

Formulating and implementing learning and development strategies

This chapter deals with the formulation and implementation of learning and development strategies, the purpose of which is to provide a road map for the future and a basis upon which learning and development activities can be planned. The chapter deals with making the business case, creating a learning climate, identifying learning needs, planning and implementing learning and development activities, and evaluating the learning that has taken place.

MAKING THE BUSINESS CASE

The business case for learning and development should demonstrate how learning, training and development programmes will meet business needs. Kearns and Miller (1997) go as far as to claim that: 'If a business objective cannot be cited as a basis for designing training and development, then no training and development should be offered.'

The areas of the business strategy that depend on talented people should be analysed. The organization's strategic plans and their impact on knowledge and skill

requirements should also be noted. For example, these might include the development of a high performance culture, productivity improvements, the innovation and launch of new products or services, achieving better levels of service delivery to customers, or the extended use of IT or other forms of technology. Any proposed learning and training interventions should specify how they would contribute to the achievement of these strategic goals.

A cost/benefit analysis is required that compares the benefits, expressed in quantified terms as far as possible, which will result from the learning activity. The business case has to convince management that there will be an acceptable return on the investment (ROI) in learning and training programmes. It can be difficult to produce realistic figures, although the attempt is worth making with the help of finance specialists. The case for investing in learning and development can refer to any of the following potential benefits:

- improve individual, team and corporate performance in terms of output, quality, speed and overall productivity;
- attract high-quality employees by offering them learning and development opportunities, increasing their levels of competence and enhancing their skills, thus enabling them to obtain more job satisfaction, to gain higher rewards and to progress within the organization;
- provide additional non-financial rewards (growth and career opportunities) as part of a total reward policy (see Chapter 42);
- improve operational flexibility by extending the range of skills possessed by employees (multiskilling);
- increase the commitment of employees by encouraging them to identify with the mission and objectives of the organization;
- help to manage change by increasing understanding of the reasons for change and providing people with the knowledge and skills they need to adjust to new situations;
- provide line managers with the skills required to manage and develop their people;
- help to develop a positive culture in the organization: one, for example, which is oriented towards performance improvement;
- provide higher levels of service to customers;
- minimize learning costs (reduce the length of learning curves).

DEVELOPING A LEARNING CULTURE

A learning culture is one that promotes learning because it is recognized by top management, line managers and employees generally as an essential organizational process to which they are committed and in which they engage continuously.

Reynolds (2004) describes a learning culture as a 'growth medium' that will 'encourage employees to commit to a range of positive discretionary behaviours, including learning' and which has the following characteristics: empowerment not supervision, self-managed learning not instruction, long-term capacity building not short-term fixes. It will encourage discretionary learning, which Sloman (2003a) believes takes place when individuals actively seek to acquire the knowledge and skills that promote the organization's objectives.

It is suggested by Reynolds (2004) that to create a learning culture it is necessary to develop organizational practices that raise commitment amongst employees and 'give employees a sense of purpose in the workplace, grant employees opportunities to act upon their commitment, and offer practical support to learning'. He proposes the following steps:

1. Develop and share the vision – belief in a desired and emerging future.
2. Empower employees – provide 'supported autonomy'; freedom for employees to manage their work within certain boundaries (policies and expected behaviours) but with support available as required.
3. Adopt a facilitative style of management in which responsibility for decision-making is ceded as far as possible to employees.
4. Provide employees with a supportive learning environment where learning capabilities can be discovered and applied, eg peer networks, supportive policies and systems, protected time for learning.
5. Use coaching techniques to draw out the talents of others by encouraging employees to identify options and seek their own solutions to problems.
6. Guide employees through their work challenges and provide them with time, resources and, crucially, feedback.
7. Recognize the importance of managers acting as role models: 'The new way of thinking and behaving may be so different that you must see what it looks like before you can imagine yourself doing it. You must see the new behaviour and attitudes in others with whom you can identify' (Schein, 1990).
8. Encourage networks – communities of practice.
9. Align systems to vision – get rid of bureaucratic systems that produce problems rather than facilitate work.

IDENTIFYING LEARNING NEEDS

All learning activities need to be based on an understanding of what needs to be done and why. The purpose of the activities must be defined and this is only possible if the learning needs of the organization and the groups and individuals within it have been identified and analysed.

The basis of learning needs analysis

Learning needs analysis is sometimes assumed to be concerned only with defining the gap between what is happening and what should happen, ie the difference between what people know and can do and what they *should* know and be able to do. This gap is what has to be filled by training.

