Chapter 12
Adult Learning in the Workplace:
Critical Application and New Mediums

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ABSTRACT

The needs of the adult learner are distinctly different from those of children. In a world where employees are becoming increasingly remote, recognizing the core concepts of adult instruction is increasingly critical. This chapter examines the foundational constructs of adult learning and instruction and factors that promote and inhibit adult learning. Theories of adult learning pioneers Knowles, McClusky, Deci, and Ryan apply in the organizational classroom and the "virtual" classroom. With this understanding, the learning practitioner may implement meaningful curriculum that appeals to the adult learner, encouraging individual growth while supporting employee retention and organizational development.

INTRODUCTION

The learning practitioner's understanding of adult learning principles is essential for effective employee instruction and avoiding methodological contradictions that inhibit learning. Employees as adult learners have unique learning requirements that require attention for active learning and engagement. Detail of these requirements follows, but for a moment, imagine a Monday morning "staff development" meeting driven by a slide presentation in a dark room. The instructor steps forward and establishes the ground rules for the session. Participants are to put phones away or on mute, hold all questions until the end, and hang on; there are 350 slides to grind through during the eight-hour session. One might argue that medieval torture devices are preferable to such inhumane treatment. The human mind chained to a droning, omniscient orator and endless bullet points is prone to mentally exit such an environment frequently, negating the workshop's intended purpose - the transfer of knowledge. Furthermore, such experiences minimize the probability of employee anticipation for the next "learning event" as many conveniently scheduled calendar conflicts arise to prevent further personal distress.

Successful implementation of adult learning in the classroom through virtual meeting platforms also requires the adult learning practitioner to command an understanding of adult learner needs. The COVID-19 global pandemic, taking hold in early 2020, has either stressed or enabled adult learning, depending on the perspective. The learning practitioner, prepared or not, was suddenly required to extend adult learning for employees beyond the corporate classroom. A wealth of research exists on adult learning requirements; a summation of core findings follows in this chapter with additional consideration of their application within the new "normal" of remote employees and Internet-driven business. Following COVID-19, the paradigm of remote workers is likely to stay, reinforcing the need to engage employees in effective online learning sessions. While the delivery modes have shifted hard right from the classroom to the virtual learning environment, employees' need for purposeful engagement as adult learners persists.

The modern learning practitioner in the workplace must overcome the challenges of distance, restriction, and new learning environments, as continuous learning is essential to personal and organizational advancement. Thoms and Burton (2016) advised:

Growth entails learning throughout life. This learning offers a diversity of learning styles; diversification of ideas; enhanced measurements and aspects to knowledge assembly, construction, and production; attainment of competencies; in addition to avenues of change to transform from one way of thinking and acting to another. (p. 88–9)

Continuous learning supports adult performance (and ultimately, organizational growth) in the workplace, yet the wrong type of education is detrimental for employees. The failure to offer meaningful adult learning in the workplace is a problem that affects individual job performance and organizational profitability. Organizations with long-term goals focus on their most valuable assets—their employees—from the first day of onboarding and throughout their tenure. Englehardt and Simmons (2002) suggested, "The emphasis on training may be captured by a distinct and defined program; however, supporting the full range of these factors implies something more… an environment for learning" (p. 41). Beyond offering career-based education, compelling growth opportunities must support the employee's needs as an adult learner.

This chapter includes three sections drawn from scholarly research to promote the understanding and purposeful application of adult learning methods for employees in the modern context. The first section examines the discovery of employees' needs as adult learners to support impactful organizational outcomes. The second section surveys the factors that inhibit adult learning in support of active participation. Lastly, this chapter explores the application of andragogical concepts in local and virtual settings with additional considerations for meaningful distance-based learning and engagement.

EMPLOYEES AS ADULT LEARNERS AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Employees are the greatest asset of organizations, though trends in management practices often oppose creating a high-performance learning culture as organizations downsize or outsource tasks to minimize overhead, destroying organizational culture along the way (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999). Such actions are counterintuitive to earning profits that shareholders demand. Employees surviving these layoffs are stymied in active contribution and productivity within their roles, wondering if they are next (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999). Rather than laying off employees for short-term cost savings, efficient organizations

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