

Avoiding training waste †

Nick Rushby Conation Technologies Limited

There is currently a great deal of discussion on calculating the return on investment (ROI) in training. ROI is important. It helps us to understand whether the training has had an effect on the bottom line of the business – and it helps us to convince decision-makers that they should invest in training. Different authorities advocate the merits of different ways of calculating and presenting ROI. It seems self-evident that one way to improve the ROI – regardless of the way in which it is calculated – is to improve the efficiency of training and to avoid wastage. We can calculate the efficiency of training as the ratio of desired training outcomes to the amount spent on that training. You can maximize this ratio by avoiding – or at least minimizing - training waste.

A first step is to avoid duplication in the training syllabus. As training programmes get older and more comprehensive, we start to find different courses with the same objectives. While there are occasions when it is helpful to have several different courses on the same topic, perhaps because they take different approaches and so appeal to different groups of trainees, often the only reason for duplication is historical and accidental. Establish which is the most effective for your purpose, focus on that one and retire the duplicates.

While we are looking at course content, most consultants will tell you that over time, courses accrete content but rarely shed it. As a course evolves, successive trainers will add bits and pieces to meet the changing needs of their clients. Somehow, the bits that are no longer needed are never removed and so courses get longer and longer. In extreme cases the things that the trainees need to know are lost in the undergrowth of unnecessary historical perspectives and side issues. At regular intervals, review courses to confirm that the content is necessary and sufficient to meet the current training needs.

The idea of training people just in time rather than just in case has received considerable exposure in recent years as e-learning becomes more widely available. This makes it feasible to provide training at the time it is needed rather than when a course is available to meet a need that may or may not arise. Training people just in case they may need that knowledge and those skills is likely to be very wasteful. Even if they do encounter the need in the future, it is quite likely that they will have forgotten what they learned and the skills will have faded away over time.

And we should also ensure that we are training the right people; those people who do not already have the knowledge and skills and who are not already competent. We have to address the performance gaps and to do that we have to know about the performances that are required and the performances that have already been achieved. To do this on any scale without an impossible paper chase requires some form of an automated learning management system that can help with the process of assessment (both in the classroom and in the workplace), identify the gaps and help to match individuals to appropriate training. That system can also issue timely reminders so that people turn up for training when arranged and thus avoid training resources (including expensive trainers) sitting idle.

But perhaps the most effective way of avoiding training waste is to find ways of avoiding (but not evading) training altogether. New systems and new equipment can be designed to minimise the amount of training required and to simplify the training process. Performance support systems can help, both to provide highly focused training at the point and time of need, and to guide someone who is not yet competent through the task. Think! Perhaps we can avoid this training!

It is interesting to speculate how some of these strategies could be applied to education!

† This article was first published as an editorial in *The British Journal of Educational Technology* Volume 37, no 2, March 2006. It is reproduced here by permission of Blackwell Publishing