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REVISITING TRAINING EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

In 21st century when there is enormous pressure on organisations to justify every business process, training department has the onus to quantify training results and assert their strategic importance by laying down an objective and effective evaluation system. Organisations should clearly articulate the need for training evaluation and take every stakeholder and participant of training evaluation process into confidence. Although there are many effective evaluation models employed by organisations but even the most sophisticated and objective evaluation model will fail unless training needs are identified and training evaluation outcomes are judiciously selected and deployed. Another key point to remember is the selection of training design which lends credibility to the finding. This article stresses on the fact that evaluation is no more a desirable activity but an imperative which every organisation has to carry out to stay alive and competitive.

KEYWORDS

Training evaluation, Return on Investment, Training Needs Analysis, Training outcomes.

n order to keep pace with the changing business world, organisations need to redefine and reprioritise their learning needs to gain sustainable advantage (Quinn et al., 1996) over competitors. Training in 21st century has come out of its traditional supportive role of basic skills development and taken up the strategic mantle of creating intellectual capital. Many organisations have adopted a philosophy of high leverage training which is linked to strategic business goals and objectives, thereby creating wealth for various stakeholders. The importance of training can be gauged by the fact that training is more than \$100 Billion industry in US (Carnevale, 1990).

Now, with so much investment, the emphasis is clearly on finding the effectiveness of training programs and validating it by quantifying the results. Evaluating training programs has now become imperative than just being desirable. This categorical stress on calculating the benefits of training programs can be for various reasons starting from, justifying the increase in annual training budget to demonstrate it to the clients and prospective clients to garner further contracts (Kirkpatrick et al. 1994).

Training evaluation refers to the process of collecting the outcomes needed to determine whether training is effective or not. Training evaluation answers various fundamental questions like, whether and how the competency level of participants has improved after the training intervention; and what is the monetary value of training outcome against the cost incurred for conducting the said training programme.

Training evaluation brings rationality, objectivity, accountability and credibility to HRD by insisting on tangible and verifiable outcomes. While training has too often been viewed as trivial by both employers and employees, today's stakeholders are demanding better linkage to business needs.

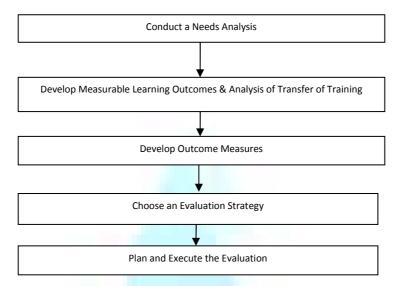
Many training professionals agree that evaluation is essential to successful training, but few conduct complete and thorough evaluations. Despite its importance, there is evidence that evaluations of training programmes are often inconsistent or totally missing . Possible explanations for inadequate evaluations include: insufficient budget allocated; paucity of time; lack of expertise; blind trust in training solutions; or lack of methods and tools (McEvoy & Buller, 1990).

On the basis of the purpose training evaluation can be categorised into formative and summative evaluation (Wart et al., 1993). Formative evaluation refers to the evaluation of training that takes place during program design and development. It ensures that the training program is well organised, smoothly conducted and achieves learning objectives. Formative evaluation provides information about how to make the program better; it usually involves collecting qualitative data like opinions, beliefs, and feelings about the program. The formative evaluation is conducted either individually or in the groups before the program is administered in rest of the company. As a result of the formative evaluation, training content may be changed to be more accurate, easier to understand, or more appealing. The training method can be adjusted to improve learning.

Summative evaluation refers to evaluation conducted to determine the extent to which trainees have changed as a result of participating in the training program. It assesses their newly acquired knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviour, as identified in the training objectives. Summative evaluation may also include measuring the monetary benefits (ROI) that the company benefits from the program. It generally involves collecting quantitative data through tests, ratings of behaviour, or objective measures of performance such as volume of sales, accident rate, or number of patents etc.

TRAINING EVALUATION PROCESS

The evaluation process begins with setting realistic and relevant training needs. Needs assessment helps an organisation in not just identifying and bridging the current competency (Knowledge, skills and attitude) gap, but also in building future HR capabilities.



Source: Grove and Ostroff, 1991

Identifying specific, measurable training objectives follows as the next logical step. The more specific and measurable these objectives are, the easier it is to identify relevant outcomes for the evaluation. A screening of work environment to facilitate smooth transfer of training will greatly help in achieving the set objectives. Based on the learning objectives and analysis of training, outcome measures are designed to assess the extent to which learning has happened and transfer of the same has occurred.

