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The First 30 Days

Preparing Your Newest Employees for Success

Think back to your first day on any job, whether your first or the role you're in now. Do you remember everything from your initial few weeks? How long did it take you to master the skills you eventually used every day? There is a lot of information new associates are expected to grasp in those first few weeks. Following a concrete training program can be the solution and may help improve employee retention rates.

Hardware Retailing spoke to Pete Walsh, who is the fourth-generation owner of Walsh's Ace Hardware and operates four stores in central Wisconsin, to learn more about his training philosophies. Walsh employs about 150 people throughout his four retail locations,

which all serve rural and suburban communities. Walsh has spent many years planning and developing his training programs, but he often returns to the same conclusion: When you commit to training, you have a hand in creating the good habits that you prefer in your team members.

Find out how Walsh executes training in his stores in the first 30 days of a new associate's employment and how you can implement a similar plan in your operation. Also, look for additional resources from the North American Retail Hardware Association's (NRHA) Trainer's Toolbox, a free online collection of videos, worksheets and other training options. See what's available at nrha.org/trainers-toolbox.



Getting Acquainted

Everyone has had a first week on the job, and it's generally filled with a fair bit of nerves and anticipation. That week can go by in a flash, becoming a blur of learning other employees' names, figuring out where to put your lunch and reading through pages of human resources documents.

For new associates at Walsh's Ace Hardware, the first week is about getting to know your new work environment. Walsh doesn't want to overwhelm his new hires during their first week in his stores, so their time is spent learning the basics.

"The first week of employment in any enterprise will show you the most important things. What you learn in week one is the building block for all things you learn in the future," Walsh says. "We show them where the bathroom is and how to get paid. Forget either one of those, and you are in trouble! After that, we introduce them to the rest of the team and explain different parts of

the business, like what a bin tag is. After that, it's mostly about our company, safety and protocols."

Also during that first week, Walsh says his store managers and training coordinators are ensuring the new associate will be a good fit for the business overall. While evaluating fit for company culture is part of the interview process, a more accurate assessment forms once the person is on the floor interacting with the entire team.

"When we're interviewing new team members, we primarily look for personality, someone who fits the mold of who we need and the position we're hiring for," Walsh says. "Secondarily, we look for people who have succeeded in a team environment, which can be anything from a sports team to a former job. Having experience working with others and working through frustrations is an important component."

Walsh says having a structured training process can help quickly weed out the people who may not be a good fit for your operation during a probationary period. You don't necessarily make a final decision about deciding to part ways with an employee after the first week of training, but having a structure in place provides insight you may not get from the interview and allows you to catch problems early.

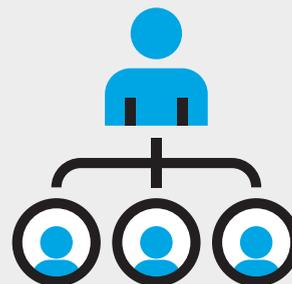
"When you expedite training, you lose that process of ensuring they are a strong fit. You inherit problematic behaviors you could have avoided," he says. "We're a family business, and everyone here is part of that family. New team members need to mesh with the culture, which doesn't mean changing it, but adding to it."



The first week of training at Walsh's Ace Hardware includes interacting with associates, which gives managers a chance to assess fit within the team.

Training Tip

When communication among team members is lacking, it can have a negative impact on daily operations and even customer service. To help create a stronger team, consider hosting team-building exercises at your next store meeting. Download this helpful guide at nrha.org/teambuilding_notes.





Checking the Boxes

Several years ago, Walsh developed a training program that outlined the first 12 weeks of training. Each new hire is issued a booklet that spells out on a daily and weekly basis what tasks need to be accomplished.

“The booklet takes tasks that every associate needs to know and itemizes them throughout the first 12 weeks. It tells the associate how many times they need to accomplish a task in order to move on to the next step,” Walsh says. “We don’t just say, ‘Follow this person and learn something.’ We say, ‘Do these things at this time.’”

The booklet system allows Walsh’s Ace training supervisors to track the progress of new employees and ensure they are achieving the necessary milestones. While the booklets allot a certain length of time to learn specific tasks, Walsh says he understands that some people learn at different paces. His system allows for additional time if an associate isn’t retaining information or skills within the set time.

