

Orientation vs. Overload: Effectively Managing Your Summer Training Program

By Christopher McKenna and Kelly McPhie

Each year, professional development managers take the time to create or refine their respective summer associate training programs. These managers typically have one goal in mind: to provide content that develops the skills for summer associates to succeed at their firm. However, as managers put pen to paper to develop their training schedules, issues and constraints — for example, speaker availability and/or the time within which managers must complete training — inevitably interfere. Too often, the result is an unfocused training schedule, or worse, a schedule that requires new associates to absorb a wealth of information over a short period.

While managers may have to accept these results, they should not strive for them. As discussed below, there are significant barriers to summer associate learning and retention that, if not addressed early on, could affect the success of a training program.

Associates Arrive Feeling Overwhelmed, Overloaded

For many summer associates, the road to employment has been a difficult journey. They may have endured difficulty with school, debt, or family that has caused or contributed to stress in their lives. Because of this stress, many summer associates already suffer from increased anxiety, lack of sleep, and poor diet and/or health. They are prone to decreased attention spans, have poor short-term memories, and/or have trouble retaining information.

Overwhelmed and overloaded, these associates arrive for their summers only to face more stress and anxiety. The fear of failure, working with others, and office politics only add to their challenges and further affect their attention and retention. Managers must recognize these limitations and plan around them.

Focus on Timing, Delivery, and Meaning

To reduce overload, where possible, managers should design their summer training with three concepts in mind:

1. **Timing.** Long days of training with back-to-back sessions and few breaks will force summer associates to process information quickly, not giving them enough time to learn and retain information. This also places an onus on the associate to take and keep good notes, making that the focal point of their learning. Scheduling shorter days of training, with fewer sessions and multiple breaks, supports better attention and retention by building in time for the associates to learn the content and to ask questions or seek clarity when training resumes. It also gives the associate time to process additional aspects of being on the job, including getting to know their office environment and colleagues, reducing the initial stress of those unknowns.
2. **Delivery.** Offering content only once or all by the same means (e.g., through lecture only) requires summer associates to learn quickly or to adapt to a learning style that may not fit their needs. Repeating content — at different times in a day or over a

week — is essential to associate retention because it reinforces the importance of the skills you want to develop and want associates to learn. Similarly, using multiple techniques — for example, visuals (e.g., slideshows or pictures), active participation (e.g., games or role-playing), stories (e.g., personal or from current/ former associates), and/or applied learning exercises — when teaching associates will help hold their attention and accommodate different learning styles.

3. **Meaning.** Millennials and Gen Z summer associates are generally hardworking and eager to learn. However, unlike the generations before them, their receptiveness to work and to learning often starts with the meaning behind what they are doing.

Adopting a framework for training, one that connects each training session as a building block for the skills expected of a summer associate, can be an effective way to convey and repeat meaning throughout the training process. As an added bonus, managers can use that training framework to evaluate their existing content, further reducing overload by eliminating sessions that are redundant and/or unnecessary for the summer associate to learn. Adopting these concepts, managers should see an immediate improvement in summer associate attention and retention of their training content — allowing interesting, enjoyable, and useful training to sink in rather than overwhelm.

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