# Collection Agency Best Practices: 2021

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# How to Make New Hire Training Effective in a Remote Work Environment

Training new collectors is relatively the same whether it is being done in person or remotely, but the other aspects of bringing in new employees are not so easily replicated when those individuals are not in the office together, and collection agencies need to make sure to focus time and attention on helping new hires bond with their co-workers and teaching them about the company's corporate culture, according to a panel of industry professionals who spoke last week during a webinar – sponsored by Peak Revenue Learning – about the topic.

Most agencies have been forced to pivot to working remotely, and that includes new employees and collectors who are hired by the company. Most are using video platforms like Zoom or collaboration platforms like Microsoft Teams for their training programs, with new employees watching and learning from their homes. But while that is all fine and good to teach them about the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act, and those new hires can be tested on what they retain via online learning platforms, there is a bonding element that happens during the training process that is not as easily replicated when those new hires are not all in the same room. The webinar panelists each shared different ideas that they have rolled out to make their training programs fun and help acclimatize new hires to the culture they would be seeing if they were in the office.

"Remember what it was like for all of us to be a new hire – you don't know what the culture is, you don't know what the language is, you don't know how friendly people are with each other," said Judy Gray, the

Chief Human Resources Officer at State Collection Service. "And one of the things that we've been able to do rather successfully is before a person even starts, while it's still in the HR realm, we're on the phone with them, we actually do a one-on-one orientation the week before they start when they get their equipment. So we kind of walk them through some of the HR paperwork that you do ahead of time. And then they ask us any questions – if they need help learning how to use their computer system, and some of these new folks have never used Teams before, except in the interview process. And so they already know two or three of the HR people. And they've laughed a little they've gotten to know each other a little. So when they start on Monday morning at eight o'clock, they at least know a few people. And it makes it a little bit easier for them to feel a little bit more comfortable because you get to know the culture when you talk to two or three different people."

It is also important for companies to not forgo the traditions and events that may have taken place when employees were training in the office and to replicate them as best as possible in an online setting, the panelists said. Companies should still be holding graduation ceremonies for new training classes, as well as other celebrations.

"Not only do we try to celebrate a graduation, but we try to celebrate even the little wins in between that, so that we know that we're going on the same path," said Kristy Loyer, the Subrogation Training Supervisor at Wilber Group. "They feel that they're appreciated, the work that they're putting is

Kenneth Aldrich
Harris & Harris

Mindy Chumbley
Solverity

Judy Gray
State Collection Service

Kristi Loyer
Wilber Group

appreciated, even if it isn't necessarily, you know, a $10,000 payment or something like that. At every little point, there's wins that you can celebrate. And it kind of helps with the engagement also. So we do it on a multitude of different levels. Not necessarily just at graduation but throughout their whole time here."

Like trying to adjust how to celebrate milestones in a remote office environment, trainers need to understand that the way they may have taught a classroom full of new employees is not the same as teaching to a screen full of new employees. Trainers need to adjust their techniques to make sure their trainees are engaged.

"Attention-grabbing techniques are different when you cannot move around very much," said Kenneth Aldrich, a Training Manager at Harris & Harris. "Facial animation is much more important if you're used to moving around a room to gauge attention, walking up behind people breaking up sidebar conversations by you know, standing over somebody for a moment. The kinesthetics change a lot when you are in an office chair."

Keeping the mood and atmosphere light can help trainees feel more comfortable when working from home, and a good way to keep the mood light is to use games. The webinar panelists shared a number of different ideas that they have found to work, including scavenger hunts. To make the game relevant to their training, you can have the trainees hunt for data instead of items around their homes.

"Another way to do a scavenger hunt is like a data scavenger hunt where you give a reward for someone who finds the, you know, relevant statute or the relevant policy in your policy manual, so that you're rewarding people for diving into the data that they're supposed to be studying anyway," said Mindy Chumbley, the co-owner of Solverity. "It makes it fun."

Chumbley also recommended book clubs, where trainees can read and discuss books aimed at helping their professional development.