Once the outcomes are identified, the next step will be to chalk out an effective training design. The selection of training design is based on several factors such as expertise, ease and speed of accessing information, change potential, and the organisational culture. Planning and executing the evaluation involves previewing the program as well as collecting training outcomes according to evaluation design.

CONDUCT A NEEDS ANALYSIS

Training needs analysis is the process of identification and prioritization of training needs. It is the first step in the instructional systems design process, which determines the necessity of training in an organisation.

Needs analysis can further be divided into three components: organisational analysis, task analysis and person analysis (Goldstein et al, 1991). *Organisational analysis* or strategic analysis determines whether training supports the organisation's strategic direction, it has the support of top management and necessary resources allocated for training activities or not. It must take into consideration the product and market diversification, growth plans in terms of volumes and geographical spreads, modernisation and computerisation plans, outsourcing and contracting issues, quality improvement and cost cutting and profit maximization proposals.

Task analysis (Schneier et al, 1988) is a systematic collection of data about a specific job or job family to determine job specific competency (KSA) standard desired for optimal performance. Job analysis, skills inventory can yield valuable information about tasks and their significance. Task analysis should be carried out only after organisational analysis is over, since the commitment of top management is crucial in achieving the training objectives.

Person analysis (McGehee & Thayer, 1961) intends to find out who needs to be trained and what kind of training they need. Person analysis is aimed at finding out the individual competency in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude against the requirements for successful performance of a given job role. Performance appraisals, observations of immediate supervisors and self-perception needs of the employees are the important sources of data for person analysis.

DEVELOP MEASURABLE LEARNING OUTCOMES

To evaluate the training programs, it's imperative to develop measurable (quantifiable) learning outcomes. Although there are various evaluation models proposing various learning outcomes or criteria, two models stand out from the rest because of its popularity and acceptability among the training fraternity. The first model was postulated by Kirkpatrick in 1967 for categorizing training outcomes. It is a four level framework consisting of reaction, learning, behaviour and results.

Le	evel	Criteria	Focus
1		Reaction	Trainee Satisfaction
2		Learning	Acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes
3		Behaviour	Improvement of behaviour on the job
4		Results	Business results achieved by trainees

Source: Kirkpatrick, 1996

LEVEL 1: REACTION

Evaluation at this level measures the learner's perception or reaction to the programmes. Interest, attention and motivation of participants are critical to the success of any training programme. People learn better when they react positively to the training programme. The most common method of reaction evaluation is the questionnaire completed at the end of the training. Other methods are surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

LEVEL 2: LEARNING

The second level of Kirk Patrick measures the learning of the participants from the training programmes. This level seeks to find answers to following questions like, what knowledge was acquired. What skills were developed or enhanced? What attitudes were enhanced? Learning measurements are administered after the training programme is over to ensure that the performance objectives are achieved. Methods used in this level are verbal questions and answers, paper test, observation etc (Phillips, 1983).

LEVEL 3: BEHAVIOURS

At this level evaluation is designed to determine whether there is any behavioural change on the job because of newly acquired knowledge, skills and attitude. Such evaluation is generally done once the participants have returned to the workplace. The methods employed are, work sample review, interviews with learners, supervisors, observations, questionnaires.

LEVEL 4: RESULTS

The fourth and final level determines the business results the training has helped in achieving. The key performance indicators are volumes, values, percentages, time scales, and other quantifiable aspects of organisational performance. Since this level is very objective, the information is difficult to collect and quite time consuming. Although, Kirkpatrick's model is one of the most famous and credible model of training evaluation, it has its share of criticisms too. First, there is little evidence that validates that each level is the result of the preceding one. Second, there is quite insignificant proof that levels differ in importance. Third, outcomes should be collected according to a given sequence like reaction should be followed by learning, behaviour and results but, realistically, learning measures should be collected at the same time as reaction measures that is at the end of the programme (Kraiger et al.,1993).

As a result of severe criticisms, both academic researchers and training practitioners advocated for outcomes beyond the results. This search led Jack Philips to state the fifth level, ROI (Return on Investment). Measuring ROI is quite complicated because of the presence of many business variables and isolating the training intervention from multitude of business variables is quite a challenge. For example, the increase in sales turnover of a company can be attributed to one of the many reasons like either closure of rival business firm, new product line, tax concessions by the government, new and better technology or, due to market expansion. Therefore, it is imperative on the part of an organisation to identify critical competencies which contribute directly towards the result. But, such a causal relationship is not that easy to establish because of which Philips and Stone (2002) recommended an inclusion of confidence level to the previous model. Any method to measure ROI should be robust, acceptable and scientifically valid, in this regard Philips and Whalen (2000), have suggested certain criteria for effective ROI process they are:

- a) The ROI process should be simple, easy to understand and execute.
- b) It must be economical.
- c) It should be theoretically sound and based on generally accepted practices.
- d) It must be applicable to all types of data including hard data (output, quality, cost and time) and soft data (employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction and complaints).
- e) It must have a flexibility to be applied on a pre-programme basis as well as post-programme basis.

