

Are You Getting Value For Money From Your Tax Dollars?

Evaluation of Training in Government Departments in New Zealand

By

Angela Robertson

Is your workplace training accomplishing the desired results? How do you know? Training will only contribute to enhanced performance in organisations if the knowledge and skills have been successfully acquired by trainees and are transferred to the workplace. Recent research conducted with several Government Departments in New Zealand suggests that the effect of training is not known. There is a heavy reliance on intuition and individual performance management to determine the effects of training. The argument for managers and practitioners is that these methods are not reliable methods of subsequent change in quality, productivity and service following the investment in training. If there is no measurement there is little possibility of continuous improvement.

Moving towards the new millennium there is a growing trend towards more accountability in the Public Service and more pressure to produce results. With rapid technological change, Government Departments in New Zealand have had to make some fundamental changes in the way they do business. Training is recognised as a vital and necessary activity in improving performance and aiding the achievement of organisational goals. Much of the available literature on evaluation of training is based on research conducted overseas within the private sector. This paper presents the results of a practical action research project that explored what evaluation of training is taking place in Government Departments in New Zealand and question's management's role and level of support for the process.

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INTRODUCTION

Restructuring, downsizing, re-engineering - these expressions have become familiar language that has been used globally in the workplace for more than a decade. Many organisations have undertaken major efficiency drives focusing on improved products and services with a trend towards flatter organisational structures. Rapid technological change has increased the momentum altering the 'way we do things' and accelerating the introduction of new systems and processes. Government Departments in New Zealand have been no exception with major changes being made to the composition of departments and subsequent provision of service.

In this rapidly changing environment training is one way to develop new skills and is recognised as a vital and necessary activity in improving performance and aiding the achievement of organisational goals. Rudman (1994) advocates that no matter how thorough the recruitment process, there is always a need to improve work performance or gain new or different skills and knowledge as the organisation and its environment interact bringing change to the organisation and its employees. The challenge for organisations is to focus training and development activities so that they systematically enhance the ability of the organisation and its people to carry out their role and fulfill their objectives. This means linking training to business needs and strategically implementing programmes to attain measurable results (Robinson and Robinson, 1989). The organisation environment needs to be structured in such a way that it will tend to sustain and reinforce the learning which occurred in training. Dana and James Robinson advocate the results formula:

$$\text{LEARNING EXPERIENCE} \times \text{WORK ENVIRONMENT} = \text{BUSINESS RESULTS}$$

The Robinsons argue that a zero on either side of the multiplication sign will yield no results. Support for the learning process is therefore a vital component to improve performance and achieve successful organisational results.

The word evaluation when related to training implies valuing, ascribing worth and perhaps determining what is good or bad. In order to plan for revision and improvement, effectiveness and impact of training need to be established (Margolis & Bell, 1989). Evaluation is the follow up to training. It measures the changed behaviour or increased skill as a result of training and assesses the impact of this on the organisation. Basarab and Root (1992) suggest that the process of evaluation is a systematic collection of pertinent data, which is used to measure the effects of training. Rae (1993) refers to a systems approach describing evaluation as the assessment of the total value of a training system, including courses in social as well as financial terms. Sloman (1994) advocates that training is one operating system within an organisation and as such should be evaluated as a system in support of other systems within an organisation. Data can be collected from document searches and baseline data can later be compared with new statistics after trainees have returned to the job (Cheeseman, 1997). The documented information forms a permanent record from which decisions can be made with regard to the training programme itself and the

benefits of the training on the organisation as a whole. Anne Evans (1996) states that the objective of evaluation is to demonstrate that there is a probable association between the training event and a subsequent change in quality, productivity, sales or service thus assigning value to the outcome of the training effort.

