by steven ferry

Some may look at the lowest employment figures in 30 years and the continuing building boom and wonder where the next trained employee is going to come from who can work the contract that was just awarded.

Trained employees may drop out of the sky occasionally, but for those who prefer to be in the driver’s seat in life, the best approach is to make trained employees—and why not? They don’t tie up foremen and co-workers with questions when they should be working. They don’t create urgent callback that tick off general contractors and customers. They don’t leave behind public relations nightmares and courtroom messes. They are an asset to the company and its bottom line because they are efficient and enable the company to deliver high-end work.

In a nutshell, training allows the artisan to control his job and the company to control its destiny and bottom line. This makes a strong case for training even for the in-and-out cowboys who aren’t reading this article. So why is there so little training going on, not only of new personnel, but also ongoing for those already trained?

Even unions, offering free training to their hundreds of thousands of members, report a fraction of one percent of the membership taking advantage of that training at any given time. One contractor called at random (in Ohio) complains, “I have one-in-20 skilled tradesmen.”

As Bill Kendrick, executive director of the St. Louis Plaster Bureau in Missouri, noted, “In our mad dash to build it bigger, faster, cheaper, maybe we didn’t put BETTER in there—quality somehow slipped between the cracks. Trades and crafts peo-
ple used to be looked upon as artisans and craftsmen and held in some regard. Today, they are production employees. Get it up, get it done and don’t look back. That’s the curse under which we live today.”

As Benjamin Franklin noted, “An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.” For those old hands that want it spelled differently, Henry Ford said, “Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at 20 or 80. Anyone who keeps learning stays young. The greatest thing in life is to keep your mind young.” Even if you drive a Dodge, you’ll probably admit Ford had a point.

Who’s Got the Time?

Some may say that it’s hard enough to rub two minutes together to submit the next bid on time, let alone do online training. So how does one free up personnel to spend a week, a month or half a year on some training program at some remote location?

A better question to ask is this: If the key to job and company performance is training, why is it so hard to get most employers to insist their employees are properly trained? And how come most employees or potential employees aren’t revving their motors at the starting line to get trained?

The answer to this question may seem to be out in left field, but it’s about as effective as catching that flyball in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded. Let’s take a look.

Most folk are only too glad to leave school. Why? For many reasons, chief among which is that they have had enough of banging their heads against subjects that are nothing but confusing. Some made it through high school, some didn’t, but in each case where a subject was torturous, they were tripped up by one simple, unsuspected fact.

Take the “cooler chat” column in a recent AWCI’s Construction Dimensions — the apprentice who was sent out for a skyhook. Or the one who was sent out for a pick and eventually came back with a pick ax, instead of a stretch board. They’re funny when thrown into relief with such “obvious” examples, but what about your own understanding of materials you have read?

Imagine reading a manual for a VCR (which for the sake of argument, we’ll pretend was actually written by someone whose native tongue is English). You read something like “Press the Aflex
button twice and then press Start.” You look closely and see there is no Aflex button, but there is a “Bflex” button. You press that twice and then the Start button and nothing happens. A bit annoyed, you do it again and still nothing. “*@$&!,” you mutter. You look again for an “Aflex” button, check behind, underneath and all sides of the VCR, and still no ‘Aflex” button. You look at the directions again—nothing. You throw the manual down, swear some more, go get a beer and call the kid down from his video game to fix the “bleepin’ VCR” so you can record the Monday night game while you are out playing pool with the boys. “Sure, dad,” your kid tells you, “everyone knows the ‘Aflex’ button is the ‘Widget’ button, the one right here by the Start button— where’ve you been?”

“Sure,” you say. “So who can understand a VCR manual anyway?” Which is just the point. When the teacher stands up in front of the class and says with great authority, “The peregrinations of the Visigoths led to the early demise of the crustaceans in Islamabad,” you are meant to understand history. When she asks you later what happened to the crustaceans in Islamabad, you’ll probably rewrite history with the same degree of understanding as the young student who was asked to write about U.S. technology in the 19th century: “Cyrus McCormick invented the McCormick Raper, which did the work of a hundred men. Samuel Morse invented a code for telepathy. Louis Pasteur discovered a cure for rabies, and Charles Darwin was a naturalist who wrote the ‘Organ of the Species.’”

You Put What in the Mix?

Similarly, when a plasterer explains to a hoddie how to mix portland cement, “You put in the water, then the cement, then the plasticizer and then throw in the sand,” do you think the wall is going to look good if he thinks “plasticizer” means “terrazzo-style chips of plastic.” Or if he has no meaning for the word at all and so just leaves it out of the mix?