But this 'deficiency' model of training – only putting things right that have gone wrong – is limited. Learning is much more positive than that. It is more concerned with identifying and satisfying development needs – fitting people to take on extra responsibilities, increasing all-round competence, equipping people to deal with new work demands, multiskilling, and preparing people to take on higher levels of responsibility in the future.

Areas for learning needs analysis

Learning needs should be analysed, first, for the organization as a whole – corporate needs; second, for departments, teams, functions or occupations within the organization – group needs; and third, for individual employees – individual needs. These three areas are interconnected, as shown in Figure 41.1. The analysis of corporate needs will lead to the identification of learning needs in different departments or occupations, while these in turn will indicate what individual employees need to learn. The process operates in reverse. As the needs of individual employees are analysed separately, common needs emerge that can be dealt with on a group basis. The sum of group and individual needs will help to define corporate needs, although there may be some superordinate learning requirements that can be related only to the company as a whole to meet its business development needs – the whole learning plan may be greater than the sum of its parts.

These areas of analysis are discussed below.

Analysis of business and human resource plans

Business and HR plans should indicate in general terms the types of skills and competencies that may be required in the future and the numbers of people with

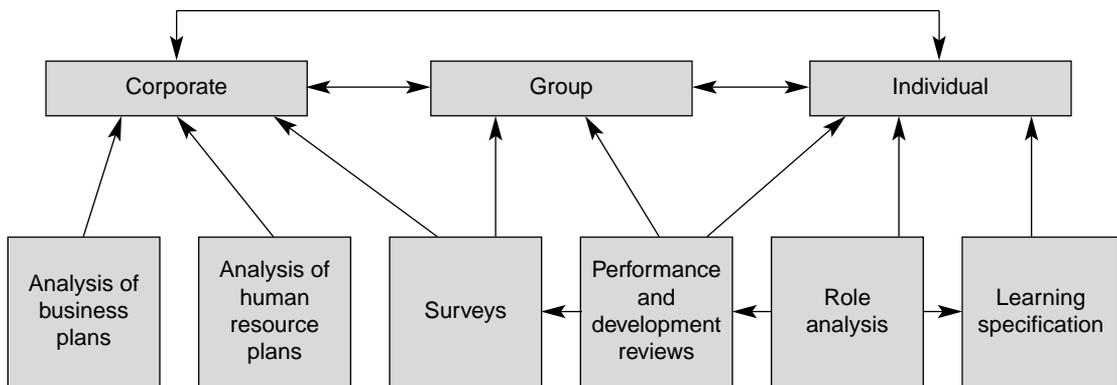


Figure 41.1 Learning needs analysis – areas and methods

those skills and competencies who will be needed. These broad indicators have to be translated into more specific plans that cover, for example, the outputs from training programmes of people with particular skills or a combination of skills (multiskilling).

Surveys

Special surveys may be carried out that analyse the information from a number of sources, eg performance reviews, to identify corporate and group learning and training needs. This information can be usefully supplemented by interviewing people to establish their views about what they need to learn. But they often find it difficult to articulate learning needs and it is best to lead with a discussion of the work they do and identify any areas where they believe that their performance and potential could be improved by a learning or training programme.

An analysis should also be made of any areas where future changes in work processes, methods or job responsibilities are planned, and of any common gaps in skills or knowledge or weaknesses in performance that indicate a learning need. Further information should be derived from the evaluation of training, as described at the end of this chapter.

Performance and development reviews

Performance management processes, as described in Part VII of this book, should be a prime source of information about individual learning and development needs. The performance management approach to learning concentrates on the preparation of

performance improvement programmes, personal development plans and learning contracts that lead to jointly determined action plans. The emphasis is on identifying learning needs for continuous development or to produce specific improvements in performance.

