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7 ways to ensure your training translates into business performance

As demands build for the constant upskilling of an evolving workforce, training costs are escalating. According to the ATD (Association for Talent Development), the average annual learning expenditure per employee is roughly $1,300[1]. That doesn't include costs associated with pulling employees away from their regular duties for training.

Then, there is "the new workplace normal." The COVID-19 pandemic forced vast numbers of employees to work remotely from home. Both trainers (internal and external) and learners had to make a hard pivot to virtual solutions, opening up new challenges - and opportunities - to ensure training solutions are effective.

In this environment, the pressure has never been greater for Learning & Development to demonstrate

[1] https://www.td.org/press-release/new-atd-research-investment-in-talent-development-on-the-rise

that training is an investment rather than a cost centre.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of training, organizations need to create a skills development framework that brings employees from training to knowledge retention to sustained behavioral changes. Once you know your training initiatives are framed in this way, it's easier to measure the true business impact.

Changing learning landscape makes measuring ROI challenging

According to the ATD report, traditional instructor-led classroom training accounted for roughly 50% of learning hours in 2019. Spurred on by the events of 2020, this delivery method is quickly giving way to new types of agile, adaptive learning.

With large parts of the population working remotely, flexible learning models are required more than ever. Digital training or eLearning can be provided to a physically dispersed audience and can be consumed wherever and whenever training is required - on any device. Programs can be customized and adapted to different types of learners in formats such as online materials, explainer videos, podcasts, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), interactive courses and more.

Furthermore, the evolution of communication platforms like Zoom, WebEx and Microsoft Teams has enabled training providers to more closely mirror the physical classroom experience in an online world. With more tools and methods to impart knowledge, instructors don't need to be onsite for days to have an impact.

Of course, not all work can be performed from home. On-site employees still require upskilling an training and will benefit from delivery methods of on-the-job training. On-site learning can be intertwined with work activities such as coaching, job shadowing, job rotations, and stretch assignments (jobs assigned outside of current employee roles).
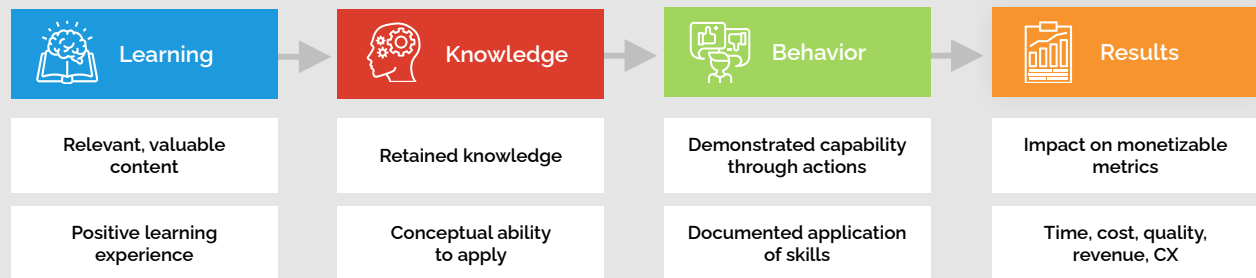
Simulation and gamification are experiential learning methods that help employees apply new skills in low-risk, safe-to-fail practice environments. Experiential learning easily engages tech-savvy millennial employees, and also helps to overcome any learning resistance from a workforce of varying ages, cultures and languages through its "hands-on" learning design.

These are both exciting and challenging times for L&D and for workplace learners. The evolving learning landscape has opened the door to a new world of training, but new delivery methods can also make it difficult to evaluate training effectiveness and translate that into measurable results.

A framework for translating training into results

Maximizing results from training requires understanding the different levels of objectives that learners and organizations can have and how they are connected. The four levels - learning, knowledge, behavior, results - typically vary by role, and can evolve over time as the organization matures.

The Kepner-Tregoe ROI Framework

Learning	Knowledge	Behavior	Results
Relevant, valuable content	Retained knowledge	Demonstrated capability through actions	Impact on monetizable metrics
Positive learning experience	Conceptual ability to apply	Documented application of skills	Time, cost, quality, revenue, CX

Measurement tool examples

Learning	Knowledge	Behavior	Results
Workshop survey	Automated knowledge testing	Coaching logs	Business KPIs
Management reviews	Standardized exams	Documentation in the work-flow	Customer experience
Case studies	Certification/Badging	Project templates	Project dashboards

Organizational performance improvement from training

Learning
Concerned mainly with the training experience itself and making sure the content is relevant to learners

Knowledge
Focuses on how much knowledge has been re-tained and can be applied based on mostly theoretical scenarios and questions, like an exam or a case study

Behavior
The demonstration and documentation of actual, sustained behavior

Results
The impact of training on hard metrics (KPIs)

The point of having a framework is to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement. Knowing that a progression is required in turning training into "hard results" is an important realization. Results will not appear out of thin air just because someone receives training.