In a nutshell, if a word is used that someone has a wrong or no definition for, they will not understand the sentence,
There's no shortage of resources. Where there's a will, there's a way.

and whatever you tell them after that will go in one ear and out the other. Cloth ears, plain dumb, plum lazy, thick as a brick—the names may seem accurate, but they don’t do justice to the persons situation.

Following so far? Well, it gets worse.

Take the hoddie: he’s now put up with two five-minute shellackings from the plasterer, who keeps telling him to put in the plasticizer, and even shows it to him. Now the hoddie’s cussing under his breath, he’s cranky. He starts to find reasons for his crankiness—blames his hangover, the equipment, the plasterer, the coworkers, the foreman, the GC, the weather, the working conditions, the boss, the company and/or OSHA. He mixes the next batch, including the plasticizer this time, because that dumb plasterer wants it in for some reason, even if he never said so before, and then throws in the plastic chips. So the foreman sees three wasted batches, a wall that would suit a horror-movie set, and fires the hoddie. Do you think that hoddie is going to say he’s a hoddie when he applies at the next site for a job? Heck no! He’ll tell them he’s a drywall hanger.

OK, so that’s a simplified example of the cause and effect between words that are not understood during instruction, and the result in the field: botched jobs, mistakes, accidents, breakages, lost production, lost time, lost business, lost jobs, abandoned trades. The worker who was meant to have been in control wasn’t. And the prevention of that, ludicrously simple as it sounds, starts with making sure he knows how to do it right in the first place.

So maybe this puts a different perspective on why, when you mention training or learning to folks, they suddenly talk about being real busy. They mention how the bills need to be paid—like you don’t believe they should—and how they’d rather be fishing, sailing or watching the game—anything but looking at pages of what looks like bird tracks in the snow.

If you have trouble agreeing with this new idea, take a couple of seconds to consider your own feelings about study. Have you abandoned any subject, or come to realize you “were never meant to learn math” or “just weren’t cut out to be a_____”? Strange as it may seem, you weren’t really dumb—you just needed to get those words defined and the subject wouldn’t have been such a confounded mystery

Training Waiting to Happen

If this is true, where does that leave us? Perhaps with the idea that training isn’t that bad, and with a whole slew of trade unions and vocational schools, universities and technical colleges dying to get their hands on more trainees for each and
Training for union members, for instance, is a no-brainer because it’s free (see page II-195 of AWCI’s 2001 Who’s Who in the Wall and Ceiling Industry for a list of resources). The International Union of Bricklayers & Allied Craft Workers, to take one example, will get anyone up to speed and contractor ready (able to make money) on tile, brick, stone, marble and plaster in 12 weeks. Contact Ed Bellucci at ebellucci@imi-web.org or (301) 241-5503 for more information.

Having a recruitment problem? Then plug into the nationwide Job Corps by calling (800) 733-JOBS. They take 16- to 24-year-olds who didn’t make it through high school, who lacked direction afterward or who come from low-income backgrounds, and train them on any facet of the construction industry. That’s free training and materials, free room and board, and even a complete set of tools and work clothes thrown in on graduation. And they fill in any missed academic training up to GED or high school diploma level. The same hands-on training is open to any current construction workers under the age of 24, as long as the employer hires them back. Many graduates then go on to union apprenticeship programs, because, as Mark Twain once said, “A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn by no other way.”

Then there are initiatives like AWCI’s own EIFS and welding programs. Call Nancy Roylance at (703) 534-8300 for the details. Or the Texas Lathing and Plastering Contractors Association and the Texas Bureau for Lathing and Plastering, who are developing a training program on the use of portland cement stucco and one-coat stucco. Wayne James, at (800) 441-2507 or www.tlpca.org, can provide more information.

The Construction Education Foundation, in Texas, similarly provides training for the construction industry, which can be paid for by contractors contributing 15-cents per-craft labour-hour to their training account. More information is available by calling (972) 574-5200 or by visiting www.ntcef.org.

For those wanting to find out about other educational programs around the country, visit www.constructioneducation.com for Bradford Sims’ list of a couple of hundred institutions, including six distance-learning schools.

If that Robbins guy never said Knowledge is Power, he should have. Training is the smart thing to do, especially when you have the drop on what booby-traps it.

About the Author
Steven Ferry is a free-lance writer for the construction industry who used to teach in his youth. He is based in Dunedin, Fla.