

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

A learning programme without a framework is unlikely to offer any long-term benefits, say **Joseph R Czarnecki** and **Pete Cresswell** from ESI International. Instead companies should work hard to identify problem areas and have a clear end-goal in sight.



THE DIFFERENCE between training and a comprehensive learning programme is that the latter is a planned, benchmarked effort executed with very specific goals in mind. Learning programmes go beyond the classroom experience to a higher level of comprehension that is later implemented into the real-time workplace. With the proper tools and techniques, you can exponentially increase your chances of success.

The best way to ascertain whether your learning programme is working is to know where you started in the first place, where you are headed in the long-run, and whether you are actually getting there. It is impossible to measure return on

investment when you haven't first defined your starting and ending points.

Projects consist of people doing their jobs to the best of their abilities and skill levels. You may have the right person for the job, but their skill level could use improvement. Or perhaps you have a team of people doing a great job, only to find out the overall organisational maturity is lacking. In a three-phase solution, companies can learn to assess, implement and adopt strategies for learning programme success.

There are five common mistakes most companies make when building a learning programme and simple, yet significant methods to remedy them.

Jumping right in

Without measuring where people are currently, you will not be able to answer the return on investment question to senior management down the road. It's a lot like weight loss. How do you know how much you have improved if you don't have a starting weight to match against? Without an upfront assessment, companies often end up offering the wrong type of training to obtain their desired performance improvement. It is better to invest time in identifying the problem first before offering a solution that might not be needed. For instance, is the knowledge gap in understanding project management theory, in using project management tools or in following company methodology?

An added benefit to the assessment phase is that, while you might try to estimate improvement, it is impossible to measure accurate improvement retrospectively. It is better to establish a baseline performance level (AS-IS). You can then calibrate that against your desired state (TO-BE), and your progress along the way, using key assessment tools such as custom surveys, interviews with staff members, or a skill gap/performance analysis of your employees. This will shed a light on your employees' knowledge gain and the use of the various project management methodologies, tools, techniques and processes available to them in the organisation.

Once you have established your

baseline, you can monitor progress as you go along. When the question “How effective is our training programme?” gets raised, you’ll have your answer.

Ignoring individual and organisational perspectives

Pre-training assessments are not only beneficial for individuals, but also for the entire enterprise. Establishing where your organisation falls on the maturity scale is as important as assessing individual skill levels. For instance, perhaps your organisation’s capability in project scheduling and estimating is ‘low’, but you have experienced personnel who excel in those areas. Instead of sending everyone through training because the organisation as a whole has been assessed as ‘low’, you could set up a mentor programme for those you are trying to teach. The goal is to provide the organisation with a path toward learning that is flexible and durable enough to provide the individual with his or her own roadmap toward the organisation’s vision. Company processes and its infrastructure must support the skills people are being trained to have and vice versa.

Getting caught in the details

This is where discernment comes into play. It is important to find out the root cause of the issue at hand because, like a virus, not all diseases can be handled with antibiotics. In other words, not all performance issues can be addressed through training alone. For instance, companies often try to improve performance by focusing on one element (a symptom) of a much larger and very complex process (a cause). If they took the time to rise above the details to look at the overall process, it might be easier, faster, and ultimately, cheaper to find a way to make the process less complex. The result leads to setting up a learning programme that focuses on the ‘new’ process for success and driving an increase in performance.

An example might be when a client wants to learn how to build better schedules. They purchase project management software to help them do that, then ask for training on how to use the tool (the symptom). However, they

Top five remedies

1. Find out where you are currently by benchmarking levels of best practice knowledge and current working practices together and against a common set of baselines and metrics. Use proven ‘maturity models’ to deliver those baselines.
2. Align the individuals and organisation by investing in a structured learning programme and continuing education for the individual over the long term, to ensure that motivation levels remain high and staff continue to feel empowered to challenge ‘business as usual’ in the interests of practice improvement.
3. Treat the cause, not the symptoms! Never focus exclusively on ‘business as usual’ at the expense of expanding individual horizons, and vice versa.
4. Plan the work and work the plan by designing your programme with the end in mind. Match regular measurements and progress validation against the agreed maturity targets, re-aligning as necessary.
5. Start small and build momentum to calibrate the speed at which you develop (and consolidate) individual skills and proficiencies with your organisation’s ability to adopt, embed and deploy those skills consistently in the workplace – this may involve process refinement.



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have forgotten to look at the actual cause of their problem. To address the underlying cause, they would need to learn the theory of how to build a schedule with its intricate relationships, structure, and all of the elements. Without this, the schedules they create with their project management software will

not significantly improve from where they are now.

It is essential to maintain the big picture, looking at how learning can contribute not only to the individual, but to the company from a strategic enterprise perspective as well. Obtaining a bird’s eye view of your particular situation is more than helpful – it is imperative.

Failing to set milestones to evaluate progress

Companies that do not define what they want to accomplish and /or learn are at serious risk of wasting precious resources. Creating a road map to success may take initial investment, but long-term it is a smart way to keep your activities in alignment with your end-goals. Implementing learning plans takes several years. If your organisation has been able to overcome the first mistake by actually creating a plan in the first place, periodic updates are needed to ensure proper implementation. A strategic learning programme guides the organisation through its overall strategic plan for growth. That requires a regular

check-up on your progress, either through a project evaluation or audit, to determine if you are still on track. As stated previously, you cannot know if you have arrived if you do not know where you are going. A road map, complete with milestones, can be your guide as you move toward greater maturity.

Forgetting to start small

Companies that use pilot programmes to test training effectiveness tend to have a higher success rate than those that roll out a company-wide learning programme from the beginning. Baby steps often serve the company’s needs more effectively than a full force effort. For example, an IT manager need not go to a basic Web design course, but perhaps his administrative support should. Starting small can establish who needs what sooner. Throughout your learning programme, companies should also think about how they will put their theory into practice. The post-assessment accomplished during the adoption phase can guide your organisation beyond the classroom into sustainable, effective change.

Getting the balance right

An effective learning programme is about getting the balance right between building the individuals’ talent (through training and education) and ensuring that the individual growth can be channelled more directly, and more predictably, into driving organisational results. This balance leads to more established organisational and individual maturity.

When companies adopt a more holistic approach to learning, they can enjoy the effects thereof by remembering what learning programmes are ultimately designed for: to improve business on all levels while working toward a common goal and creating the greatest impact with the fewest resources possible.

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