Svenson and Rinderer (1992) argue that you can only tell if all systems are producing the desired benefits if you measure results as this information provides feedback enlightenment for planning, directing and controlling training activities to attain organisational objectives. They insist if that if there is no measurement there is no possibility of continuous improvement. The complexity of the issue suggests that it is not the responsibility of the training or human resource department alone to evaluate the effectiveness in terms of measured business results. Commitment from management is essential. The argument for managers and practitioners is that intuitive judgement is not enough for evaluation (Blumenfeld & Crane, 1973). Kirkpatrick (1994) reports that in most organisations there is little pressure from top management to prove the benefits of training or outweigh the cost unless they hear bad things about it. This is consistent with the opinion of most commentators.

Considering the radical changes in Government Departments in New Zealand, the growing trend toward more accountability, the pressure to produce results within the Public Sector, and acknowledging massive technological change, this research explored the evaluation of training from a practitioner's perspective in search of the link between training and business results.

METHOD

The action research study reported here examined the nature of evaluation of staff training in Government Department's in New Zealand in 1997. In collaboration with Training professionals, Human Resource practitioners and managers actively working in this environment the current evaluation practice was explored to

- establish whether Government Departments in New Zealand have a comprehensive system for measuring results
- stimulate the desire to investigate new ways of evaluating the effectiveness of training, and
- further develop and improve professional practice

Training Officers, Human Resource Managers and senior managers from a representative sample of 26 Government Departments located in Wellington were invited to participate in the research. Representatives from these organisations were selected by title held within the organisation as they were identified as being in the best position to be able to answer the research questions. Representatives from 16 Government Departments elected to take part with the participants representing a mix of gender, age and cultural groups. It is interesting to note that the reasons given for not participating were that

- training had been decentralised
- training was now delivered at each individual managers discretion
- nobody was doing the training
- the training programme was not formalised

It was clear from the initial invitation to participate and from subsequent interviews that there is little continuity in training in Government Departments and that Training professionals are a transient segment of the workforce in the Public Service in New Zealand.

The emphasis for this research concentrated on the extent to which the four levels (reaction, learning, behaviour and results) based on Kirkpatrick's (1994) evaluation model, acknowledged as the most widely known (ASTD, 1998), are being used. How

Government Department's evaluated each phase on the model including the level of management support for the process was considered. The purpose of the research was not to test participant's knowledge of the model, but to collaboratively explore what evaluation of staff training had been conducted in Government Departments in 1997.

Kirkpatrick's model lets us understand the effectiveness of training at four distinct levels. The four levels are described as;

- **Level 1 Reaction** - the method used to measure customer satisfaction. It helps to determine how effective the programme is and to learn how it can be improved
- **Level 2 Learning** - determining what knowledge was learnt, what skills were developed or improved or what attitudes were changed. If no learning takes place, no change in behaviour can be expected.
- **Level 3 Behaviour** - was the knowledge or the skills learned in training actually transferred to the job? No results can be expected unless a positive change in behaviour has occurred
- **Level 4 Results** - what were the tangible results - for example did quality improve or productivity increase?

These four levels represent a sequence of ways to evaluate programmes. Moving from one level to the next becomes more difficult and time consuming, but, according to Kirkpatrick also provides more information.

Kirkpatrick's model was used to provide a basic structure for the research questionnaire which was designed to provide a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data. The emphasis for the questions were based on:

- The extent to which the four levels (reaction, learning, behaviour and results) were being used, and
- How organisations were evaluating each level including the level of management support for the process.

RESULTS

A variety of internal training courses were delivered in Government Departments in 1997. All of the representatives stated that their organisations delivered some form of specialist technical training in relation to their specific business. Apart from specific technical training the most common courses delivered in 1997 were;

Change management	Customer Service	Induction
Communication	Decision making	Cultural awareness
Project management	Occupational Safety & Health	Effective business writing
Computer training	Management development	

Of the 16 organisations participating 12 representatives stated that they evaluated the effectiveness of training in some form although it was clear from the responses that this was generally a patchy exercise.

Reaction

All of the organisations who participated stated that they evaluated trainee's reaction to the training event. This exercise was completed either verbally or in written form following the training event. Only ten organisations tabulated reaction results for benchmarking purposes.

