

Is The Training Room Defunct?

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One of the greatest challenges that training and organization development professionals face is the demand on the part of their organizations for a minimization of employees' time off job. Our own research shows that while there is a higher focus on the time and attention spent on developing capabilities across all levels of operation, that time and attention is not in the classroom.

The reliance on in-classroom training by many organizations is dying a rapid death, not out of any ill will; primarily it is out of economic necessity. Business-impacting results are rare in a classroom setting. Newly formed skills learned and immediately applied; to produce operational results are the order of the day and the future of organization transformation. We all feel it. The rate of organizational transformation is becoming faster, daily.

The pace of change

A number of trends are at play. The primary one ringing in the changes is the competitive pressure of the marketplace. Corporate trainers are under intense pressure to not only justify their expenditure in measurable ways; also they must achieve those results with reductions in the amount of time employees are away from the activities and environments of their jobs. The message is clear: Learning must be applied to the ongoing challenges of the workplace. A bias for action, active learning, and highly focused engagement, combined with response-based consequences and feedback, are becoming the new model for optimum capability development. The specific response to a decrease in classroom-based learning, however, is not as clear because it is highly dependent on operational needs and business context.

"Training, at least the way many organizations have understood it, is going the way of the dinosaur"

So what has occurred to create this change in focus and effort? As businesses have examined the way their business processes add value to the customer experience, they have finally turned their gaze to those internal activities supporting operational performance. Training has come under the magnifying glass. Preconceived notions about what is effective are being questioned. Long-held standards and practices are being afforded a degree of scrutiny often reserved for production lines and sales programs. The result of which is a renewed commitment to creating as many opportunities as possible for skill development, knowledge transfer, and incremental learning, and to compound that learning with habits formed through applied repetition.

There is an old adage, often referred to in the context of training in the medical profession: "See one. Do one. Teach one." A reflection of that mindset is becoming the pattern for approaching performance improvement through results-based skill development. In a recent survey reported in Chief Learning Officer magazine, and conducted by Novations Group, the top five trends impacting organizations' approaches to training and organizational development were:

1. More on-line/e-learning
2. Greater effort to quantify results of training/development
3. Increased on-the-job training
4. Personal coaching
5. Fewer classroom hours/more condensed classroom time

The driver in all of these cases is that there should be a meaningful, behavior changing impact on the learning that should be sustained within the operational context in which the learning will be applied. These trends reflect current thinking that no matter how close a classroom training program is conducted to the worksite, the distance from classroom to work

area has a diminishing effect on business impact.

The holistic approach

There is a better way to capitalize on learning experiences. It requires a results-based, holistic approach to learning that is in the context of the learners' work. To arrive at that approach, it is necessary to understand some fundamental building blocks in human performance.

The critical question for any organization seeking results from changes to human behavior through skill development is: "What do we need people to be doing to achieve our strategic intent?" Fundamentally, only those skills that drive the change required to achieve an organization's strategy should warrant time and attention. Some of which might be basic or elemental in nature, essentially the price of admission to a market. Other skills might demand the creation of new ways of thinking or being in the context of work. In either case, the required new behaviors must be transferred, applied and tested within a supportive performance environment. They must also be relevant to the production of customer-perceived value as rapidly as possible.

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The best skill development is done by an organization's own practitioners and focused on producing results within the context in which the work will be conducted. Many organizations cannot afford to have their best practitioners always involved in skill development. Nor can they always create the space required to train people in situ in a work environment. The approach we recommend is partnering with people, within your organization or external to it, who can transfer a skill rapidly and who can support the development of that skill through feedback, coaching and mentoring alongside the person being trained as they test their newfound knowledge.

While our organization has been a master practitioner of classroom training for many years, we have seen time and time again through our consulting engagements that structured on-job training results in faster transfer of skills, faster testing of those skills, and a higher chance of those skills being retained over the long term. In terms of the scope of organizational change, it is akin to changing the interior of a jumbo jet while it is in flight. As such, there are some critical ingredients and some key questions on your flight toward success.

Results-based skills development demands that an organization focus its efforts on developing those skills rapidly so they can be applied immediately to those business processes that result in the greatest customer impact. The delay between classroom training and application defeats the intended benefit. The abdication of responsibility for skill development to the classroom instructor means that managers are off the hook for providing the appropriate coaching, feedback and mentoring that creates habits in the newly developed.

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The tyranny of efficiency that classroom training implies, and in fact demands, is negated when assessed against its long-term effectiveness. The old training watchwords were: "backsides in seats," minimized costs-per-head, days-long programs, job aids soon lost, and management "buy-in" without commitment. The new results-based skill development language revolves around: rapid development of skills, relevancy to the job, immediately applicable, universally encouraged and sustained through habit.

While results-based skill development drives business results, the economic reality is equally appealing. The return on investment of these initiatives is greater than 1:1 because creating value is the target of the learning approach. For example, at a San Francisco Bay Area biotech company, the senior leadership team needed to make a series of critical decisions about positioning the business in light of recent changes in their development mix and the associated external partners. Rather than an executive retreat to discuss strategy, the CEO used this opportunity to "level-set" the senior leadership team's decision-making processes. An external facilitator was brought in, to not only drive to successful decision outcomes, they were also responsible for creating a common language for decision making that the team could share.

Summary

Training, at least the way many organizations have understood training, is going the way of the dinosaur. A renewed

commitment to only doing those things that create a meaningful, positive impact on the performance of our people, and results recognized by customers, is the order of the day. Clear, specific expectations, tied to strategic and operational goals, with targeted skill development activities that can be rapidly applied, tested and improved will move organizations further faster than nearly all knowledge imparted in a classroom. Classroom training is not habit forming. Improved business performance means constant skill development. Business performance excellence created through results-based skill development is not an act, it is a habit.

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