



## **Learning: Nice to Have or Indispensable Business Asset?**

**Most people like learning new things, but without accountability for improved performance back on the job, learning will always be vulnerable and its value questioned.**

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Imagine this scenario: A company conducts a yearlong leadership development program for 200 high-potential employees that included workshops, international trips, a business school week, visiting speakers and so forth. As part of the evaluation, participants are asked, “Now that the training is over and you’re back on the job, what consequence would there be if you never applied anything at all from the training in your work?”

Their response? “Nothing.”

Further program evaluation showed little behavior change, though participants loved it and reported much new learning. Participants thought application was optional. They viewed the training as a résumé-building opportunity for a new job in this company or elsewhere; an entitlement they had earned and deserved. From their perspective, this was just another staff benefit.

Their belief in no expectation or accountability to apply the training, however, was diametrically opposed to the C-suite’s rationale for this investment. They wanted emerging leaders to break the mold of practicing from a “maximize my business unit outcomes” perspective and act in ways that increased whole-organization benefits — a goal that senior leaders believed was make-or-break for the future of the company. This imperative need for training application did not percolate down to the participants or the participants’ managers.

This misalignment between learning customer expectations and learning and development's purpose is not unique; it is pervasive and poses serious short- and long-term threats. Learning does, and should, have benefit value. Without it, organizations cannot recruit or retain talent.

Not all of a company's learning portfolio has to drive behavioral change. Some training is for compliance reasons, some for bench strength, some for certification, some for emergency capability, some for onboarding and a lot is for staff benefit purposes. All these types are necessary to play in today's market, but they are not sufficient for an organization's success.

There are other learning initiatives that drive an organization's prosperity through new or improved job performance. Learning leaders and their customers cannot afford to allow these few, but strategically vital, training investments to become tarred with the same brush from other training that carries no expectation for behavior change.

If the principal perception of learning's value is as a staff benefit or an otherwise necessary overhead cost, then it is constantly on the budget chopping block. Worse, the organization is deprived of a key competitive advantage resource. "As an L&D leader in today's environment, playing it safe by the old rules doesn't yield the impact our businesses need to compete," said Julie Dervin, change and education leader at Cargill Inc., an agricultural company.

**FIGURE 1: THE VALUE OF TRAINING**

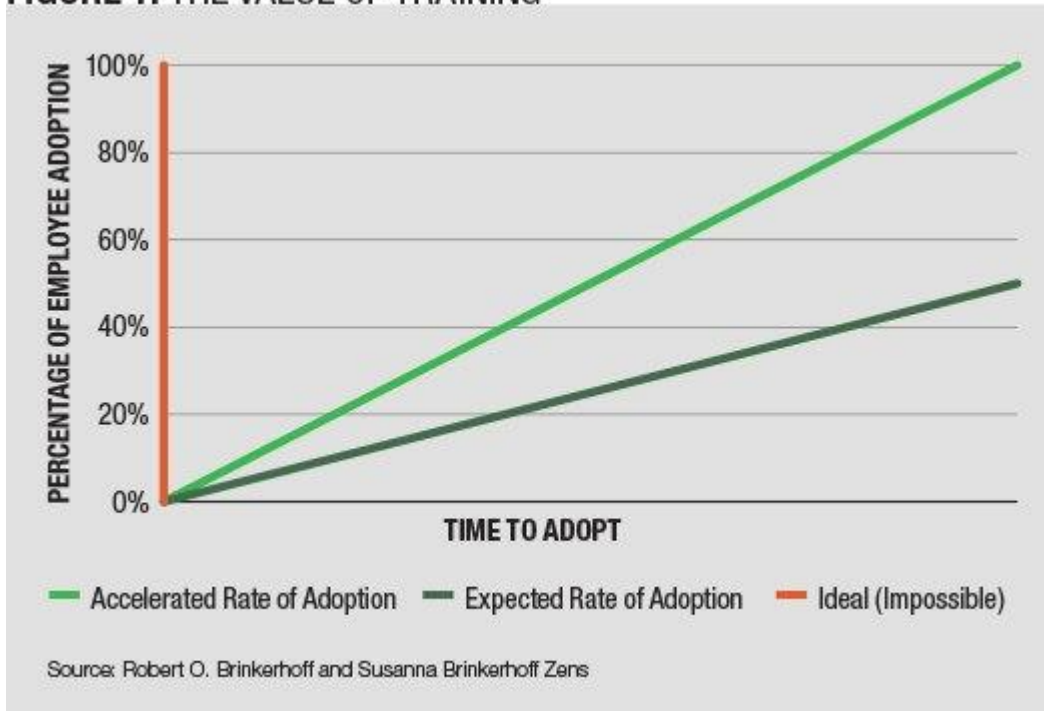


Figure 1:

The Value of Training (Source: Robert O. Brinkerhoff and Susanna Brinkerhoff Zens) The following three-fold action plan can firmly establish learning as an indispensable business asset:

**1. Promote and differentiate a new highest and best mission for learning.** The highest and best mission for learning is to help accelerate execution of an organization's critical strategic initiatives. This perspective is fueled by the perennial truth that most organizations fail not because their strategy is flawed but because they do not adequately execute their chosen strategy. In a 2013 study from The Economist Intelligence Unit, researchers surveyed nearly 600 C-level and other senior executives from around the globe. Almost 90 percent agreed that implementation of strategic initiatives will be critical to competitiveness, but nearly 60 percent acknowledged a struggle between strategy formulation and execution.

