



## Pez Dispenser Professional Development

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Are you investing in employee development like a parent invests in a Pez Dispenser?

What's the appeal of Pez dispensers? For the most part, parents, not kids, are spending the money on these silly toys containing mini-bricks of flavored sugar. Maybe the parents like the cheap price tag and the "no decision" solution to their child's sweet tooth, conveniently placed in front of their eyes in the supermarket checkout line. Unfortunately or fortunately, one week after purchase the dispenser probably ends up stuffed between the sofa cushions or under a bed.

### A Reality

Sadly, many companies' management teams select their employee professional development much like a parent chooses their child's Pez dispenser. They simply look for training that is inexpensive and convenient. So, if a manager receives a flyer from a large training shop, the search for professional development comes quickly to a happy ending - in the short term. Of course, the employees attend the off-site session happily, since time out of the office is rare these days. Only a week or so after the training, however, the employees have pushed the experience to the backs of their minds, as if the mediocre candy just ran out of the proverbial Pez Dispenser. The satisfaction, value and longevity of the training simply were not there.

### Your Company's Energy Efficiency

Companies that intend to compete and lead must look for professional development opportunities that can bring long-term improvement to their teams, not simply immediate gratification. They must take the time necessary to find a company that truly fits the needs of the organization. This time investment is well worth the effort when you consider what is at stake. Imagine if your training selections could increase the organizations productivity, while also improving employee morale and retention. What cost savings might that mean to you?

### An Unintended Experiment

While there are studies from MBA schools and consulting firms that discuss how program development selections can impact the bottom line of large companies, here is an example, a bit closer to home. After being asked to use up a sum of training dollars before the quarter's end, I registered two of our project managers in a well-known training company's project management course. It was

inexpensive and taught the skills for them to become certified project managers. During the next quarter, I researched additional options for the remaining two project managers and registered them at a lesser-known, more expensive organization offering in-depth training and ongoing support resources. To make a long story short, those receiving training from the company in which I researched attained immediate certification, whereas the others did not until they, too, attended the smaller organization's workshop. The loss from choosing the wrong professional development program for just two people exceeded \$4,000. Imagine the cost had I regularly opted for the cheapest, most convenient program.

### Some Helpful Hints

If you want true value from your training and professional development efforts, spend time looking for options that align with your company's strategy and vision. You can also get moving in the right direction by asking yourself the three questions below.

Is it interactive? If you have attended numerous training seminars, you probably cringe at the thought of how boring the next one might be, yet you relish the thought of escaping the office, if even for a few hours. Unfortunately, many sessions are very lecture-like, with a presenter monotonously reading their Powerpoint slides verbatim. This, of course, is not the best option for effective training. Instead, look for professional development courses that allow participants to, well, participate. Courses that enlist all of the senses are best. Find those that offer exercises, case studies, projects and multimedia examples. A session with a lecture portion of no more than half the overall course can be very effective if complemented by related activities.

Does it come referred by colleagues? People in other companies can often refer you to organizations that have worked well for them. Just be sure to understand at what level the training is conducted. For example, if you want to send your seasoned account representative to learn advanced sales techniques, make sure the referred course is not intended for entry-level associates. Wasting your employee's time wastes your money twice! Not only do you pay for training he does not need, but you also pay him while he is out of the office. See the Unintended Experiment above.

Walsh Hot Topics sessions are great professional development options, thanks to their direct connection to a higher education institution and their professional development value in numerous disciplines. They are also uniquely low-cost, and provide exposure to participants from various companies who can make further professional development recommendations. And, if you really like a specific presenter and session, you can often hire him/her for a more intensive workshop specifically designed for your company.

Is it the right format and length? If you are looking to immerse your employees in an entirely new process, you may need a long term relationship with an organization that works to understand your company dynamics and current processes. The training might take place periodically for many weeks or months. This type of program is often best delivered and received if conducted solely for your employees, as opposed to in a public setting. On the other hand, if you wish to train your three managers on how to better communicate performance issues, a one-time session with the appropriate expert may be what you need. Some professional development companies have trainers who teach a generalized course and then disappear, never to be heard from again. To get the most value, make sure the presenters can field questions specific to your company's situation and offer ongoing online or phone support.

## Moving Forward

By working through the three questions above, you may see more clearly that the best option is not always the least (or most) expensive or the most (or least) convenient. As with all products and services, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is. A \$100 course that claims to help all your sales people double their sales is probably not realistic. However, the most expensive option might not be the best either. The company should be able to work with you to determine if their offerings succinctly meet your company's needs.

While we all want immediate gratification for our investments in our companies, let's invest in professional development the right way - by finding valuable solutions for our most valuable assets, our people. Sure, there are many options out there. So, determine which will help improve your company's productivity in the long-term; which will help impact the bottom line; and which could help shape your company's future. Step out of the cashier's line of convenient, cheap choices and onto an aisle specific to the needs of the company. Good Luck!

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