

## Features

### The evaluation of learning and development

**Angela Mulvie** looks at some of the issues concerning training evaluation and the methodologies used. She also describes some recent research she has conducted into evaluation practices.

The evaluation of learning and development — the logical end result of an organisation's investment in developing its people — is notoriously difficult to carry out effectively. Despite growing levels of training evaluation activity at both organisational as well as individual level, much of this work is conducted in a simple and relatively unsophisticated manner. This is perhaps surprising, given that levels of investment may be quite high, not only in terms of costs of training delivered, but also in terms of other resources used — namely time, facilities, staff redeployment, engagement of temporary cover, and so on.

The reasons for the general lack of evaluation activity are difficult to establish other than to suggest that, because it is a challenging area, organisations do not feel confident about what to do. A recent survey by the *Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the United Kingdom* (UK) suggests that the top ranking benefits of training are associated with skills improvement which are directly linked to immediate job demands. Meanwhile, general organisational benefits such as staff motivation, retention, raised commitment and reduced absenteeism are considered to be quite useful. Even though organisations may be able to identify such benefits in broad terms, they do not appear to undertake sophisticated measures at the end of learning and development activities, other than an immediate check on learners' general satisfaction with the training event.

Evaluation techniques need to be clearly thought out and manageable in their levels of complexity and sophistication. Yet the approaches can be expensive to manage and administer while catering to the need to produce useful information for forward planning and the determination of a strategy for evaluation. Recent changes to the UK's national Standard Investors in People, an internationally recognised people management and development framework, now requires organisations to demonstrate how they are using evaluation data to develop a strategy for performance improvement. Arguably, this may mean that at last organisations begin to give real attention to this part of their business activities.

For large organisations that have a dedicated, in-house HR/training/learning and development function, there is an opportunity to establish clear systems and processes for data gathering upon the completion of training. In addition, the impact assessment and outcomes from development activities can be included in the manager training. For smaller companies, simplicity of approach is probably the best way forward. In both environments, however, a strong case can be made, in purely business terms, for measuring the return on investment (ROI).

#### Why should organisations measure their ROI?

Evaluation has been described as “the systematic collection of descriptive and judgmental information necessary to make effective decisions related to the selection, adoption, value and modification of various instructional activities”. Evaluation is, therefore, about the gathering of information for a purpose. Easterby-Smith (1990) provides four such purposes:

1. **Proving**: to demonstrate that something has happened as a result of training and development activities
2. **Controlling**: to demonstrate that the standards of delivery have been monitored
3. **Improving**: to demonstrate that the review of current programmes and activities will ensure they

become better in the future

4. **Learning:** to demonstrate that evaluation is an integral part of the whole learning and development process itself

By measuring the ROI, the organisation can establish what has resulted from a certain level of investment and use this information to determine future strategy on staff development.

### **Methods of evaluation**

A number of different evaluation methods are available although many of these are linked to what has been described as the most commonly used and popular method, Donald Kirkpatrick's four-level model of training evaluation. These four levels are:

1. **Reaction:** assessing what the trainees thought of the particular programme, usually by use of a questionnaire (Level 1)
2. **Learning:** measuring the learning principles, facts, skills and attitudes which were specified as training objectives (Level 2)
3. **Behaviour:** measuring aspects of job performance which are related to the training objectives (Level 3)
4. **Results:** relating the results of the training programme to organisational objectives and other criteria of effectiveness (Level 4)

Other approaches to evaluation have been highlighted but these have tended to be an extension or variation of the original Kirkpatrick model. Pulley (1994) describes *responsive evaluation* which focuses on what decision-makers in the organisation would like to know, and how this might be met ie the senior team/board of management and the kinds of data they require for forward planning. Newby (1992) describes a *context evaluation* approach, which focuses on the different contexts of evaluation — evaluation activities need to take account of the environment and contextual features of the development. Preskill and Torres (1999) describe *evaluative enquiry*, which approaches evaluation as a learning experience in itself, using dialogue, reflection, and challenge to distil learning opportunities and create an environment where enquiry skills might be used. Whilst these are interesting developments, they only serve, however, to widen the opportunity for difficulty of gathering and presenting information.

