



Cookson Walker Consulting

Blessing or Burden

Has mandatory education made better brokers?

By Eric Walker and Karen Rutherford

Years ago, when regulations for brokers were being drafted, many of us thought that mandatory continuing education was a great idea. The theory was that it would consistently move brokers to higher levels of excellence and knowledge. This improvement could garner the brokerage community the same level of respect given to doctors, lawyers and other professionals -- those who had already implemented mandatory continuing education.

Recently, much has been made in the press about doctors who receive their continuing medical education hours from the multinational pharmaceutical companies. The education is biased, single-sided and designed to serve the drug makers. The parallels to the insurance industry struck me. Many brokers still wait to see what their companies are going to provide for education credits before they make any education plans.

Has mandatory education made better brokers? Are consumers really better served today? Are there more great brokers because of 20 or 30 hours of education year-in and year-out? There is little evidence that things have changed very much over the years. That is a shame.

Perhaps now is the time for brokers to finally make continuing education really pay for their offices instead of seeing it as an expense and logistical hassle.

At Cookson Walker, we encourage brokers to use strategic planning on a regular basis. The business practice of setting goals, aligning them with your long-term plans and executing action plans that move your goals into reality is just part of normal discussions with our clients. Isn't it time to include annual planning for education?

Aligning skills and people takes planning and time. It also takes money. Right now brokers in Canada are already spending the time and the money. The missing ingredient for many is the planning process.

An annual education plan helps keep thoughts focused on your "vision." It helps scan the horizon for interesting new opportunities and new threats. It is an opportunity to look at each person in the office and evaluate their current skills and consider what new skills might help both them and the organization. Your goal is to determine what's missing to move your people to the next level of excellence. Once you know what your various employees could use to help your brokerage move forward, you can build an annual plan instead of just sending your staff to the next program offered by your markets.

In recent discussions with brokers, many aren't using technology to assist them and efficiencies available are not being realized. Many struggle with understanding financial statements, their own as well as those of their clients, and this lack of knowledge contributes to the reticence many producers feel when going after larger accounts.

Each of the above examples could be fixed in one day of hard work. Why then are brokers missing the opportunity provided by mandatory education? There have never been more options for training, from online learning to completely customized programs.

What if you looked at your skill base, isolated all the skills that were missing, and then took steps to see that your star performers added those to their resume? As business leaders and owners of brokerages, what personal business skills do you plan to sharpen and hone through courses and programs?

In the planning process staff should be given the opportunity to select what new skills or programs they are interested in. Employees who feel "in on things" report higher job satisfaction. This has a major impact on their productivity, absenteeism and general morale. Isn't that a worthwhile goal in itself? Most offices just sign up to fill the time quota, send their people, many times at considerable personal inconvenience, and then reap little benefit. Little wonder program and course teachings are rarely implemented into a broker's office.

If you wonder if your staff appreciate the education opportunities you currently offer, just consider how many times you have heard them brag about all the great courses they have been on!

Want to start your annual planning this year? Look at your employees and the total skill set. When you reflect on your staff, you need to think about business, communication, and technology skills as well as insurance knowledge. Identify what might be missing and who would be the best candidate to fill the void. Then use your mandatory education hours to move your brokerage to the next level of professionalism.

While you're thinking about your annual education plan, take the time to consider your choices. Hold your suppliers of education to a very high standard. Does the program need to be relevant when you send your staff member away for a whole day? Costs are enormous, including the day's salary, travel expenses, lost productivity, and the inconvenience to customers and staff. If you are paying a hefty price, you should demand value and results. What will your measure be? Look at your immediate past year and make a list of all the improvements for your staff, your operations or your clients that you can directly attribute to the investment you made in education.

We encourage you to spend a few hours thinking about the year ahead. Attach your education goals to your business plan. If you need a technician for Excel or Power Point or improved front line underwriting, then find the supplier that can meet your needs. Let your staff give you feedback. Make it a practice to debrief employees returning from education programs (at least you will know they stayed awake for the course!).

If you are pushing your employees (and we use "pushing" because that is what many staff feel) through some of the longer programs, make sure you find a way for them to utilize their new knowledge. What could be worse than having your staff struggle through several years of courses, not use the knowledge, and have it result in total burnout?

Too often, the education process exhausts talented employees to the extent that they have no enthusiasm left to change their role in the office, or improve their own job.

You might consider the impact on employee morale when reviewing your current suppliers of education and your own plan. Are you able to actually use the information to improve a client concern, move you toward your business goals, or improve productivity? If the seminar was technical, was the information effectively shared with all the right people? Those of us in the training world want to make a difference. The greater your demands, the better our programs; get your money's worth!

The money and time must be spent. Make it count.

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