Article

Implementing effective training evaluation in the NHS

Whilst national governments stress the importance of workplace skills development as a central element of economic growth and organizations invest substantial amounts in training, very few private firms or public sector organizations actually review learning's impact on individuals, teams or organizational results.

There is a fundamental paradox here. While the importance of vocational training is widely recognized, promoted and backed with impressive amounts of spending very few organizations actually evaluate training. The stark truth is that most organizations do not know what difference their training makes despite the high expectations placed on it.

This is an enduring problem. Despite evaluation becoming an established profession more than half a century ago, it still struggles to provide practitioners with reliable tools to allow them to effectively assess the impact of learning.

This matters because a lot of training, including time, effort and budget, may be wasted. Studies show that just 10 to 15 per cent of what employee's learn in a classroom transfers to improved job performance. This is a problem in both the private and public sectors. Results from an NHS Staff Survey in 2008 showed that 44 per cent of nurses and midwives didn't believe the training they had received in the previous twelve months helped them do their job better.
What's going wrong?

When there are many compelling reasons why organizations should evaluate training, why do less than two per cent attempt to evaluate its impact? There are three interrelated reasons that explain the low level of workplace learning evaluation:

1. The complexity of learning. Learning is a complex multiple dimensional phenomenon comprising, amongst other things – individual traits, needs and emotions, organizational structures and cultures, wider policy concerns (particularly in the public sector) as well as programme design, content and delivery. Isolating just one variable, such as training, and demonstrating a causal relationship between it and an outcome is not straightforward.
2. Inadequate methods. While there are many evaluation tools available to practitioners in reality most base themselves on a four level model (student reaction, learning, behaviour and results), sometimes with the addition of the "return on investment" (ROI) "fifth" level. These approaches provide poor indicators of learning's effectiveness.
3. Organizational barriers. Practitioners face a range of practical, personal and organizational constraints, which inhibit their ability to undertake evaluations. These include cost, limited capacity, capability issues, lack of time, difficulty in obtaining relevant data, lack of organizational support and inadequate evaluation systems.

These are real problems. To be effective evaluation needs to address these issues

head on. Practitioners need reliable, relevant and robust measurements of impact, which also take account of context and, crucially, are usable.

Effective evaluation

There is a need to square the evaluation circle in order to provide robust approaches that produce credible results but also addresses practical barriers. What is required is a systematic and logical approach that practitioners can adopt to meet the needs of individual programme and organizational circumstances. One approach adopts the following six steps (not all of which will be necessary in every evaluation):

1. Consider the pre-learning condition.
2. Take account of context factors.
3. Utilize a productivity framework to identify inputs and outputs learning will impact upon.
4. Gather and analyse data.
5. Benchmark the learning programme.
6. Develop a metric.

Step 1 – pre-learning

Evaluation needs to take place before the learning programme starts. Evaluation can even address whether training's needed in the first place. Learning and Development (L&D) staff should consider:

1. What the expectations, aims and objectives and anticipated outcomes of the programme are?
2. What the focus of the learning is (for example, the acquisition of skills or the development of new work related behaviours)?
3. What elements of the learning cycle should you evaluate? Organizations may be interested in discovering the effectiveness of a programme's design and delivery, the extent to which learning transfers, or the impact on performance of learning or all of these.

Being clear on what exactly you are going to evaluate and why will assist you in focusing resources and shape data gathering.

Stage 2 – Context

Learning takes place within a specific context. The attitudes and behaviours of peers, for example, reshape learning in the classroom, and supervisors back in the workplace. Factors unrelated to the learning programme, such as lack of supervisor support, may impact on effectiveness. While all barriers may not be apparent at the beginning of a programme, you should give thought to them as part of the initial evaluation process. Doing this will allow L&D staff to assess whether negative outcomes from evaluation lie within the programme itself or whether external issues are affecting it.

You should consider the eventual audience(s) for the evaluation, as this will partly shape the gathering and presentation of data. The extent to which trainers, line managers, supervisors and others will be involved needs to be taken into account at this stage. The role of stakeholders may include assisting with the identification of impact measures, the gathering of data and the validation of results.

Stage 3 – Measure what matters

The economic concept of productivity provides a useful framework to guide data gathering. A productivity framework provides a coherent means of identifying

potential evidence to assess the overall impact of learning. Ultimately, this is what matters. Inputs and outputs do not have to be tangible costable elements. They can include employee motivation or quality measures.

Issues to consider will include:

- What's the cost of the programme (including the evaluation)?
- What other input factors might the learning impact on? Input costs may reduce as a result of the training programme for example through reduced absence.
- What are the relevant output measures for the programme? Output measures may be costable factors such as increased sales or intangibles such as greater customer satisfaction.

Stage 4 – Data

Inevitably, the evidence that is ultimately gathered will be constrained by organizational realities such as what is available, time and cost and capability issues. Focus groups are an effective means of gathering data on learning's impact but require time and particular skills to run, transcribe and analyse. L&D specialists will need to consider their own capacity and capability when deciding what to gather and how to analyse it.

Relying on a single source of data, however, leaves evaluators open to the charge that evidence is not robust or convincing. Using a range of methods and sources to build up complementary evidence will strengthen claims that the programme, rather than another factor, has made a difference.

Questions at this stage include:

- What data do you need? What's currently available and how will you gather any missing data?
- Over what time period is the evaluation required?
- What resources are available to carry out the evaluation including data analysis?
- Who will gather data and analyse it?

Stage 5 – Benchmark (if possible)

There is a growing body of occupational psychology research that convincingly suggests certain features can positively impact on workplace learning's effectiveness. Auditing the extent to which a learning programme and associated workplace environment meet these will provide further evidence of whether training is effective. Employees' motivation to learn relates to their willingness to transfer training into their job. Unfortunately, academics could do more to make research easily available to practitioners.

Stage 6 – Metric

The public sector uses metrics as a method to present impact data. They are a convenient means of marshalling evidence to assess the impact of a programme. Data is grouped according it its effect within the overall productivity framework. For example, in an evaluation of a training programme for domiciliary social care support workers the evidence, gathered through a range of methods and sources, was grouped under the following headings in the metric:

- individual and organizational capacity (examples included reduced turnover and increased discretionary effort);
- work organization (such as improved team working);

- quality of care (for example improved client satisfaction);
- skills development and application (this was linked to the NHS competency based appraisal framework); and
- allocative efficiency (evidence of the effectiveness of the learning itself such as its contribution to widening participation and partnership working between the employer and education provider).

Metrics allow the measuring of costable and intangible costs and benefits. You can calculate the ROI by extracting the quantitative data from the metric. The metric can provide further data to incorporate into other human resource performance measurement tools, such as balanced scorecards.

Questions at this stage include:

- How to present the results of the evaluation?
- Who will you present the results to?
- What further uses will you put the evaluation to?
- What went well and what would the practitioner change next time?

As Paul Bramley notes in his book *Evaluating Training*, ultimately, assessing the worth of a programme "is actually someone's opinion". Despite this, a metric provides an ideal tool to allow stakeholders to make informed judgments on the value of a programme, whether it has met its objectives and what its impact is.

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The author is Richard Paul Griffin.