Training Events Aren't Working …
But Just-in-Time Content Does

Overview

Training is all about results. For compliance training, it's avoiding potentially massive costs and ensuring the welfare of all involved. For general workplace training, it's moving the needle on scorecard measures to an extent that more than pays back the investment in training.

The problem is that most training, whether classroom or e-learning, has not been producing the results that organizations require. In too many cases, training is a one-and-done event that delivers little lasting impact.

Organizations today can quickly generate a greater and more immediate payback on their learning investment. This requires reallocating training resources to include a comprehensive performance support function where content is delivered on mobile devices, just-in-time and at the point of need.

Training's questionable results

The lack of training results is the "elephant in the room" issue that no one wants to talk about, yet won't go away. Experts have been sounding the alarm for years.

Although millions of dollars are spent on training, there is little empirical evidence linking training to improved job behavior or employee attitudes.

Haskell observed in *Transfer of Learning*, "Most of the research on employee training clearly shows that, although millions of dollars are spent on training, there is little empirical evidence linking training to improved job behavior or employee attitudes."[1]

In the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Martin wrote, "With some studies suggesting that just 10% to 40% of training is ever used on the job, it is clear that a big chunk of the tens of billions of dollars organizations spend annually on staff development is going down the drain."[2]

One survey of a large number of employees who had just gone through training found that only 15% of them tried the new skills and got positive results. 15% said they didn't even try them, and 70% said they tried them somewhat and got no worthwhile results.[3]

It's no wonder that the training budget is the first to be cut when times get tough. According to Bersin, over the last five years, average training expenditures per employee have dropped 37%, the average number of training hours provided per employee has dropped over 50%, and trainers are covering more employees than ever before.[4]

Performance Improvement Results

In fact, some employers now consider training to be a last resort, figuring that it's easier and cheaper to hire from the large pool of qualified applicants currently available rather than train existing employees.[5] This may be acceptable for general professional skills, but it won't work when everyone needs to be trained on a new piece of equipment.

The disconnect with adult learning research

According to Kay Bunch of Georgia State University, "Organizations spend as much as US$200 billion annually on training and development; however, much of this investment appears squandered on ill-conceived or poorly implemented interventions."[6]

Whether it's an all-day classroom session or a 90-minute e-learning program, most workplace training suffers from the "Terrible Too's of Training": Too much information that is too complex is dumped on learners too fast for too long with too little reinforcement and too big a delay before using it back on the job.[7]

It's a telling commentary on the quality of typical training events that learners usually rate the time spent mingling with other attendees as the most valuable part of a class.

It is not about training events

The creation and delivery of training events, which tends to be the primary focus of training departments, is only a minor contributor to the overall success of learning.

First, a Bersin study indicated that approximately 80% of all corporate learning takes place through on-the-job interactions with peers, experts, and managers.[8] So most workplace learning is actually happening outside of formal training events.

Second, for the 20% of learning that takes place in events, the focus is often misplaced. An ASTD study analyzed the causes of poor training results, and found that only 10% were due to the learning event. 20% were due to what happened prior to the event, and 70% were due to the application environment after the event.[9]

This suggests that training can't be a one-and-done event. The right learning culture and process has to be in place prior to training, and the right refresh learning and workplace support has to be available afterwards.

Yet where do organizations put their money?

70% of the causes of poor training results were due to the application environment after the event.

Performance Improvement Results

	Causes of poor training results[9]	% of training expenditures[10]
Prior to the event	20%	10%
The learning event	10%	85%
After the event	70%	5%

Figure 1.

As summarized in Figure 1, approximately 85% of training funds are spent on the learning event itself. Only 10% of funds are spent on pre-work, and a mere 5% of funds are spent on the follow-up to training—which is where the most problems arise.[10] It's a total mismatch between resources and importance.

Improving results with just-in-time content

Training is *anticipation learning*, i.e., large chunks of content delivered in advance of someone actually needing it. It is conceptual and informational, and it pulls workers *off* the job.

Performance support is *tactical learning*, i.e., small bites of content delivered just-in-time and only as needed. It is "do this, say this, get this" information designed to generate specific and immediate results. It *is* the job.

Training is going to an Excel class, being shown hundreds of commands, and then forgetting them before they're needed. Performance support is watching a short on how to do a function in Excel. Learners view it, then do it. If they need to do it again, they can view it again. If they do it often enough, at some point they don't need the video anymore.

Learners don't want training that they have to remember and figure out how to use on the job. They want content that tells them exactly what they are supposed to do next and how to do it.

Mobile first, not last

Classroom content, by its very nature, can never be just-in-time. And the vast majority of e-learning is designed for the PC screen. Both of these are developmental dead ends when it comes to content for immediate use.

Devices such as smartphones and tablets are in the process of overtaking PCs as the information screens of choice. And mobile infotainment and connectivity is seen as a key technology for the automotive industry, another massive mobile delivery option.

This is why Google adopted its "Mobile First" strategy. Its applications are now developed first for smartphones, and then for PCs.[11] To stay competitive,

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organizations are going to need to do the same thing with their training and performance support function.

Summary

A Bersin survey found that, "Organizations are turning away from formal classroom training—and even traditional e-learning programs—to deliver bite-sized learning on a continuous basis. In fact, our research shows that today, the demand is for 'just the learning you need, just in time.'"[12]

To accomplish this, organizations need to do the following:

Perform an assessment. Take a candid look at the training function. Is it generating results? Is learning a one-and-done event? Do courses have the proper instructional design? Are new programs mobile-ready?

Identify the best practices that will quickly improve results. Figure out what specific workplace behaviors will immediately move the needle on scorecard results. Capture them and create short programs that can be deployed to all six screens (smartphone, tablet, route handheld, PC, MP3 player, and TV) without redevelopment.

Create a just-in-time content engine. Establish a process and the information systems that enable the rapid deployment of information and skills to all of the organization's constituents.

It's not about spending nearly the entire training budget on one-and-done events that don't work. Adding a just-in-time content capability to the existing training function is the next big opportunity to generate dramatically improved results.

Adding a just-in-time component to the existing training function is the next big opportunity to generate dramatically improved results.

About the author

Ken Cooper is the founder of CooperComm, Inc., a St. Louis-based productivity improvement firm. He has conducted over 2,500 training seminars and appeared in over 300 live and recorded video-based e-learning programs. Ken has written for *Training, Trainer's Workshop, Chief Learning Officer,* and *The Corporate Board,* and is co-author of *Taming the Terrible Too's of Training* (TotalComm Press) and author of *Effective Competency Modeling & Reporting* (AMACOM).

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