It's also important to understand that this framework is a continuum. There is a natural cause-effect relationship between these levels – they are interrelated. Note too, that there isn't a wrong place to start. It all depends on what the training objectives are and where your organization is in the journey.

However, there is a critical transition point that needs to be crossed to truly capture the value from any training effort. That point is the translation of knowledge into behavior. Without behavior change, there can be no change in outcomes. For that to happen, you need to focus on the adoption of the skills you are looking to instill.

The key to driving adoption

When new skills are underused or ignored as soon as employees are back to work, behaviors and processes don't change, the output remains the same, and training dollars are wasted. With so much time, money and effort devoted to training, achieving measurable results must start with one question, "Did learners change their behavior after training?"

That's why the behavior level is the critical point of the ROI Framework. If addressed with clear intention, it can unlock a return on your training investment of significant proportions. The key is defining those critical behaviors that the training sought to instill and sustain in individuals, teams and entire organizations… and then driving the adoption.

Seven building blocks to ensure sustained behaviors

Sustaining behavioral change and driving results can be challenging. Here are sevens ideas that can help make training initiatives more successful.

1. Leaders must support training - before, during and after

Behavioral change is impossible without leadership buy-in. Leaders must be involved from the start to demonstrate their commitment to training, and to underscore its importance to the company. Leaders should conduct pre-training communication with learners to fully prepare them for training, explaining the skills they need to learn and how the new skills relate to their job. In addition, leaders should be present at the beginning of the training program itself and return at the end for potential learner presentations to ensure the training has met expectations. However, they should avoid staying for the duration of training, so as not to pressure participants.

On the job, it is imperative that leaders encourage, support and monitor learners in the ongoing application of new skills in the workplace. Leaders must:

1. Reinforce the expectations and the consequences of action or inaction
2. Break down any internal barriers to behavioral changes
3. Manage team priorities to limit conflicts
4. Demonstrate and model the use of the new skills
5. Provide guidance to employees as to when they should use the new skills
6. Observe and document the use of new skills in the workplace

To motivate new learners, leaders may want to adjust job profiles to reflect the desired behaviors, integrate the use of new skills into regular job performance reviews and feedback/coaching sessions, and consider offering rewards for people who change the way they work. When leaders maintain a consistent interest in the use of new skills, so will the people they manage.

Before training begins, answer these questions:

Which business results are driving the need for training?

What is the gap that needs to be closed?

What do you expect employees to do differently after training?

What indicators will demonstrate behaviors have changed?

2. Make training relevant and accessible to learners

Learners need to be able to link training directly to their job. By being able to make this connection, they see value in the training, and are more confident using their new skills in the workplace.

First, L&D needs to collaborate with operations to gain a clear understanding of the training requirements and the reasons why employees need new skills. Next, training must be tightly aligned to the work environment in order to make it relevant to learners.

To reduce the mental distance between training and applying new skills on the job, training must focus on the application of new skills to solve real-world problems from the workplace. Use actual on-the-job problems and ask employees to resolve them with new learned skills. Provide one-on-one coaching from instructors/coaches who have experience in achieving operational results. Don't aim for perfection. Instead, encourage a "fail fast, fail forward" culture and focus on incremental improvements.

Learning doesn't end when the clock strikes 5 pm on the last day. After training, participants will require access to on-demand tools and resources so they can put their new skills into practice when they are on the job. Tools might include demonstration videos, templates, workflow tools or checklists, and quick reference guides for specific problem-solving. The more employees can connect new skills training to their job, the more likely they are to continue using them. Eventually, new sustained learning becomes simply the way work gets done.

3. Provide opportunities to deepen new skills

After training, learners return to their workstations or desks where day-to-day distractions take over. Deadlines, projects, a backlog of emails, and "firefighting" relegate those precious hours of training to the bottom of the pile.

How do you help employees maintain focus on what they've learned for the successful transfer of new knowledge to the workplace? Before they have a chance to make new learning a distant memory,

extend the classroom with opportunities for them to deepen their skills. Make sure these opportunities can be "consumed" easily and in a flexible manner without disrupting the day-to-day work.

Additional post-session content for review such as self-paced eLearning courses can be very powerful to reinforce the skills they have learned.

Experiential training or simulation opportunities where employees can practice skills and receive feedback in a "safe-to-fail" environment optimize the application of new skills and can help build confidence for faster adoption and shorter time to results.

Conduct follow-up exams to test employee comprehension and understanding of concepts. Instead of testing the "what", test the "how." How do the new skills learned apply to real-life scenarios? Where should these skills be applied, when should they be used, and when should they not be used?

4. Support success with coaching and feedback

Applying new skills in a rapid-paced, day-to-day work environment can be daunting. Often, it is simply easier to fall back on old ways. But a good coach or facilitator can make the transition to new processes easier.

