

Three essentials for a return on Investment in learning and development

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Our learning world is full of learning and return on investment models and formulas. I like to keep it simple, and work with my clients on a three part model to help select only those people most likely to truly make a real and measurable return on their very limited funds most likely.

So, here it is – I hope you can use it to your own advantage – I am always keen to hear from fellow practitioners and to enhance mutual understanding and learning from practice...

Desire

Without the clear and evident will to engage, to participate actively, seek learning and most importantly to make efforts to apply and implement learning in the workplace no return is possible. Irrespective of the presence of other positive factors, it is the drive and motivation of the individual learner that is the single most significant factor in determining genuine return over cost and therefore value. For this reason, learners must be chosen with care, informed fully of the purpose and content of an event, and of their personal responsibilities for making a success of any learning programme. In addition, if required, they must be reminded of their responsibility to make real efforts to learn and apply that learning, as scarce resources must not be wasted on those with too little will to make real use of them.

Opportunity

Secondly, it is essential that learned behaviours and best intentions are given active support and encouragement in the workplace on return. Passive managerial indifference will not provide the nurturing environment an enthused learner requires to optimise value from the spend. So, time and genuine managerial support and interest are essential for the learner whose desire to improve has created a plan to implement that learning. Only the most motivated learners will overcome obstacles, disinterest or downright opposition in the workplace. Thus managers need to move from seeing a development programme as 'sit on a chair and be told you things you already knew while we have to do your work for you when you aren't here' to understanding their crucial role actively supporting and encouraging the application of learning and play their part in creating sustainable value. Too many managers need shall we say a reminder of that critical role in actively assisting the use of new learning in the workplace.

Competence

The two above elements are absolutely required to provide attributable value from a development event or programme. That said, individual learners must possess sufficient competence to fuel the desire and take advantage of the opportunities provided. A learner lacking the personal or learning skills needed to generate return on investment will, despite their genuine efforts to use what they have learned, waste the organisational and managerial support provided to assist that process. Consequently, all learners must have sufficient current *and* potential competence to make the investment worth making in the first place. For this reason care in selection, and the recruitment of only

those whose future value and likely retention will over time exceed cost should be chosen for cost bearing events.

It's about combinations

Time is tight here, but I need to emphasise that in real-world situations, it's the mix that matters – as the man said, 'two out of three aint bad', but for us it's not good enough.

Thus it is frustrating to see someone with ample support and opportunity, with competence both current and potential, yet insufficient desire to create value from an investment. Then sadly there is the strong desire person, with loads of opportunity and support, but nowhere near enough competence – for whom an expensive programme just would not pay off.

Another example is someone with plenty of desire, clear competence to make them apparently a prime candidate yet without managerial support, or workplace opportunity to provide time and space to practice and explore new skills.

In my experience, to have just one of these is all too often as good as it gets. A really strong desire can overcome a lot of the problems that absence of opportunity and even obvious talent and competence will present.

I have reflected many times on why it is that we see so little learning applied in the workplace for long enough to genuinely repay the cost of a learning programme of any kind. For me, this simple model helps explain this – and the best value comes from individualised consideration of each potential recruit prior to signing them up.

It is important we are seen to be leading our clients in the drive to see a tangible return on their scarce budgets for development – a few, and I do wish it were more, have the appetite to work on this, and I hope you find some.

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