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# Tips to Hire the Best Candidates, Even in a Tough Job Market

It might not seem like much until you sit down and actually quantify it, but hiring a job applicant who is not a good fit for your company can be a very costly mistake. Not just in the money that you spend on screening, training, and compensating the employee, but the money it takes to screen, hire, and train that employee's replacement. On top of that are the intangible costs, like decreased customer service, lower recovery rates, and the impact that a bad employee has on a company's morale. These are all reasons why it is so important to develop a screening process that identifies the candidates who are going to be the best fit for your company. And while that may seem like a luxury in today's job market, compromise is never a word that should enter your vocabulary when considering an applicant for a job with your company, noted a panel of experts who participated in a webinar this week that was sponsored by Peak Revenue Learning.

Mike DeCarpio
Consultant

Rick Faulk
People Decisions

Jessica Haig
Wonderlic

Xavier Nelson
Greenberg, Grant & Richards

Compromising, and hiring someone who might not be the best fit or the best candidate, is just going to increase your turnover rate, said Mike DeCarpio, a consultant who runs Prompt Pay Consulting, during the webinar. On top of that, you're putting someone you might not totally trust on the phone to work accounts where someone might be likely to pay a debt. And the last thing you want to do is turn a paying consumer into a non-paying one.

"It's not just about filling a seat," said Xavier Nelson with Greenberg, Grant and Richards. "Ultimately, it is about compliance as well as it is about the company and the culture of your company and your existing staff. We want people to grow and succeed with us. I don't want to see people going in and out of the door."

To that end, it is important for collection agencies to build hiring and screening programs that identify the skills and character traits that they are looking for in order to maximize their chances of hiring the right candidates. The webinar featured experts from Wonderlic and People Decisions, which offer tools to help identify character traits and aptitude during the screening process. One thing that Rick Faulk from People Decisions has done in the past is lay out all the difficult components of being a collector during an interview, as a way of having candidates self-select themselves for the position or not. By showing them how challenging the job can be at times, the objective is to identify people who believe they have the skills necessary to succeed and aren't just in the job for the money or because they don't fully understand what it entails.

Another way to have individuals self-select during the screening process is by using knockout questions, such as whether the person has specific salary requirements, or meets minimum education requirements.

In adapting to the current labor market, while it's important not to compromise on hiring standards, it is acceptable to hire someone on the spot if you feel like the person is a good fit and has met all the criteria for being hired.

One last point to consider is that a company with no turnover is not always a good thing, noted Jessica Haig from Wonderlic. "Keeping the wrong person in a role for a long time can be as damaging as hiring a new person who's wrong, too," she said. "Those people who are like narrowly getting by, or maybe just flying under the radar and not performing could be just as toxic as bringing in someone new who's toxic as well, so I think there is some degree of turnover that may be a little healthy, as sad as that is."

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# Collectors Share Tips to Help Them Connect with Consumers

Conversations between collectors and consumers are like snowflakes, in that each of them are unique and one-of-a-kind in their own way. Consumers can be hostile, skittish, uncertain, embarrassed, aggressive, confused, or some combination of any or all of those emotions. Making any of those types of consumers feel comfortable is no small feat. And it's usually the collectors who do less talking and more listening that are able to bridge those gaps, establish connections with consumers, and get them to pay their debts. A panel of training experts recently talked about the skills needed for collectors to establish connections with consumers during a webinar that was sponsored by Peak Revenue Learning.

Mindy Chumbley
Solverity

Richard Cichon
MRS BPO

Kristen Rowles
CBE Companies

The key to establishing connections is more about listening than it is about talking. Each of the panelists talked about the importance of engaging active listening skills during the discussion, and how those skills can help consumers feel heard and understood, which makes them feel more comfortable and likely to make a payment.

"If the customer knows that they've been heard and that you understand their situation, it really helps to build that relationship with them and it builds that trust factor," said Rich Cichon, the Director of Corporate Education and Development at MRS BPO. That also means that collectors have to avoid "overtalking," as Cichon put it, to give consumers a chance to "finish the story they want to tell us."

