



Warning! Learner at work

We all know of people who know all the theory but are practically useless. Perhaps you have worked with some. In engineering operations or maintenance environments theoretical knowledge is not enough. To become a useful and professional engineer, theoretical knowledge has to be blended with practical experience and local knowledge. This can't be done in the classroom but demands on the job training and experience.

Different approaches to on-station training

Different people have different views about how best to make on the job training work.

Some believe that experience is the great teacher. They get a trainee on their shift, show them where the canteen and toilet is, give them a few jobs to do and then pretty much leave them to it. The trainee is expected to fend for themselves, the shift is expected to help out when asked, and everyone hopes some useful and relevant learning takes place. Trainees are seen as a possibly useful hanger-on.

Others believe the only way trainees can learn is through direct instruction with guidance from an experienced hand. They tightly control the trainee's work, ensure close supervision at all times, and keep them away from the serious action where they might get in the way or make mistakes. And if the demands of supervising this way get too much, they have them 'consolidate skills' on routine tasks or 'sit, watch and learn' so they can't do any damage. Trainees are seen as a risk to be managed.

Of course, both approaches work to some degree but neither approach maximises the opportunity that exists to enhance a trainee's skills and experience in a meaningful way **and** get useful work and contribution from them.

The nature and 'problems' of learning on the job

When on the job training works well, it is a highly effective way of learning. It delivers practical learning which is immediately applied in real situations. It provides opportunities to apply and consolidate theoretical knowledge and trainees get to know the people, places, equipment and tricks of the trade so essential to become operationally useful. When it works well, trainees grow towards professional competence, feel useful and contribute directly to the work of the team and department. The problem is, it doesn't always work well.

Talk to trainees about on-station training and they'll tell you that learning 'on-the-job' can be chaotic, unstructured, frustrating, lonely and sometimes anxiety inducing.

The working environment is not set-up for learning in the same way that training centres and courses are. The process of learning is different, with less structure, a wider range of things to learn about, and interference from the demands of the workplace. There are no 'professional' trainers and support and guidance can be harder to come by since those in workplace trainer roles have to juggle the demands of their 'real' work with those of trainees.

Research tells us that when learning 'on-the-job' trainees often find it hard to:

- spot the really important things to focus on and learn about;
- plan ways to learn these things;
- gauge how they are getting on and the progress they have made;
- identify and articulate what they have learnt.

It also tells us that focused support and guidance from supervisors and colleagues makes a big difference to quality of the trainee's learning experience and the results it delivers.



Making on the job learning work

Training supervisors have an important role to play in making sure on-the-job training really works – both for the trainee and the department.

The role is **not** about being the technical expert, teacher or trainer. It is **not** about knowing and providing all the answers. It is **not** about supervising the trainee day-to-day or spending lots of time and effort providing detailed guidance.

The role **is** about being available as a point of contact, reference and support for the duration of a training placement. It **is** about doing a few key things that support and guide the *process* of on-the-job learning. This means spending a small amount of time, say monthly, helping trainees with planning, doing and reviewing their learning.

Here's a few key things that really help.

Make yourself available

We know that on-the-job training can be frustrating, confusing, anxiety inducing and sometimes lonely. Training supervisors can help with this simply by making themselves known and available as a point of contact and support, someone to turn to if things get tough.

You can help by making yourself contactable or available on a regular basis, letting the trainee know when and where you will be around, explaining when it's OK to contact you, and how best to do that. Give them contact details and explicit permission to get in touch if they need to. It also helps if you make contact, drop by or say 'Hi' occasionally just to keep in touch and let them know you're there.

Help set goals for learning

When trainees start a new placement, it's not easy to identify the really important things they need to learn, because they don't know what they are or because there are so many possible things to learn. What's more, whilst on placement it's easy to get so embroiled in learning the minutiae of an area that they don't attend to other important areas of learning related to their overall professional development.

Training supervisors can help with this by meeting the trainee at the start of a placement to discuss, advise on and agree on a few focused learning goals - both for the placement and relating to overall professional development. Use your own knowledge of the area and current operations to advise on the most important things to focus on in the placement. Review trainees progress reports and recent appraisals and you can identify and advise on the most important things to focus on in terms of ongoing professional development.

Identifying priority areas, the most important things to learn, helps bring focus which helps people learn. The goals need not be rigid as the demands of the operation will, to some extent, dictate day-to-day activity, but they should help guide and focus attention during the placement.

Help plan useful action

Trainees sometimes get stuck in the gap between good intentions and action. They know what they want to learn but somehow don't know how to or don't get around to it. Training supervisors can help bridge the gap by getting trainees to think through and plan how best to achieve their learning goals. Chat with them and ask how they could begin to work on their learning goals. Discuss tasks, jobs or projects that might help, identify useful people they could speak to, point them to sources of information, reading, or training materials that might help. Help them build an action plan that will help them learn **and** help them feel useful and make a contribution to the work of the department.



Help review progress

It's easy to get lost when learning on-the-job. The demands of the operation can take precedence over learning. You forget what you were focused on. In the flow of experience it becomes hard to see where you've got to, identify the progress you've made and figure out what to do next. The training supervisor has a critical role to play here in helping trainees review progress, recognise learning and achievements, refocus and stay on track.

An hour spent, once a month, doing a review and check-up can make a huge difference to an individual's motivation and ability to learn on the job. It provides support, renews focus and injects new energy into the learning process.

Training supervisors can help by holding a monthly review discussion with the trainee. Use this meeting to review learning goals and actions agreed last time, discuss action taken and what has been learnt, offer some feedback on progress based on your own observations and what you've heard from others. Discuss learning goals and actions for the next month to ensure the trainee is focused on continuing to make progress.

When giving feedback, comment on areas where you see good progress being made and those where you think further attention is needed. Remember, it's hard for trainees to gauge how they're doing, they may be unclear about the standard expected and have little sense of the level they've reached. Recognising achievement aids motivation. Identifying areas requiring further work helps guide and focus further learning.

Encourage the trainee to identify, recognise and record progress and learning in their training book, learning log or record of achievement. Make a note of anything significant which will help you with formal reporting on trainee progress at the end of their training placement.

Summarise progress and performance

The formal part of the training supervisor's role involves producing an 'end of placement' report on a trainee's progress and performance. This should help trainees understand how they're progressing towards professional competence, clearly identify gaps in their knowledge and performance, and focus continuing development. The appraisal report is a formal record of progress and should help other supervisors and line managers get a picture of a trainee's progress, performance and development needs.

Training supervisors will already be discussing performance against goals and professional competencies informally in regular review meetings. Writing end of placement reports is much easier if you hold thorough review discussions like this at least at the start and middle of a placement. Keeping your ear to the ground and asking others regularly for information on your trainee's progress will make your life easier when it comes to reviewing and reporting. Don't leave this to the end of placement though; if you informally gather information during the placement you'll be much more useful in supporting and guiding the trainee and much more prepared when it comes to writing the final report.

The formal process requires training supervisors to hold an appraisal discussion with trainees towards the end of a placement, discussing and summarising achievements, progress and performance against goals and competencies. This discussion is written up clearly, concisely and constructively on the report form. Discussing and signing off the finished report is a useful way of concluding the placement and passing the baton to the next training supervisor.

The support that that makes a difference

Training supervisors can make a huge difference to the training and development of junior engineers. They help them feel more supported, accelerate development towards professional competence and become more useful and integrated into the department more quickly. But it's not a one way street. Do it well and you can hone your coaching and people management skills and experience the satisfaction that comes from seeing others develop with your help.