

Training Your Sights on Training

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Growth is good—a simple statement with which most of us would generally agree.

In a service business like ours, growth usually means an increased need for people, and for those people to develop additional skills. Simply put, if you expand from two locations to five, or extend your hours of operation, you're going to need more people. If you expand your menu or institute a home meal replacement program, your people are going to need new skills.

Any smart businessperson is going to plan and research the market before making these growth moves. But how often does that planning focus on training and performance systems? If you believe the data, the answer is "not often enough" when it comes to foodservice.

This year, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) launched the Human Performance Practices Survey. Their findings point to a strong correlation between the performance of leading edge companies and the commitment of these companies to employee training.

Nine industry segments were examined, including Customer Service which includes foodservice. Our segment ranked last in total training expenditures per employee (\$162 versus \$504 on average; \$1,659 by leading edge companies). We also trained the fewest employees (62% versus 69% on average and 86% for leading edge companies).

A look at the link with performance will show the significance of the numbers. Companies with a greater commitment to training in general reported better performance versus comparable organizations when it came to productivity, customer satisfaction, sales, employee satisfaction and retention.

These last two measures are critical. Without satisfied employees, success on the other measures is impossible. As growth demands more employees, and employees with broader skills, a satisfied employee base is critical. This is nothing new—other studies have reported links between training and employee satisfaction and retention. But as we look ahead to the year 2000, this issue deserves renewed attention.

Growth may be good, but growth also means increased competition—not only for

customers, but for employees. Without employees, you won't have customers, so it really does make sense to focus on how you can recruit, train and retain the kinds of employees who will enable you to reach your goals.

Training is a tremendous recruiting tool. As candidates job hunt, they size up potential employers against each other. Very often, the balance is tipped in favor of the organization that offers the greatest opportunity for skill and career development.

Orientation and basic job skills training have been shown to reduce turnover within the first 3-4 months. More advanced skills and cross-training can reduce turnover during the balance of the first year (not to mention that this training will improve productivity and customer satisfaction)! Training tied to career development plans will have the same effects over longer periods of time.

All of these correlations assume that training is professionally designed and presented. Poorly designed and executed training can be worse than no training at all since (a) it lulls management into thinking training needs are being addressed when they are not, and (b) it runs the risk of communicating poor practices and a less-than-desirable management commitment to employees.

The ASTD survey reveals a much greater discrepancy in training expenditures than in employees trained between the foodservice/retail sectors and the survey average (spending 32% of the average dollars but reaching 90% of the average number of employees). At least part of the explanation for this discrepancy comes from the fact that what is labeled as training is often not—it is merely one employee telling or showing something to another. Not only is this kind of training not effective; it is often not even perceived of as training by the recipient.

Foodservice operators must look very closely at their commitment to employee training and how well it is designed and delivered in their organizations in order to ensure that they can build and retain the kind of employee base they will need to succeed in the 21st Century.