

# Keeping Skills Fresh for Older Workers

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## Organizational Effectiveness Strategies

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As the labor market continues to be tight for the foreseeable future, older workers are increasingly valued in the marketplace. Important to keeping these workers vital participants in the workplace is updating their skills. Yet some older workers are reluctant to take part in training and development activities. Stereotypes such as, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” can further limit older workers’ opportunities for development. Traditional training methods often mirror a school-like approach to education, which may be ineffective for more seasoned workers who haven’t recently participated in formal education. The increasing use of new technology in training may also cause older workers some anxiety.

Whether on-the-job training is provided individually or in group settings, maximize the success of your veteran employees by following these tips.

### ***Confidence and motivation***

Older workers may lack self-confidence. Recently I had a conversation with a woman in her mid-fifties who confided, “I don’t think I can learn. Do you think I can?” This type of candor is refreshing because more often you will hear excuses from veteran employees such as a lack of time for or interest in the training. Encourage self-confidence by having the person think of something he or she has successfully learned. Simply providing encouragement by saying, “I

believe in you,” can be a powerful motivator. Employees also need to understand how a new skill will increase their value on the job.

### ***Connection to previous knowledge***

When I had to learn the Microsoft Windows operating system for my computer, my knowledge of DOS and mainframe systems interfered with my ability to maneuver in a Windows environment. My brain needed to reconcile the similarities and differences. On the other hand, my children can easily maneuver through a variety of Windows-based programs because they have never experienced anything else. We can all learn new skills, but our different past experiences will affect how we learn and how much time we need to unlearn old patterns of behavior. The older we are, the more diversity there is in our past experiences.

### ***Pacing and practice***

Older adults are often intimidated by a fast moving, performance-based approach to learning. Time to explore, master concepts, and practice in a non-threatening environment may be needed before older adults will jump into a participative group activity. Allowing older employees to have some control over the pace of their learning can additionally help reduce the apprehension they may feel.

### ***Frequent feedback***

Having been away from a school setting can provoke anxiety about, “How I am doing?” when older workers are placed in a learning environment. Frequent feedback helps adults re-connect to their ability to monitor and self-correct their own learning processes.

Interestingly enough, when studies have been done on these types of training and development methods that are designed to improve success of older adults, **all** trainees learn and perform better. The conclusion is that better training approaches help everyone; they are just more critical to helping older workers succeed.