Here's How to Assess An Organization's Education and Training Needs

By Brooks Mendell and Amanda Hamsley

Managing trees is really about managing people. If you are a forest resources manager, you also are a human resources professional. Managers and leaders help develop the skills and abilities required in their teams to meet the objectives of their organizations. This begins with deciding on the combination of skills and processes required to meet those objectives and determine if the necessary skills currently exist on their team. Therefore, assessing the training and education needs of the team is an explicit requirement to successfully meet the objectives of the organization.

Satisfying this requirement has become more complicated as forestry continues to experience change in technology, software, communications, and forest ownership. Firms must continually upgrade the skills of their teams and develop younger talent for future managerial and leadership roles.

Traditionally, firms developed these skills through on-the-job experience, rotating employees through several jobs with increasing responsibility, and traditional classroom training. Some firms hire summer interns or trainees to identify high-potential candidates for future full-time roles. However, pressure on time and budgets has prompted questions about training alternatives that can reduce costs or help teams move faster. As such, we address two themes in this article: What alternatives to formal training exist, and when might they be appropriate? And, how should a firm think about hiring a new employee versus developing new skills within the current team?

To Train or Not to Train

Robert Mager (1999) writes that training is appropriate only when there are things that people cannot do, and they need to be able to do them to perform their roles. While seemingly obvious, it acknowledges that sometimes alternative, and possibly less expensive, solutions exist to solve a performance problem. A partial list includes coaching and feedback, information resources, and performance aids.

Coaching and feedback produces two desirable consequences: They reinforce desired performance, and they enable wanted behaviors (Mendell 2006). A common reason individuals fail to perform in their jobs is that they simply do not know what is expected of them. If a member of your team does something well or does something poorly, whether it is a timber cruise, wildlife survey, or project analysis, tell them. They want to know!

Information resources include manuals, handbooks, teleconferences, and online references. Is a formal training class required when a 1-hour CD or a reference manual would suffice? For example, a forest agency called us about a live training session on a specific financial topic. However, based on the needs of their team, we found that a 90-minute conference call and a customized packet of critical information resources satisfied the needs of the client sooner, more directly, and less expensively.

Performance aids help individuals perform their jobs. They are designed to "cue people to do their jobs right" (Mager 1999) and often represent simple reminders to people for things they already know how to do. An example would be the pre-flight checklist used by airplane pilots. In forestry, performance aids include flagged lines in the woods, log truck signs on roads near active harvest operations, and daytime running lights on our vehicles. Multiple aids exist that eliminate the need for excess training.

While other factors also can affect performance, such as reward systems, annual reviews, and organizational structure, sometimes training is suitable, appropriate, and most effective. For example, CPR or first aid training and driver safety training are two areas that demonstrably save lives and money. In forestry, driving often is our biggest exposure, and insurance is a growing cost; training helps in both areas.

Train or Hire?

Evaluating and assessing the training needs of your organization can identify gaps between the needs and current skills of your team. Typically, two choices exist for closing the skill gap within a firm: hire or train (also called the "make or buy" decision). For example, a firm can hire or contract with others who have the needed skills or they can train and develop current employees. Good reasons exist for considering either alternative.

Some research shows that hiring is not as effective in firms that rely heavily on social groups, where employees depend heavily on interacting with each other to get their jobs done. Professor Peter Cappelli, Director of Wharton's Center for Human Resources, writes of workers in such networks, "They know what to ask each other. They know each other's strengths" ("Why," 2003). In these types of groups, it can make sense to use training and education to develop the skills of existing employees rather than replacing them. This keeps the critical social networks in place.

Another key factor is technological rate of change. Wharton Management Professor Benjamin Campbell argues that hiring new talent makes more sense for firms in industries where technology and markets change quickly. "When product generations are short, there is not necessarily time to develop the necessary skills for the next generation in-house, so these companies benefit from hiring skills from the external labor market," notes Campbell ("The Hiring," 2005).

Training and education may make more sense for slower-moving industries because they can take a longer-term approach. Forest resources–professions are highly relationship dependent, and many jobs in harvesting, forest management, and procurement are similar to those of 10 and 20 years ago. While the fundamentals of these jobs in

forestry have changed little, the technology to perform these jobs has advanced. Today we have cell phones, email, Excel, GIS applications, and database management tools at our disposal. Training can assist with using these technologies effectively while keeping the valuable social networks in place that are crucial to many forest businesses.

In forestry, organizations often feel they must work with the talent available to them. This demands a viable training and education approach. Some advise "hiring for attitude and training for skills," and there is some truth in that. When you get the right person with the right personality to fit the team, it is worthwhile to develop a training program to meet the skills gaps of this person.

When training addresses a specific need to fulfill a business objective, evaluation becomes simple. At the end of the day, was the need satisfied? Did the training provide the skills needed to fulfill the specific business objective? In some instances you may not need to train employees to fill a skill gap. Alternatives such as coaching, information resources, and performance aids may provide as much value to your team as training without the added cost. Another piece of the training puzzle is whether to train or hire to supplement your team's skill needs. Training and educa-tion often are advantageous in forestry to maintain vital social networks and keep employees with forestry specific knowledge that may need technological support. So, next time you think about hiring someone, ask yourself, "Will training suffice?"

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