LEVERAGING L&D INVESTMENTS
INTO **WORTHWHILE BUSINESS VALUE**

Wringing performance from training is a whole-organisation responsibility, argues Robert O Brinkerhoff. He also explains how to implement this cultural transformation.

A wise man once said "the more things change, the more they stay the same". This truism presents a challenge to training leaders. What remains the same is that L&D leaders must produce worthwhile business results. The change is that these results must now be produced faster than ever and make a greater impact from decreasing resources. Shifting global markets, emerging new technologies and uncertain economic conditions require organisations to develop new strategic priorities ever more frequently.

The even greater challenge is to motivate employees to execute new initiatives. But training as an organisational function remains stuck with a fundamental decade's-old weakness. Research – and dozens of our own evaluation studies – show that less than 20% of trainees take their learning back to the job or use it in alignment with strategic goals likely to achieve worthwhile results for their businesses.

IMPACT RATE

If we look at training simply as a sort of staff benefit, then maybe these results are tolerable. To be sure, learning and development does have staff-benefit value. It is impossible to recruit, develop and retain employees without it. But conceiving of training as nothing more that a benefit is a fatal error, for it will always be just a cost and a vulnerable overhead expense.

Inevitably, new business scenarios – a merger, a new product launch, a new strategic direction – require training that works to achieve 80% and better impact rates. Too many companies may be betting the business on defective training. Training has to drive performance change and improvement. If it does not, strategic initiatives die from failure to execute. At a 20% impact rate, by the time training produces a sufficient mass of employees actually executing a new strategy, the

strategy is obsolete and it is time to launch a new one.

GOOD NEWS: BAD NEWS

In recent years we have dug deeply into the causes of poor training and development. We almost always find that a percentage of trainees apply critical elements of their new learning in improved job performance, thus making substantial contributions to important business goals. The good news is that *training works*. The bad news is that *it doesn't work this well for enough of the time with enough of the trainees*. So, the typical training initiative leaves a lot of impact – thereby a lot of money – on the table.

There's more good news. The reasons why this larger percentage of trainees does not effectively apply their training is NOT that the training itself is a failure; we already know it works very well for some people. The majority of participants that do not apply their learning (i.e. fail to execute strategic behaviours) do not fail because they did not learn the right stuff. Instead, they failed to *apply* what they learned because they too often encountered one or more negative performance system factors.

When we do a better job of managing these key performance system factors, we see dramatically improved results: More people applying their training in the workplace and doing it as well as the few who do it best. Here are some of the most important factors that consistently cause training to fail.

• Senior leadership does not understand or believe in the business need for the training and thus fail to support it rigorously and thoroughly

• Trainees sent to training without adequate preparation. They do not have a clear line of sight as to why the training is important, exactly what they most need to learn, or how they could use it to drive their (and their business's) performance

• Trainees get trained at the wrong time, when they are not positioned to make the most of it in their work. The calendar, not their needs, drives their involvement

• Managers do not support or reinforce or hold employees accountable for applying new learning in their jobs

• Managers of trainees' managers fail to hold their direct reports accountable for coaching and supporting employees' efforts to apply their training

• Incentives and other performance factors are not aligned to the application of learning in the workplace, or in new behaviours

Note that none of these failure causes are

centred in training events or materials. They are failures of the 'operating system'. And, they can be relatively easily mitigated and managed positively, as our high-impact learning converts have demonstrated time and again.

GET OUT OF THE MORASS

There are two fronts on which we must battle to turn training results around. First, we have to expand our thinking beyond simply delivering a powerful learning event. We must manage the larger process of getting senior leaders involved, getting managers to prepare and support trainees, and so forth. This helps improve results, for a while.

Which brings us to the second battlefront: We must begin a long-term strategy to educate the larger organisation and change the way training is perceived and managed. Getting impact from training is the responsibility of the whole organisation since the critical failure factors lay outside the bureaucratic purview of the L&D function. *Accountability for training impact cannot be delegated to a training department*. However, teaching this lesson and beginning the cultural transformation lies squarely in our accountability laps. Evaluation and measurement are the tools that will best help us begin and complete the journey.

LEARNING-TO-PERFORMANCE PROCESS

We have to be relentless in measuring and evaluating results; not only measuring the business impact of the training, but assessing who did what to help (or hinder) impact. And we have to provide feedback to all stakeholders in the learning-to-performance procedure. We do not evaluate

training; instead, we evaluate *how well the organisation is using training to get results* – what's working, and what is not.

If some managers really did their jobs – in preparing trainees, for example – then our evaluation would dig out these facts and document the good work they did and the results it produced for managers, their employees and the business. We must also show what was lost when the performance support chain snapped, so that senior leaders can see a true business case for holding managers accountable for supporting training and development.

VIDEO: *From cost-centre to must-have. Making L&D matter*, Learning Technologies 2013 conference presentation.
https://www.annotag.tv/learningtechnologies/play/18184
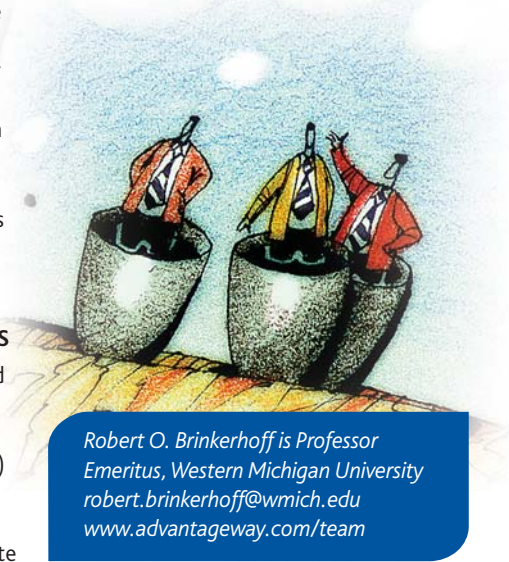
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Simple prescription to make training work

Stop delivering training. Start building methods and tools for the organisation to use to ensure that training sticks and gets results.

• Educate senior leaders and managers about their role in making training work. Show them what's at stake when it works, and what's at risk when it doesn't

• Relentlessly measure results and show how the performance system factors were the make-or-break factors in success

• Tell the truth about training results. When it does not work, say so clearly. Be sure everyone understands the reasons for failure, and the costs incurred by failure and what benefits were not realised

• Provide feedback to *all* stakeholders in the value chain so they can clearly see how their support (or lack of it) makes a difference

Tell the story loud and clear. When you make a strong business case for managing training as a process, and only then, you will build the organisation that achieves consistently great results.