

Many Happy Returns - Improving return on investment for training

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The past 30 years have seen many changes in the world we live in. Companies have grown, merged, de-merged and globalised. With this has come a much greater focus on career planning and development which has brought with it performance reviews, appraisals, profit related pay and high expectations.

This fast paced, global economy creates a demand for individuals who are highly skilled, highly focused and highly motivated. These people will fuel business growth in the 21st century as the importance of personal relationships emerges from the shadow of electronic customer service.

Will people cope with this transition? Firstly, it's not a question of 'if' but of 'how' people will cope. Human Beings have survived millions of years of competitive evolution by being highly flexible and adaptable. Web sites and email cannot replace the gifts that Mother Nature has given us.

We've known for a long time that traditionally delivered, blanket training of management and interpersonal skills has been.....in need of modernisation. We also know that the human capacity to learn consistently leaps over any barriers set before it. Therefore, how can you use our innate abilities to deliver learning more efficiently and effectively?

Training in time management, presentation skills and negotiation skills is fine for people who've never prioritised, influenced or bargained in their lives. If you employ people who have never done those things before, then it may be time to review your interviewing procedures. Take a look at your nearest five year old child and you'll see what I mean.

By surviving your interviewing process, your employees have demonstrated highly advanced communication and influence skills. Why deliver training that assumes people are blank slates when you could instead develop the talents they already have?

Traditional training programs could be described as 'problem solving'. Time management training, for example, is designed to solve a problem of too much work and not enough people. Personal Computers started life as an 'enabling technology'. 20 years ago, it was difficult to sell PCs to finance departments because there was nothing wrong with paper spreadsheets. Now, companies buy PCs to solve a problem - "there's a new starter in finance and he doesn't have a PC yet".

20 years ago, the most forward thinking companies bought PCs to gain competitive advantage. They realised that solving day to day problems wasn't enough to ensure long term success.

Enabling technologies don't solve problems - they create opportunities and not all companies - or people - are in a position to exploit new opportunities.

How can you develop the innate talents of your staff to deliver the skills your business needs more quickly, more cost effectively and more enjoyably? I'm finding that the answer to this question is a combination of learning approaches, primarily of training and coaching.

A base level of ability is an important starting point for any development program. Every one of your employees has different experiences, different abilities and different motivations. To deliver a blanket training program and leave it at that simply implies that those differences are not important. Ask your marketing people if differences are important and hopefully they'll tell you about Unique Selling Points and about competitive advantage. Those differences represent a rich, untapped business resource that your competitors would pay good money for - and they probably do, with the help of recruitment agencies.

Developing natural talent is good for you and it's good for your people too. I heard about someone who works in the warehouse of a large company, In his spare time, he's a well known and respected international football referee and coach. Apparently, the CEO of the company asked "how can I get this guy to use his coaching skills in my business" and the question I had to ask was "how do you know he doesn't already?". An image of a wise but humble man, leaning on his broom giving sage advice to the young management trainee popped into my mind.

For me, coaching and training are the same thing, delivered in an individual or group context. Coaching is not about round table discussions and focus groups. Coaching is the process by which a person's mental representation of the world expands dramatically as a result of specifically structured questions. When this is done properly in a group context, something magical happens - all of that innate, natural talent emerges and people start to glimpse their own, limitless capabilities. This is not idle chat and then back to work. This is a carefully managed and orchestrated process which guides the participants to a very specific outcome.

If you're beginning to wonder when I'll get back to Return On Investment, I never left it! When you employed the staff in your company, you made an investment in a rich resource. The success of your business and the security of your employees demands that you exploit that resource. You can send all of your marketing people on a presentation skills course, and they'll be taught what they already know - how to stand up and speak at the same time. What stops them from being breathtaking presenters? Is it confidence? Do they imagine the audience is thinking bad thoughts about them? Do they worry how their voices will sound? I have encountered all of these and more. All of these people had been sent on many presentation skills courses because their managers generalised their problems as "not a very good presenter".

Traditional training will never solve these types of problem. It certainly has a place for the majority of people, but I suspect that it's the minority of people who really make a difference to your company. If you have someone who regularly presents to your key customers, how will your business benefit from turning him from a competent presenter into an electrifying

presenter? What about turning an able negotiator into a formidable negotiator? You may be thinking “this all sounds great, but it's not practical to train a large workforce in this way”

Coaching is a developing market and most coaches are still using commercial models that are based more on therapy than on business results. The idea of a one hour session with a set fee per hour belongs in the consulting room, not in the board room. Coaching that amplifies the skills of your most talented people has a tangible business value, and that value can be related back to the cost of sourcing the service.

What is the cost of running blanket training programs that just tell people what they already know? What is the comparable return in business value that you achieve by developing, building on, focussing and amplifying the skills those people already have?

When I hear the phrase “people are our greatest asset”, I often wonder if this means “asset” as in “a thing of value” or asset as in “something that ties up liquid capital and depreciates in value over time”. With many companies I know, I fear it's the latter. By developing the skills and talents your people already have, you appreciate that asset.

Return On Investment is surprisingly easy to demonstrate when you have an asset that appreciates in value.



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