

## Adult Corporate Learning

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I decided to take a step back and cover some basic principles of adult learning for the corporate environment (which most of us refer to simply as training and development).

Much of my information comes originally from ideas and work done by Malcolm S. Knowles (coined as the father of adult learning) and his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*.

**Some of the modern day concepts of adult learning even date back to Socrates!**



### Adults As Learners

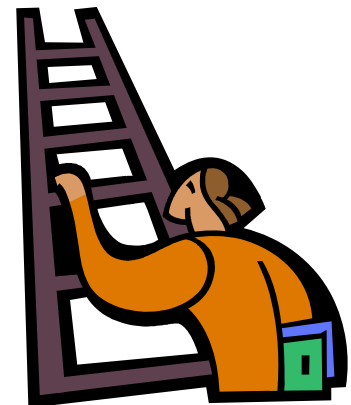
As managers looking to provide effective training programs, we must make difficult and complex choices about adult learning. We try to choose effective programs, with good trainers and interesting curriculum that will lead to achieving staff developmental goals.

However, I think many of us need to have a better understanding of how adults learn. Compared to children, adults have special needs as learners. Despite the seemingly obvious, adult learning in China is a fairly new area of study. The field of adult learning in the west was pioneered by Malcolm S. Knowles. He identified the following characteristics of adult learners:

**a) Adults are independent and self-directed.** They need to direct themselves. Their trainers must actively engage adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. Specifically, they must get participants' opinions about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that suit their interests.

**b) Adults have life experiences and knowledge** such as work-related activities and previous education. They need to connect learning to this foundational knowledge/experience. To help them, trainers need to help participants' recognize their experience and knowledge which is relevant to the topic. They must also relate program content theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.

**c) Adults are goal-oriented.** They appreciate a training program that is organized and well managed. Trainers must help the learners to see how the learning will help them reach their goals. This connection of goals and course objectives must be done early in the program.





**d) Adults need relevancy.** They must see a purpose for learning something. Learning has to be linked to their work to be of value to them. Therefore, trainers must ensure that theories and concepts are related to situations familiar to participants.

**e) Adults are practical,** focusing on the points of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Trainers must help participants to see how the learning will be useful to them on the job.

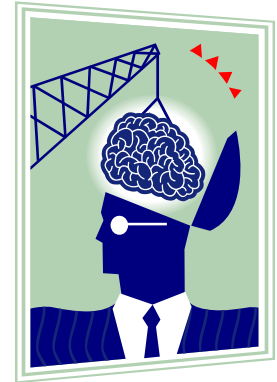
**f) Adults need to be shown respect.** Trainers must recognize the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and encouraged to voice their opinions openly in class.

### **g) Motivating the Adult Learner**

What motivates adult learners? Typical motivations include competence or licensing requirements, potential promotion, adjusting to job changes, or the need to learn in order to comply with company policy.

The best way to motivate adult learners is simply to *enhance* their reasons for enrolling and *decrease* the barriers. I believe there are at least five sources of motivation for adult learners in China:

- **Social relationships:** to make new friends, to meet a need for associations and friendships or in China ... building the social network (guanxi).
- **External expectations:** to comply with company wishes; to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.
- **Professional advancement:** to be eligible for a raise in salary or a promotion, or to keep up with competitors or colleagues.
- **Escape/Stimulation:** to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of work, and provide a contrast to other challenging details of life.
- **Personal interest:** to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to satisfy an inquiring mind and personal growth needs.



### **Barriers and Motivation**

Because of their responsibilities, adults have *barriers against participating in learning*. Some of these barriers include lack of time, money, confidence, or interest, scheduling problems, and others.

**Successful corporate learning programs will reduce the barriers against participating in learning while enhancing the reasons to participate in programs.**

### **Tips for Training Managers**

Everyone learns continuously throughout their lives. People learn at different speeds and in different ways, and some can be anxious or nervous when faced with a learning situation. Positive reinforcement by the organization and the trainer can improve learning.

Learning is the result of stimulation of the senses. In some people, one sense is used more than others to learn or remember information. Instructors should present materials that stimulate as many senses as possible in order to increase their chances of learning success.



There are four key elements of learning that must be considered to make certain that participants learn. These elements are:

1. **motivation**
2. **reinforcement**
3. **retention**
4. **transference**



Training Managers should ensure that learning programs address all the key elements.

**1) Motivation.** If the participant does not recognize the need for learning, all of the trainer's effort will be wasted. The trainer should motivate students via several means:

- **Set a mood or tone for the learning.** Trainers should try to create a friendly, open atmosphere that shows the participants they will help them learn.
- **Set an appropriate level of concern.** The level of tension must be adjusted to meet the level of importance of the learning objectives.
- **Set an appropriate level of difficulty.** The degree of difficulty should be set high enough to challenge participants but not so high that they become frustrated by too much new information.

In addition, participants need feedback about their learning results. Feedback must be specific, not general. Participants must also see a *reward* for learning. The reward does not need to be monetary; but it must be desirable to the learner. Finally, the participant must be **interested** in the subject. Adults must see the benefit of learning in order to motivate themselves to learn the subject.

**2) Reinforcement.** Reinforcement is a necessary part of the training/learning process; through it, instructors encourage correct modes of behaviour and performance.

- *Positive reinforcement* is "good" and reinforces "good" (or positive) behaviour.
- *Negative reinforcement* is uses negative reinforcement until the "bad" behaviour disappears, or it becomes extinct.

When trainers are trying to change behaviours (old practices), they should apply both positive and negative reinforcement.

**3) Retention.** Learners must retain information in order to benefit from the learning. The trainer's job is not finished until they have assisted the learner in retaining the information. If the participants did not learn the material well initially, they will not retain it well either.

**Retention by the participants is directly affected by their amount of practice during the learning. Instructors should emphasize retention and application.**

**4) Transference.** Transfer of learning should be the result of training -- it is the ability to use the information and skills taught in the course in the work setting.

Trainers have to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with answers. This is a new way of learning for many graduates of the traditional Chinese education system. Many Chinese learners need coaching and encouragement to support them in understanding that making decisions and mistakes is a natural part of learning.





Although adult learning in China is relatively new as field of study, it is just as substantial as traditional education and carries potential for even greater success because it is applied learning.

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