

## THIS ISSUE

Competency-based training.....**1**Learn more about EditU .....**3**

# Competency-based training

## Getting the most from your staff training program

**By Garrett A. Holm, Education and Training manager, CARF International**

Organizations recognize the importance of staff training to enhance service delivery and business operations, and CARF business practices standards reinforce this concept by emphasizing the need for competency-based training.

Competency-based training sets clear expectations for learners regarding the

- skills needed to perform essential job-related tasks and duties,
- knowledge needed to successfully apply the identified skills,
- level of performance needed to demonstrate competency relative to identified skills, and
- ability to learn and grow while working for the organization.

This article provides tips to help your organization establish or add value to its competency-based training program.

### CONSIDER THREE ORGANIZATIONAL ELEMENTS

Whether your organization is beginning or in the process of enhancing its competency-based training program, carefully consider three organizational elements: communication, infrastructure, and accountability. Each element can affect the training program's cost, effectiveness, and sustainability.

#### Communication

Organizations need to clearly communicate to all learners in their training program:

- Relevant skills in relation to their specific job roles or responsibilities.
- Content knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to apply relevant skills.
- The method by which content knowledge and skills are taught. This includes the structure of the training program (that is, the curriculum's scope and sequence), training materials, and instructional methodologies used to support training objectives.
- Performance objectives that establish a context to demonstrate competency. This context should include the expected level of performance for a specific identified skill (for example, the desired number of times an individual must perform a task without error). In addition, the performance objective should include the environmental conditions in or by which the skill is performed, such as technology needed to perform a task. These should be developed with input from the direct supervisors who will determine competency.

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- The method by which learners are assessed in relation to stated performance objectives. This includes the assessment time frame and format (for example, paper test, observation, simulation) used to evaluate individual performance.
- Feedback regarding individual performance relative to identified skills. This feedback should not only communicate individual strengths and areas for improvement, but also support improvement in relation to demonstrated competency. In other words, if an individual has not demonstrated competency, it is crucial that the organization provide information and tools needed to enable improvement.

Finally, the organization must consistently communicate the importance of the training program in relation to improving individual employee performance and, by extension, the quality of services provided to persons served and organizational performance.

### **Infrastructure**

Your organization can build a solid foundation to fully promote and support competency-based training by:

- Soliciting and using feedback from supervisors about necessary competencies.
- Reviewing performance improvement issues that relate to competencies and including specific training on these issues.
- Formulating and implementing policies and procedures to guide the training program. Although CARF standards do not require this step, policies and procedures for the training program can provide direction for the process by which competencies are identified and verified. Policies and procedures can also spell out the roles and responsibilities for both trainers and learners and the alignment of the formal job performance evaluation process with the training program.
- Allocating necessary resources (for example, time, funding, personnel, technology) to meet training objectives.
- Developing good trainers internally. Typically, trainers are seen as specialists hired specifically to coordinate training. However, many organizations do not have the resources to hire or contract for the services of a professional trainer. One solution to this challenge is to implement a mentorship program. By using individuals within your organization who have a wealth of knowledge and skills and have themselves demonstrated competency, your organization can maximize its available resources. Furthermore, mentoring helps develop a community of learners and teachers, which, in turn, fosters continued growth for all staff members participating in the training program. A frequent byproduct of mentoring is improved employee relations.

Although policies, procedures, and resources are key elements of a successful training program, the value of good trainers and mentors cannot be overstated. They act as the primary facilitators of organizational communication and accountability.

### **Accountability**

As mentioned, effective competency-based training serves to improve individual job performance, which should lead to improved services for persons served and organizational performance. To protect your investment in the training program, it is important that your organization establish a learning environment that promotes accountability at both the individual and organizational levels. To ensure organizational accountability, your organization can:

- Align training with formal job performance evaluation to highlight the importance of continued professional growth.



- Make performance information about the training program a key element in your organization's outcomes measurement and management program. Although not required by CARF standards, this can be a useful step in bolstering an organizational culture that values training.
- Share performance information with individuals involved in the training program.
- Use performance information to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the training program.

You can also use performance information to identify training needs and provide insight into how to modify the training program to address these needs. In addition, this information may benefit employees whose field certifications or licensures require continuing education.

## LOOK FOR OTHER WAYS TO ADD VALUE TO YOUR TRAINING PROGRAM

Your organization can explore other ways to improve the quality of the program and maximize the benefits for both individual learners and the organization as a whole. These suggestions may be tailored to match your organization's needs and resources:

**Form a training workgroup.** Competency-based training programs should be evolving and dynamic. Competencies should be regularly reviewed and modified if necessary to maintain alignment with the organization's mission, reflect current best practices in the field, or address changes in the needs of persons served. If staff and financial resources allow, a training workgroup provides the perfect forum for this type of review. Workgroups can also support the organizational training program by reviewing and updating training materials and performance evaluation formats. Finally, a training workgroup provides an appropriate venue to communicate performance information relative to the training program.

**Use technology to enhance the training program.** A common challenge related to training is the constraint of balancing time between work and professional growth. Organizations often overlook readily available or affordable technology that can help manage this balance. For example, training sessions can be videotaped and saved for later viewing. Technology can thus facilitate self-paced learning by allowing learners to choose a time to view the training when their work is not as demanding.

**Explore online training.** Several online training programs are available to organizations that can make training more convenient for individual staff members and the organization. One such program offered to CARF-accredited organizations is EditU, which offers a wide variety of online SkillSoft courses in business management, information

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## Learn more about EditU

Providers may participate in EditU if they are CARF accredited, become members of the Association of Rehabilitation Programs in Computer Technology (ARPCT), and agree not to charge their staff or persons served an additional fee to access the courseware. For more information about EditU, please click on the SkillSoft online training link on the providers portal of CARF's website at [www.carf.org/providers.aspx](http://www.carf.org/providers.aspx) or visit the EditU website at [www.editu.org](http://www.editu.org). For more information about ARPCT, please visit [www.ARPCT.org](http://www.ARPCT.org).



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technology, workplace skills, health and safety, and risk management. Online training programs range in cost, and it is important to find what works best for the organization in terms of training needs and available resources. Also, remember that online training is more effective if supplemented with contact training such as classroom learning or group study.

**Create partnerships.** Organizations often work in isolation when it comes to training. If your organization has limited training resources, you will want to avoid costly trial and error. Most likely, another organization is already doing what you want to do. Engaging in partnerships or informal collaboration with other organizations, academic institutions, or professional associations permits you to share ideas about instruction, curricula, and evaluation formats. Such collaboration also allows your organization to invest its resources in proven training components. This is especially helpful for smaller and midsize organizations looking to maximize their training resources.

Effective competency-based training improves staff performance and, in turn, service quality for persons served. A training program not only benefits your organization, but also benefits the reputation of the human service field.

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