



Programs for Working People

CORPORATE WORK-LIFE SEMINARS

Programs For Working People is a nationwide training firm specializing in corporate work-life seminars that focus on a wide variety of professional, personal, and family life issues. Based in the Boston area, the organization works with companies to help their employees lead more effective, balanced, and satisfying lives through content-packed, lively, and thought-provoking educational programs. The menu of offerings includes seminars on stress management, health and wellness, effective communication, conflict resolution, positive relationships, financial planning, positive parenting, elder caregiving, retirement, and many other topics.

This article was prepared by company president Rita Ghilani, for Work & Family Connection's website, www.workfamily.com. It reviews the evolution of the work-life training industry, highlighting the benefits of seminars, as well as the conditions that facilitate successful outcomes.

“Work-life seminars: a fresh look at an old standard”

Seminars have long been a staple in companies' menus of work-life programs, often included as part of their resource and referral services, sometimes rolled into EAP or corporate wellness programs, and occasionally provided as a stand-alone benefit. As a company that has been in the seminar business for the past sixteen years, Programs for Working People has seen significant changes in this work-life arena; concurrently, many things have remained much the same.

The benefits of work-life seminars

The myriad benefits provided by work-life seminars continue to capture the attention of savvy work-life professionals. They recognize that creatively crafted and competently delivered work-life seminars:

- Help employees recognize that others share their issues and challenges

- Provide support as individuals manage complex, conflicting priorities
- Enhance employees' efforts to integrate personal, family, and work lives
- Assist employees with managing change, time, stress, relationships, and money
- Energize employees to make significant lifestyle changes
- Build camaraderie and improve the nature of interactions
- Facilitate efforts to manage dependent care responsibilities
- Enhance employees' ability to focus on getting the job done

Alice Freedman, senior training specialist at Ceridian Corporation, has been working in the work-life training field for over twenty years. She remarks on the evolution of work-life seminars: "Today's organizations face fierce competition, and employees are expected to be poised for ever-changing challenges and do more with less.

Continuous learning -- whether it's about new techniques and information, skills to do a job more efficiently, or ways to improve interpersonal relationships -- is a must for managers and employees. Training gives workers the opportunity to keep abreast of current information and strategies, as well as practice using the tools of success. Helping employees manage multiple priorities at work and in their personal lives reduces stress levels, related illnesses, and associated health care costs. It leads to healthier living. As organizations scramble to attract and retain their best workers, training can help position companies as the 'employers of choice' and increase individual effectiveness and productivity."

What we have seen over the years

- ***Employees continue to be eager for the information and receptive to the support provided in work-life seminars.*** Busy professionals are unlikely to find the time to conduct web searches, or to obtain and review books on topics of interest and concern. Seminars put a wealth of information at their fingertips immediately, and guide them to appropriate resources if further research is desired.

- ***When contact time is maximized, the chance for positive results is the greatest.*** While single, one-hour seminars held several times a year can ignite the enthusiasm of employees and provide important tools for life management, more contact time increases the likelihood that they will make permanent changes. If seminar scheduling allows sufficient time for in-depth coverage of the topic, plenty of

opportunities for participant discussion, and repetition of some key points and strategies, even more significant results can be achieved.

- ***Attendance at sessions has become inversely proportional to employee's workload.*** It may be difficult for employees to prioritize seminar attendance when it seems impossible to get away from their desks. To avoid the perception that attending a seminar has a "price to pay," in other words, falling further behind, employees can be coached or trained in goal setting, establishing priorities, getting organized, and managing time and work flow. Many of these topics can actually be covered in seminar sessions. Work redesign is sometimes necessary to maximize the benefit gained by work-life programs and services; seminars are no exception.

- ***Manager encouragement is essential.*** As with any other work-life program or service, manager attitudes can influence the outcome. Ideally, managers promote the sessions actively and encourage those they supervise to attend. Conversely, a manager may be seen tapping the face of his or her watch as an employee leaves to attend a noontime seminar. We expect that this is the exception rather than the rule. Smart managers recognize the need for work-life seminars, understand their value, and develop a willingness to encourage employees to participate.

- ***Making the sessions more attractive gets more people out.*** Providing fruit, cookies, beverages or even a bag lunch maximizes attendance and is greatly appreciated by those who come. Holding work-life seminars in a pleasant meeting space or boardroom, particularly one with some natural light, can increase participation.

- ***Employees continue to seek new topics of interest.*** There continues to be tremendous interest in training on stress management, parenting, elder caregiving, and wellness. At Programs for Working People, seminars on shift-work, workplace relationships, burnout, terrorism, retirement, nutrition, and mental health issues are frequently requested. Financial education seminars have become extremely desirable and now draw out large numbers of participants. Clients look to Ceridian to help managers and employees cope with issues such as performance appraisal, workplace violence, substance abuse, diversity, leadership, and workplace effectiveness.

- ***One of the most important features of seminars has always been, and will continue to be, the "normalization" of the experiences of attendees.*** Employees feel that they are not alone in their challenges; they connect in meaningful ways with others who experience the same struggles and triumphs, express like perspectives and feelings, and come away with similar new approaches to work and personal life.

- ***Technological advances have made it possible for employees to attend sessions remotely via conference calls, streaming video, and "webinars."*** These vehicles

make it possible for greater numbers of employees to be reached, and have become far less complicated to implement. Employees in remote locations appreciate being included, and often have the opportunity to share concerns or ask questions. Since one of the most important features of any work-life seminar is the discussion of individual issues and concerns, this opportunity is very valuable to those who participate from a distance. While there is no substitute for sitting in room with a group of colleagues and an experienced professional, remote access to these programs increases utilization, sends a message of inclusivity, and boosts the level of appreciation among employees.

- ***Many people want to talk about spiritual matters.*** Recent research on the power of prayer, more open spiritual dialogue in the media, and people's search for meaning have set the stage for deeper discussions on the spiritual side of life. Many participants bring up feelings of faith, belief in something greater than self, and the sense of inter-connectedness with life, both here and beyond our earthly experience. For some employees, spirituality is an extremely effective method for managing stress, healing damaged relationships, developing acceptance, and maintaining a positive attitude at work and at home.

- ***Seminar professionals can gauge the perceptions and attitudes of employees on a regular basis.*** This can be enormously helpful in assessing problems and needs. While all discussions are held in the strictest confidence, common themes and issues can be identified and shared with management. No comments are attributed to a particular attendee. Results of evaluations can be compiled into reports that capture not only ratings of the seminar and trainer, but narrative comments as well. These reports provide compelling information for management to review.

In companies where seminars are frequent and well promoted, attendance is neither judged nor discouraged, topics are diverse and pertinent, and the backdrop of work-life supports and corporate culture is optimal, seminars have the greatest chance for making a difference. However, even in the absence of the finest work-life resources, seminar participants gather valuable information and come away committed to making small yet important changes in their lives. The opportunity to listen, reflect, discuss, and learn, increases the likelihood these changes will be made.



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