

Training employees to know what they are supposed to do, how to do it, and why produces two types of benefits. Productivity and quality improve as workers do the right task the right way, waste less time and fewer materials, and offer new and better methods of completing their duties. Likewise, job satisfaction among employees improves as they successfully meet new challenges and feel the support of their manager. Both eventually translate into improved profits for the business.

When committing to an investment in training, the logical starting place is to understand what the job requires and what employees do and do not know. Training even helps workers who do the most basic and simple tasks. Jobs of every type can be done easier, faster, or wrong.

A crew of greenhouse workers packaged potted plants for shipment. After the crew was simply shown a different way to perform that task, the total number of pots prepared per worker per hour more than doubled, climbing from 189 to 488.



While all training may not result in such dramatic results, there is room to improve productivity in virtually all agricultural operations.

Training Methods

Once the level of employee knowledge and skills for a job has been assessed against job requirements, training can be designed to address real needs. Training that combines explanatory instruction, practical demonstration, and hands-on experience is often best to ensure that employees will be able to actually apply new information to their jobs. There are many ways to involve learners in both planning and conducting the training.



Overview of purposeful workplace training

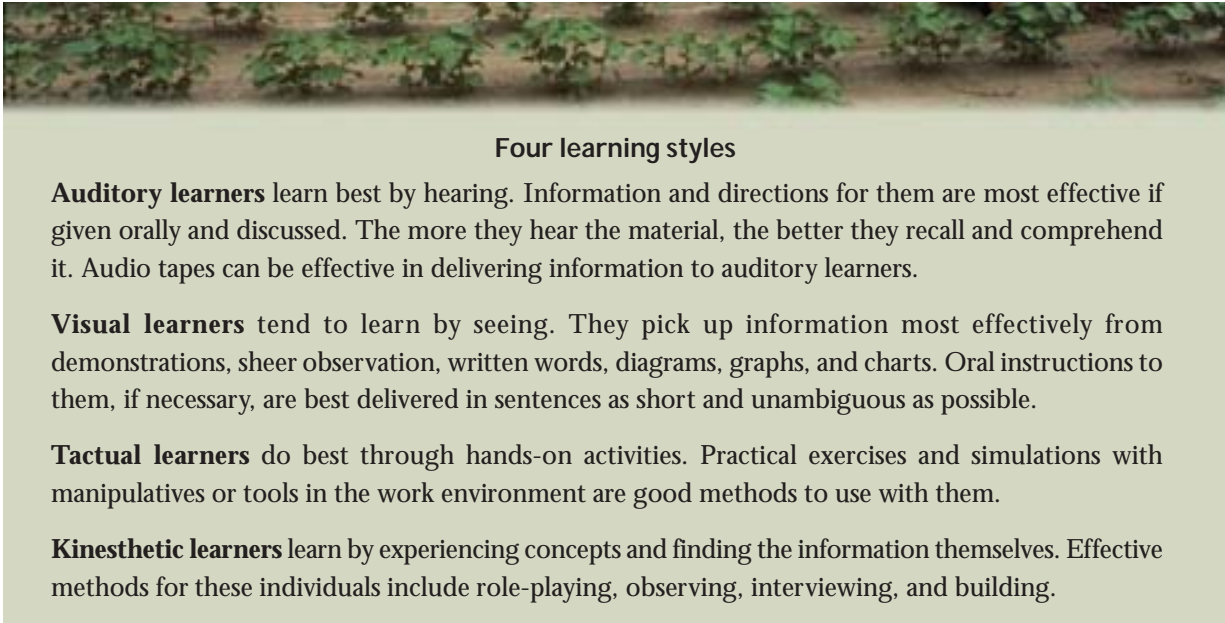
- Review the symptoms of need for training such as productivity statistics, performance appraisals, turnover rates, accident experience, and employee requests.
- Set objectives and a timeframe in terms of tasks that workers would be able to do, things they would know, and standards to which they would perform after training.
- Plan the content, methods, setting, and schedule for training sessions.
- Deliver the training by informing, explaining, showing, advising, observing, asking, assessing, and refining.
- Evaluate the extent to which the objectives have been met; consider more than how the employees feel about the training in the short-term.

Choice of training techniques depends, in part, on time and resources available, but most of all, it depends on the training objectives—the type of skills or knowledge to be developed. Naturally, the best methods for teaching how to use a computer, overhaul an engine, birth a calf, or identify voracious insects are not the same as to lift a computer, change the tractor oil, pitch hay at the calves, or pick berries. Skills to perform more complex jobs or those that have more cognitive content warrant more planning and time to help people learn.