### **What problems exist in the calculation of ROI and why are organisations reluctant to carry out such work?**

Evaluating levels of investment in staff development is inherently problematical and this is what stops a lot of organisations from doing much more than gathering up initial information about what trainees felt about their learning experiences. Most evaluation is carried out at Level 1 as organisations find it difficult to establish precise measures of change at Levels 2 and 3. Traditionally, very limited attempts are made to establish links between the results achieved (Level 4) and business improvements which might accrue. Attempts have been made to establish a Level 5 — the measurement of the real return on investment — by Jack Phillips who argues that by planning the project (an impact study), collecting, analysing, and reporting on data, it is possible to calculate a monetary value of the outcome of the investment. He suggests building this information into a scorecard approach, and tying specific results to the known monetary value of the employee (his or her salary). He describes the need for participant estimation at the beginning of any training investment of the performance change which will result, and how this will impact on job performance, productivity etc.

The key difficulty, however, is how to isolate the estimated increase in performance to just training, when a number of other variables may also be impacting on what has happened. This has become the key deterrent for organisations in trying to make such calculations. If the other variables could be identified and quantified in

monetary terms, they could be subtracted from the cost of the development activity itself.

The approach which an organisation takes to its evaluation activities must not be prescriptive ie one size will not fit all. Recent research conducted in 20 organisations in Scotland, both public and private sector, large and small scale, on how training evaluation is carried out presented some interesting findings. The research examined current practices on how evaluation of learning and development is undertaken, within organisations currently working with the Investors in People National Standard, and how this assists with the measurement of performance improvement overall at different levels.

Respondents all described the difficulties of going beyond Kirkpatrick's Level 2 of evaluation, using line managers to follow through on learning achieved. While they have prepared a corporate training plan, containing priorities for learning and development and preliminary associated costs, only loosely defined objectives were set for events planned. No clear relationship was found between the setting of such objectives and specifications of quantifiable performance improvement expected. The line managers' role in evaluation was generally limited to the completion of post-course discussions either immediately after an event or specifically organised some two to three months after the learning activity, or as part of on-going performance review interviews. Very limited information was found of organisations providing specific training to managers in evaluation processes. Respondents cited the biggest barriers to evaluation as lack of time, lack of knowledge about how to make it really work, concerns over the sheer scale of what had to be done, concern over the line managers' commitment to it, and the need to engage senior managers appropriately.

### **The way forward**

The key message from this small scale study was that an integrated approach should be followed, whereby the organisation thinks about its evaluation activities at the planning stage ie before the start of the learning and development intervention, and considers why that intervention is taking place. By taking a more strategic approach, whereby evaluation commences at the initial stage of identifying and prioritising development needs, these can be matched more closely to overall organisational requirements. By pursuing an integrated approach the risk of not meeting training objectives at the input stages (needs analysis, design of programmes and their implementation) is lessened. Evaluating reactions and impact at the output stage (ie on completion of the development activity) will also contribute to the overall measurement of levels of investment. If evaluation is working well, senior managers should be able to describe the organisation's overall investment of time, money and resources in learning and development, and quantify, where appropriate, how this has improved the performance of the organisation. Managers and their staff should be able to provide examples of how learning and development has improved the performance of their team and the organisation. By taking evaluation information back into the business planning cycle, the organisation has a real chance to make it work as part of continuous improvement strategies.

#### **References**

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**Angela Mulvie**, who established Wellpark Consultancy Services in 1991, is an experienced HR practitioner who has worked in the electronics and manufacturing sectors and the public sector, before entering management education where she spent 15 years training and developing personnel specialists.

A Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, she has extensive knowledge of the employment

*market through her academic and research work and writes for a number of publications.*