

Approaches to evaluating learning and development

PART 3

by Andrew Simon

Alternatives to ROI

As we discussed in the last edition of Performance Architect, ROI calculation may not always be possible or desirable. Other assessments of outcomes may be considered. These could include:

- impact statements
- value for money assessments.

Impact statements

Impact statements are qualitative and quantitative descriptions of how training or learning has made a difference to the learner's ability on the job, the workplace and the organisation as a whole. Data for impact statements can be gathered by the evaluator through structured observations, interviews, work sample reviews, surveys and where appropriate, performance management reports. Descriptions on specific improvements and their consequences are written up as a summary of how training has impacted on the individual, group and organisation.

A structure for an impact statement could include:

- **The Issue:**
 - summary of the problem or need and its consequences.
- **The Intervention:**
 - brief description of the Intervention strategy and associated costs.
- **The Impact:**
 - summary of the skills that were acquired
 - list of examples of how the new skills are now being applied
 - summary of what has changed as a result
 - assessment of the perceived benefit, negative outcomes or ambiguous outcomes this change has brought.

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■ Potential Impact:

- indication of longer term implications and possibilities.

■ Recommendations:

- for investment related decisions
- for improvement related decisions.

While impact statements are generally used at the highest level of evaluation and generally constitute a component in a comprehensive evaluation exercise, a detailed impact statement itself can constitute an evaluation model. The amount of information that could be potentially captured and reported in comprehensive impact statements can be useful in presenting a picture of the overall benefit of a program especially for programs which have a more developmental or longer term focus and where other methods of evaluation would be inappropriate.

Value for money assessments

Value for money is an assessment of worth that is commonly used within Commonwealth agencies to guide procurement decisions. Value for money principles however, can also be used in making judgements about the worth or significance of a program.

There are three key factors in making value for money judgements:

- 1 Cost related factors including direct, indirect and lifecycle costs.
- 2 Assessment of the contribution which the program makes to the advancement of organisational output and outcomes structures or to business unit goals. These may include:

Intangible contributions

- Enhanced self awareness
- Greater employability and deployability
- Networking opportunities
- Increased participant morale and enthusiasm
- Increased awareness of program initiatives by other employees
- Enhanced team effectiveness

- Integration of the program with other organisational processes e.g. performance management etc.
- Enhanced organisational reputation and image
- Enhanced organisational capacity to respond to contingencies

Tangible contributions

- New or enhanced work related skills and knowledge
- Alignment of the program with business intentions and skill needs
- Customer or client satisfaction
- Reduced error rates
- Faster response times
- Enhanced productivity
- Better quality
- Employee retention (where this is directly related to training/learning)

Selected contributions are then weighted to reflect organisational emphasis or priorities and scored to provide a 'contributive score' if required, to summarise the 'contributive value' of the program.

- 3 Judgement on the value of money as a result of program costs versus weighted program contributions.

Value for money analysis is typically expressed as statements rather than ratios or other mathematical figures. In summary:

*Value for money =
total costs compared to
total contribution.*

Evaluation resources

The provision of organisational support and resourcing is essential if evaluation activities are to be seriously undertaken and be effective in providing information that facilitates on-going improvement or people investment decisions. Typical evaluation related resources could include:

Program evaluator

Depending on the scope and level of evaluation activity and other organisational constraints, resourcing this role within organisations could be undertaken in a variety of ways. These may include:

- 1 Dedicated full time/part time permanent or contract position. A dedicated resource would be responsible for the planning, conduct and reporting of all evaluation activity
- 2 Assign responsibility to a current staff member who would focus on the planning and coordination of evaluation activity which would be largely conducted by service providers as part of their contracted program delivery responsibilities
- 3 Assign evaluation responsibilities to all program managers who would as part of their program management responsibility, plan and coordinate evaluation activity which are then largely conducted by services providers, with the HR area providing expert support and advice

- 4 Contract expert evaluation consultants who would plan, conduct and report on evaluation activity
- 5 A combination of the above options.

Learning related data

The capacity and ability to identify, track and report on learning related data from the organisation's Information Management Systems is a required organisational capability if evaluation is to be conducted at deeper levels. Basic data required would include:

- direct training costs by programs
- indirect training costs by programs
- payroll costs by programs
- number of days spent on formal training by program
- number of employees who have attended formal training by classification, gender and business unit by program.

Evaluation tools

Surveys and polls are basic tools which evaluators use to gather post program data. Surveys can be delivered by hard copy or by email, Intranet or Internet based forms. Organisations should have the capacity to facilitate the quick delivery and computation of surveys especially when evaluations are conducted internally.

Conclusion

The core feature of any evaluation is judging the value and worth of a program. This is never an easy task and effort should be made to identify the appropriate scope and nature of any evaluative effort on a program by program basis, if the information gathered from evaluation is to be useful in facilitating continual improvement and appropriate people investment decision making.

This paper has attempted to provide some background on program evaluation as context for such considered thinking regarding the nature and scope of evaluation activities within Australian organisations including the use of ROI, impact statements and value for money measures.

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