Employee training is a paradox and reminds me of the cartoon I watched as a child where the lead character would weigh a decision in his mind, all the while aided by a good little angel whispering in his right ear and a malevolent little devil grumbling in his left. Well, the decision on whether or not to offer your employees formalized training can conjure up its own pair of pixies, who we’ll dub “TT” (to train) or “NTT” (not to train).

TT is the good angel, of course, and she only imparts the benefits received from training. That would make NTT the troublemaker, a true devil’s advocate, and he’ll only show you the dark side of the training decision. Deciding who to ultimately listen to will depend on many factors and include considerations ranging from your company’s financial situation to the extent of faith you have in the employee who’s being considered for training. It’s not an easy decision—never as clear-cut as it first may appear.

So, let’s examine the good and the bad of the training dilemma.

**The Advantages**

Why would anyone not want to train employees? Certainly, the benefits seem clear and laudable. Logically, it’s easy to conclude that formalized training will increase the skill levels of your people out in the field and in turn bring you the following benefits:

- Increased productivity though a greater knowledge of the trade.
- Enhanced company image from more knowledgeable and professional crews.
- Greater individual employee self-esteem through a feeling of personal self-improvement.
- Increased owner satisfaction.
- Higher profits from the accumulative effect of all those items above.

So, with all this going for the good side, isn’t the decision to train a no-brainer?

Well, not exactly Let’s hear from the other side of the debate.

**The Disadvantages**

No business decision is easy, and the training decision is certainly no different. If you contemplate it long enough, it seems that for every positive, pro-active benefit you come up with for training, you can also find a correspondingly eroding reason to hold off.

Some of these reasons include “The Triple Dollar Whammy.” If you think about it, the employer takes a triple hit in the pocketbook when offering employee training. I call this the “triple dollar whammy,” and it goes like this:

The first part of the whammy is the cost of the training sessions themselves. If you’ve checked the flyers and magazines lately, you may have noticed that many private training programs can run into hundreds of dollars for a day’s training. Understandably, an employer would need to be very comfortable that the session would provide the positive results he desires before sinking that kind of money into it.

The second bite comes from the lost revenue due to the employee actually being at the training and not being on site working. After all, that’s how money is made in this business, and when a training attendee isn’t out in the field working, no profit is being generated for the company. It becomes revenue that “might have been.”

The third dagger comes in the cost of
the employee’s normal working wages during the training time. Now, I know some employers “prod” their employees into training sessions during non-paid or off-hours, but the obvious pitfall here is the eventual sure-fire resentment on the part of the employee toward the employer. And with lowered morale looming over the entire event, haven’t you defeated the purpose of trying to better the employee and your company?

Although this three-tiered attack alone is enough to convince an employer to take his time, we haven’t even discussed the biggest gamble of all. Sit back and listen to this horrifying tale:

Rob is a great employee. He’s been with you for a while now and has been a consistent, responsible performer. He’s on time, doesn’t question orders (at least to your face) and has begun to show leadership skills. Better yet, the other men are looking to him as a leader, a fact that doesn’t escape your attention.

Now, you’ve been around, and you know this kind of guy doesn’t come along every day. And you’ve recently become way too swamped with the business end of things to pay enough attention to the crews.

So you weigh the facts. Let’s see, you need a field leader. He’s got potential and your workload isn’t getting any lighter. True, he’s a little rough around the edges, business-wise that is, but the good ultimately outweighs the bad. You decide to make a commitment. You call him in, let him know your thoughts, offer a modest raise (and a company truck), and he leaves your office enthusiastic and committed to his new role.

“So far, so good,” you think, but you still feel a little refinement is in order.
After all, he does represent management now. It just so happens that over the years, you’ve seen a lot of flyers for training seminars float across your desk. You normally chuck them, save a few and then chuck those a couple of days later. You never put much stock in training—waste of time. Workers should be working, not sitting in a hotel drinking free sodas.

But, then again, you did make the commitment. Your company is growing fast, but your competition is advertising their “skilled, professional, business-like image” on television.

Well, maybe one seminar won’t hurt. You shell out $295 and send Rob to a taping and finishing seminar. Lo and behold, Rob comes back with new knowledge, perspective and enthusiasm. He adapts this training to his leadership role, and the men seem to respond. You, meanwhile, are patting yourself on the back, pleased with the results, and six months later you send him to a “superintendent skills” seminar; and six months after that to computer training.

And then he quits!

Well, don’t be silly Of course he couldn’t stay—not for what you’re paying him. And besides . . . now he’s got skills!

Scary, huh? And enough to make many employers shy away from the whole training issue.

**Soften the Blow**

So what to do? Considering (and admitting) that we’re human and owing to our perpetual and relentless yearning for personal and professional growth, it’s only natural that most caring employers will, at some time or anoth-
er, offer training to their employees. So, with this acknowledgment in mind, let’s look at a few of the many avenues for training available to the wall and ceiling contractor, many of which offer their services at reasonable to very little cost to the trainee and employer.

**Apprenticeship programs.** Most of you have heard of or are familiar with apprenticeship programs, which offer excellent instruction and preparation for the young or new worker. They’re generally multiple-year programs, requiring a mandatory minimum amount of hours of instruction per year and are supplemented with on-the-job training. Those persons enrolled are commonly registered in an apprenticeship training program with that particular state’s apprenticeship agency or similar office.

Degree programs. These are the full four-year degree programs in such fields as civil engineering, building wall and ceiling, architecture and more. Obviously, this type of training is more general and would require much greater time, planning, cost and commitment on the part of the student and employer—and a long-term strategy on the part of all parties involved. But everyday employers shouldn’t count these places out. Often, these same schools offer, along with their regular
curriculums, periodic and/or abbreviated non-credit or continuing credit courses for interested participants.

Technology and vocational programs. I’ve taught building wall and ceiling technology at a local junior college for about 10 years now, so I admit to a certain bias toward this type of training. These are, however, tremendous programs that commonly offer two-year associate degrees along with an assortment of, perhaps, one-year certificate programs and shorter-term educational goals. Two-year programs are often less-expensive than their four-year counterparts and are probably (because there are more of them) more geographically accessible to the average person. As a matter of fact, there’s probably one being offered close to you.

Private organizations. There are many private organizations that offer wide-ranging and excellent training resources to the interested person. Many manufacturers in the wall and ceiling industry offer trade- or material-specific training. You can find them by asking your manufacturer’s rep directly, by visiting the manufacturer’s web site or by contacting The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International.

Other training venues. In addition to the many private organizations out there, interested persons may also search out training assistance through local building material suppliers and wall and ceiling trade shows and/or expositions. There are also many strong foreign programs, many of which, like their native counterparts, can be found by searching the Internet.

Once you begin searching for options, you’ll probably not have a hard time finding the type of training you’re after. More likely the toughest part will happen on a more personal level, and that is whether or not to make the commitment to your employee and the future of your company. And that’s a decision only you can make.

About the Author
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