The Domino Effect

When times get tough and budgets are cut, one of the first things to go is training. Then there are those companies that don't even have a training budget. A big reason for this is that many companies look at training as an expense rather than an investment.

I have worked with various firms that considered investing in the software to do either 3D or BIM and in most cases knowing the company's mindset on employee development and training, I discouraged the idea. There are many incredible products currently available or coming down the pipeline that can transform a company's marketability, but they come with a cost. For the most part, companies seem to accept the software licensing and hardware costs, but they typically falter when the cost of training comes up. As incredible as the new 3D and BIM products are, they do not run on autopilot; the more complex they are, the more important training is. Companies that are not willing to invest in the training are throwing away the rest of their money on a product and hardware that will not deliver anywhere near its potential. This often becomes an undeserved black eye for the product and a sour reference when the company considers new products or technologies later. It is similar concept to the old adage "You get what you pay for." If you don't invest in training, you will get the results that go along with it.

In many years of working in the building design industry I have worked with a lot of professionals in the engineering and architectural sides of the business. In this time I have been able to get to know and gain respect for those who work with AutoCAD® and Autodesk® Revit® every day. My first exposure to AutoCAD was on version 3 (it has been a while) and have used nearly every version since. Over the years I have seen dramatic improvements in the product's capabilities and features. Even though the product has improved, I am continually amazed and sometimes frustrated by how so many architects, engineers, designers, and daily CADD drafters still misuse or misunderstand the software. By misuse, I mean they have still not learned, refused to learn, or just don't care about some basic concepts. Taking the more positive approach, I think that many believe (as do their employers) that they know enough to do their job and do not have the time or energy to invest in additional learning on their own time. This is an area where company-provided training is important.

The amount of time wasted every day by the untrained (inefficient) user and the domino effect created when their work goes out to others is sad. Many companies believe when they hire new employees who have attended CADD programs at technology schools or community colleges, the new hires are already trained. From my experience, much of the knowledge gained in these venues is very basic and requires a whole other level of training by the employer for not only application practicality, but also industry-specific needs. There will always be exceptional employees eager to continue advancing their knowledge from a personal drive, curiosity, or career advancement standpoint, but they tend to be the exception rather than the norm. Even the exceptions will often only invest as much time as they see worthwhile and appreciated. If the only way employees are to learn is on their own time and at their own expense, they will start seeking other employment opportunities where their quest for new knowledge and improvement will be valued.

Successful companies understand the importance of training and how it benefits everyone. Training is a win-win-win situation. Providing training benefits the employer, the employee, and the customer, which, in turn, benefits the employer, the employee, and so on. It's a domino effect.

WHY?

Training benefits companies from all industries. The more technical their work, the more critical and beneficial training becomes. Training provides initial benefits that domino into even more benefits. Training:

- increases knowledge of products and methods, which increases efficiencies in daily tasks.
- increases employee confidence, which increases employee motivation.
- creates the chance for infusion of new technologies and methods, which stimulates growth.
- improves employee job satisfaction, which increases overall company productivity.
- increases employee morale, which improves employee retention.
- improves customer satisfaction, which improves customer retention.

By investing in training, a company is investing in a lot more than just a product or technology. The new and/or improved skills create confidence in the employees and the employer alike. Employers, armed with the knowledge that the current staff has the technical know-how and confidence to take on bigger, more complex projects, are more confident to go after those types of projects. The more experience gained by applying the knowledge learned in training and during the application of that knowledge creates a desire to constantly improve, which opens the door for greater challenges and rewards.

A company that wants to grow needs a staff that is creative, competent, and confident enough to push for and sustain that growth. Training introduces new ideas and creative ways of solving existing problems that may not have previously been considered. This creativity has the potential to infuse energy into employees. Skilled and energized employees are just what a company needs to stimulate growth and problem solve in lean times. The business world is continually changing and the needs and wants of clients change just as quickly. As a business owner, it's vital to take proactive steps toward ensuring that your employees are ready and able to handle the technological changes that are likely to impact your ongoing business.

HOW?

Create a needs assessment. In order to determine what training is needed to position a business for long-term success, it is important to look at the core products the company uses to create its deliverables. What are the skill levels of the current employees and where do they need to be to allow the company to reach its quality, profitability, and growth plans? This process will require communicating with staff and clients and potentially outside consultants to determine your current and long-term training needs.

Prioritize. Once a needs assessment is completed, create a list of priorities with goals and timelines. Approach this the way you would approach any important business decision. Focus on the most critical areas first—the areas that will yield the quickest results. Research training options for the areas that are indicated as the highest priority. Options will include creating an internal program, purchasing training software for internal use, hiring third-party trainers, or sending staff members to training facilities or events. The best approach is often a mix of these options.

Start small and look for tangible results. Once the benefits of the initial training are realized, there will be more energy to extend the plan to additional items on the priority list. For the internal option, there may be a few "star" people within the organization who can create the training program. Another option is to train your most eager staffers and require them to share the new information they've gained in a formal setting after their training is complete. This allows you to get the knowledge delivered back to other staff members in a format that pertinent to the specifics of your company.

No matter what type of training you choose, be sure there is some form of testing or evaluation of the information provided. If there appears to be few gains, there may be an issue with the training option used or possibly the staff itself. Not everyone wants to learn new things; many are comfortable with just the knowledge necessary to do their current assigned tasks. If the goal of the company is to acquire more skills and experience and continue to grow, that same mindset needs to exist within the team.

- Consider the benefits of training
- Develop a list of training priorities
- Research the various training options
- Evaluate the results of the training
- Continue to develop your training program(s)

Training is not a one-time, quick fix. In this rapidly changing world, training cannot start and stop with a new product or technology rollout. It needs to be continual and part of the company culture. Improve, grow, and prosper!
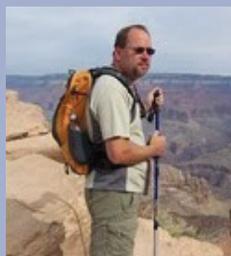
Walt Sparling has worked in the building design industry for 25+ years, starting as a hand drafter, he moved on to CADD in the mid 80s and then in to CADD and networking training and consulting. Walt has served as project manager and designer in the mechanical and architectural realms and currently works with an electrical Engineering firm in Tampa, Florida. In his spare time, Walt maintains a couple of blogs and a personal website: www.waltsparling.com.