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Why take on a trainee? - by Jennifer O'Neill

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I recently sponsored a young woman who wanted to be an appraiser trainee. She found me, she knew she wanted to be an appraiser, she had already taken all her classes, and she needed a mentor. She found me right when I was thinking that I really should be doing more in/for my industry.

As we all know, the thought of taking on a trainee is often overwhelming in our profession. Maybe partly because Fannie and Freddie let us use trainees, but in a knee-jerk reaction sort of way, many clients freaked out and said, “no trainees.” Today, many clients have reconsidered (or are reconsidering). But banks, especially, need several meetings, analysis, conferences and whatnot before they overturn a long-held stance like this.

This question about some clients not accepting work from trainees is contrasted with the new hybrid and desktop appraisals we see looming in the marketplace. How is it that some clients seem to want to send out almost anyone to measure, create a floor plan, and the exterior and interior photos? Some of those persons might be a Realtor (qualified and not biased as long as it's not their own deal), an Inspector (a licensed building inspector would be qualified, but the term “inspector” might be applied to other individuals which raises questions about training, etc.), the homeowner (where there is definite potential for bias), or as the appraisers fear – any “Joe Schmo” they found smoking a cigarette on the street corner, who needs a job!?

But SOMEONE must go do this work so the appraiser can complete a desktop or hybrid appraisal. Why can't it be my trainee? The person who needs experience. The person who I am training anyway. The person who I trust to follow directions, do a good job, and meet my needs as the appraiser-supervisor. Not someone who meets the clients need to get a warm body in the house in hopes of speeding up the appraisal process. Appraisers have been stifled in using trainees. Stifled in training trainees. And not allowed to run their own businesses efficiently, with trained people.

But despite all that, a trainee found me. And my first question is, why aren't we all doing this? Residential appraisal shops tend to be single owner, small businesses. There are larger firms, no doubt. Even though clients want more appraisers, and there are studies on the “appraiser shortage” (let's see how important that stays as the interest rates rise...), it is an uphill battle for supervisors to train people.

There also seems to be little to no guidance readily available providing best practices or a training plan for a supervisor working with a trainee. There are a million questions. Like I need a contract with my new worker. What should that look like? And what kind of worker are they? There is fierce

debate on how trainees and/or new appraisers fit into the work environment. The debate on independent contractor versus employee has been going on for over the 30 years that I've been listening. And truthfully, the answer depends on the structure of your business, or what that person is doing (working for other clients, only you, has another part time job). There is no clear-cut answer, but you need to know the parameters you are working with and follow the rules. No one wants the IRS calling on them.

So, there is no handbook on training. I have been so lucky with my trainee, because our styles seem to work together. She knows I want to make her the best appraiser I can, but that I give her room to make decisions. She hasn't been frustrated so far with my laid-back instructions. I tell her how I do things, and I give examples of how I've seen others handle the same thing. She knows to ask questions and has room to try different things if she thinks it will work. And I grow as she grows. She asks how to do something or why something is a certain way, and I find I must then pause before I answer. In the end we are both growing and working together.

I know that in the past when I had help, my work life was easier. I especially remember when I had my brother running around to town halls for me (thank you COVID, for making town halls more online - now I use online resources instead of driving to town hall to save the \$1). But I remember being so much more efficient with my time, getting more work done, and enjoying my work more when he was helping me. Which makes me ask, why have I waited so long to get a trainee and/or office help? I have become a firm believer, as my podcast appraiser friend states, "teams are better." I know I don't want to do the accounting. I know when I have someone doing data entry I can get more inspections done. I know that with my new trainee, I can train and still get work done. And as soon as she's confident in her skills, we will both profit from this relationship.

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