Role analysis

Role analysis is the basis for preparing role profiles that provide a framework for analysing and identifying learning needs. Role profiles set out the key result areas of the role but, importantly, also define the competencies required to perform the role. A good performance management process will ensure that role profiles are updated regularly and the performance review will be built round an analysis of the results achieved by reference to the key result areas and agreed objectives. The competency framework for the role is used to assess the level of competency displayed in achieving, or as the case may be, not achieving those results. An assessment can then be made of any learning required to develop levels of competency. Ideally, this should be a self-assessment by individuals, who should be given every encouragement to identify learning needs themselves. But these can be discussed with the individuals' manager and agreement reached on how the learning needs should be met, by the individuals through self-managed learning, and/or with the help and support of their managers. The output of role analysis could be a learning specification, as illustrated in Figure 41.2.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

Every learning and development programme needs to be designed individually, and the design will continually evolve as new learning needs emerge, or when feedback indicates that changes are required. It is essential to consider carefully the objectives of the programme and to express these in the form of what behaviour is expected from those involved in the workplace (terminal behaviour). When planning a learning event, the process used should match the desired objectives for the event.

The basis of learning and development programmes

The planning and implementation of learning and development programmes is based on an understanding of learning needs. A training survey conducted in 2005

| LEARNING SPECIFICATION | |
|---|--|
| Role title: Product Manager | Department: Marketing |
| <i>What the role holder must understand</i> | |
| <i>Learning outcomes</i> | <i>Learning methods</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The product market ● The product specification ● Market research availability ● Interpretation of marketing data ● Customer service requirements ● Techniques of product management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coaching: Marketing Manager and Advertising Manager ● Coaching: Operations Manager ● Coaching: Market Research Manager ● Coaching: Market Research Manager ● Customer Service Manager ● Institute of Marketing courses |
| <i>What the role holder must be able to do</i> | |
| <i>Learning outcomes</i> | <i>Learning methods</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prepare product budget ● Prepare marketing plans ● Conduct market reviews ● Prepare marketing campaigns ● Specify requirements for advertisers and promotional material ● Liaise with advertising agents and creative suppliers ● Analyse results of advertising campaigns ● Prepare marketing reports | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coaching: Budget Accountant ● Coaching: Mentor ● Coaching: Market Research Department ● Read: Product Manager's Manual ● Read: Product Manager's Manual ● Attachment to agency ● Coaching: Mentor, read analyses ● Read: previous reports, observe: marketing review meetings |

Figure 41.2 A learning specification

(CIPD, 2005e) produced the data set out below in response to the question, 'Which skills does your organization need to develop in order to fulfil requirements in three years' time?' The respondents listed in order:

1. Management and leadership.
2. Communication.
3. Business skills.
4. Customer service.
5. Advanced technical skills.
6. Broader skill sets.
7. Coaching and mentoring.
8. Innovation.
9. IT skills.
10. Ability to adapt easily to change.

Account needs to be taken of the lessons that can be learnt from learning theory, especially those concerned with cognitive, experiential and social learning. These highlight the importance of providing people with the opportunity to learn for themselves, and emphasizes the importance of learning from experience and learning from other people. The concepts of self-directed learning and personal development planning are particularly important, but encouraging these processes needs to be reinforced by the provision of guidance and advice to learners, mainly from their line managers but also from learning specialists and through the provision by the organization of learning resource centres and e-learning programmes.

Responsibility for the implementation of learning

While individuals should be expected to take a considerable degree of responsibility for managing their own learning, they need the help and support of their line managers and the organization.

Line managers have a key role in planning and facilitating learning by conducting performance and development reviews, agreeing learning contracts and personal development plans with their staff, and helping staff to implement those plans through the provision of learning opportunities and coaching. But they have to be encouraged to do this. They should understand that the promotion of learning is regarded as an important aspect of their responsibilities and that their performance in carrying it out will be assessed. They also need guidance on how they should carry out their developmental role.

Responsibility for learning and development is being placed increasingly on managers and employees rather than training professionals. The latter are becoming learning facilitators rather than training providers or instructors. The direct role of training is becoming less important. As Stewart and Tansley (2002) point out, training specialists are focusing on learning processes, rather than the content of training courses. Carter *et al* (2003) argue that 'The shifting organizational forms of training, coupled with multiple delivery methods, are not leading to a single new role for the trainer, but rather an array of different role demands.' These roles include facilitator and change agent.

As facilitators, learning and development specialists analyse learning needs and make proposals on how these can best be satisfied. They provide facilities such as learning resource centres and e-learning programmes, and plan and implement training interventions, often outsourcing training to external providers. Importantly, they provide guidance to line managers and help them to develop their skills in assessing development needs, personal development planning and coaching. Additionally, they are there to give advice and help to individuals on their learning plans.

