
QuickTip: Just-in-Time Training

What it is

1. A just-in-time training series is a set of short training modules (30 minutes or less) on related topics. Each module is focused on teaching one specific skill or technique. Rather than being taught all at once or on a fixed calendar, each module is taught just before the participants start a project or work activity that needs the skill.
2. Modules can be in-person or virtual. Preferably, they are synchronous because the interaction improves effectiveness.
3. “Learning cycle” techniques are used during the module to make the knowledge transfer more effective and directly focused on developing useful skills.
4. Participants attend a module just before they will need to apply the skill taught in that module for real work. If the work is being done by a team, preferably the entire team attends. A module can be done as part of an existing team meeting or as a separate brownbag.
5. Near the end of the module, homework that must be completed within a week or two is assigned. The homework is to try the new skill on the real work that is coming up, then report back to the group on how it went. These homework assignments can be individual, but it is even better if they are structured as pairs or trios so participants can help each other and provide some mutual accountability. If possible, the instructor or other person should be available to coach people and teams if they have questions or challenges with the homework.
6. Participants get back together within a few weeks for a short debrief. This debrief focuses on application.

Advantages

1. Since the sessions are in digestible bites, retention is much better than for traditional training. Traditional training covers more than people can absorb. Typically, more than half of the content is immediately forgotten.
2. Short sessions work better for remote participants and virtual teams, both from learning effectiveness and scheduling points of view.
3. The needs of the work, rather than training schedules, drive the topic and scheduling of each module, so the chance is much higher that the content will be applicable. This increases engagement and has a more immediate effect on work performance, in contrast to traditional training where most of the content may not be needed until far in the future.
4. A series of short modules is easier to fit into peoples’ busy schedules than a one- or two-day class.
5. Since each module is scheduled for when a person or team is about to start the corresponding work, there is a better chance that an intact team can attend together. This increases impact.

Examples

1. You commissioned a group of people to take on a new project. The project is important, but the team doesn’t have much experience running projects. Rather than hoping these people remember the important stuff from the big project management class that everyone had to attend a year ago, you can use just-in-time training. For example, create a series of five modules on the topics of how to write a good charter, how to create a short but effective project plan, how to manage risks and issues, how to track and communicate project status, and how to run a

lessons learned review. The modules are spaced throughout the project because each is held just before the corresponding part of the project work is started.

2. You want to get your organization into a continuous improvement mindset, so you regularly ask people who are new to formal process improvement to take on improvement initiatives. Rather than holding annual process improvement classes, create a series of modules on topics such as how to use PDCA, how to do root cause analysis using the five whys and fishbone techniques, and how to gather data and perform experiments. Hold the relevant module whenever you have a team that is about to start that phase of process improvement.
3. If you are in a PMO or similar organization, you can create a library of modules that you can mix and match to offer to teams as they need. This also gives you good mentoring opportunities that help you increase the capability of the entire organization as the participants return to their home groups when the project is over.