

BY JLC STAFF

Creating an In-House Training Program

In a previous article, “How Can Building Professionals Improve Training?” (Nov/Dec 2021), we surmised that when it comes to training employees, “success will likely come from robust in-house programs.” The story was based on responses to an online survey of the *JLC* audience on how to narrow the skilled-trades gap facing our industry. A reply to one survey question in particular caught our attention; when asked, “Does your company have a formal, structured training program for either new hires or existing crew members?” 90% of respondents responded, “No.”

This past fall, *JLC* hit the road to visit a company in the 10% outlier “yes” group, DBS Remodel in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. In search of information on how they approach improving their skills training, we met with DBS president Brian Altmann; operations manager Bob Lutz; operations support manager Rich Dutra; project lead manager Mike Whalen; and project lead manager Rob Wheeler. They graciously took time from their busy schedules to sit down for an interview at their office.

After years of striving to recruit, train, and retain new employees, DBS rebuilt its training process, which now features a blend of in-house video training, monitoring the progress of the learners, and getting employee feedback. The following is a condensed version of our conversation.

What made you reassess your approach to training and hiring?

Brian Altmann: Well, for us, we’re just not finding kids coming out of trade schools with acceptable skills. The tech programs at the local high school level are not producing qualified candidates. So, we decided a couple of years ago to look into training on our own. We still attend career fairs at local high schools trying to recruit students as well, but we haven’t had much luck in this pursuit.

Mike Whalen: There’s just so much to know about remodeling. That’s the challenge. I think trade schools have their own challenges with what they can do with their programs, whether it’s with the curriculum, funding, or even having state-of-art tools. So, what we once viewed as a potential “feeder” of talent to our company has slightly shifted to where we’re trying to bolster their programs; we’re now part of an advisory board at our local tech school.

Rich Dutra: I think that’s why trade schools and job fairs have not been great recruitment options for us. It takes time to learn what we do.

Rob Wheeler: We have people coming in with zero experience for laborer positions. For lead carpenters or project managers, we look for someone who owns their own company and has the organizational skills to run jobs but doesn’t want to do the paperwork or the business side anymore.



Operations support manager Rich Dutra (middle) and project lead managers Mike Whalen (background) and Rob Wheeler (foreground) review the results of an employee’s answers to a training video. The 360Learning LMS (learning management system) software has a summation sheet, which displays analytics and results data.

Photos by Tim Healey

Does your company only do remodeling work?

Bob Lutz: Yes, it's all remodeling. We don't do any new construction or any commercial work. It's all kitchens, basements, bathrooms, additions, and decking. Our average job is four to six weeks. On a big job, we may be on site three to six months. We don't do a lot of handyman-type projects, so our range is \$10,000- to \$500,000-sized projects.

How big is your company?

BA: We have 22 employees. In the field, we have eight lead carpenters out there now, typically running seven to 10 jobs at any given time, two secondary-tier carpenters, and two laborers. In the office, we have 10 employees, including Bob and myself.

You have more experienced field personnel than entry-level ones. Are you having difficulty finding new entry-level talent?

BA: Yes. You can't always find the right fit when it comes to new hires. Possessing soft skills, in terms of dealing with client expectations, is equally important to us as having technical knowledge. A lot of our training is technical, but in this company, there's just as much, if not more, training on customer service. Training on emotional intelligence, being able to coach each other and our trade partners. We try to improve everything we do all the time. One of our core values is growth. Our company motto is "cleanliness, politeness, and trust."

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You recently revamped your training regimen. What's different now from past years?

MW: Years ago, we started with lead carpenter's training. The lead carpenters would meet and talk about how we're training on the job with new hires, which we still do. Then, as Brian mentioned, we weren't finding the right fit when it comes to new hires: kids with technical skills for entry-level positions or experienced carpenters with soft skills. So, we had to take the initiative to train in-house. Rich reorganized our training around LMS software—learning management system software—so it's much more structured. We refer to our training 2.0 efforts as "DBS University."

BA: There's "Bob's Bootcamp," too, where Bob holds sessions with new employees, ones new to construction. He'll pick a topic and spend an hour talking about it; it could be about kitchens, bathrooms, or installing windows.

RD: Today, it was paperwork because that became a hot topic in

our company recently, so we moved that to a priority. He spent a lot of time with two employees going over paperwork, how important that is, and how it affects the bottom line.

MW: Training used to take a lot of our time as leads, and because we were running our jobs, too, we weren't always effective teachers. Now, everyone has a different part to play in it. Rob is doing a lot of the hands-on training with the new employees down at the shop, Rich with the LMS programs, and Bob with "Bob's Bootcamp." The biggest thing was to organize the process, because everyone was kind of training their own way. We had to create a unified voice and commit to the training mission.