Learning and development activities

A balanced learning approach is required, making use of the various forms of learning and development referred to in Chapter 38. The aim should be to produce a coherent strategy that contains the plans for creating and maintaining a learning climate and developing and implementing complementary and mutually supportive learning activities such as coaching and mentoring. Details should be provided for each activity on its objectives, the methods to be used, its timing as part of a programme, how it is linked to other learning activities, who is responsible (emphasizing the role of individuals and their managers), and the business case for using it in terms of a cost/benefit assessment.

The extent to which organizations use different approaches as revealed by a survey conducted in 2004 (IRS, 2004g) is shown in Table 41.1.

Table 41.1 Use of learning activities (*Source: IRS, 2004g*)

| Activity | No of organizations using 'regularly' or 'sometimes' |
|------------------------------------|--|
| On-the-job induction | 72 |
| On-the-job skills updating | 71 |
| External conferences and workshops | 70 |
| Formal classroom training | 67 |
| Coaching | 64 |
| Mentoring | 55 |
| Off-the-job induction | 49 |
| Off-the-job skills updating | 40 |
| e-learning | 35 |
| Non-vocational training | 22 |
| Action learning sets | 16 |

N = 79

EVALUATION OF LEARNING

It is important to evaluate learning in order to assess its effectiveness in producing the outcomes specified when the activity was planned and to indicate where improvements or changes are required to make the training even more effective. As Tamkin *et al* (2002) suggest:

Learning can be modelled as a chain of impact from the planning of learning to meet organizational or individual learning needs to the learning that takes place in a learning event, from learning to changed behaviour, and from changed behaviour to impact on others and the organization as a whole.

It is at the planning stage that the basis upon which each category of learning event is to be evaluated should be determined. At the same time, it is necessary to consider how the information required for evaluation should be obtained and analysed.

Approaches to the evaluation of learning have traditionally concentrated on the evaluation of training events as described below. But the trend is to concentrate more on the validation of the total learning process.

Training evaluation defined

The process of evaluating training has been defined by Hamblin (1974) as: 'Any attempt to obtain information (feedback) on the effects of a training programme, and to assess the value of the training in the light of that information.' Evaluation leads to control, which means deciding whether or not the training was worthwhile (preferably in cost/benefit terms) and what improvements are required to make it even more cost-effective.

Evaluation is an integral feature of learning activities. In its crudest form, it is the comparison of objectives (criterion behaviour) with outcomes (terminal behaviour) to answer the question of how far the event has achieved its purpose. The setting of objectives and the establishment of methods of measuring results are, or should be, an essential part of the planning stage of any learning and development programme.

Levels of evaluation

Four levels of training evaluation have been suggested by Kirkpatrick (1994).

Level 1. Reaction

At this level, evaluation measures how those who participated in the training have reacted to it. In a sense, it is a measure of immediate customer satisfaction. Kirkpatrick suggests the following guidelines for evaluating reactions:

- determine what you want to find out;
- design a form that will quantify reactions;
- encourage written comments and suggestions;
- get 100 per cent immediate response;

- get honest responses;
- develop acceptable standards;
- measure reactions against standards, and take appropriate action;
- communicate reactions as appropriate.

Research by Warr *et al* (1999) has shown that there is relatively little correlation between learner reactions and measures of training, or subsequent measures of changed behaviour. But as Tamkin *et al* (2002) point out, despite this, organizations are still keen to get reactions to training, and used with caution this can produce useful information on the extent to which learning objectives were perceived to be met and why.

Level 2. Evaluating learning

This level obtains information on the extent to which learning objectives have been attained. It will aim to find how much knowledge was acquired, what skills were developed or improved, and the extent to which attitudes have changed in the desired direction. So far as possible, the evaluation of learning should involve the use of tests before and after the programme – paper and pencil, oral or performance tests.

Level 3. Evaluating behaviour

This level evaluates the extent to which behaviour has changed as required when people attending the programme have returned to their jobs. The question to be answered is the extent to which knowledge, skills and attitudes have been transferred from the classroom to the workplace. Ideally, the evaluation should take place both before and after the training. Time should be allowed for the change in behaviour to take place. The evaluation needs to assess the extent to which specific learning objectives relating to changes in behaviour and the application of knowledge and skills have been achieved.

Level 4. Evaluating results

This is the ultimate level of evaluation and provides the basis for assessing the benefits of the training against its costs. The objective is to determine the added value of learning and development programmes – how they contribute to raising organizational performance significantly above its previous level. The evaluation has to be based on 'before and after' measures and has to determine the extent to which the fundamental objectives of the training have been achieved in areas such as increasing sales, raising productivity, reducing accidents or increasing customer satisfaction.