Practice makes permanent, but feedback makes perfect

Coaching can guide employees as they apply their skills on the job, ensuring that skills are properly used, and helping to develop employee confidence along the way.

One critical factor for performance success is feedback. Practice makes permanent, but feedback makes perfect. Coaches can use feedback to address application errors in real time when leading individuals or a group. Coaches give learners an opportunity to correct their work and learn from their efforts. Plus, positive feedback encourages others to take the extra effort and use a new skill.

Coaching can be provided in person by someone who is a constant presence in the operation or who is available for coaching during specific hours and can respond in a timely fashion. Coaching can also be provided virtually through platforms like Skype, MS Teams, or WebEx. Coaches can be on-site employees or external SMEs. Make sure that

coaching fits within the context of the employee's role, happens during daily routines, and is short and targeted.

5. Observe and document ongoing use of new skills

Your people have received training and have begun to apply new concepts to their work. How do you encourage them to continue to use them in the future?

Leaders and learners can work together to look for operational problems and determine how to use new skills to find solutions. If the problem is particularly difficult or the impact of the problem is significant, the learner may default to old habits. It's up to their leaders to slow them down and encourage the use of new learned skills (which should produce a better outcome anyway).

Leaders can assure training has a shelf-life by requiring employees to document their use of new skills. In this way, skills are reinforced through regular reporting, and eventually resolutions are arrived at faster and easier. Consider issuing training certificates or official credentials only after learners have documented use of their new skills. That way, praise is tied to outcomes rather than to proof of presence at training or conceptional knowledge.

When existing processes and systems do not support use of the new skills, learners are confused and demotivated

Additionally, employee success stories and applications should be stored in an online knowledge base for quick reference by others when similar problems arise in the future. Leadership should involve finance in the documentation process to validate financial savings or benefits from problems solved, and those results can be shared.

6. Embed new skills into existing processes

Back on the job, learners have to determine how to apply their new knowledge within standard operating procedures. When existing processes and systems do not support use of the new skills, learners are confused and demotivated, and training quickly falls by the wayside.

The key is to embed the new skills into an organization's standard day-to-day operation. The common pitfall here is positioning the use of new skills as special occurrences

rather than simply the way work is done.

Clear triggers for use and a common understanding of how to use new skills in processes are vital for successful implementation. Involve the learners in designing these process integrations, and be careful not to add steps for the sake of adding detail. In other words, if you are adding or modifying process steps, what can you remove in order to keep the use of new skills from becoming cumbersome? The new designed business process becomes part of the basis for coaching around skill use.

L&D and operational leaders should also consider involving the IT department to take advantage of existing workflow tools for documentation, sustainability and to increase organizational learning.

7. Consider initial impacts to learners that can derail success

Barriers that impede desired behaviors must be identified and removed to clear the way for integration of new skills. If the work environment makes it difficult to apply new learning, training dollars are wasted.

 Once people have received training, they are technically ready to apply the new skills in their work setting. But there may be barriers or short-term conflicting priorities that prevent them from applying their new learning. For example, additional paperwork may make it a burden to use new skills. Learners may be encouraged to use the new process, but not given sufficient time to put it into practice.

It is not just about defining job responsibilities. In the battle between what is good for the organization and what is good for the learner, learner-based impacts usually drive sustained behavior. This is the struggle of balance of consequences between the organization and individual - and where most organizations fall short.

For example: A plant engineer usually understands why problem-solving is important to an organization. He has the skills and the knowledge to solve problems. The same engineer understands how preventive problem thinking is helpful. These are positive consequences for the organization, but recognition of them is usually delayed.

Some conflicting short-term impacts related to the engineer may start to play a role. The focus may be on completing documentation over solving a problem permanently. The engineer may be rewarded publicly for effectively fighting fires, but not acknowledged for AVOIDING a problem.

Individual impacts relevant to the learner always win over long-term delayed impacts to the organization.

Training is about improving individual and team performances, and in turn influencing the overall performance of your organization. It is important to evaluate training effectiveness and ensure theoriginal goals were achieved. Equally important is applying learnings to update and improve programs, find a better solution, or even discontinue a program.

Recognize that many benefits of training are hard to measure because they are mostly qualitative in nature. Factors like job satisfaction, high morale, and increased employee retention may seem intangible—but can be extremely beneficial to the bottom line.

Overall, remember that training should not be a one-time event - but rather a learning journey. Organizations that define and support continuous learning paths enable employees, and hence their companies, to stay relevant in the rapidly transforming landscape.

Authors

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About Kepner-Tregoe

Kepner-Tregoe is the leader in problem-solving. For over six decades, Kepner-Tregoe has helped thousands of organizations worldwide solve millions of problems through more effective root cause analysis and decision-making skills. Kepner-Tregoe partners with organizations to significantly reduce cost and improve operational performance through problem-solving training, technology and consulting services.