

Turning Evaluation On Its Head

Philip Sweet and **Greg Whiting** explain how to prove which of your trainers and training programmes are working and which need to be upgraded!

Does every piece of training, coaching, mentoring and learning in your organisation contribute to its bottom line? What is the financial return on investment? Which are the best programmes? Which are the worst? Who are your most and least effective trainers? What separates the two?

All these pieces of information and many more should be coming from your learning analytics to give you proof of what is really happening!

"What on earth does that mean?" You might say. "Evaluation is difficult?" "Expensive?" "Can't be done here?" Any of that seem familiar?

Well, it can be done if you take the right approach.

Evaluation of training has a long and rather fraught history. Often using traditional methods, good evaluation is seen as both expensive and difficult.

And therefore, many people believe that evaluation is best kept simple with happy sheets seeking feedback and reaction to the training and de facto: If participants are happy, the training is therefore good.

Then, along came Kirkpatrick who confirmed what we all thought secretly - this really was not enough. He helped us see that we need to understand what participants have learned, how this affected their behaviour and what impact this had on the business environment.

So, every body started to get more professional about this. Some

brought in outside professionals to evaluate, they showed us better ways and did interviews and focus groups with participants, stakeholders, commissioners and lots of other really excellent stuff ... and then provided us with the all too important final report... that said what exactly?

Well it is all rather complicated and tenuous and shows us some things we might do next time to help the training run better but actually it wasn't really possible to link it to organisation results because, you know' there are so many other factors'. And the bill? Well it's often bigger than the training itself! Mmmm! No wonder many people don't go beyond the first two levels.

Then, to make matters even more complicated, along comes Becker with his human capital contribution calculations, Phillips with his very excellent work on measuring Return on Investment (ROI) assessments and Brinkerhoff with his case study approach and bingo we suddenly have a full set of tools!

So, now we 6 levels!! Why then have we got so few people using them? Having talked with dozens of trainers, training managers and evaluators the problem seems to come from setting about evaluation as a series of levels from the bottom up. When we get to level 3 most people seem to get rather lost. What is behaviour? Do we mean internal or external behaviour? How do we measure it? How do we describe it? There are



literally thousands of theories and descriptors and that's before we add in competence frameworks and their hundreds of subsets? It's no wonder most people stay at levels 1 and 2 if they are measuring training at all!

Well, there is another way. We could do the whole thing backwards! In what other area do we even attempt to forward assemble events – it's like playing one of those consequences games you get roped into at parties. You can potentially link anything to anything – a butterfly flaps its wings in China and causes a hurricane some where else in the world. Yes, it's a good story and fun at our party. Yes, this might be possible but proving it? Way too hard!

It gets slightly better if the result was one we intended to create and it happens reliably enough for us to say yes this causes that or at least there is a probability that it will.

What we are familiar with is looking at what has happened, the result that is in existence, and then

finding out what caused it. Whilst sometimes this will be hard to identify it is usually much easier because every event leaves a trail of evidence - artefacts, witnesses and the like. This after all is the principle of audit.

Now join the two together – a deliberate intention to create an outcome and the willingness to go visit it, see how much of it was delivered and then find out what value it has, how it got there and who did what to make it happen! Suddenly you've got a story that makes sense and is loaded with facts and useful information.

Well that's it! Let's treat evaluation as though it is all dimensions of a single whole rather than separate levels and lets do it upside down!!

How is it done so it is affordable? Via e-mail to participants and their line managers before programme start, following every learning event in the programme and at 3 and 6 months

after the programme is completed

How much does it cost? Well lets put in another way you'd expect to see a return on investment 1.56 to 67 times the amount you spend on evaluation.

We're interested in helping organisations do this for themselves. If you want to be one of them please get touch.

LINKS

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