Training collectors to be active listeners should be an important component of an agency's development program, the panelists said. Mindy Chumbley, the Co-Owner of Solverity, a collection agency in Washington, puts clues or hidden triggers into calls that are used for training purposes, and it's the collectors' job to identify those clues. Sometimes, Chumbley said, it's more effective to catch someone being wrong — not picking up on the clue, for example — to train them to develop their active listening skills.

Other techniques, like matching and mirroring, can be effective tools to help collectors connect with consumers, as well. These skills, which are different than mimicking, and involve trying to match the speaking tones and patterns of the person on the other end of the phone, are more difficult to do in phone conversations — you can't match someone's body language, for example — but can help consumers feel more comfortable, said Kristen Rowles, the Director of Organizational Development for CBE Companies.

Small talk is often attempted to help establish a connection, but asking someone about the weather or how he or she is doing is not going to cut it, Rowles said.

"Asking questions doesn't build rapport," Rowles said. "They have to be applicable to the conversation."

Knowing whether a connection has been made is easy, Chumbley said. If the consumer on the other end of the phone is sharing any information with you at all, then they are beginning to trust you.

"The ultimate information is their bank account information or a debit card number — that's the ultimate trust of information," Chumbley said. "But if you think about it, we hear all day long, 'Be careful who you talk to' and there's all these scammers, so anyone willing to trust me with their phone number or trust me with their place of employment or trust me with a payment — we obviously have a connection because we've gone from in their mind being a scam to being credible."

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# How Companies Have Adapted Their Training Under Regulation F

There is a lot of muscle memory in being a debt collector. From the time you begin training to the many similar phone conversations that are had day in and day out, there is a lot of repetition. It can be tough to unlearn certain behaviors and it can be easy to fall back into old habits. This has made training collectors for the changes brought on by Regulation F more difficult for companies in the accounts receivable management industry. Companies have had to get creative with their training to teach and reinforce the changes that collectors need to make during conversations with consumers. A panel of experts recently shared their experiences and perspectives during a webinar sponsored by Peak Revenue Learning.

Companies have had to adapt their training materials not just for existing employees, but any new employees who start working after November 30, when Regulation F went into effect.

Mindy Chumbley
Solverity

Gwen Gullicksen
Sentry Credit

Michael Jeselnik
Carter-Young

"My manual is this thick and now I get to go through the whole thing again," said Gwen Gullicksen, the training manager at Sentry Credit, during the webinar. "I thought I got the the key points on it while we updated all this stuff, but I know as I go through and teach this class, I'm going to come across things like, 'That used to be true, but now it's not.' "

A key to helping collectors retain the knowledge they need to learn as part of Regulation F has been to make the training fun, said Michael Jeselnik, the General Manager of Carter-Young in Conyers, Ga. When being lectured, people tend to retain only about 10% of what they hear, Jeselnik said. By making the content more interactive and entertaining, not only are you making it more enjoyable, but also increasing the amount of information that is being retained. Carter-Young celebrated the enactment of Regulation F with a party and all the employees were given t-shirts to commemorate the occasion. Another key component to helping collectors learn the ins and outs of Regulation F was offering incentives, Jeselnik said.

Being vulnerable and transparent can also help in an agency's training, said Mindy Chumbley of Solverity. When asking employees to take a test to ensure they have learned key information, Chumbley said she takes the test, too, and isn't afraid to show her employees where she made mistakes.

"That kind of willingness to jump through the ropes yourself shows it's not this cheesy thing but that it's important and then you value it enough to run through it yourself and it can really encourage your team," she said.

There's a saying that goes something along the lines of — there's no such thing as a unique question. If you have a question about something, chances are you're not the only one. And that's true about Regulation F. To help its collectors, Sentry Credit created a wiki on its intranet that employees can use to ask questions about the provisions of the rule and see what other questions their co-workers are asking.

"If you can get it to me, and I can get that information to everybody, we can all be on the same page," Gullicksen said. "We try to make sure that anybody who needs this information has access to it and can use it, and if you don't we're going to make it as available as possible as quick as possible so that everybody can get their questions answered."

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