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What's the Value of Training Time?

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I think everyone would agree that the caliber of service provided by any contract security firm is directly related to the quality of training its security officers receive. But can the same be said for the *quantity* of training they receive? Do more hours in class equate to better performance on the job? Far from it. Yet, in the security industry, quantity is still king.

Cities across the United States are considering bills that would mandate a minimum number of hours for security officer training. There is no discussion of quality, only quantity. That's a mistake. In an age where the range of skills and knowledge that officers must have is growing, it is more critical than ever that the industry move away from measuring training strictly by hours and, instead, begin to emphasize the quality of training that employees are receiving.

Unfortunately, anyone who has participated in a request for proposal of bids knows that training hours continue to be the benchmark for judging the value of most training initiatives. Rarely does any kind of contract or legislation attempt to address the quality issue.

That there is no standardized way to rank the quality of security training raises questions about how effectively the industry is serving the interests of its customers. This lack of accountability allows almost any organization, regardless of its credentials, to claim that it is working to improve security standards merely by advocating more, rather than better, training.

The basis of successful training is how well someone learns, not how long it takes to learn. Web-based training is a good example of this point. Because Web-based instruction is designed to be self-paced, different peo-

ple learn the same material at various rates. Is the faster learner less qualified because he or she spent fewer hours in the Web-based training?

In other words, what matters is how well officers have learned and retained information and how well they can perform when tested on the material. This points to the critical importance of good, accurate testing to measure both performance and retention.

There is another way to look at this issue. In this industry, as in every other, time is money. All the more reason why it is imperative that training dollars are well spent and targeted at delivering the most efficient instruction possible.

The quality of training and its relationship to career development also have a direct impact on employee retention rates. Employees know whether or not they are just going through the motions of an "8-hour" exercise. They also understand that a quality program directed by dedicated and experienced staff reflects the value that is placed on the jobs they do and the knowledge and skills they acquire.

How then should any company define "quality training," and how can it create and implement training programs that deliver the most bang for the buck? AlliedBarton Security Services follows seven key criteria in framing its training process from development to implementation.

Set objectives. Simply put, before any training material is developed, it is very important for the organization to clearly define and highlight the specific learning objectives it wishes the exercise to achieve. These objectives should also be plainly stated at the beginning and end of any classroom training session and made abundantly clear on any written materials. As the old saying

goes, "Tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you told them."

Vary methods. One of the most important rules of thumb is that the subject matter should dictate the delivery method, and the delivery method drives the amount of training time required. At AlliedBarton, our training programs are available via several different media, including the Web, classrooms, or self-study booklets. In each case, a method is selected based on how well the subject matter lends itself to that particular teaching model.

When real-time interaction with an instructor is essential to the learning process, the classroom is the right venue. Some examples include First Aid/CPR/AED, computer skills, and crisis intervention skills. Conversely, certain learning components are better absorbed through reading and self-study courses, which allow employees to digest and review materials at their own pace, rather than having to participate in the "one size fits all" environment of a classroom.

Web-based training modules expand the potential of self-study by incorporating interactive elements. These programs are available 24-hours a day, seven days a week, allowing trainees to study according to whatever schedule works best for them.

Although some would argue that training directly with an instructor is the most valuable form of instruction, reading should not be undervalued. It is a useful and important method of training in our profession, especially when the material is well designed and focused.

Be visual. To ensure that the training programs we develop and run are not only easy to understand but also easily retained over the long-term,

AlliedBarton follows what is commonly known as the “55/38/7” rule. Based on communications research by UCLA professor Albert Mehrabian, this widely applied prescription confirms that the most effective form of communication is nonverbal.

Professor Mehrabian demonstrated that people receive only about 7 percent of the meaning of a communication from words themselves, about 38 percent of the information successfully received is based on sounds or tone of voice, and a whopping 55 percent of what we learn and retain comes from what we see.

How do we apply this rule in our training? We ensure that all of our training materials emphasize and in-

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corporate visually oriented elements, including, but not limited to, videos, photographs, clip art, and charts. In order to keep everything clear and concise, we only use clean fonts (such as Arial, not serif-based) in large sizes. Additionally, we always make sure that our written materials have plenty of “white space” and don’t overwhelm any trainee by putting too much information on one page.

