



Footwear Fundamentals

The essentials of training

Whilst the provision of training throughout any modern organisation is acknowledged to be essential, it often means different things to different people depending on whether it involves management or operator training. Regardless of which, training can be instrumental in modifying or increasing a person's views or set of values. It may also be seen as a way of broadening or increasing their knowledge or skills. In most instances

these two elements are in fact closely related or even intertwined.

In spite of all the advances in mechanised shoemaking, it remains in many ways a craft industry. While some simple repetitive jobs can be carried out with just thirty minutes instruction, the majority of shoemaking operations can take weeks or even months to learn depending on their complexity and the degree of experience needed to master them.

TARGETING

First and foremost, all training must be targeted in order to provide the maximum benefit to the individual and employer alike. A company needs to monitor quality and performance in all areas of its activities and use the resulting data in order to identify where training might be most needed.

Pure operator training may not always be the answer. For example, if machinists are experiencing difficulty sewing a particular seam on one style

of shoe, it might pay to look at the problem in detail. It could be wrongly stitch-marked or badly skived, the patterns might be inaccurate or, even, something as simple as the wrong needle or thread is being used. If it still appears that some operators could do better, the skills and/or knowledge they lack must be identified and a method found to provide effective help.

It is often taken for granted that operators have a good overall understanding of the shoemaking process. It is not the case and they will therefore find it helpful to understand the reasons why each operation needs to be done in a particular way or to a specific standard. An upper leather cutter may be aware that the vamp must be cut from the best part of the skin; if he knows why, he can better judge how far he can go in terms of quality. Despite having a nesting system to lay out the sections, understanding why it has done so in a particular way does no harm.

TAKE A SECOND LOOK

It is easy to be impressed by a new approach to training but it does not necessarily follow that what appears impressive in a presentation will deliver the desired results in practice. For anybody to accept and apply new knowledge and/or skills, they should first understand why these are needed and believe they will benefit both themselves and the company.

The benefit to them does not have to be immediate but lie in potential future rewards such as promotion or extra payment. It can even be as simple as being able to perform better and have more pride in what they do. The importance of benefit to an organisation should not be underestimated either. Nothing undermines training programmes faster than things done merely for appearances rather than providing real benefit.

The training of new recruits is mainly a matter of bringing them up to speed and quality so they can function as a member of the workforce. This is usually done most efficiently by employing a systematic method; raising performance levels of existing workers is not so straightforward.

Just because subordinates carry out instructions, it does not always mean they believe in them. Recipients of training can be very critical of new ideas and, until they are convinced that those ideas will deliver, it is unlikely to yield its full potential. If they 'buy in' to a training programme beforehand, however, chances of success are much greater. The best way to do this is to involve them in setting the objectives. If sceptical employees have a say in what is being done, they will feel they already part-own the process.

REALISTIC TARGETS

While it is easy to set targets, what will operators know or be able to do afterwards that they could not do previously? Nothing undermines people faster than expectations they regard as impossible. Equally, training programmes are not magic wands. They not only take time and resources, but sometimes do not work. Improving the performance of people is never an exact science.

One way of reducing the risk is to be as accurate as possible when designing the training. A widely used approach sets specific objectives such as, 'after the training programme, rejects caused by roughing will be below 0.4% rather the present 0.7%' or 'after training, the operator will be able to explain the importance of wearing ear protection when working in the lasting team'. This not only focuses the mind of the person delivering the training, it also makes it clear to the recipient what the company expects from the process. Setting targets in objective terms such as these also provides a direct basis for feedback.

MONITORING

Training systems and methods do not stand still. Not only does technology change and company policies and systems move on, there are also the expectations of the workforce. To be effective, training therefore also needs to be in a constant state of change. Management must regularly look at what it is doing in regard to the provision of training and ask what that training is contributing to the organisation and whether it can be

improved. This not only includes what is being done now, but must include questions like 'what else should we be doing and what existing aspects should we drop?'

Take for instance, a CAD/CAM system that pattern cutters may have started to use six months ago. Are other factories seeing better, faster or cheaper results from it and, if so, why? Once again, it might not be just a training problem. Perhaps patterns do not always come off the cutter accurately, the vacuum holding the card down appears inadequate or the software driver for the cutting table may malfunction under a particular combination of commands. On the other hand, it can be argued that if the pattern cutter has been properly trained, he or she should be able to diagnose the cause and find a solution.

Examiners at the start of the lasting process should spot uppers that have not been assembled correctly. But do they know if a particular style should have a reinforcement tape on a specific seam? While this can simply be a case of not having up-to-date paperwork to check against, should they not also be trained to know when such a tape might be critical and when not?

SYSTEMATIC SELECTION

Training those who cannot or do not want to learn is simply wasting valuable resources. When allocating training, it is not just a case of who needs it most but also of whether they also have the ability and will to use it to best advantage.

If upper material cutters are being moved on from cutting man-made materials to through-dyed leather, they will have to learn to distinguish small variations in shades of colour. They clearly need training in this—do any of them have a colour blindness problem? This is often thought of as seeing without colour as in black and white films. It can be far more complex and perhaps it is an inability to tell brown from red or even a slightly darker brown. Simple colour blindness test kits are available and their use avoids raising expectations that cannot be delivered.

Where training is an on-going process, such as bringing sewing

machinists up to speed, it may be best to set up a dedicated facility. It is often hard to judge if somebody has the aptitude to be a good machinist during formal selection. Another approach, therefore, is to have an intensive one or two day practical selection, which is in effect the first day or two of the training programme. A good instructor will be able to tell very quickly who is unlikely to make a good machinist. While this is not cheap, it is better than having one third of the group leave after three weeks of expensive training.

MANAGEMENT TRAINING

Managers at all levels cannot be expected to manage effectively unless they possess the knowledge and experience necessary to carry out their assigned rolls. Even large multi-nationals are often ill-equipped to carry out effective management training at anything above fairly basic levels. Many managers are therefore hired ready trained in either general

management techniques and/or a specialist field such as law and finance. They will usually be graduates from universities or business schools and their further development will usually involve attending specialised courses outside the company. Experience will show which organisations offer the most suitable programmes but the decision on who to select will still depend on the same criteria as production staff.

One important area that is often neglected is that of providing new management recruits with a basic grounding in shoemaking. It is still possible to find people making major decisions in footwear companies who have only a scant knowledge of what is involved. Depending on their position and function, the degree of knowledge needed will vary but, if a young manager starts out properly, he will make a better senior manager later on. It is also a fact that you cannot fool employees; they will show little respect for a manager who does not understand even the basics.

RECRUITMENT AND MORALE

It is essential to ensure all trainees are made fully aware of how fortunate they are. We should never underestimate a person's need to learn and develop their own expertise; it can be highly motivating. Some of the biggest international corporations allocate an annual allowance which can be spent by each individual on their own training. It often has to be approved by an immediate superior but requests can normally only be turned down if the next level of management agrees. Such a policy gives each individual a significant degree of ownership of their personal development.

Finally, it is only to be expected that new levels of expertise and practical skills will in turn generate an appetite for progress and promotion. Failure to recognise this will merely result in spending money on training for another employer's benefit. If the aim is to have better employees, their newly acquired skills and knowledge must be put to good use. If not, they are quite likely to leave and join a more progressive competitor. 📌

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