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Treat or task? Recipe for effective training amid the pandemic

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"My husband and I couldn't stand our long gray hair anymore, so we had to take actions. Fearing the coronavirus, we decided to do it ourselves. We first watched the YouTube videos. Then, we put the chair in front of the TV to simulate the beauty salon environment in a hope to make it more relaxing for both of us. I used to enjoy going to the hair salon to get my hair done, because it was a treat for me. But now, it is simply an annoying task. It took us three hours to shorten and dye each other's hair yesterday. Today, his neck aches and my right arm is sore. It was not the most pleasant experience, but I have to say it was quite a unique bonding practice," one of my friends shared her story with me during a recent virtual get-together. I am sure this can resonate with many who have been forced to be homebound due to the coronavirus. After laughing with her about them being self-taught barbers, it prompted me to ponder: How can we turn obstacles into opportunities and make the task of employee training a bonding experience for employees? What's the right recipe for effective training amid a pandemic?

As one of the basic elements of a compliance program, training and education plays a crucial role in ensuring your organization adheres to all laws and regulations. Training, which covers a broad spectrum of topics and rules, from how to clock in/out and donning/doffing to how to recognize and report fraud, enables employees to conduct business in a safe and efficient fashion. It helps raise employees' awareness and understanding of regulatory requirements and promote the culture of compliance. Understanding the importance of training and education is just the first step. How to conduct effective training in such a unique time is another question. With all the competing priorities and never-ending projects, it is not uncommon to see people rush through training or skip it altogether. Even in pre-pandemic days, employees often perceived training and education as a cumbersome task that unnecessarily increased their workload and wasted their time. How do you engage employees while promoting and maintaining the level of compliance with regard to training requirements? This article aims to provide some practical tips to help you and your compliance teams assess, communicate, and deliver employee training.

Ingredients

More often than not employee training is presented in a way that is long and only provides a rundown of rules and policies without fully engaging employees. Naturally, people will tune out or skip over it, thinking they already know the content and do not need to pay attention. We are living in an information age, and our brains are busy processing all the data we receive from different directions and parties. It is easy for the information to get lost in the mix of all the meetings and calls. Factors such as frequency, length, and format should be examined and taken into consideration when developing training courses.

Frequency and length

Traditional hour-long lectures that are offered only once a year is a practice of yesterday and thus cannot keep up

with the ever-changing fast-paced modern work environment. To help employees refresh their knowledge and keep them abreast of the rules and policies, training should be provided regularly. Studies show that messages are more effective when repeated. Researchers have found that "repetition learning significantly increased the memory performance."[1] Frequent training on certain topics can ensure important messages are delivered timely to address risk areas. Although repetition is effective communication, it does not mean each training should be lengthy in time. Common estimates of the attention span of healthy adults range from 10 to 20 minutes. Therefore, a short and sweet session will definitely be more welcome, as long as the message can be effectively conveyed to employees.

Autonomous training schedule

Making it less time-consuming and burdensome for employees is one of the key ingredients in the success of employee training. Flexibility of training schedules increases effectiveness. If businesses can quickly adjust their operational methods and adapt to the new remote work setting, why not do the same for employee training? Some companies have allowed their employees to complete training on their own time and get paid for the time spent thereon. Giving employees the flexibility to decide when it's convenient for them to complete training empowers them and allows them to gain the sense of control in a time of uncertainty.

Training format

Generally, training can take a variety of forms (e.g., in-person training, online courses, a hybrid of the two), but because of the coronavirus, pulling everyone in one classroom may be impractical and violate public health guidelines. Thanks to modern technology, multimedia (e.g., written content, audio, video, and other visuals) is available for use to teach staff on subject matters. One of the advantages of going remote is eliminating the geographic barriers. Hence, inviting a subject matter expert to the virtual training without travel hassles has become a possibility. In addition, an instructor can share relevant videos or news clips on the topic when conducting the training to make it more relatable, or record the training session and post it on the intranet or online learning platform so that employees can watch it through their mobile devices anywhere anytime.

Offer more hands-on training. A simple example will be an instructor explaining proper hand hygiene with a live hand-washing demonstration and inviting the virtual audience to do the same. More actual doing than passive listening is far more effective than reading through slides or taking a quiz. My friend and her husband watched YouTube videos before putting it to action. Albeit not ideally, they did it and ultimately eliminated their fast-growing long gray hair. Mission accomplished (almost perfectly). Through the process and thereafter, they felt they created an unforgettable experience together. After an extended period of time in isolation, people yearn for person-to-person interactions and human connections. Training is a great way to turn learning into a team-building activity.

Be creative and make it fun to engage employees. My friend and her husband had a unique bonding experience when completing a daunting task; the same concept can be applied to employee training, which can be just as fun. An interesting, relevant, and enjoyable training is more memorable, and thus, more effective. Providing interactions through games is an idea for teams to consider, because completing training does not have to be an arduous chore. To me, entertaining does not conflict with the educational purpose and informative nature of employee training. Quite the opposite—it is like the special icing on the cake that may just deliver a surprisingly positive result.

Training content

Content is the core of training and education. The exact training courses may differ between industries, but

topics usually include general business laws, operational procedures, industry-specific regulations and company values, as well as guiding principles and philosophies. Certain industries such as healthcare, which is highly regulated, will require more training on things like Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act rules, fraud detection and prevention, and patient rights. It is not enough to simply provide a list of rules that employees must follow. Many violations or incidents occur because people did not understand the rules or how the rules apply to their work. The first question that should be asked is: Is your content understandable? Technical jargon may be hard for people to comprehend, which will inevitably result in loss of interest and attention. In addition, the training should not solely focus on the procedures, but also tie to the actual issues or risks that the organization faces and speak to the *why* behind such training, including the significance and purpose of the training as well as the negative outcomes, potential damages, and consequences if the procedures weren't followed. Including real-world examples and relevant case studies can help employees relate to them and better memorize the knowledge points. One helpful way is to walk people through examples of how the knowledge applies to their operations and roles in the organization. Customizing and personalizing your content to tailor to your business needs will bring more value to your training and help with knowledge retention. A well-developed curriculum will not only accommodate varying levels of employees' learning abilities and styles to help employees digest information at their own pace, but also make training less laborious and onerous.

Training records and documentation

Devise a mechanism or use a training management system (e.g., a portal or virtual platform) to track completion progress and maintain detailed training documentation. Training records can demonstrate that the organization took every reasonable step to maintain a safe working environment and educate employees on safety procedures. It protects the organization and decreases its liability if an incident does occur.

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