Conceptually breaking complex tasks into smaller, easier-to-master components is necessary spade work for training in a series of steps. If material is spread over several sessions, it helps keep training time in reasonable proportion to the work week, gives employees the chance to incrementally build and confirm their competence, and allows for adjustments with experience. An extended training program like this typically includes some information delivery in a structured setting away from the worksite. Lectures, discussions, and demonstrations can be enhanced by slides, flip charts, videos, and other visual aids.

Regardless of task or skill complexity, the use of multiple methods is a good strategy when trying to help many employees learn the same thing. While some people can pick up knowledge through explanation and discussion while seated in a quiet room, others may need to observe a demonstration or to personally perform the operation themselves. Even if methods cannot be tuned to the personal characteristics of each learner, a few guiding principles are pertinent to the design of most employee training:

1. People learn and retain information better when they see it as meeting their own needs or interests.
2. While children often try to learn out of respect or fear of their elders, adults are more self-directed and relevancy oriented. They are more motivated by an intrinsic need to grow and the instrumental value of content—such as a skill or knowledge that is applicable to a problem they have experienced.
3. Learners lose much of their newly acquired information if they do not put it to use in some way.
4. People have different learning styles and tend to acquire skills in their own characteristic mix of ways.

A rectangular box with a light green background and a thin border. At the top, there is a small photograph of green plants in a field. Below the photo, the title "Four learning styles" is centered. The text describes four learning styles: Auditory learners (learn by hearing), Visual learners (learn by seeing), Tactual learners (learn by hands-on activities), and Kinesthetic learners (learn by experiencing concepts).

Four learning styles

Auditory learners learn best by hearing. Information and directions for them are most effective if given orally and discussed. The more they hear the material, the better they recall and comprehend it. Audio tapes can be effective in delivering information to auditory learners.

Visual learners tend to learn by seeing. They pick up information most effectively from demonstrations, sheer observation, written words, diagrams, graphs, and charts. Oral instructions to them, if necessary, are best delivered in sentences as short and unambiguous as possible.

Tactual learners do best through hands-on activities. Practical exercises and simulations with manipulatives or tools in the work environment are good methods to use with them.

Kinesthetic learners learn by experiencing concepts and finding the information themselves. Effective methods for these individuals include role-playing, observing, interviewing, and building.

Most agricultural training is provided informally on the job by business operators and supervisors. A general sequence of steps for on-the-job skills training is as follows:

1. Introduction
 - Explain the purpose of the task.
 - Find out what the learner already knows and can do.
 - Identify inputs to the task and expected outputs from it.
 - Relate personal experiences in learning and doing the job.
2. Presentation
 - Describe the procedure.
 - Demonstrate the correct performance.
 - Point out critical decisions, tricky maneuvers, and foreseeable problems.
 - Invite questions.
3. Trial Performance
 - Ask the learner to describe and perform the task (or parts of it).
 - Invite self-assessment and questions.
 - Confirm what was done well. Advise on what needs improvement.
 - Ask for a repeat performance.
4. Let Fly
 - Ask the learner if he or she is ready to perform alone.
 - Put the learner on his or her own, with the option to get help if needed.
 - Check back frequently to assess progress, coach, and ask and invite questions.
 - Taper off coaching.

Employees who view their jobs as a temporary means to another end are less receptive to training specifically applicable to their current workplace. Most workers, however, enjoy learning and appreciate employer efforts to help them develop their skills. Opportunities to develop abilities beyond what the current job requires may inspire more thought and effort from them on the job.



Differences in the quality and rates of performance of equally able workers are usually attributed to their motivation.

Motivation and Work

Motivation is, by definition, that which causes action or movement. What action or movement is evidence of motivation among agricultural employees? Employers associate “motivated behavior” with those actions of workers that serve their business interests: accepting a job offer, staying in the job, producing high-quantity and high-quality results, coming to work reliably, working safely, cooperating with supervisors and coworkers, and offering useful ideas. If these behaviors are not in evidence, are workers unmotivated?

Some workers take an active interest in their work and the firms that employ them. They notice things that need attention and go out of their way to provide extra thought and care. Others are obviously turned off, showing no desire to perform beyond the bare minimum expected of them. They never notice the broken fence, the soft tire, the dry bearing, or the calf in distress.

Differences in the quality and rates of performance of equally able workers are usually attributed to their motivation. Nearly everybody is motivated but not necessarily to do what is in the best interest of the ranch or farm. Managers are challenged to tap their employees’ motivation by arranging job content and context so that workers’ pursuit of their own objectives naturally serves those of the business.