Adult Learners

The dynamics of a learning environment involve a wide range of training and learning styles; instructional methods and techniques for different kinds of learners; motivations of both learners and trainers; and the personal, intellectual, and job-related needs of learners. Following are several generalizations about adult learning that can help guide you when developing programs:

**Adults Are Motivated to Learn**
Adults’ motives to learn play a major role in determining learning outcomes. The degree and quality of their participation in learning activities depend on whether their expectations are being met by the program. If there are obvious shortcomings at the beginning, the adult will quickly withdraw from the program. Motivation can be influenced by instructional goals themselves—the learner who has clear, specific goals that are in line with the training objectives will be a strong participant.

Encouragement and support by trainers, instructors, and managers is an equally potent source of motivation. Obstacles or barriers to learning are negative influences and if not recognized and corrected immediately will block the learner’s ability to acquire new skills. One kind of obstacle you can encounter is a participant’s overly intense motivation—this can easily develop into anxiety for the learner—creating a barrier to learning.

**Recommendation:**
Give learners the freedom to explore and interpret within reasonable limits. Encourage them to seek beyond their immediate needs and help them set objectives that are individually useful and realistic.

**Adults Want to Apply New Skills Immediately**
Adults choose training and instruction when they intend to use what they will be learning immediately after the program ends. They seek additional knowledge and skills to improve job performance and are interested in developing attitudes to support and enhance their work.

**Recommendation:**
Organize and conduct learning activities by offering the most useful mix of improvements in knowledge, skills, and behaviors for your planned outcomes or objectives. Some learning activities, for example, emphasize acquiring an understanding of stress-related problems experienced by line workers. Other activities require developing skills in order to perform the line workers’ tasks.

**Background Influences Learning**
Background and experience are strong influences on the adult’s approach to learning. Individual differences increase with age, and the ability to “unlearn” or be disassociated from a particular skill or method of performing becomes increasingly more difficult. A lapse of several years in learning can result in reduced effectiveness of study and education skills. There is usually marked improvement shortly after instruction is resumed.

**Recommendation:**
Design effective programs with attention to individual backgrounds and establishing connections between the new learning and relevant previous experience.

**Ability Affects Instructional Environment**
Learning ability is an important factor in establishing an environment for instruction. Between the ages of 20 and 50 learning ability remains relatively stable but thereafter sometimes declines. High levels of learning ability usually indicate an aptitude for grasping complex material and tasks quickly. In later years, a factor such as poor physical or mental health can seriously diminish learning ability. Whether these conditions occur over time, as with the gradual loss of vision or hearing from aging, or they are short-term illnesses such as a cold or flu, the training environment, schedule, and assignments should be modified to help reduce the effect of these problems on learners.

**Recommendation:**
Carefully estimate individuals’ learning abilities and use these estimates in planning training and setting objectives. The decline in sensory faculties can be treated with sound amplification, hearing aids, glasses, and improved lighting. Anxiety and stress interfere with concentration and the use of memory, but can be alleviated with counseling, discussion, and stress reducing exercises.

Minimize the effects of health problems on the learning environment by providing such amenities as adequate low-glare lighting, sound amplification, large and neatly printed visuals, and ramps for wheelchairs. Arrange seating so that visually impaired learners can sit close to lecturers and presenters, and hearing-impaired persons can be close to loudspeakers and presenters (if they prefer to read lips).
Adults Learn Best at Their Own Pace
Learning effectiveness may decline if the adult is forced to learn faster or slower than his or her normal speed. Though learning power does not diminish with age, older learners proceed at reduced speeds while concentrating more on accuracy. Learning speeds suitable to effective learning vary widely among adults.

Recommendation:
Plan learning activities to help individuals find their best and most effective speed and follow that pace.

Varying Levels Challenge Adults
The best learning takes place when learning activities and tasks are sufficiently challenging to be engaging but not so excessively difficult or complex that they overwhelm learners. Some learners do not catch on to the more complex tasks as quickly and thoroughly as others; superfluous or irrelevant information tends to make these learners very anxious, especially when they must manage and organize the information.