“If someone isn’t getting something as quickly, that’s OK. Sometimes it’s just the way they learn,” Walsh says. “In our stores, if you need more time to learn the skills outlined in the training booklet, that’s OK. But you have to be able to meet minimum training standards so you don’t negatively affect the business.”

While some retailers may consider a check box training system to be inconvenient, Walsh says it helps instill good habits for all team members and ensures everyone throughout his four stores receives consistent training.

“I’d rather have a system that’s cumbersome instead of leaving the training up to someone’s interpretation of customer service,” he says. “We need to create the habits that we prefer. There are no magic programs or a one-size-fits-all approach, but the priority is to be honest with yourself and your associates with what you expect.”

Walsh says many retailers don’t define training within their organizations, which can lead to trouble.

“Training down an uncertain path is problematic,” he says. “Once you know what it is you want, it’s your job to train and empower your staff to get there.”

In addition to working through the booklet system, new associates also spend time putting up bin tags and backstocking the store. Walsh says these tasks are some of the best ways to learn how the store operates.

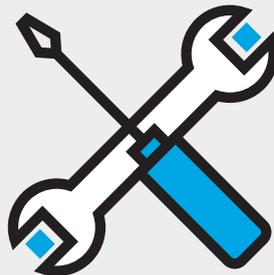


New associates at **Walsh’s Ace** learn different departments by putting up bin tags and stocking shelves, instead of just touring the aisles independently.

“Experiential education is best,” he says. “These base functions are critical, and seasoned folks sometimes avoid them, but they are the best way to become familiar with the store. Years ago, before we had a proper training program, we would send them on the old ‘walk through the store.’ But that’s not effective because it’s easy to forget where specific items are. You have to have a structured way to learn the store.”

Training Tip

The amount of information a new associate needs to know can be daunting. Have your newest team members learn about the categories and products in your store with the Trainer’s Toolbox Product Knowledge series. Visit nrha.org/product-knowledge to access more than two dozen product- and project-specific guides.





Earning a Spot on the Team

New associates at Walsh's Ace Hardware are hired to fill specific openings in schedules, such as weekday mornings or afternoons. Nearly every associate's schedule includes working at least one weekend day. During the training process, however, trainees generally work a Monday-through-Friday schedule, and then they transition into their set schedule once they "graduate" the program.

"We need a person in a spot, not just a person," Walsh says. "Part of the reward of graduating the training program is getting them to the schedule they were hired for."

Working toward completing the booklet training program is what is known to many Ace retailers as "earning the red vest." At Walsh's Ace, that achievement can only be met once all the check boxes in the booklet have been completed. Walsh says that generally takes about three weeks, but sometimes it can be longer, depending on the learning style of the associate.



Cashiers at **Walsh's Ace** are expected to know the store in detail in order to help customers get to the right place.

“Nobody walks in here ready to go,” he says. “Even if you were in another Ace store, you will not be trained the way we do it. It’s not that our way is better, it’s just different.”

For example, at Walsh’s Ace, new associates who have been hired specifically for a cashier position generally take about three weeks before they have the skills and knowledge necessary to operate the register independently.

“Cashiers go through the same training as a floor associate and then they go on a path specific to cashiers,” Walsh says. “In addition, the new employees will shadow a seasoned cashier, then run the register with oversight. When they are ready, the new cashier will work independently with a seasoned vet nearby.”

Walsh says the job of a cashier is about more than ringing sales, which is why in his operation, it can take up to a month for the employee to be able to perform all of their job expectations.

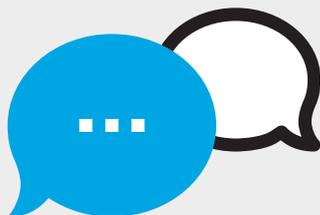
“The cashiers do such an important job of directing traffic,” Walsh says. “They need to know who’s busy and where resources are throughout the store. They field calls and take customers’ questions right as they walk in the door. If they don’t know where things are located in the store, they can’t do their job well.”

Working through booklets and putting away stock helps cashiers understand each area of the store before they are stationed at the register. As far as helping customers is concerned, Walsh says knowing the layout of the store is crucial to a cashier’s success.

“Initially, it’s better for them to know where plumbing and electrical are than how to make a key,” he says. “The skills come after the knowledge.”

Training Tip

Cashiers are often the first people a customer sees when they walk in the door, and for new associates, juggling questions and remembering to smile can be overwhelming. Have your cashiers watch the Trainer’s Toolbox video on First Impressions to help them understand how important their role is for the operation. Visit nrha.org/first-impressions.