So there's "Bob's Bootcamp" and "DBS University." Tell us about the LMS software you use?

RD: We use 360Learning and MT Copeland learning management system software in tandem. Initially, we produced a few in-house training videos without any monitoring or testing capabilities. A little more than a year ago, I started researching different LMS platforms online. Some were \$500 a month, \$600 a month, \$1,000 dollars a month, which I knew was too much of an investment for us. I eventually came across 360Learning and found it to be a good value. It gave us time to develop our training content without breaking the bank at the same time.

MW: With the MT Copeland LMS, we kind of stumbled on it at JLC Live last year. They have a wealth of great video content related to the trades. We visited their booth at the show and thought, "Wow, we were thinking about producing all these video topics in house, but they had already put them together." It would've taken a lot of time for us to produce the video content. So, it was a no-brainer. We could incorporate our own DBS-specific training videos with MT Copeland's more technical ones.

BL: We would have spent thousands of dollars putting together our own videos.

You said you use 360Learning and MT Copeland in tandem. How does that work?

RD: We think the two are a great combo. MT Coleman has done a great job producing videos on a wide range of construction topics, like basic construction math, blueprint reading, and framing roofs. On the 360Learning side, we've produced and uploaded 15 or so job-site-related videos covering everything from tape measure tricks to protecting the jobsite.

The 360Learning LMS is essentially the "brains" of our training; it's where we monitor and evaluate the test taker's results—or "learners" as we refer to them. I typically organize the test questions—which appear at the end of the videos—and monitor the results with the other leads. Once our employees take our tests on 360Learning, I can track their progress. For instance, if one of the learners said they scored a 50 on a test and it took them four minutes to complete, I can verify the results, see what questions they got right or wrong. There's also a summation sheet displaying the analytics and results data, which you can break down in all sorts of ways.



Project lead manager Mike Whalen and marketing director Andalee Powers review a recently filmed training video “Trucks/Trailers & DOT Safety.” The Swiss army knife of DBS Remodel, Andalee produces all in-house videos, which are filmed with a smartphone. Crew members are miked up with Røde wireless mics (rode.com), and the video footage is edited in Final Cut Pro. Some tests—for example, on how to install a ladder properly—require learners to shoot video of themselves, which they submit to the leads for their critique.

Another great thing about this platform is it encourages feedback from the learner. A learner can leave comments saying, “This isn’t even what we do anymore in the field” or that something is spelled wrong. So, the feedback is superimportant; you have the ability to constantly modify and bring a test up to date in 360Learning.

With the MT Copeland videos, the process is a little different. I review the MT Copeland videos first, then prepare a test on the 360Learning platform based on their material.

Are some training topics more important than others?

RD: Well, all our in-house videos are important. Company courses, such as “Orientation,” “Communication,” and “Builder-Trend-Overview,” are important. Beginner courses for field personnel, such as “Safety/OSHA-10 Training” and “Cleanliness/Home Protection,” are important. Intermediate and advanced courses for field personnel, such as “Jobsite Efficiency/Slippage,” “Job Scope and Contract Comprehension,” and “Coaching/Leadership” are important as well. We’ve also made—or plan to make—videos geared to our office staff and sales team.

With the MT Copeland courses, there are categories that are more important to us than others. We’ve found their videos such as “How to Read Blueprints,” “Intro to Wood Materials,” “Construction Math,” and “How to Build a Freestanding Deck”—which range from beginner to advanced—to be comprehensive content, taught by great instructors. But, courses related to the subtrades, like plumbing and HVAC, we don’t necessarily need our employees to know.

BA: Yes. Video courses like “How To Start a Painting Company” we don’t need. That said, our employees should know subtrade

terminology and be aware that if they see a plumber or HVAC sub starting to cut into a structural beam, that’s probably a bad idea.

You mentioned you plan to make videos. Do you plan out a course list? Is there some sort of syllabus you work from?

RD: Collectively, we meet and choose which videos to produce or review. We have a course list with produced videos and ones we want to create. The list is organized by field personnel and office staff, skill level, and in-house 360Learning courses and MT Copeland ones.

Are the courses assigned like homework assignments?

RD: No, we usually have employees come into the office on rainy days or when we have a hole in the schedule to review the course material while they’re on the clock. We happen to have a new employee, a laborer, staying home today. He’s going to take a course on fasteners and adhesives.

RW: It’s an entry-level course MT Copeland offers. They have other general knowledge classes, such as “Intro to Hand Tools” and “Intro to Power Tools.” We’re trying to build a knowledge base with him, so when he does go on site and we say, “Go get the PL 400,” he knows what it is, what it does, and how to apply it. It’s a three- to four-hour course.

