

Scrap Learning and Manager Engagement

BY JOHN R. MATTOX II

By participating in the training process pre- and post-event, managers can ensure that employees retain and apply more of what they learn.

In an ever-changing business world, where sustainable competitive advantage is key to success or failure, training is the lever many organizations turn to when searching for performance improvement. However, most organizations overlook an important aspect of development that often makes it many times more effective — manager engagement.

KnowledgeAdvisors conducted a survey from December 2009 to March 2010 to investigate the current state of training application and manager engagement. The majority of nearly 160 respondents were from companies with 5,000 or more people, and their roles within the organization were most often in learning and development (56 percent) or human resources (25 percent). More than three-quarters (76 percent) of all survey respondents indicated that training is a key organizational tool to optimize employee performance (Figure 1).

Unfortunately, using training as a performance lever tends to lose its power with time as employees forget what they've learned or let their newly acquired skills go unused. Robert O. Brinkerhoff, Ed.D., professor emeritus at Western Michigan University, said that after training, learners typically fall into one of three categories:

1. They do not try to apply training.
2. They attempt to apply it but realize no worthwhile results.
3. They apply training and get some positive results.

Positive results tend to be reinforcing and prompt the learners to apply their skills again. Yet Brinkerhoff estimates that successful application, group three, is as low as 20 percent. The remaining 80 percent is known as scrap learning — learning that was delivered but unsuccessfully applied, as in groups one and two, and is therefore wasted.

DATA POINT

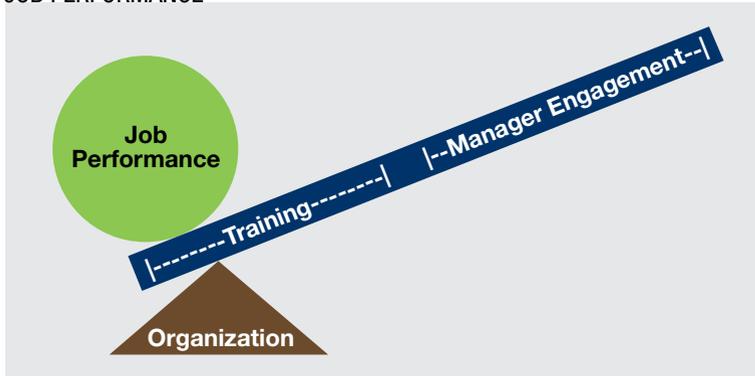
Seventy-six percent of learning and HR professionals indicate that learners apply 50 percent or less of what they learn.

Scrap learning is pervasive. By survey respondents' best estimates, only 9 percent of learners actually apply what they learn with positive results. Seventy-six percent indicate that learners apply 50 percent or less of what they learn, which means the scrap learning rate is 50 percent or higher among more than three-quarters of all companies.

There are elements of training that clearly impact the quality and effectiveness of learning; great instructors, relevant materials and the right delivery method are essential. However, factors external to training are also influential. In Brinkerhoff's book *Telling Training's Story*, he describes the influence managers can have on learner behavior before and after training. He found that managers can lengthen the training lever, or at least prevent it from shortening, by actively engaging their direct reports. In Figure 2, Brinkerhoff identifies behaviors managers can perform before and after training to reduce scrap learning.

Before training, it is helpful for the manager to assess the business case. Is the employee the right person to attend training? Is it the right time? Are the costs appropriate? Additionally, the manager should meet with the learner pre-event to set learning and performance expectations, and they should create an action plan together. These managerial actions help to ensure that training is valuable to the learner and is fully aligned with business goals. Further, the conversation and expectation setting prepares the learner for the actual training event.

FIGURE 1: MANAGERS EXTEND TRAINING'S POWER TO IMPROVE JOB PERFORMANCE



Source: KnowledgeAdvisors, 2010.

FIGURE 2: BRINKERHOFF'S LEARNING-TO-PERFORMANCE MODEL WITH KEY MANAGER ACTIONS



Source: Robert O. Brinkerhoff.

After training, the manager should review the action plan with the learner to determine if it still aligns with what was taught. As the learner applies training on the job, the manager must supervise and provide meaningful praise and feedback to reinforce success and correct mistakes. It is also the manager's responsibility to seek projects, events or situations where the learner can hone new skills.

