

# THE ADULT LEARNER

Before instructors develop lessons, it is crucial that they pause and consider the people who will be taking part as learners.

- Who are they?
- What learning preferences do they have?
- How experienced are they?
- Are they motivated to participate?

Answering these and other related questions can spell the difference between success and failure when conducting a lesson. The following information is a general description of some fundamental characteristics that are usually present in adult students regardless of their background.

*Each person is  
uniquely different  
and  
Remarkably  
similar to others.*

## Characteristics of an Adult Learner



## CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT STUDENTS

Effective training for busy, active adults must be responsive to how adults learn, their needs and working conditions. Training that accommodates some of the following traits usually has a greater likelihood of success.

### 1. Independent Self-Concept

Adults have a deep need to be self-directed. Instructors must, therefore, look upon the class as a process of mutual inquiry rather than merely as a classroom where they present information and evaluate the students' conformity to it. Adult learners want to be treated as equals in the learning process. This requires that we be flexible and respond to their ideas and needs.

### 2. Broad Base of Experience

It is important that instructors utilize the life experiences of their adult students to enrich the learning process. By relating new learning to things adults already know, instructors can help their students learn faster and make knowledge personally meaningful.

### 3. Immediate Time Orientation

Students of all ages want to know why they learn. Adult students are particularly concerned. Frequently, adults expect knowledge and skills to

be immediately useful. They want to know if what they learn can be used today or at least in the next few days or weeks. This orientation to the immediate use of knowledge “now” puts pressure on trainers and adult educators to provide meaningful, useful skills at every session.

**4. Multiple Roles**

Most adults have many social roles: employee, parent, spouse, responsible community member. Similarly adult learners frequently have many roles at work and a great deal of responsibility. Training can be seen as “interfering” with getting the job done. Trainers must be, therefore, sensitive to the limited time and attention adults may have.

**5. Physical Changes**

Adults are capable of learning throughout their lives, barring serious illness. There are three physiological changes, however, which can interfere with learning. These include:

**5.1 Speed of Learning:**

The time required to learn new things may increase with age. The instructor may have to slow the pace of instruction.

**5.2 Vision:**

As people age, their eyes lose their elasticity and transparency. For most people, their vision is best at about age 18 and it gradually declines. Beginning at about age 40 and continuing for approximately a 15-year period, the decline in visual acuity increases. After age 55, vision continues to deteriorate but at a slower rate. Trainers need to ensure that all training materials are easy to read, even for the oldest member of the crew.

**5.3 Hearing:**

There is a gradual decline in hearing in most people until about age 65 or 70, when the rate of hearing impairment increases sharply.

**6. Intelligence Changes**

Many adults believe earnestly that they are no longer capable of learning, because the speed of learning decreases as one grows older. For years we believed that people reached their intellectual peak at about age 20. It was generally believed that after 20, a person’s ability to learn declined. Recent research shows that adults increase in intelligence as they age. It is true that the quick, problem solving type of intelligence decreases with age. However, age brings experience and with that a reflective form of intelligence. Adults when older may not be as fast at solving problems, but their reasoning ability is superior.

*All learners need practice.*

*Some more than others.*

### *Implications of Adult Characteristics for Lesson Presentation*

Training should be:

- ✓ Relevant
- ✓ Time Conscious
- ✓ Participatory
- ✓ Incorporate Experience
- ✓ Respectful

**1. Relevant**

As noted, most adults expect instruction to be of use. They expect to learn things that assist them in their work or lives today. Adult learners need to know why something is important to learn and how to go about doing it. Otherwise, they grow impatient and, frequently, challenge the instructor to know why they must learn something for which they see little immediate use. It helps if you provide reason for the lesson at the outset, and help them to connect the subject to their personal motivation or desire to learn.

**2. Time Conscious**

Time is one of the most valued elements of adult learners' lives and you must value it too. Start and end on time. Keep the pace of the lesson moving and activities productive.

**3. Participatory**

Adults want to be involved in their learning. Long lectures with little opportunity to discuss and apply what is being taught frustrate adults. They are accustomed to being active participants in their work and they expect to participate in the classroom or training session as well. Just as importantly, adults need the opportunity to make sense of new ideas and procedures. This requires that they be given time to apply new knowledge, practice it and get feedback.

**4. Incorporate Experience**

Adult learners are frequently just as experienced as their instructor in some topics. They want (and need) to have the chance to share their ideas, insights and past experience as part of the training. This characteristic of the adult learner should never be underestimated. Trainers who do not acknowledge and use their participants' backgrounds and knowledge frequently experience resistance from their learners. Do not worry if your learners' opinions do not coincide exactly with what you have brought for them to learn. The opportunity for discussion, questions and thought will allow your message to prevail in the end.

**5. Respectful**

Adults must be treated with respect for who they are and what they know. It is equally important to respect their inadequacies and shortcomings. Trainers who use sarcasm, put-downs, inappropriate humour and gender stereotypes, or who fail to recognize the rights of participants to hold contrary points of view, are courting disaster. A learner's self esteem must be preserved at all times. The opportunity to learn comes to an end, the moment a learner senses that she is not respected or treated as an equal.

*The greatest challenge in teaching is not the subject matter – but managing the learning process*