RD: We think of our paying employees to take the courses as an investment.

MW: As far as employees taking courses at home, which isn’t the norm, we can check to see if they’re just running the videos and then going in the other room. Also, there are question-and-answer portions after the videos to see if they understood the information.

How do you balance training time vs. field production?

RD: It's a bit of a paradox. We've put a lot of time and energy into thinking about how to reconcile the two. Even taking the time to create videos can cut into field production, because everything has got to stop in order to shoot the video.

RW: Getting the guys in here to train can be a struggle. When you pull them out of the field, they're not producing. This was one of our biggest issues starting out. We just had to discipline ourselves and accept that taking time out to train new hires—even ourselves—is now part of the process.

RD: Portability can help with this issue. The other great thing with 360Learning is that it has an app, which allows for a portable learning experience. Our videos are typically broken up into 10- to 20-minute segments. So, if the learner has 10 to 20 minutes on his or her hands, say they're killing time in a doctor's waiting room, they could review a video segment there.

BA: As an aside, the app also allows our experienced personnel to brush up on their skills on site. For example, when our lead carpenters have to conduct a preconstruction meeting, it's not a bad idea for them to watch our in-house video on how to conduct preconstruction meetings as a refresher just before meeting the clients.

Do you have any success stories where the video training has paid off?

MW: We have Andrew; he's already transitioning to lead carpenter. He's been here a couple of years, right?

BL: Yes. Andrew's in his late 20s, and he was interested in our company. He tried other jobs, but he liked working with his hands. He also had some construction-related experience but not a ton. We ended up hiring him two years ago.

Even before our new training initiative began, we were being a lot more aggressive about the way we were going to approach somebody's employment. We deployed the concept of a career ladder with the goal of trying to escalate his ability to learn and to be able to be a lead carpenter. In a short amount of time, he demonstrated that he can deliver all the things that our company represents. He has the interest and the skill set, which both seem to be growing. And, in a short amount of time, he should be running his own jobs, which will require training on the business side of things—like understanding how to read job scopes, blueprints, and payment schedules. Also, how to conduct preconstruction meetings, working with office staff, understanding what their roles are and how they might help with, say, doing a special order.

RD: Andrew was sort of our guinea pig with the new video training. He was fairly new to construction, but he did have a little bit of experience, like Bob said. He came from the restaurant business. So, it was like, how can we help elevate him to the next level? He's just a very smart kid and a quick learner. And the video training helped.

MW: The video courses have also been great for seasoned guys like myself. They allow us to brush up on a few things, even learn some new techniques and short cuts. For instance, I watched an MT Copeland course on complex roofing, and it helped me out on a recent job. It gets to the point where you've been remodeling kitch-

ens and bathrooms for so long, you have to refresh your memory on things like roof framing, though it comes back quickly.

You mentioned you deployed a "career ladder." How does that work?

RD: Having a defined career ladder is important and we're finding that the video training helps. It's important in terms of employee retention, too. It's so hard to find good help right now. Employees will stay if you train them and give them a clear path to advance themselves. I imagine a lot of business owners like to be vague about promotions and raises. We like to be upfront about this, and we see the course training and testing helping us retain good employees. Also, everybody learns at a different pace. So, some people might be ready to advance in a year, while others might take two or three years.

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RW: Before training, it was hard to keep track of and quantify what employees were learning. They'd rotate from my job, to Mike's job, to other leads' jobs; they'd spend a day or two on each person's job. Then, after a year or so, they come and ask, "Where do I stand in this company?" We'd ask, "Well, what have you learned?" It was hard to track what they learned because they moved around so much, and we all did things a little differently. So, the new LMS gives us an organized way of doing that. Especially with Bob's Bootcamp training every week and the 360Learning's tracking, it's easier to see what they've learned over the past year.

BL: The training also allows us to hold employees more accountable—us, too. You can't discipline somebody unless you've provided proper training. Like I told the employees in my Bootcamp session on paperwork this morning, you may be doing things wrong out in the field, and we really can't discipline you, because it's our fault for not teaching you the right way to do it. So, the goal is to provide everybody with the same path. In the end, it's up to them to apply themselves and improve.

Any closing thoughts?

MW: Something I've noticed recently. The parents of high-school-aged kids at recent trade fairs we've attended are keenly interested in our in-house training program. They stayed at our booth a little longer and leaned in more trying to overhear our conversations with other parents. One parent—who was in IT—says he never thought a remodeling company would have its own in-house training program. He thanked us for taking the time to talk to him. The training shows we take our profession seriously and that we'll invest in their child's economic well-being, if hired.