KnowledgeAdvisors asked survey respondents to consider how well managers were engaged in these types of efforts throughout their organizations. When asked how often managers pre-assess learners before sending them to training, only 21 percent indicated their organizations assess learners "some of the time" or "most of the time." This means that for more than three-quarters of the organizations, learners might be attending training they do not need or they may be attending training that is too advanced.

Further, only 25 percent of managers have a dialogue with learners before 50 percent of training to set learning and performance expectations with direct reports. Granted, not every course deserves a check-

in or a dialogue. Yet, when training is directly related to job performance, critical to the employee's future success or costly and aligned with business goals, it is reasonable to expect some level of manager engagement. Thus, these figures seem low knowing that manager involvement upfront can increase training effectiveness.

The level of manager engagement is only slightly better after learners attend training. With regard to generalized involvement, 42 percent of managers "encourage learners to use training" and another 11 percent "hold employees accountable" for applying training. However, for 44 percent of respondents, managers "have little involvement in how my employees use what they learned back on the job." In other words, almost half of the managers do not support learners after training; thus they shorten the performance lever the organization has invested in.

Following up to ensure learner expectations have been met is a powerful way for managers to check in with their direct reports. Together the manager and learner can compare expected versus actual actions and

diagnose what led to successful application of training or prevented it. When asked about expectations, survey respondents indicated that only 35 percent of managers follow up on expectations by requiring a summary debrief of what was learned. Some 32 percent require a demonstration of the learning within a reasonable time frame. Among other required actions the percentages get smaller and smaller: 19 percent provide a specific program or project within which to use the training; 16 percent require an action plan that describes how training will be used on the job, and 13 percent require measurement of a business result within a reasonable time frame. The decline in percentages for the afore-

mentioned actions seems to be linked to the amount of effort required from the learner and manager. As effort increases, the percentage decreases.

the learner might have faced during training as well as barriers that might prevent on-the-job application. A performance management tool also can be used to document goals and provide automated check-ins between the manager and learner at regular intervals. Automated check-ins are important for providing information because they facilitate an even more important process — ongoing dialogue.

To quote behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner, “Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.” This quote is undoubtedly a variation of similar quotes by George Saville and Albert Einstein, but it carries substantial weight coming from

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In the same way a parent might help a child grow through praise and correction, managers have many of the same behavior-shaping tools at their disposal to support and reinforce learning. Survey respondents were able to select any or all of the following five support options. Some 25 percent of managers supported learners by publically recognizing and celebrating successful application of training on the job. At a slightly lower rate, 22 percent of managers formally observed and provided feedback to learners within 90 days of training. While these two actions are critical to develop an application-feedback learning loop, at best only a quarter of managers perform these tasks. Other support tasks included: reprioritizing a learner’s daily tasks to emphasize training use (21 percent), setting aside time to allow learners to try new concepts (16 percent) and allocating money to learners to fund new ideas that can be implemented on the job (9 percent).

Several measurement tools can facilitate manager engagement. Prior to training, managers can be surveyed to determine how much support they provide to learners pre-event, such as expectation setting. Using specialized evaluation systems, the post-course learner feedback can be routed automatically to the manager, who can gain insight about challenges

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Skinner, who spent his career shaping others’ behavior. He clearly implies that learning degrades over time due to recipients forgetting, whether they are in a generalized educational setting in a liberal arts school or participating in specific employee training aligned with a job task. Despite some degree of learning degradation, education can be prolonged and increased, and skill can be acquired and improved by using behavioral shaping techniques.

How is this relevant to manager engagement? Managers have the ability to prepare employees for learning prior to training. And after training, they have some ability to control the work environment to allow learners new opportunities to apply, practice and perfect what was learned. Lastly, managers have the ability to praise and reinforce successes as well as correct and coach mistakes.

The results of this study indicate that in most organizations today, manager engagement, both before and after training, is relatively low. If organizations are searching for ways to improve job performance through training, they should first look at performance improvement through manager engagement. How effective can managers be? Consider another one of Skinner’s quotes: “Give me a child and I’ll shape him into anything.” **CLO**

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