Creating a Path

While the first few weeks of training are dedicated to familiarization, the next phase of training at Walsh's Ace focuses on specialization.

"The first three weeks is, 'This is what a hardware store is' and, 'This is what *our* hardware store is,'" Walsh says. "After that, we'll start to create a path."

To determine the best path for a new associate, managers find out their interests and abilities, which Walsh says most people think are the same, but that isn't necessarily the case.

"We would rather put someone on a path that's something they enjoy, rather than something they're good at right out of the gate," he says. "That positioning makes for a stronger employee."

If an associate expresses interest in a certain category, they will be put on a specialist path. Specialists develop knowledge in their specific category, but their primary role is a general customer service agent.



New associates follow the **Walsh's Ace** training booklet to become familiar with each area of the operation before deciding on a specialty.

"We never want to hear, 'It's not my department' in our stores," Walsh says. "We are here to help everyone because everyone comes for something."

While a month may seem like a long time to train someone before they are ready to move on, Walsh disagrees. He says the idea that a new employee is an asset is one of the biggest retail myths, and a structured, in-depth training program is the solution.

"Employees are initially an expense to the business. Until someone is trained, they have very little to contribute," he says. "It is our job as business owners to convert expenses into investments, which pay back over time. If we do a proper job training, we recoup our investment many times over. We have at least \$2,000 invested in an employee with training before we expect any return. For a baseline, that might be 200 hours or five weeks minimum before someone can materially help the business."

Walsh says training programs fail too often from lack of commitment.

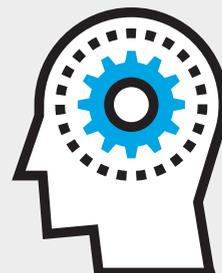
"Too many times, we are tempted to shorten the training and call it good enough," he says. "Later, when we are frustrated that a person isn't progressing properly or numbers are down, we can usually look back to the time we cut training short."

Even as the great-grandson of the founder, Walsh says he wasn't exempt from his own kind of trial period before he joined the business, and he's approaching it the same way with his sons.

"My father told me that I needed to see the world and I needed to know what it was like to lose and to win," Walsh says. "Just because your name is Walsh doesn't mean you are destined to do this for life." ➔

Training Tip

Creating a training program shouldn't be all on your shoulders. Enlist the help of your veteran employees and those who have shown they are capable of leadership. Use the Train the Trainer guide as a starting point for developing a comprehensive training program. Learn more at nrha.org/train-the-trainer.



A Training Calendar to Call Your Own

For Pete Walsh, owner of Walsh's Ace Hardware in Wisconsin, developing and redeveloping an effective, structured training program is an ongoing task. The company's current booklet system allows trainees to learn skills and achieve milestones at their own pace, while also staying within the operation's guidelines.

To help your new associates stick to a schedule during their first 30 days, consult this calendar to build your own booklet of training milestones. Determine what first steps are most important to your business, and consider making this calendar the first page of your booklet for reference. Download it at TheRedT.com/training-calendar.

Week 1

- Overviewing store policies and procedures with a human resources manager, training manager or independently.
- Meeting all team members, potentially as part of a store meeting or team-building activity.
- Touring the store with a training manager and learning the basics of each department from the training or department manager.
- Being introduced to industry-specific concepts, such as what a bin tag is and the different types of merchandisers (dump bins, endcaps, etc.).

Week 2

- Shadowing on point-of-sale system functions and reviewing cash handling best practices.
- Correctly putting away returned, unwanted or misplaced merchandise.
- Shadowing an employee performing a weekly inventory check.
- Assisting in cleaning or maintenance tasks, such as fronting and facing shelves or putting away a delivery.

Week 3

- Running the register with a training manager nearby.
- Answering the phone or greeting customers and sending them to the appropriate person or department.
- Shadowing and practicing department-specific tasks, such as cutting keys or mixing paint.
- Taking initiative to help other team members with stocking or cleaning tasks.

Week 4

- Learning more advanced POS tasks, such as processing a return or running a sales report, as appropriate for their role.
- Helping a customer from start to finish: Finding the appropriate product, asking if they need additional supplies and following through with the sale.
- Continuing to develop industry-specific knowledge by researching products and projects.
- Checking in with the training manager on any outstanding questions or challenges.