DETERMINING WHETHER OUTCOMES ARE GOOD

The effectiveness of training programme can be determined by the goodness of the outcomes. Good training outcomes need to be relevant, reliable, discriminate and practical (Holton & Naguin, 2004).

Relevance: Criteria relevance refers to the extent to which training outcomes are related to the learning capabilities as mentioned in the training programme. There are two ways by which training outcomes might lose relevance and they are criterion contamination and criterion deficiency. Criterion contamination means when training outcomes measures inappropriate capabilities or is affected by extraneous conditions. Criteria may also be contaminated if the training environment is different from the conditions under which the outcomes are measured. Criterion deficiency refers to the failure to measure training outcomes that were emphasized in the training objectives.

Reliability: Reliability refers to the extent to which the outcomes are consistently measured over time. A reliable test is one for which the meaning or interpretation does not change over time.

Discrimination: Discrimination refers to the degree to which trainees performances on the outcome actually reflect true differences in performance.

Practicality: Practicality refers to the ease with which the outcomes measures can be collected. Collecting data that too relevant data is very time consuming and cumbersome exercise, hence the practicality aspect is very vital for determining good outcomes.

EVALUATION DESIGNS

The design of the training evaluation determines the confidence that can be placed in the results i.e. whether the changes are because of the training or any extraneous factors. The validity of evaluation design faces threats in the form of a) lack of believability of the result, b) failure to generalise the study result on a greater population (Cook et al., 1990).

The first kind is called threat to *internal validity*, which can happen because of any of the following reasons, faulty needs identification, flawed training design and faulty delivery. This can lead to lack of trust on the training outcomes. The second type is known as threat to *external validity*, which states that the training outcomes can be extended to other groups and situations. This determines whether a particular training program can be imparted in future to other groups and that too under different learning conditions.

There are three ways to minimize threats to the validity: the use of pretest and posttest in evaluation designs, comparison groups, and random assignment.

On the basis of who is involved, when measures are collected, the costs incurred, the time it takes to conduct evaluation and the strength of the design for excluding alternative explanations for the results, evaluation designs are of various types. Some of the popular kinds are *Posttest Only, Pretest/Posttest, Posttest Only with Comparison group, Pretest/Posttest with Comparison group, Time series, Time series with Comparison group* and *Solomon four groups* (Bretz & Thompsett, 1992).

There are several factors to keep in mind while selecting evaluation design; few of the important ones are given below.

Factor	Factor's influence on the evaluation design selection		
Change Potential	Scope for program modification.		
Importance	Will ineffective training affect customer service, product development, or relationships among employees?		
Scale	Number of trainees involved		
Purpose of Training	Final purpose of training learning, results or both.		
Organisation Culture	Is demonstrating results part of company norms and expectations?		
Expertise	Do we have the expertise to study a complex process?		
Cost	What are financials involved?		
Time Frame	When is information needed?		

IMPLEMENTATION OF TRAINING EVALUATION

The final step is the implementation of the training evaluation. The actual effectiveness of training evaluation process lies in the actual deployment of training evaluation process. Since we can't have a total error free process we should always have a system of feedback which will guide our future designs.

SUMMARY

In today's environment of increased accountability, the training evaluation process is a vital component of any organization's training program. The training evaluation process is instrumental to provide useful information to multiple stakeholders. An effective training evaluation process, can obtain business critical information needed to improve both training program delivery and business performance, creating opportunities for continuous organizational improvement. Organisations should be clear of the reason for evaluation (Formative/Summative). The training needs analysis is very significant in the training evaluation process as it helps in zeroing on the business critical training needs. Utmost caution should be maintained while evaluating the training programs, since wrong training outcomes or a faulty training design can cause irreparable damage. While traditional training evaluation methods (Kirk Patrick's four levels of training evaluation) focus on using the assessment process to improve training delivery, information should also be collected to determine whether training is assisting

the organization to improve its business performance. Readers of this paper will find it more enriching in terms of information with critical analysis gathered through various sources which will help them to better understand and appreciate training evaluation for creating a learning organisation.

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