

Unraveling Five Myths of

OJT

Why do some on-the-job training (OJT) systems succeed while others fail? Why do some OJT systems enjoy enthusiastic backing by a company's top management, while others die from lack of support? The answer to these questions may lie in several misconceptions, or "myths," surrounding OJT that can foil even the best intentions of technical OJT trainers.

OJT is among the most timeworn training techniques, with a history dating back thousands of years. Primitive civilizations used it, ancient Greece relied on it, and as we approach the second millennium, we still make use of OJT today. Such longevity says something about the value of the training methodology.

A veteran trainer shares his methods for debunking five meddlesome OJT misconceptions.

In fact, we are all, to one degree or another, OJT trainers. At some point in our lives, each of us has sat next to someone else and shown them how to perform a task, which is the essence of OJT. This analogy demonstrates both OJT's strengths—its flexibility, timeliness, and learner-orientation—and its weakness—the fact that everyone considers themselves an expert at OJT.

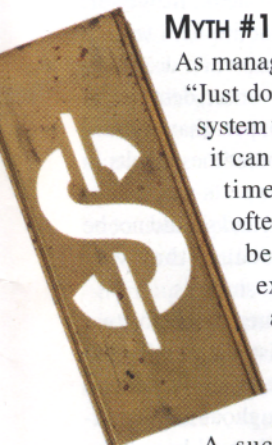
OJT and OJT systems are becoming very popular training formats. Companies are establishing OJT systems in ever increasing numbers with the expectation that it will solve their most important training problems. Unfortunately, most organizations do not understand the basic concepts of on-the-job training, and since most managers and supervisors consider themselves OJT experts, they hold certain myths as gospel regarding the inner workings of OJT. As trainers, we may run smack into these myths when we venture forth to implement OJT systems. And if we're not careful, the collision could prove painful.

In This Story

- ▼ on-the-job training
- ▼ program delivery
- ▼ train-the-trainer

Each of the following five myths is a potential land mine that could undercut your carefully constructed OJT presentation, cause management to turn down your request for resources, or even forever ban you from the production floor.

MYTH #1: OJT IS “FREE”



As management is wont to say, “Just do it. Implement an OJT system this afternoon. After all, it can be done in your spare time....” Organizations often assume that OJT can be implemented within existing resource, staff, and expense allocations. This casual attitude is dangerously wrong. OJT is *not* free.

A successful OJT system requires structure, check-off lists, trained trainers, materials, and the myriad other items that make any training program successful.

Indeed, OJT already costs companies enormous amounts of money. In every company, inevitably, employees informally teach others how to perform various tasks. This is OJT in its raw form—uncontrolled, unstructured, and potentially very expensive. Companies don’t track the amount of time this informal training consumes, nor do they track the amount of scrap or mistakes that the “informally trained” trainee produces. If they did, management would be horrified at the true cost of unstructured OJT.

The first objective of structured OJT is to control and set procedures for OJT activities in order to significantly increase the return from OJT investment. The materials used to harness OJT include check-

off lists, as well as training and operational procedures. The development of these control structures represents the up-front expenditures OJT requires in order to succeed. The development process also requires a commodity more valuable than money—namely, the time and effort of the most competent people on the production floor.

Don’t assume that on-the-job training is less expensive than classroom training. In fact, when you add up the time required to develop the check-off lists, put the training materials together, and perform the training, the cost may approach or even exceed that of classroom training. However, good on-the-job training often provides a much higher return on investment than other training programs, in terms of employee competency, shortening the learning curve, and lowering of scrap rates. The fact that OJT is not free is a fundamental point that management must accept prior to any such program implementation.

MYTH #2: TRAINING TIME IS PRODUCTION TIME




A trainer can either produce or train, but cannot do both successfully at the same time. In a typical unstructured OJT scenario, a supervisor tells novice worker

Joe to stand out on the production line and watch veteran worker Mary for a while, convinced that he will pick up the needed job skills. This is not fair to Joe (who does not know what he is doing), Mary (who has extra responsibili-

ties), the customer (who may receive less than perfect products), or the company (which thinks that Joe is now a fully trained and productive employee).

If a supervisor is told that both Joe and Mary will be taken off the production line during training, the usual reply is, “You can’t do that, it will cut into my production numbers.” What the supervisor and those he answers to don’t take into account is the negative effect Joe will have on production volume and product quality when he hits the line after his unstructured training experience.



Production managers usually work in “now” time—as in, “How much are my production workers producing right now.” Management does not react well to promises of future productivity gains at the expense of current productivity—as in, “Give me two people this week and we can give you better numbers next week.”

The myth that production can carry on full tilt while OJT is in progress is one of the most enduring and peril-prone misconceptions surrounding the training method. OJT systems can crash and burn simply because incentives are based on production level per head counts, which puts those production managers who take the time to train their personnel at the bottom of the productivity list. It doesn’t take these managers long to realize that, in their company, training is viewed as a waste of time. Consequently, most production training simply stops. Incentives should be tailored so that production managers do not take a hit simply because they are properly training their people.

MYTH #3: OJT IS JUST PART OF THE JOB

Some organizations tend to view on-the-job training as volunteer work. They expect their trainers to carry this training load in addition to all of their other responsibilities—and receive nothing in return for their efforts. This myth is not only false, it is dangerous. OJT systems based on volunteer work will eventually fail.

