



How to Retrain for a Second Career

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When factored into learning design, understanding employees' personalities and what motivates them at work can make it easier to retrain an individual.

In today's dynamic business landscape, many have defined their career and success by their job title and skills, only to wake up one morning obsolete. This unsettling sensation may be the case with many high-performing employees due to fear of being laid off in an effort to trim the fat.

Evidence is amassing that such downsizing is counterproductive. Researcher Wayne Cascio of the University of Colorado Denver, for example, won a 2010 Losey Award for his work indicating that unforeseen fallout from downsizing frequently produces negative financial returns. Rather than dismiss valuable staff whose skills might be outdated and scrambling to fill new positions, some companies are retraining those who have already demonstrated their dedication and competence. The question is: can management be confident they'll perform as well in a new role? If managed correctly, the retraining process offers an opportunity to boost these employees' engagement by placing them where they'll perform with even more energy.

Who You Are, What You Do

The fact that an employee excelled in a previous function doesn't necessarily mean the job was optimally suited to his or her natural style; many learn to perform well in roles that are less than ideal. For such individuals, retraining based entirely on previous experience may sell both the employee and the organization short. The first step in retraining for a new role involves helping employees distinguish learned behaviors from natural preferences — innate mental processes that drive how people perceive information and make decisions. Psychologist Carl Jung's theory of personality type, as presented by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) instrument, identifies four such preferences:

- How people are energized and whether they tend to focus their cognitive energy externally (extroversion) or internally (introversion).
- Preference for taking in information, either through focusing on facts and details (sensing) or big-picture orientation (intuition).
- How decisions are made, based on following objective logic (thinking) or personal values (feeling).
- How one is oriented toward the outside world, either through a planned and organized (judging) or a spontaneous, flexible approach (perceiving).

Psychological type is a personality pattern resulting from the interaction of these four innate preferences. Conscious behavioral choices are influenced by psychological type as well as environmental demands. As people tend to develop behaviors, skills and attitudes associated with their type, the more they use these natural preferences in their work, the more energized, engaged and productive they will be. For example, someone with a preference for extroversion may be energized by the open environment-styled office that has come into vogue. Conversely, someone with a preference for introversion may need privacy to concentrate, and might be drained by an open environment. If people work in careers that mostly support their natural preferences, it may be quite easy for them to distinguish between innate and learned skills. Those working in a capacity exhibiting their natural talents often describe loving what they do.

For many the influence of family, culture and prior career role has forced them to exhibit behaviors outside their natural preferences — often so much so that they have become proficient in learned behaviors. However, while they may exhibit great skill in use of learned behaviors, they are likely expending much more energy to sustain those behaviors than they would within their natural preferences — work may feel like a stage in which they have to perform learned skills.

Consequently, identifying which characteristics are learned versus innate often yields a sense of relief, clarity and an empowering understanding of “This is who I am, that is what I do.” When moving into a new role, it also helps employees pinpoint when they’ll need to flex behavior from natural to learned — knowledge that increases their level of control over the transition process.

During retraining, this becomes important as employees will inevitably have to learn skills that fall outside their comfort zone, even when training for jobs that align well with their innate preferences. Knowing in advance which aspects of the new job are likely to be challenging will help the trainer design curriculum and select learning methods.

For example, a trainer designing curriculum for people with a preference for intuition, who will tend to focus more on the big picture and less on details, may encounter some

difficulty helping them master a new process involving specific sequential steps. Start with an explanation of why the steps should be performed in a particular order. Satisfying the intuition-based need to understand the big picture will give them room to flex their work style to master processes that come more naturally.

Pinpointing the Best Role

As innate characteristics are identified, insight into talents and interests will emerge that will help identify a new role linked to an employee's innate strengths. Consider how the following occupational themes from the Strong Interest Inventory — an assessment that compares people's interests to those like them who have found satisfying careers — best describe employees' interests, work activities, potential skills and personal values:

Social: An interest in working with people, teamwork and helping others — a cooperative and collaborative work environment is appealing.

Artistic: Interested in roles that offer the opportunity to be creative, imaginative and independent.

Enterprising: Interest in business, politics, leadership, entrepreneurship, selling, managing or persuading — appreciate the environment that offers competition and the chance to motivate or direct others.

Realistic: Tend to be hands-on and physical — enjoy working with machines, computers, networks, operating equipment, and value tradition and practicality.