Recommendation:
Start with simple tasks and gradually build more complex ones onto them as your learners become more confident of their skills and abilities. Simplify difficult tasks by using diagrams, charts, visuals, written instructions, and models.

Teaching Styles Affect Learning Ability
Effective learning and teaching styles vary with the particular instructional task or material: Mastering skills requires practice and rehearsal; learning effective communication and interpersonal relations is best accomplished in a group; becoming familiar with new analytical or review procedures may entail application and use of the procedures in a self-directed, laboratory situation.

Recommendation:
Consider the content and nature of the instruction as you plan and apply the most appropriate techniques for presenting the particular subject matter or conducting the learning activity. Pay attention to the individual learning dynamics applicable to each task or assignment; this will be your best guide for designing and delivering training.

Consistent Feedback
Learners of any age accomplish more when they receive regular feedback on their progress. Having a standard of excellence helps learners establish goals, and knowing where learners are in relation to their goals enables them to plan and direct their efforts.

Recommendation:
If feedback is discouraging, consider modifying the task so that the learner may experience some level of accomplishment and satisfaction. Negative reinforcement or punishment is not as effective as positive reinforcement or reward. Immediate recognition encourages and reinforces new learning. For more information, see Infoline No. 9006, “Coaching and Feedback.”

Interpersonal Skills Affect Learning
Serious personal or social maladjustment reduces the effectiveness of learning. Anxiety and defensiveness regarding unsatisfactory performance or failure are the usual causes of poor adjustment. If adults are confident in their abilities, then they perceive complex problems as challenges; conversely, if they lack confidence, then the problems will appear as threats. Those adults most afraid of failure and lacking confidence tend to have limited recent educational experience, while those able to confront and handle failure usually have many successes that balance out their experiences.

Recommendation:
Provide guidance and support, prevent maladjustment at the beginning, and emphasize learners’ successes. Strong confidence and a positive outlook on the learning efforts are valuable qualities. These and faith in the trainer or facilitator as a reliable, concerned resource person may be all most learners need to be successful.
Interest in educational activities develops from encouraging influences. Potential learners pursue education to achieve personal and professional goals, to participate in a group endeavor, to acquire skills and information that will help them meet formal requirements, and to gain understanding of a subject or satisfy curiosity about it. Many times, the appeal of an educational experience begins with the learner’s own interest in reading, ideas, and school. Additional support may come from friends, managers, a close correlation between personal goals and available training, and a strong desire to have a better job that requires additional training and education.

Recommendation:
Inform employees of training and educational opportunities: Tell them how the particular programs are relevant to their situations (anyone who uses a computer would want to know how to fully use a software program to achieve the highest level of efficiency on the job); and how the instruction will change their approach to the job (new information or skills regarding computer operations make a significant difference in job performance).

Initial Fears
Many adult learners enter educational experiences with apprehensions about the unknown and about possible failure. They cannot reconcile their role as student with their idea of the “responsible adult.” They also mistakenly believe that learning ability diminishes with age. To maintain and enhance their self-image, adults must have initial successes; positive experiences offset the problems and difficulties that attend change. Learners who have achieved some success and gained recognition tend to seek more challenging educational objectives.

Recommendation:
In the early stages of the program, help learners feel that they are part of the group, that they are welcome and they belong. Participants will begin to concentrate on learning once they have passed the “inclusion” phase. It is best to introduce important input later in the program when learners feel comfortable with themselves and their environment.

Assist learners in accomplishing one of their objectives early in the program. This will boost their confidence and sense of being effective. Talk about past and future learning activities with individuals; show them how the teaching process involves them and helps them learn. When learners understand their needs and feel secure, they will be ready to make changes.

Adults Need to Feel Involved
Group and organizational tasks at the beginning of a program may not run as smoothly as you would like. As mentioned earlier, the need for inclusion and security are priority concerns for individuals new to the learning environment. Learners’ behavior in the early stages of the program will be inwardly or self-directed.

