

Does Training Work?

Use Assessments to find the Answer

While I'm well known in the industry for asking the politically incorrect question, none of my questions ever received more of an uproar as the one I asked customers and suppliers last week at a trade show.

Does training work? How do you know?

People who've made training their life's work are extremely devoted to their craft. They carefully analyze new presentation tools and authoring packages. They explore new ways to incorporate animation, deconstruct their courses into reusable learning objects, and sit up at nights memorizing the latest jokes or polishing that new icebreaker. Yet year after year, budget cycle after budget cycle, the training organization is left yet again begging for the scraps of leftover money, with other business units complaining about chargebacks or "overhead." Clearly there is a question of value to be answered.

Trainers see it in the eyes of many of their students. Not the "good students," mind you; there are always several students in a course for whom the material is both timely and appropriate, and the value of a good training course is clear to them. But a large number, maybe even a majority in some courses, are enrolled (note the passive voice; it's important later!) in courses that don't fit them. They may already know the material, may know a great deal of it already and thus only benefit from a small part of the course, may not know enough to even begin grasping the course concepts, or don't need the content at all and were compelled to go against their will. Nonetheless, there they are, wasting their time and preventing you from spending more time with the ones who really need you.

Training managers see it in the resistance of the business units to setting aside time to train their personnel. Sometimes we say, rather offhand, that these difficult managers "don't understand the value of training." Well, what is the value? How do we know? In a business context, the value of training isn't the sum of our course evaluations, our popularity as instructors, or even customers who acknowledge that they like the training. The value equation is simple to state but very difficult to demonstrate.

"How does this training specifically change my knowledge, skills, and behavior at work to improve my productivity and the company's bottom line?"

Our industry has spent years distracting itself from the fundamental value question. Through the propagation of learning development technologies, learning workflow management systems (LMSs), and Internet-based delivery systems, we spend our days shuffling the costs of different means of reaching our customers. Vendors of instructor-led classes, asynchronous e-learning libraries, synchronous Webinars, video and DVD, all create a cacophony of different learning delivery choices. But very, very few focus on the real ingredient of ROI: the actual performance improvements of training.

Yet this lack of focus on the real performance benefits is the one most fundamental reason why training organizations don't get the respect (and budget) they deserve.

We recommend a series of three key steps that organizations can use to immediately avoid spending 30-40% of their budgets ineffectively.

1) "Measure, measure, measure"

If the mantra of real estate is "location, location, location", the mantra for the training industry must become "measure, measure, measure." Even a simple pre- and post-assessment can add extraordinary benefits to a training program, including

- Proof of knowledge development during the training (to test retention and start to get at application at work, add a 3rd measure 90-180 days later)
- Identification of underqualified and overqualified candidates – imagine not sending people to training they don't need or can't use...
- Provide the foundation of an ROI program; if you don't do at least this much, you can never reach a defensible ROI since you won't have any metrics to measure what impact the training had on their knowledge

2) Test for skills, not just knowledge

Businesses train people to DO work, not only to KNOW information. Knowledge that cannot be applied seldom can provide demonstrable value to the business (unlike the university or for personal development, where knowledge for its own sake is indeed a noble goal). It is strange that our key measures of training tend to entirely avoid actually asking anyone to specifically perform the work in question.

Companies like Deep Creek Center have begun producing lab-based testing for IT professionals, so that enterprises and training companies can validate that as a result of a training program or prior competency, a person can perform the specific work of their particular discipline. Unlike the de facto certification exams, these assessments actually place the person in a full hands-on environment with the equipment, and the students are asked in a high stakes environment to demonstrate their skills in actually performing the work. Similar programs are being developed in soft skills programs for creativity and leadership development, presentation skills, and negotiation.

3) Make the business units responsible for training performance results

In many organizations, the business units abdicate responsibility for identifying and selecting appropriate training for their employees, then complain that the training was not what they had wanted. As the training professionals in an organization, you are well situated to help work on a day-to-day basis with outside vendors and the employee base to deliver and support the ongoing training programs, but don't have the visibility into the performance goals of the business units, and thus would be challenged to align them well. Insist that as they have a superior understanding of both the subject matter needed and their personnel, they should take the lead role in assessing the needs for training; you will

serve to consolidate needs across the organization, drive economies of scale, and ensure effective and professional delivery of the programs. Then, on a periodic basis, you can provide reporting, guidance, and suggestions for specific improvement to the business unit manager. It's interesting that sales managers almost always are supportive of the training programs they put together themselves!

If training organizations are to gain a place in the boardroom and avoid becoming yet another outsourced division, they must by definition become part of the company's core competency, a key component of the engine of the business's growth. Only by taking a leadership role in the extensive use of testing and assessment to ensure training dollars are put to appropriate use will training as an industry begin to develop its true potential to build the skills that will move business forward.

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