

Application of Adult Learning Theory

1. Adults have a need to know why they should learn something.

Adults spend a considerable amount of time and energy exploring what the benefits are of them learning something and the costs of them not learning something before they are willing to invest time in learning it. It is seldom convincing for them to be told by someone (even the boss) that it would be good for them.

Training should be based on valid needs of the intended audience. All information provided about the training, including lesson plans, should include reasons for learning. The benefits of learning should be clearly shown. Activities should be based around real work experiences.

2. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.

The psychological definition of "adult" is one who has achieved a self-concept of being in charge of his or her own life, of being responsible for making his or her own decisions and living with the consequences. Adults develop a deep need to be seen by others as being capable of taking responsibility for themselves. Too often as trainers we design training situations that place adults back in their childhood where they are told what where and when and how to learn. Self-directed is not the same as self-paced. Self-paced means that the learner is only in charge of when to experience what the trainer has produced. Self-directed learning puts the learner in charge of much more.

Incorporate as much "search and discovery" into the training as possible for experienced learners. Present training with as many options for learning as possible.

3. Adults have a greater volume and different quality of experience than youth.

Adults bring into the learning situation a background of experience that is a rich resource. Adults have a broader base of experience on which to attach new ideas and skills and give them richer meaning. The more explicit these relationships (between the old and the new) are made - through discussion and reflection - the deeper and more permanent the learning will be. Experience is to adults, the chief source of self-identity. If adults' experience is not made use of in a training experience, adults may see it as a rejection of themselves.

Design training activities that reflect the actual work the learners perform. Provide activities that permit learners to compare the theoretical aspects of the training with their experiences.

4. Adults become ready to learn when they experience in their life situations a need to know or be able to do in order to perform more effectively and satisfyingly.

Some of the greatest goofs of training have occurred as a result of forcing people into training activities before they perceived a need for them. Adults again must see a need for training before learning will take place.

Provide training, as close to the time it is needed as possible. Don't do an information dump on learners, calling it training, and tell learners they need to know the information for future use. See 5 below.

5. Adults enter into a learning experience with a task-centered (or problem-centered or life-centered) orientation to learning.

Youth (conditioned by schools) have a subject-centered orientation to learning where they focus on learning content to pass a test. Adults by virtue of life and work experiences develop a task-centered or problem-centered orientation to learning. If training is developed around problem solving, then adults will learn content with the intention of *using* it.

Design training so that learners are solving problems or are performing tasks as close to those encountered back on the job as possible. When large amounts of information support the problem solving activities, present this information as reference material. Teach learners how to use the information to successfully complete the problem solving activities. Again, don't do an information dump. Focus activities on "doing" something with information rather than simply "knowing" the information.

6. Adults are motivated to learn by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators.

Adult learners respond to extrinsic motivators - promotion, bonuses, etc. - up to the point that they are reasonably well satisfied. But the more potent and persistent motivators are such intrinsic motivators as the need for self-esteem, broadened responsibilities, power, and achievement. And back to point one. Adults may not be motivated to learn what we tell them to learn unless they perceive a need to learn.

Learning activities should clearly demonstrate to the learner where he or she would benefit in their jobs. Quality training is built around the concept of nourishing those intrinsic motivators. Learning feeds on itself and suggests to the learner to become even more proficient in the job.