Recommendation:
Include a good icebreaker at the beginning of training so that the learners become acquainted and feel comfortable with one another. Conduct group or organizational activities after the “comfort zone” is established.

Learners Need Support
Throughout the learning experience, participants require support and encouragement. Group support and emotional encouragement can give assurance and confidence.

Recommendation:
To increase the incidence of positive learning experiences, help learners set realistic, achievable goals and plan multiple outcomes if a chance exists that one or more may not develop. Attend to needs expressed by individuals, small, and large groups of participants.

Help participants put negative experiences or failures into perspective by showing them how to learn from and how to reduce the incidence of these experiences. Some ways to decrease the chances of failing include working through problems or mistakes with learners, giving them the freedom to work at their own speed, evaluating the program by using the learner’s previous performance as a reference point, and relaxing learners with gentle, nonoffensive humor.

Freedom to Select Their Own Training
In some ways it is better to have had no contact with trainees than have them drop out of a program after only a few sessions. If former attendees are disappointed or upset about failing, you may not be able to persuade them to take any instruction voluntarily and, as studies have shown, train-
ing is more effective when learners are free to choose and pursue it at will.

A high retention rate of participants is determined by various factors such as the match of learners’ personal goals and program objectives, the background and education of learners, and the level of their emotional and financial investment in the training. Retention rates decline under the influences of discouraging friends, general disinterest, family conflicts, and job-related problems. As many as half of all withdrawals are unrelated to the instruction, showing that family and work have higher priorities than the training.

**Recommendation:**
Accommodate conflicting demands by developing a flexible schedule. Participants will feel comfortable about remaining in training and contributing to their potential if they know they will have sufficient time for family, friends, work, and community. Further increase retention rates by sending polite reminders to participants who have missed some sessions. In cases where the retention rate is extremely low, use program evaluations to find out what the program lacks and make the necessary adjustments. Survey dropouts for additional suggestions on how to improve the retention rate.

**Characteristics of Adult Learners**
Adult learners are motivated to learn when they have a need to do so. They want to know how the training will help them. Before undertaking any instruction, learners need to understand why they must learn the material or skill. Studies show that part of an adult’s preparation for learning is to determine the benefits of the learning as well as the disadvantages of not learning.

Adults learn from activity. Practice and continued use increase learning and retention more than other passive (though standard) approaches, such as lectures. Participants respond better when the material is presented through a variety of teaching methods and understood on different sensory levels. As a group, adult learners vary greatly in their areas of education, background, experience, intelligence, emotional stability, and motivation for achievement. Instructors and trainers must allow for these differences as they plan and present the instruction. An additional consideration is that adults must have the desire to learn. Following are some adult learning characteristics that you should familiarize yourself with to help you attain better results:

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**Tips for a Good Learning Environment**

1. Match your training design to your training population. A group of machinists, for example, would not learn well from eight hours of lecture.

2. Vary your style and method of presentation. Use visuals, narratives, guest speakers, and group participation as alternatives to the standard lecture or discussion but remember to make changes on a regular basis; too much of even a good thing can get tiring.

3. Encourage interaction. Adults learn more effectively when they have opportunities to interact and, when appropriate, to contribute input to the training outcome.

4. Eliminate the podium—unless you have a very good reason not to. A podium can be intimidating to many adult learners and may inhibit interaction.

5. Simulate the work environment. Skills and knowledge that are gained in a simulated work environment are more likely to transfer to the job.

6. Provide examples from the “real world” as opposed to trite ones that are unrealistic and difficult to relate to.

7. Design your training setup to facilitate your presentation.

8. Do not impose artificial barriers to learning. When possible, provide restroom and refreshment breaks throughout the session, not just during designated times.

9. Keep the session moving. Do not allow yourself to be drawn away from the subject and the training goals.

10. Learn to read your audience. Recognize when it’s time to move or take a break. Look for signs—gestures, facial expressions, body language—that indicate whether participants are tired, hungry, bored, anxious, and so on. Respond promptly by announcing a break or by asking them to initiate discussions on the topic of their choice.

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