Minimize lectures. Again, as the “55/38/7” rule makes clear, people have a harder time retaining the words alone. It is highly unlikely that employees will gain much from sitting through a lecture about one of their training topics. Granted, as mentioned earlier, certain subjects lend themselves to instructor-led, classroom-based sessions. But these classroom experiences must include visual aids, along with student interaction. A straight lecture is probably a waste of everyone’s time and money. Remember, the more you

are talking, the less they are probably learning.

Be concise. Learning objectives should be outlined, using short, declarative, and simple sentences as much as possible. We also try to incorporate just one complete thought or training element per page or slide, which requires a certain amount of discipline. Even though it’s not always possible, this should be the goal.

Another important element of training material is incorporating plenty of real-life examples of what is being taught and limiting the theoretical exercises. Finally, as Polonius reminds us in Act 2, Scene II of Hamlet, “Brevity is the soul of wit.” In other words, keep it as brief and straightforward as possible.

Incorporate exercises. Role-playing is an invaluable exercise when it comes to interpersonal skills training. Group discussions, brainstorming sessions, and even games are also great practical training tools. But, in the end, having the student perform the actual tasks that are being taught is the most effective form of training.

Test for results. Testing is critical not only to evaluate whether each trainee now meets the standard of knowledge and skill that the company has set for its employees but also to assess the effectiveness of the training itself.

What type of test should be required? While practical exercises are the best way to test learned skills, especially for those who will be out in the field, these are also the least feasible kind of tests, particularly for companies with a large or geographically dispersed employee base. Whenever practical exercises aren’t possible, I find that multiple-choice examinations are the next-best method for testing the effectiveness of training.

There are three important rules we follow when creating or evaluating a good multiple-choice test: no “True/False” questions; no “Yes/No” questions; and no options for “All of the above” or “None of the above.” These just aren’t accurate ways to measure someone’s skill set and problem-solving abilities.

Instead, multiple-choice tests need

to offer several legitimate alternatives to every answer (even though only one answer will be correct). Writing this type of test—with multiple, credible answers—is not easy. In fact, it is one of the hardest parts of my job. But, ultimately, it is worth the effort because we know that our successful employees passed because they made informed decisions, not because they made lucky guesses.

These guidelines create the basis for a good program. But the most effective training programs incorporate additional, external and internal factors that influence motivation, retention, and skill development.

What we like to call the Learning Cycle helps to illustrate the importance of these other factors. Or, as we say, “Learning Takes T.I.M.E.,” which stands for Training, the Individual, Management, and Experience. The success of our curriculum depends heavily on how well we recognize and incorporate all four of these interconnected elements.

Training. The first quadrant in the Learning Cycle refers to the training itself, specifically the programs, classes, materials and instructors that we provide, as already discussed.

Individual. The second quadrant highlights the role of individuals, including the desire, motivation, and capabilities of security officers to improve their skills and develop their careers. In other words, you can lead security officers to a training room, but you can’t make them think. Neither can you guarantee that they will apply what they learn.

This may seem apparent, but it is an element that every trainer must consider when evaluating staff. Once applicants get the job and go through the training, are they motivated to perform up to their capabilities? If not, they will not make good officers no matter what they score on a test.

Management. Management must take the lead in making training a top corporate priority. Senior management must provide the focus, support, and positive reinforcement necessary to inspire the troops. It is a truism that most people will do whatever it is

they think the boss wants them to do. So if the boss sends out the signal that training is a priority, employees will value it; conversely, if employees sense that management doesn't care about training, neither will they.

At AlliedBarton, training is mentioned as an integral part of our official corporate mission and vision. Our management team also takes training measurement seriously, requiring that we track the completion of required training, voluntary participation rates, and performance levels of every employee throughout their tenure at our company. We believe that management's attention is a key reason why more than 85 percent of current employees voluntarily participate in elective training programs.

Experience. The last quadrant makes plain that no amount of training can take the place of time and experience on the job. In other words, practice makes perfect.

Moving forward, the security industry must begin to realize the value of quality over quantity when it comes to training. By clearly defining the value of quality training to our customers, our legislators, and the public, we will be doing the security industry as a whole a great service. ■

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