

Simple Techniques Improve Training, Say Learners

This month is the debut of our column, “Everything DiSC® Pulse”, in *Training*. Every month, we’ll give you the learner’s perspective on training: what’s important, what works, and what doesn’t work for *learners*. And every month, we’ll elaborate on our findings here, online.

For our first column, we asked 4,967 training participants about common training techniques that may have been included in their most recent training experience and how the presence (or absence) of these elements impacted their job effectiveness. (Participants could select as many elements as applied.)

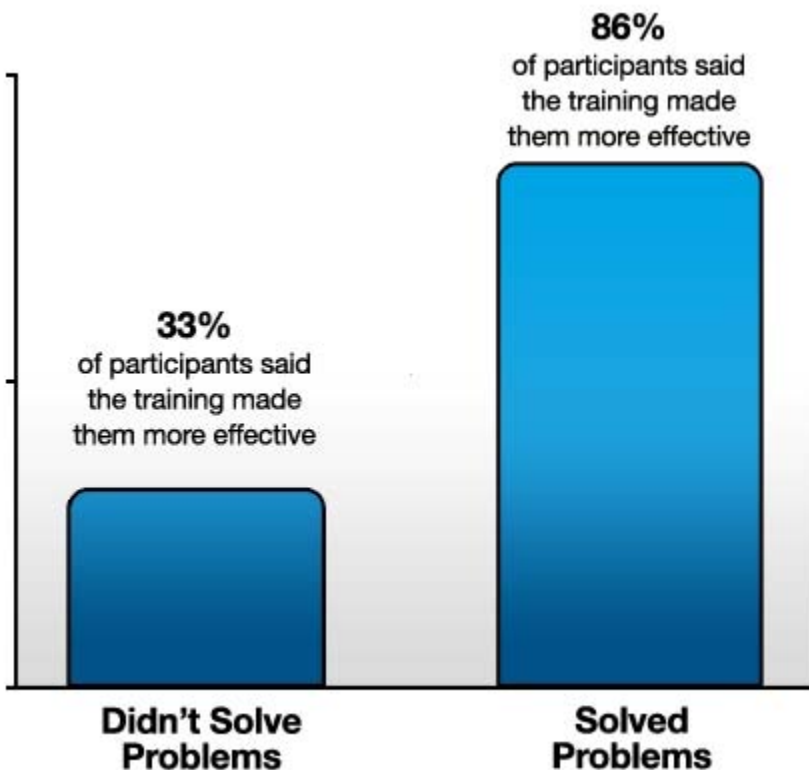
Rather than simply asking if the techniques improved the training experience, we wanted to understand if the rankings could be translated to improved job effectiveness. We found that when training included problem-solving exercises, multiple examples, practice, and action planning, participants noted a significantly greater impact on self-perceived job effectiveness.

Problem Solving

Psychologists know that people remember material better when they have put effort into learning it. For instance, one classic study found that participants who solved difficult anagrams in their learning remembered significantly more information than participants who solved easy anagrams in their learning (Tyler et al., 1979).

When faced with a problem-solving task, we engage the material on a deeper level. We look at information from different angles, think about the big picture, and make connections. All of this work has a payoff. In fact, of all of the training practices discussed here, problem solving-activities had the biggest influence on training effectiveness.

