

Evaluating training and development initiatives

Why bother?

Measuring the real business benefits of Training and Development (T&D) is a major challenge for organisations looking to evaluate their T&D models, and is often an inconclusive, problematic and frustrating process. So how should T&D expenditure be assessed? Just like all other business processes!

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Since 1959, Donald Kirkpatrick's four-level model of evaluation for training (Reaction, Learning, Behaviour and Results) has been generally regarded by T&D executives as the most structured basis for assessing the success (or failure) of formal training interventions.

While it is not my intention to debate the merits and demerits of Kirkpatrick's four-level model, I have yet to encounter any organisation that can categorically prove that they have achieved level three as a direct result of a training initiative, let alone level four! So why would a business bother with the considerable amount of work involved in developing and isolating proper metrics to enable accurate evaluation, and then go through a futile exercise trying to establish direct training course outputs, if there is little chance that they will generate any measurement of substance or benefit? It does not make business, or even common, sense.

There are currently a myriad of methodologies available to monitor and evaluate strategy implementation and business performance, with one of the best-known and most widely utilised examples being Norton and Kaplan's Balanced Scorecard (BSC). The BSC uses formalised key performance indicators to assess four key components of the business environment: (Finances, Customer, Business Processes, Internal Learning and Growth).

While each component is important individually, considering all four collectively provides a powerful review mechanism for the organisation, giving a key overview when evaluating business performance. However, it is argued that this makes the evaluation process more important than the desired end result and reinforces the limited benefit of levels three and four of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model.

Of course, it is an established business imperative that organisations must ensure that resources are utilised as effectively and efficiently as possible for the maximum benefit of the organisation; however, what is less certain or identifiable for many organisations is the influence that T&D actually plays in delivering the Growth and Learning aspect of the BSC. There are a number of reasons for this, but it is suggested the key issue is use of classroom-based training as the main delivery channel for T&D within the vast majority of organisations.

The critical flaw in this approach is that the classroom is largely devoid of environmental reality. While pre-course questionnaires and interviews provide limited insights, it is almost impossible for external trainers to grasp the real context and gain an understanding of organisational idiosyncrasies unless they are fully immersed in the organisation and actually getting their hands dirty in day-to-day situations.

The adoption of an Action Learning approach to the provision of T&D has proven successful for many organisations in identifying real results, albeit for those brave enough to try it. The identification and delivery of training modules at the most appropriate time during the delivery of a real live project ensures that skill application is immediate, and success can be measured by the individual's or team's ability to achieve the project's objectives.

This begs the question, however, that if the benefits of Action Learning are so obvious, then why are relatively few organisations adopting this approach to T&D? The answer rests in the considerable shift in mindset and subsequent work practices that an Action Learning approach can require.

Action Learning demands immediate changes in management responsibilities and often the approach of project managers and senior management. It also removes a large degree of the identification, organisation, and delivery of training (including the key issue of evaluation) from dedicated training personnel and places it firmly where it should be, at operational delivery level. This, naturally, is not a development always welcomed by

training personnel or managers, and as such often requires a change in not only practices but also in mindsets.

In summary, spending precious resources on attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of stand-alone training initiatives, where it is virtually impossible to measure actual business benefit, is a waste of time. We must look to the realisation of our business objectives, with attention focused on measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of project achievement across the board. This includes assessment of all of the factors, including T&D inputs, which have combined to achieve real project and business success.

It is only with this broader evaluation that we can achieve a truly holistic insight into how training and development is supporting the achievement of an organisation's goals, and ultimately is the only real mechanism for evaluating the true efficiency of a company's T&D programme.

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Article at a glance

The benefit of using standard training evaluation models to evaluate Training and Development initiatives is limited.

The impact of training interventions should be assessed as part of a wider review of the achievement of overall project objectives.

The adoption of a Just-In-Time Action Learning approach to Training and Development may require process and mindset change, but it can deliver measurable business benefits.