Conventional: Organized and detail-oriented — interests tend to favor setting up procedures, systems and organizing, and an environment that allows them to work with numbers and data analysis.

Investigative: Analytical, independent and curious; enjoy solving abstract problems or research — prefer environments that are scientific and research-oriented.

Combinations of these six broad interest patterns may describe employees' work personality and provide a sense of what keeps them engaged and motivated. Again, it's important to differentiate between learned and innate preferences. It's not uncommon for someone whose innate preferences favor a more enterprising role, for example, to have developed through necessity skill in an investigative capacity. Therefore, placing them in a role similar to their previous one may not yield the best performance.

Developing a sense for their innate preferences, on the other hand, helps to identify a new role based on actual day-to-day activities. This may seem like an obvious strategy, but people frequently choose careers based on other factors, and often their perception of what a job entails is different from reality. Pinpointing a role that aligns well with the employee's interests and preferences will shape the training process by illuminating their preferred learning style.

Support Individual Learning Styles

Perceiving — the cognitive process governing how we take in new information — is a critical component of optimal learning, which will take place when retraining aligns with the employee's learning style. In designing training, consider that according to researchers Nancy

Schaubhut and Richard C. Thompson's 2009 book *MBTI Type Tables International*, approximately 73 percent of the population has a preference for sensing, or learning by focusing on facts and details, and may become frustrated with theoretical material unless they see its practical applications.

On the other hand, 27 percent of the population has a preference for intuition, or learning by focusing on patterns and possibilities. They may become highly agitated when required to follow a step-by-step approach, unless they first see the big picture and grasp the underlying concepts.

According to *MBTI Type Tables International*, those who gravitate toward training and HR tend to have a preference for intuition. There's a good chance that optimal learning for those administering training is different than for those receiving training. In designing a program, trainers should take care to accommodate all learning styles and not let their own preferences bias their approach. This means ensuring that details and concrete applications aren't lost in a theoretical and conceptual cloud.

Whether intentional or imposed, people tend to manage change better on all levels if they feel in control of their own needs during the process. Allowing them to receive information and communicate concerns according to their preferences will give them a sense of control at a time when people often feel helpless.

For example, those with a preference for judging may prefer a set plan with strategies and clear parameters. However, these same parameters may spark resistance among people with a preference for perceiving, who often prefer more open and loosely defined processes.

Further, as those with a preference for thinking may need to know the logic behind the decisions, it will be helpful to explain in detail the pros and cons of various options. When retraining someone with a preference for feeling, who may be more concerned with the effect of change on the individuals going through the process, a more empathetic approach may be helpful.

Managing Stress Through Transition

Stress will be present to some degree during retraining. It affects both learning and change management. But according to Naomi L. Quenk, author of *In the Grip*, stress-induced behaviors are often out of character, such as withdrawal for those who normally are engaged with others, and emotional outbursts for those who typically have a calm demeanor. Rather than applying a bandage to stress-induced behavior, explore the root causes of these emotions.

During change, for example, employees with a preference for extroversion may become depressed and not share their feelings with colleagues. This kind of internalizing is likely out of character, but this stress symptom may be overlooked during retraining and become a roadblock to success in their new role. To help them get back on track, consider that for such people, common stressors may include changing procedures, poorly defined criteria, a disorganized environment, and lack of control over time and tasks.

Conversely, an employee with a preference for introversion may become excessively harsh or critical, exhibiting behaviors that are out of character and perhaps puzzling to those who know him or her. To help this employee get back to a state conducive to learning, consider that root stress causes may include rigid structures, time pressures and insufficient time to work alone. In general, anticipate some negative side effects during the retraining process. It doesn't reflect poorly on the employee, it just means he or she is experiencing normal transition-induced stress.

For tried and true employees, the retraining process could place them in a position to add even more value to the organization. The journey to a new career, however, may offer a few roadblocks, which can be overcome by helping them understand what makes them tick. According to personality type theory, differences in behavior result from people's inborn tendencies to use their minds in different ways. Understanding their natural strengths and gifts provides clarity about why certain roles may be more energizing and comfortable.

The retraining process will yield better results as the trainer follows an approach that includes identifying the employees' natural preferences for perceiving information; determining their work personality or what aspects of a job will keep them motivated at work; tailoring the training program to their particular learning style; and understanding all of the aforementioned to minimize stress. This process will help guide employees to hone skills that fully leverage their innate talents, and step into a role where they'll perform better and enjoy it more.