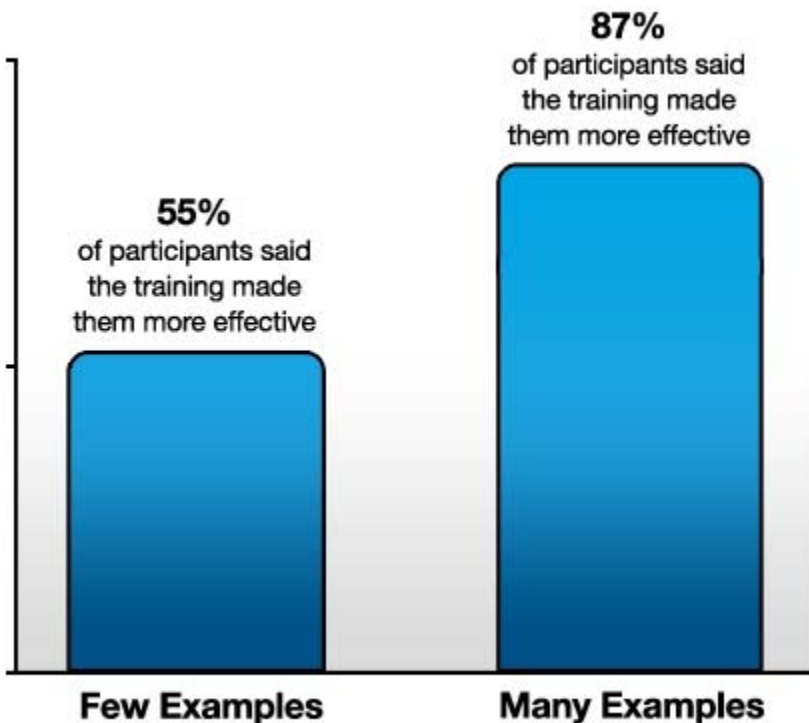
In our study, **86%** of participants said their training made them more effective at their jobs when they were challenged to solve problems as part of the training. On the other hand, only **33%** who were **not** challenged to solve problems agreed that the training made them more effective at their jobs. As a bonus, problem solving also seemed to have a big impact on the participants’ enjoyment of training.



Multiple examples

Another way to increase participants' job effectiveness is by using multiple examples. Now, most of us use examples when we're teaching a new topic. They help participants see issues in a real-life context and they help make abstract concepts concrete. But too often we only use one example to illustrate our point. Research has shown that the more examples participants hear, the more they remember. One study found that learners who heard three examples recalled more than **twice as much** as those who heard only one example (Palmer et al., 1983).

From a cognitive perspective, using multiple examples allows for *elaboration*. Participants can mentally elaborate on a new idea and connect it with what they already know. In our study, **87%** of participants who said that their training had a lot of examples agreed that the training helped them be more effective at their jobs. By comparison, only **55%** of who were **not** given a lot of examples agreed that their training made them more effective at their jobs.

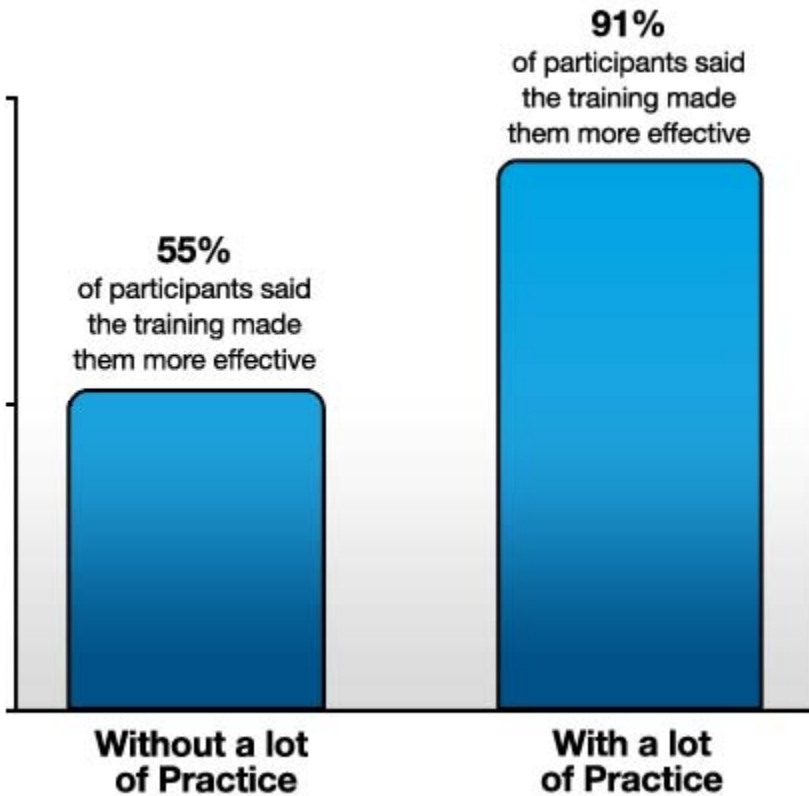


Practice

Including practice in any training is a given — there's a reason we've all heard the expression "practice makes perfect." Practice provides participants with the opportunity to get feedback on their mastery of a new skill. If they have difficulty, they usually have support available to tell them what they're doing wrong.

