setting meetings. Investing in people came out on top. When oil prices fell, the company stuck to its values by not cutting training. If it had, the long-term consequence would have been a lot more significant than any short-term savings.²

Employees also have to believe that the training program is fair and based on logic. If they believe that favored employees are consistently handed the “plum” training programs, a backlash could result. If employees are having performance problems, they should get these messages directly from management, not indirectly. In fact, specific training should be an integral part of performance improvement, not exclusively a rewards system.

STRATEGIC VALUE

Crotonville is General Electric’s world-famous training center located near the Hudson River just outside New York City. In 1980, the place was abuzz with speculation over the next CEO. Jack Welch had already built his reputation as a relentless cost-cutter, and the general mood among the Crotonville staff members was tense. I can vividly recall a Crotonville training program I attended during this period of uncertainty. At night during the open bar social hour,

ADVISOR CHECKLIST



- If you are able to, organize your program during good times and build credibility with the results achieved. Reactive responses to cost-cutting are always an uphill battle.
- Leverage off of existing, organization-wide training programs.
- Categorize training needs in terms of value and objectives:
 - regulatory/required
 - maintenance of continuing professional certifications
 - productivity/skills improvement
 - capacity/ability to deliver
 - cost-effective information gathering
 - strategic value
- Go for quality—use measurable criteria and performance indicators such as past evaluation scoring.
- Benchmark with other companies using common parameters such as class hours, CEUs, or number of courses provided to EH&S professionals.
- Develop a focused, organized plan.
- If training is a employee value, do not abandon it in tight times.
- Watch the optics—pick the best training in Boston in February over the so-so stuff in Scottsdale (unless the authors are giving the course, of course!)

the staff members opened up and speculated that “if Jack gets the job, Crotonville gets the ax.”

The exact opposite happened. Immediately after his promotion, Welch proceeded to pump \$45 million into facility expansions, a position that outraged some company managers faced with increased cost cutting.³ In a recent interview for the *Wall Street Journal*, he stated that he “would never want to run [the] company without Crotonville.”⁴ Welch views training as a strategic element in promoting the company culture, producing a new kind of management and new ideas.

Later in that decade, he realized that plant management needed a better understanding of what was expected of them in maintaining EH&S compliance at manufacturing sites. I was involved in the development of an EH&S training course for plant management, which continues today at locations around the world. It is not optional; Welch continues to require all plant managers to attend.

The preceding case study illustrates several key points. First, leverage off established programs if your organization is large enough to have its own training department. In addition to GE’s Crotonville, a number of companies

such as Motorola (Motorola University) and McDonalds (Hamburger University) have internalized training. United Technologies requires each employee to receive a set amount of training each year, varying from 40 to 100 class hours per year.

Second, understand what the strategic direction of the company is and provide training that is consistent and supportive of these goals. This is an additional selling point to management. Internal meetings coupled with training opportunities provide a framework to articulate the strategic vision for EH&S and employee expectations. Framed in the proper context, executive management will be supportive of external training on long-term issues that will affect the competitive nature of the business. They must first see this as relevant to the strategic direction of the company. Again, getting buy-in and understanding from the CEO is key.

MAKING THE BUSINESS CASE

If management believes that training is picked more for the location appeal than the value to the company, you are in serious trouble. Whether you are an individual laying out your own training needs or a manager developing the budget for an entire department or organization, the

Please Ask, Please Tell

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essential steps are the same. You must specify what is needed, why it is needed (for example, required, productivity improvement, capacity/ability to perform specific tasks, cost-effective information gathering, or strategic value), and how it can best be obtained (that is, quality/value considerations).

In summary, you need a focused, structured plan. All too often, training is haphazard, centered on what happens to be nearby, what is "free" (but low value and time consuming) or associated with some other meeting or event. You need to demonstrate that a lot of careful thought went into picking the specific programs. There are more subtle considerations that might be pointed out to management. For example, an organization that has well-trained employees will be in a more credible position when negotiating with regulatory agencies. Should serious issues arise leading to court testimony, the relevant training and qualifications of the employees add credibility to the testimony.

What can be especially persuasive to management is to frame the training program around benchmarkable, quantifiable parameters such as class or credit hours. Required regulatory training is typically set up this way, but many courses have CEUs. Using these parameters, you can benchmark with other organizations to put a perspective on how much training is typically supported.

The above information helps to specify quantity, but equally important is the quality factor. Is the organization getting its money's worth? Training

programs that have been rated CEUs are one indication of quality. Pojasek, my co-author, teaches several training programs that are CEU-rated, but more significantly, the students rate them. If the quality is not there, the company will drop the low-scoring course. The competition is brutal and rapidly weeds out poor quality. We recommend that you ask for a copy of the course evaluation form and the statistics from previous offerings. If the course provider cannot or will not provide this information, be cautious and check further (for example, contact previous attendees).

In general, references are the best indicator of good quality training. If you cannot find someone to vouch for the training, take a close look at the qualifications of the trainer(s). Company or regulatory employees who volunteer to teach may have very current information, but the quality of information delivery can vary tremendously. Professional trainers or individuals whose livelihood depends on the outcome may be an indicator. Longevity of the course is another factor that can be readily checked. For example, the Harvard School of Public Health offers a world-famous industrial hygiene short course that has run for more than 20 years (http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/ccpe/programs_oeh.html).

Another factor to consider is to coordinate training for maximum cost-effectiveness. Combining training with annual professional associations is one technique already mentioned. A number of training companies offer discounts for multiple registrants. It may also be possible to negotiate favorable terms to bring an external training program inside the company, coordinated with, for example, some other employee meeting.

If you have a large organization, it may be worthwhile to assign one person (in addition to all their other duties!) to coordinate the system and negotiate favorable terms. If your company has a training department, establish close links and get advice.

The point of all this is to demonstrate to management that all avenues have been explored to make the training needs cost-effective.

CONCLUSION

Demonstrate to management that a thoughtful process was used to select EH&S training. It is a management education process in and of itself. Management may be unfamiliar with regulatory requirements and may be unaware of the potential advantages and value to the business. An organized approach will make your program more resistant to potential cutbacks. If you are attempting to rescue threatened or previously eliminated programs, the same principles apply; you just face a greater hurdle and a lot more homework to sell your proposal to management. ☺

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