Learning

Ten representatives stated that their organisation determined the amount of learning that took place, although some admitted that this form of measurement occurred for only some courses that were delivered in 1997. The most favoured methods for establishing learning included pre and post tests, observation, questioning of trainees colleagues following training events, through trainees self assessments and completion of written and oral tests on conclusion of the training event. Other methods used included role plays, practical application of new skills, video recordings and trainees reflections shared in personal journals. Eight respondents stated that the trainer took responsibility for determining the amount of learning that took place, while three organisational representatives identified managers as taking responsibility for this. Managers were identified as mentors, coaching trainees in the use of the new skills.

Only two organisations tabulated results for benchmarking purposes. Six representatives stated that their organisations are planning a more structured process for measuring learning for use in 1998.

Application of Learning (Behavioural Change)

Nine organisational representatives stated that application of knowledge and skills was determined for some courses although some admitted that this was a patchy exercise. Transfer of training was measured at varying intervals for each organisation ranging from 2 weeks after the training event to up to 1 year before acknowledging that the skills were not being used. Comments from organisational representatives suggested that there was a heavy reliance on the 6 or 12 monthly performance management system to determine application of learning but that 'it depended on individual managers'. A number of representatives stated that it was not known if skills and knowledge learned during training were subsequently being used on the job. Other methods included interviews or surveys with trainees and/or with the trainee's manager, focus group discussion, or a combination of these methods.

It was acknowledged that in most cases there was no structured process in place to undertake this level of evaluation. Some respondents stated that development of measures for the transfer of training on the job was in progress for the future for their Government Department. One organisation tabulated results for benchmarking purposes.

Organisational Results

Two organisational representatives stated that training had made a significant impact on the way in which their organisations conducted business. These organisations had identified and made a conscious effort to eliminate organisational barriers and to develop systems that supported the use of new skills in the workplace. Some representatives said that they were unable to determine the impact of training due to restructures, service initiatives and because of inadequate data collection. Only two organisations benchmarked results using human resource information system for this purpose.

DISCUSSION

The results presented represent a first attempt to collaboratively establish what evaluation of staff training took place in Government Department's in New Zealand in 1997. Training professionals, Human Resource practitioners and managers who represented their organisations were keen to be involved. From the responses to the questions it was evident that the representatives were familiar with Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation and were willing to share their practices, frustration's and triumphs and their aspirations for the future while at the same time gain insight into the practice of others. Most of the

Government Departments who participated evaluated the effectiveness of training for some of the courses they delivered in 1997.

Reaction to training was the most popular measure of evaluation with participating organisations. This form of evaluation was conducted either verbally or in written form on conclusion of the training event. This information was used to evaluate trainers' ratings, monitor standards, develop training and was kept as a record for tendering of training.

These organisations used a variety of different tools to measure learning including the use of workbooks with a structured process, competency tests, role play and practical application of skills, progress checks, the use of critical questioning and case studies. Learning journals have also been used although it was acknowledged that the journals are not widely used and are intensely disliked. One organisation had undertaken extensive evaluation work gathering qualitative and quantitative data from managers, Maori representatives as well as trainees. The performance management system was identified as a tool for measuring learning in some Government Departments.

It was established that not all Government Departments are evaluating learning for every training course and some organisations acknowledged that they are developing systems of measurement.

Measurement of behavioural change following a training event varies amongst Government Departments. Some organisations admitted that they do not evaluate transfer of new knowledge and skills to the job and that no official follow up is undertaken. Others stated that this measurement was done 'patchily' or was being developed for future use. One organisation stated that they measured behavioural change using a control group while another said that they conducted training audits. A few organisational representatives commented that the measurement of transfer of knowledge and skills to the job depended on the cost of the investment of the training and the frequency of courses.

