

Mentoring a Coworker

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Lately I've had a problem trying to mentor a co-worker. Strictly speaking, it's not my job to mentor them. But if he doesn't get better, the rest of us can't get real work done. I'm hoping someone has some suggestions to approach this in as friendly a way as possible. I don't want to have to approach our manager if there's some way we can fix it. So far it's been a problem for about 2 months.

He lacks some of the most basic programming skills. He won't do things like incremental compilation, design an algorithm, and in many ways it's like he barely has basic computer skills (he routinely has no idea where he just saved a file or what he named it so you can't even search for it). I don't mean to insult him, casually speaking, he sounds like a smart guy, but his job performance doesn't at all reflect his portfolio or his stories about programming in his spare time.

The biggest problem is that he doesn't learn. We all constantly harp on "incremental compilation", I mean constantly, two to three times a day. Yesterday I told him multiple times that he should compile and fix every single error after every function he writes. Another co-worker asked him every half an hour or so "Did you compile?" and he kept responding "Yes. No errors." After a 3 hour block goes by, he asks for help because he has 100+ errors. There are errors as far back in the file as the very first line (an import statement). 90% of the errors are simple typos (missing braces, parentheses, etc.), things I think any competent programmer can fix on their own, and aside from that, our IDE highlights such errors as you type. Before, I thought the problem might have been that I wasn't being clear about how frequently to compile, so I thought saying "after every function" was a concrete enough guideline but it didn't change.

A couple of us were thinking maybe we should make up a series of notecard tips or something, give him a few books (like *The Pragmatic Programmer*), and get him over to one of our houses on the weekend to help him out. Do you think we're putting too much effort into helping him? It's a hard choice, he's a nice guy, I don't want to just tell the manager "You need to fire him." Thankfully we're in a low-pressure job, we do research, we don't really have much in the way of time limits and deadlines in our department so he's not really setting us back very far. It's more like silent pressure. No one is 'saying'

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anything about our recent lack of productivity, but the anxiety is there just the same that any day now someone is going to be asking questions about why we haven't produced anything lately.

I don't mean to sound like an elitist. When I first started here, I know I made mistakes too. But I like to think I learned faster, that I didn't need to be told dozens of times about the same thing. I'm just uncertain, is this par for the course? It's my first programming job, and the first time working with someone new (up until he came I was the new guy). Is this just what it's like breaking in a new programmer?