In addition, practice forces participants to internalize the information they have been taught. Simply put, the information can't go in one ear and out the other. In order to practice, they must process their new knowledge on a deeper level.

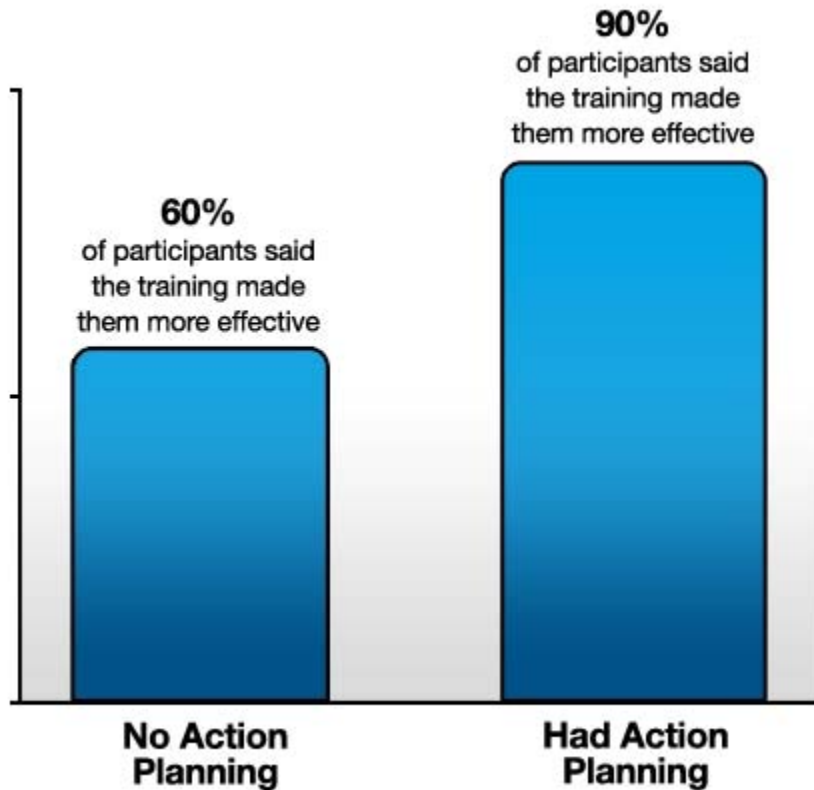
So, knowing that practice is essential to effective training we were surprised to find that only half of the participants said that their last training involved a lot of practice. In our study, **91%** of participants who said that they had a lot of practice in their training agreed that the training made them more effective at their jobs. On the other hand, only **55%** without a lot of practice agreed that the training made them more effective at their job.



Action Planning

The final crucial training element we found was action planning. In our study, **90%** of participants who said that their training involved action planning agreed that the training made them more effective at their jobs. By contrast, only **60%** who did **not** have action planning agreed that the training made them more effective at their jobs.

By creating an action plan, participants figure out how they're going to use their new skills or knowledge in their day-to-day life. By imagining how new information relates to their daily work, participants engage in a deeper level of processing. The brain is integrating new ideas and skills with existing knowledge. Consequently, this new information has more meaning. And participants are more likely to use it in the "real world."



Conclusion

So, what does this mean to you? It means you don't have to tie yourself in knots to create and deliver more effective, more powerful training. By adding or increasing simple, low-tech training techniques like problem-solving exercises, giving multiple examples, practicing new skills and knowledge, and action planning, learners feel that the training has a greater impact on their job effectiveness.

Next month in Everything DiSC® Pulse, we'll be discussing the learner's perception of training content.

About the authors

Mark Scullard is the director of research at Inscape Publishing, a leading provider of training materials for the corporate market. He has over a decade of research and data analysis experience in the development of psychological evaluation tools and methods. Mark received his doctorate in psychology from the University of Minnesota, with a supporting program in statistics.

Jeffrey Sugerman is the president and CEO of Inscape Publishing. He has over 20 years of experience in senior management, marketing and business development in the technology, training and publishing industries. Jeff holds doctorate and master's degrees in psychology from Washington University in St. Louis, and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Northwestern University.

Originally published in Training magazine.

For more information, contact Inscape Publishing at 763.765.2263 or media@inscapepublishing.com.

© 2009 Inscape Publishing Inc. All rights reserved.