On-the-job training is a responsibility in itself, complete with its own set of skills, paperwork, successes, and failures. OJT trainers must be rewarded in some way, either in terms of additional pay, reduced production responsibilities during training, or elevation to a lead or other training-related status. Skillful, capable, and concerned trainers are the most important key to a successful OJT system. After all, OJT trainers pass on their feelings about the company, product, and training to their students, and savvy organizations want to make sure that these feelings are positive, quality-oriented, and productive.

MYTH #4: ONCE IMPLEMENTED, OJT SYSTEMS LAST FOREVER

There are two factors that support the misconception that OJT systems are self-sustaining: the belief that OJT training skills “propagate” indefinitely, and the assumption that OJT policies and checklists can remain unaltered.

First, OJT training skills are not genetically passed from one generation of on-the-job trainers to the next. In any organization, there is employee turnover. As new trainers enter the system, they bring new attitudes to the process. It is vitally important that new trainers be trained to the same quality standards and in the same manner as the original trainers. If this is not done, the system loses its anchor and begins to drift toward new and perhaps undesirable training techniques.

Many companies train the initial group of trainers very intensively and get the system off to a rousing and successful start. Additional trainers receive no training at all. They are simply assigned to training. Later, people wonder why newer trainers don't have as much enthusiasm or commitment as the original team. This is the beginning of the end for this OJT system, as over time, piece by piece, it will fall apart for lack of commitment.

Second, trainers need to realize that training is work. It means filling out forms, checking off lists, and dealing with students who are sometimes less than perfect. We are all human, and sometimes there is a tendency to take shortcuts and “let our students through” without fulfilling all of the needed qualifications, especially when the quarterly checklists are due the next day. When trainers fill out the checklists without training their students, they are essentially destroying the structure of the OJT system. Management needs to work constantly with the trainers, reviewing the student check-off sheets and reinforcing the OJT structure. Otherwise the lists will eventually become worthless as a measure of student proficiency.

MYTH #5: ANYONE CAN BE AN OJT TRAINER

The idea that anyone can be an OJT trainer is the most corrosive myth—one that has the potential to kill an OJT system before it gets started. Companies that believe in this myth and allow anyone to be a trainer are setting the stage for chaos. On the other hand, any investment in trainer selection and training produces significant returns in terms of student learning, trainer enthusiasm, and adherence to the OJT procedures.

In successful training systems, trainers are the key ingredient and must be chosen and trained very carefully. If check-off lists, procedures, or materials are of poor quality—or worse, nonexistent—good trainers can still make the system work. Poor trainers, even with great materials, almost certainly ensure failure, and the company will find the entire development effort wasted.

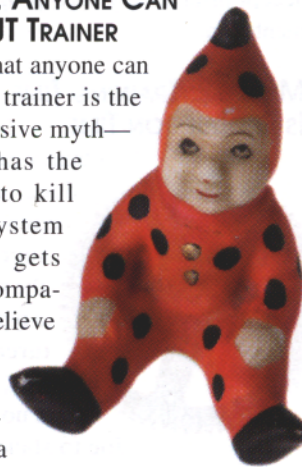
OJT trainers are usually chosen because they are very good at a specific task. This apparently logical choice comes with an inherent weakness, however. Sometimes the best practitioners tend to skip over “simple” items, while drowning their student in more advanced details. It is very hard to teach an expert that in training, less information sometimes results in more learning. Some experts won't subscribe to this crucial fact and should not be chosen as trainers because they will quickly overwhelm their students.

When selecting trainers, look for two key characteristics—listening skills and patience. The best trainers are those who are well respected throughout the department and who are already well-known for their informal “helping and coaching” skills.

OJT TRAINER TRAINING

In order to reinforce their training skills, all OJT trainers should participate in a train-the-trainer program that refines their training technique from one of telling to coaching, and from doing *for* the student to doing *with* the student. Since most OJT trainers have already been training for years, they don't necessarily need to learn basic theories of adult learning, since they have already discovered how adults learn. What they do need is lots of practice training with specific feedback on their training skills, some advanced training techniques, and encouragement.

In some cases, the train-the-trainer program can function as a selection device. Employees who volunteer to become OJT trainers should be allowed to



go through the program and then decide if they want to join the OJT system.

Some potential trainers may elect to drop out of the program after they discover that training is more work than just “sitting down next to my friends and dumping out all that I know.” Even though they are not a formal part of the system, these employees can still provide support to the OJT trainers through their understanding of the OJT system and the training process.

During my many years of helping companies implement OJT programs, the five

myths outlined above have made their appearance on countless occasions—both in executive suites and on the production floor. In some cases, they have stopped the project cold. In others, through careful education and explaining, the misconceptions were cleared up, and the OJT implementation succeeded. My only counsel for the OJT implementor is to think about each myth and prepare a good response, so you will be ready for the manager who says, “We don’t need to spend that money on OJT training—we’re already fulfilling our production quotas.” Being prepared up

front will save you some of the embarrassment and frustration I found when I encountered these myths for the first time. ■

Charles Levine has over 25 years’ experience as a trainer and consultant for private industry, including positions at Raytheon Data Systems, Honeywell Information Systems, and Westinghouse Learning Corporation. He currently is president of Instructional Design Associates (P.O. Box 457, Sharon, MA 02067;