

Learning Evaluation, or Not?

By Martyn Sloman

If training is focused on the learning needs of the organization, is detailed evaluation of the techniques involved really necessary?

Whatever big ideas emerge in learning and development over the next year, two things are certain. One, seminars and workshops on training evaluation (or return-on-investment) will continue to be popular. Two, however good the chosen presenter, a significant number of attendees will say they have learned nothing new.

The brutal truth is that there is very little new to be learned. Our fundamental approach to training evaluation has scarcely altered for almost half a century. Let's defend that bold claim. Donald Kirkpatrick's premise was that the evaluation of training should fall into a series of four levels: Level 1 asks trainees' reaction, level 2 concerns how much trainees learned, level 3 seeks to measure changes in job behavior, level 4 attempts to determine the bottom-line impact on the organization. The Kirkpatrick model has been accepted universally as the desired approach we should all adopt.

So, what has happened over the intervening, nearly 50 years? There has been endless discussion and debate on the practical implementation of Kirkpatrick at the higher levels. A whole industry seems to have emerged on the best way to assess the overall business benefit, or ROI, on training—sometimes referred to as the fifth level. Also, though recognized as important, little higher level evaluation happens in practice. Surveys show that most evaluation stops at Kirkpatrick's level 1.

What should we conclude? Let me offer a heretical line of argument: Evaluation does not receive the attention that orthodoxy demands because it's not necessarily important in determining the allocation of resources to training and learning in organizations. We have reached the stage at which we should come clean and say that this precise evaluation isn't necessarily what organizations want or welcome. Rather, what matters is that the training and development efforts are focused on the learning needs of the organization and that HR development activities are properly directed, well managed, and moni-

tored accordingly. That can be complex. But when it works well, organizations know it and there's no need for a mass of over-precise reports.

Similarly, the CIPD research on the evaluation of human capital by professors Harry Scarbrough and Juanita Elias concluded that it isn't so much the measures that are important but the *process* of measuring. Information about the value of people-management strategies, such as training and learning, need to be embedded in wider processes of dialogue and exchange over time. That will enhance the knowledge and understanding of managers on the value of human capital and, ultimately, the contribution of those strategies to the business.

I often reflect on my experience in my previous job at Ernst & Young, which was a well-managed and exceptionally well-led organization. One priority of the senior partner was to develop future partners who could take a rounded view of business opportunities rather than delivering technical excellence in a narrow area. He and his senior team were closely involved in the partnership development process, which took the form of a two-stage assessment center. It was here that he could judge progress. He and the senior team would spend a considerable amount of time asking aspiring partnership candidates whether they were getting the developmental support they needed to become rounded business leaders. That immediate evaluation of the effectiveness of the training and development effort provided powerful feedback to those responsible in the HR function. That may have been a special case; not every chief executive is as committed and supportive of learning efforts. But it does lead me to conclude that we should spend more effort exploring how we can achieve better alignment with the needs of the business, and disproportionately less effort seeking improved techniques for evaluating training. If we do the former rather than the latter, we're likely to achieve greater effectiveness, and demonstrate and deliver enhanced value to the organization. **TD**

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