For All the **Right Reasons**

By John Hoffman & Tanya Lubner

How WQA's mentoring program helps businesses meet goals

More confidence in your employees. Stronger work relationships. Faster preparedness of new staff. Fewer errors in the field.

If these are goals you would like to achieve in your company, the Water Quality Assn. (WQA) is introducing an effective way to meet them—and it is a way that has already been proven.

WQA's new approach to professional education rolled out in March. Among the biggest news is that in pilot testing, one of the key aspects of the new approach—mentoring—has garnered overwhelmingly positive results.

It will take some commitment on the part of managers, but pilot testing feedback shows that the mentoring process built into the new Modular Education Program (MEP) can become an invaluable investment of time and energy for companies. By bringing managers and frontline staff closer together in meaningful ways, mentoring promises to boost knowledge, trust and understanding for everyone.

A New Way to Learn

One of the first goals the MEP designers committed to was tossing out the old way of doing education. Fundamentally, in traditional education, the student or learner opens a textbook, reads and then takes a test.

The MEP introduces several major innovations to the old way. First, education is available fully online. By taking advantage of the latest technology, WQA is offering courses in the kind of packages and portions that fit the needs and expectations of people today. The education is delivered through a series of "bite-sized" online courses. It incorporates self-study, targeted background reading and real-world activities.

On-the-job experience also becomes central to learning. By adding real-world experience into the curriculum, WQA makes the information practical and much more likely to be retained. This approach is key to reinforcing technical information and making it feel real to learners' on-the-job activities and the problems and questions they address in the field.

Woven throughout the MEP program is the crucial practice of mentoring.

The mentor is often a more experienced employee within the learner's company or perhaps a willing tech support professional from the company's vendor. He or she is there to give feedback and approve the learner's work. In doing so, the mentor can ensure that the right information is being learned and retained.

For the employee who is learning, mentor interaction helps ensure information is right the first time, without wasting time on trial and error. That means learning in less time and fewer repair efforts.

WQA committed to embedding mentoring into the program after carefully reviewing current research in adult learning. It used the TREK Learning Experience Manager, mobile software developed by Cognitive Advisors, a company that provides learning strategy consulting for many industries, to automate the mentoring process. When an employee completes a learning activity, he submits his work to his designated mentor with the push of a button on his computer or mobile device. The mentor immediately receives an e-mail notification that there is work that needs to be reviewed. He or she can easily pull up the mentee's work, give feedback and approve the submission—all from a mobile device.

Marty Rosenheck, Ph.D., is chief learning strategist for Cognitive Advisors. He points to the advantages of mentoring in the industry.

"Many organizations in the water treatment industry rely mainly on informal learning," he said. "It's the sink-or-swim method."

The major problem with this approach is that it can be haphazard and inconsistent, according to Rosenheck.

"It takes too long and you risk people learning the wrong things," he said. "This can result in real harm to the business and its reputation in terms of customer dissatisfaction, mistakes and callbacks."

For Rosenheck, the mentoring feature of the MEP is a 21st-century approach to apprenticeship. Employees are motivated to learn by having their progress and accomplishments recognized along the way. Electronic badges are earned as the learner successfully acquires new knowledge. These badges can be confirmed by employers and mentors simply by clicking on them to see what the employee has done to earn them. They can even be displayed on the company website, or the employee can share them on social networking sites.

The program is designed specifically to make it easy for supervising mentors to track the learner's progress. The supervisor gets a notification from the education tracking software that a particular lesson has been completed. Then a brief "coaching conversation" is scheduled. The learner at that point demonstrates that he or she can successfully complete the task, and the electronic badge can be displayed.

Mentoring in Action

After careful development of the program, WQA took its own advice on using real-world experience. Pilot testing of the MEP offered feedback by letting real mentors and learners work through the system.

The resulting commentary showed the effectiveness of mentoring in the MEP.

"I enthusiastically recommend the program," said mentor Michael Kinney, CWS-VI, of Portasoft of Morris County in Kenvil, N.J. "It's a great tool for both new and experienced people. Having a new employee go through the training can identify faster whether or not an employee will work out."

"It made training easier and helped the learner feel more comfortable to use me as a reference," said mentor Jill McDonald, CWS-VI, CI, of Hellenbrand Inc. in Waunakee, Wis.

Bret Tangley, CWS-VI, of Sterling Water Conditioning in Eau Claire, Wis., said the program helped him as a manager to see what frontline staff is doing and easily track the progress of the learner he helped. *wqp*

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