Evaluating results is obviously easier when they can be quantified. However, it is not always easy to prove the contribution to improved results made by training as distinct from other factors and, as Kirkpatrick says: 'Be satisfied with evidence, because proof is usually impossible to get.' Perhaps the most powerful method of demonstrating that learning programmes pay is to measure the return on investment, as discussed below.

Return on investment as a method of evaluation

Return on investment (ROI) is advocated by some commentators as a means of assessing the overall impact of training on organizational performance. It is calculated as:

$$\frac{\text{Benefits from training (£) – costs of training (£)}}{\text{Costs of training (£)}} \times 100$$

Kearns and Miller (1997) believe that only this sort of measure is useful in evaluating the overall impact of training. They argue that particular hard measures should be used to evaluate specific training; for example, if development aims to bring about greater awareness of customers then it should still be measured by the eventual effect on customer spend, customer satisfaction and number of customers.

The pressure to produce financial justifications for any organizational activity, especially in areas such as learning and development, has increased the interest in ROI. The problem is that while it is easy to record the costs it is much harder to produce convincing financial assessments of the benefits. Kearns (2005a) provides a response to this concern:

All business is about the art of speculation and the risk of the unknown. The trick here is not to try and work to a higher standard of credibility than anyone else in the organization. If accountants are prepared to guess about amortization costs or marketing directors to guess about market share why should a trainer not be prepared to have a guess at the potential benefits of training?

He recommends the use of 'a rule of thumb' when using ROI to the effect that any training should improve the performance of trainees by at least 1 per cent. Thus if the return on sales training is being measured, the benefits could be calculated as 1 per cent of profit on sales.

Use of evaluation tools

Research by The Industrial Society (2000) has shown that the Kirkpatrick model was used by 35 per cent of the 487 participants. Research by Twitchell *et al* (2000) found that many US organizations use levels 1 and 2 evaluations for at least some programmes, fewer than half even try level 3 and only a small percentage use level 4 evaluations.

The number of respondents to the IRS 2004 training survey using different types of evaluation is shown in Table 41.2.

Table 41.2 Use of evaluation tools (*Source: IRS, 2004f*)

| Activity | No of organizations using 'regularly' or 'sometimes' |
|--|--|
| Immediate post-course questionnaire | 74 |
| Monitoring appraisal results | 50 |
| Observation of participants at work | 49 |
| Interviewing participants | 48 |
| Employee attitude surveys | 44 |
| Monitoring qualifications gained | 42 |
| Follow-up questionnaires | 41 |
| Monitoring test results | 35 |
| Survey line managers | 34 |
| Assessment of participant's action plans | 31 |
| Evaluation framework/model | 28 |
| Customer surveys | 28 |
| Analysis of output/quality data | 25 |

N = 79

Application of evaluation

As Reid *et al* (2004) comment: 'The more care that has been taken in the assessment of needs and the more precise the objectives, the greater will be the possibility of effective evaluation.' This is the basis for conducting evaluation at various levels.

Like the similar levels of evaluation suggested by Hamblin in 1976 (reactions, learning, job behaviour, impact on unit and organizational performance) the levels defined by Kirkpatrick are links in the chain. Training produces reactions, which lead

to learning, which leads to changes in job behaviour, which lead to results at unit and organizational level. Trainees can react favourably to a course – they can enjoy the experience – but learn little or nothing. They can learn something, but cannot, or will not, or are not allowed to apply it. They apply it but it does no good within their own areas. It does some good in their function, but does not improve organizational effectiveness.

Evaluation can take place at any level. In the Kirkpatrick scheme it is easier to start at level 1 and progress up with increasing difficulty to level 4. It could be argued that the only feedback from evaluation that matters is the result in terms of improved unit or organizational performance that training brings. But if this is hard to measure, training could still be justified in terms of any actual changes in behaviour that the programme was designed to produce. This is based on the assumption that the analysis of learning needs indicated that this behaviour is more than likely to deliver the desired results. Similarly, at the learning level, if a proper analysis of knowledge, skills and attitude requirements and their impact on behaviour has been conducted, it is reasonable to assume that if the knowledge, etc has been acquired, behaviour is likely to change appropriately. Finally, if all else fails, reactions are important in that they provide immediate feedback on the quality of training given (including the performance of the trainer), which can point the way to corrective action.