Responses from organisational representatives indicated that trainees managers and district managers were responsible for determining application of learning on the job following attendance at training. Two organisations were identified as using a structured approach to evaluation. This approach included interviews with trainees and trainee's managers, the use of surveys and focus groups, identification and elimination of organisational barriers to encourage the use of skills, top management support and buy-in and the use of Human Resource Information Systems.

These two Government Departments had determined that where there was strong management support and consistency within teams newly acquired skills and knowledge were successfully being used. This finding reinforces the notion that the training that is supported in the work environment is the best investment.

There appeared to be a heavy reliance on the performance management system to establish measures of behavioural change with some Government Departments. Rudman, (1994) identified several issues with regard to the performance management process including

- A lack of management commitment
- A lack of training

- No follow up or feedback and
- Emphasis on personality rather than performance

It is therefore critical that managers are committed to performance planning and review and are equipped to do the job. Performance management (whilst a system in itself) may overlook the systems approach to evaluation whereby the organisational structure or the work processes are not being evaluated in relation to behavioural change following a training event. Utilisation of new skills may be inhibited through pressure or stress or even conflicting policies and procedures. These organisational barriers may remain unidentified in the absence of a systematic approach to evaluation. It was also unclear how the collated information from the performance management process linked back to the training area although a few organisations were utilising Human Resource Information Systems which could make collation of data from individual appraisal documentation more meaningful in terms of evaluation for the future. There may be a question around the validity of the performance management system in terms of evaluation of training.

Some organisational representatives acknowledged that it is not known what follow up is undertaken by managers, which raises the question of the level of involvement and support from management in some Government Departments.

The impact of training was measured using

- Client surveys
- Staff turnover
- HRIS analysis
- Programme alignment with legislation, strategy, procedures and recruitment
- Management buy-in
- Culture surveys
- Teamwork measures

Only two organisations indicated that training had made a significant impact of the way in which they conducted their business. Factors inhibiting measurement included restructures and service initiatives, transience of Training professionals, focus on 'getting things going' in a changing environment, developing training systems and processes and insufficient data collection.

Considerations for the future

The tenuous position of Training professionals and Human Resource practitioners within Government Departments is noted and may be a reflection on the restructures and service initiatives within these organisations. Training professionals are currently a transient group of the workforce. Practitioners and managers who took part in this study were focussed on getting things going again and putting systems into place. Although knowledgeable about evaluation processes energy is being spent on the provision of training with limited time spent on establishing the benefits from the investment. This information raises some questions for consideration.

1. Is the training function valued?
2. Are the skills of practitioners recognised?

Representatives that took part in this study were keen to investigate ways of evaluating training and eager to share their own knowledge and skills and improve their own professional practice.

Congruent with other commentators this study revealed that where there was strong management support and consistency within teams newly acquired skills and knowledge were successfully being used. Commitment from management to both the training and the evaluation process is therefore essential. As there is little pressure to prove the benefits of training in terms of quality, productivity and service or gain feedback for planning or decision making purposes education for managers in the value of evaluation should be considered.

CONCLUSION

Many organisations including Government Departments have undertaken major efficiency drives focusing on improved products and services, with a growing trend towards more accountability and pressure to produce results. In addition, the massive changes in information technology have accelerated the introduction of new systems and processes. Training has been recognised as a way to develop new skills and improve performance to aid the achievement of organisational goals. Evaluation of training has been shown to exist in Government Departments to varying degrees. Reaction measurement is the most commonly used, however the assumption can not be made that favourable reactions actually translate into changed behaviour on the job. Some organisations are measuring learning and a few organisations have a structured process for this. There is a heavy reliance on the performance management process to ascertain behavioural change following the training event. In terms of evaluation of training it is unclear if the collated information from the performance management system is linked back to the training area or to any particular training programme. In situations where there was strong buy-in from managers, new skills and knowledge were successfully being utilised on the job. Two organisations had made some progress in terms of measuring organisational results. However, the results of the study suggest that Government Departments in New Zealand do not have a comprehensive system for measuring organisational results at this time.

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