In an ideal — but impossible — scenario, a company's given strategic initiative is fully adopted immediately after it is announced (Figure 1, red line). In reality, new initiative implementation is almost always slow (Figure 1, black line). Execution takes time because it often calls for new skills and knowledge and requires changing entrenched workplace behaviors. Learning departments can add value by helping change the slope of this adoption curve: Get more employees to execute new behaviors more quickly (Figure 1, green line). Measuring learning's contribution is the difference between expected and accelerated adoption rates.

Consider the transformation in national pharmacy retailers such as CVS Health Corp., Rite Aid Corp or Walgreen Co. All are pursuing the same strategy: Become mini health and wellness clinics. Pharmacists will now be much more involved in customer interactions and service, actions that require different skills and knowledge. The company that wins is the one that can best leverage learning to most quickly, effectively and consistently change its pharmacy staff's behavior.

Learning leaders should adopt and promote this kind of differentiated mission. "We have earned the role of trusted adviser to help solve business challenges," said Cory Bouck, director of organizational development and learning at Johnsonville Sausage. "We can leverage training in high impact ways because our customers know we are in and of the business, just like they are. OD&L [organizational development and learning] leaders should not try to be 'business partners' practicing outside of core operations. They need to identify as leaders of the business who confront the same challenges and are accountable for the same organizational goals as any other business leader in any other function."

**2. Structure training in ways that strengthen expectations and accountability for on-the-job application.** Much has been written on how to increase typically low behavioral transfer rates from training. Learning initiatives aimed at performance improvement must be structured as a process, not an event. To start, establish a link between training and the business goals it intends to address. This linkage must be deep enough to clearly delineate who is to learn what, what specific on-the-job behaviors must be executed differently or better, what job outcomes should be achieved and to which business goals these short-term outcomes should contribute.

Once defined, learning leaders must communicate the business linkage to all stakeholders from the senior executives down to the employees. "As a leader in the learning space, it's my responsibility to intimately understand the strategic direction of the business and be able to help translate it into organizational learning and behavior change implications," said Cargill's Derwin. "It's not about understanding senior leaders' view on what kind of training we should do; it's about understanding business objectives, making sure the linkage to business results is clear, and aligning learning resources to enable those goals."

Dervin, Bouck and other learning leaders use a tool called an “impact map” to formulate and communicate this business linkage. Defining and explicating the business value of training plays a critical role in facilitating expectations and accountability for learning application. Further, achieving business results hinges on engaging trainee managers in building intentionality before training and coaching for continuously accelerated performance after training. Learning departments should provide wrap-around education and performance support tools for managers to easily execute these tasks.

**3. Leverage evaluation as a strategic development tool.** For learning initiatives meant to accelerate execution of strategic initiatives, the role of evaluation is simple and imperative: to discover where key behaviors occurred and where they did not, to identify what helped or impeded their adoption and to formulate data-based recommendations to increase execution. This gives leaders the information necessary to make informed decisions regarding ways to improve performance or adjust strategic objectives.

Imagine, for instance, the effect of the learning director at any of the national pharmacy retailers being able to report, “All pharmacy staff attended the same training, but nearly 75 percent of store managers in the southeast market compared with 25 percent in your market are acting in ways necessary to implement and reap the benefits of the new health clinic operations strategy. Let’s discuss what the southeast regional director did differently to get these results”

This evaluation is about the business, not the training. Evaluation and training should work hand-in-hand to help the company get its work done fast and well and to continuously improve upon its ability to execute. Evaluating individual training programs illuminates how well a current learning effort works to help a strategic initiative succeed, and provides guidance on who needs to do what to accelerate adoption of best-practice performance.

Over time, multiple such evaluations reveal patterns about what an organization does well to turn learning into results and where it struggles. This knowledge builds the organization’s capability to milk more value from training, leveraging the right learning resources to drive job performance that quickly integrates, executes and capitalizes

on critical strategic initiatives. The winning organization is the organization that masters the ability to out-learn in order to out-perform its competition.

In its highest and best value-creation role, learning can help organizations address one of their greatest challenges: to accelerate the execution of key strategic initiatives. This call for action requires a dogged adherence to feedback on training application in the workplace and high-impact learning principles and actionable measurement.

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