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## Buy-In: At the Heart of Training's ROI

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*Pre-learning assessments and benchmarking are the “high octane” of learning success.*

“Sounds good in theory, but my boss won't let me do this.”

“That's nice, but I already know how to do it my own way.”

“Why do I even go to these training sessions when this stuff obviously can't be applied in my real job?”

Many learning and development professionals can tell you these sentiments reflect a common complaint frequently heard from learners. Often, people who receive job or skills training perceive there won't be support or reinforcement for their new competencies back at work, and therefore, what's the use in learning? Why do many learners feel this way and what can we, as learning professionals, do about it? After all, if learners are so cynical, why even show up at training sessions at all? To enjoy a few days out of the office or add a certification to their resume?

With pressure for increased job competence and performance mounting from stakeholders, customers and executives, HR executives need to address this phenomenon head-on to ensure the learning programs they implement yield quantitative benefits to their organizations. Given the vast amount of money invested in learning and development today—\$134 billion in the United States, according to the American Society for Training and Development—organizations should make every attempt to create environments conducive to learning, and a key part of that environment is encouraging the application and adoption of skills. A sound, first step toward that goal is the use of *pre-learning assessments* (PLAs).

### **A Refresher on the PLA and its Relevance Now**

The primary purpose of PLAs is to identify what individuals know about a given job-related skill. PLAs can also reveal what individuals need to know in order to perform better on the job. Moreover, by aggregating PLA results, an understanding of the “collective” knowledge of a group of people is gained. After all, HR executives are most interested in improving overall group or organizational performance, as compared to upgrading the performance of any single individual. To be sure, HR and learning professionals know that information gleaned from PLAs can better equip instructors to bring the session materials “to life” for the participants by drawing clear links between the content and their jobs. In short, PLAs are the platform upon which learning solutions are engineered.

Why does this matter now? Because “cash is king,” and the currency of training is ROI., plain and

simple. Placing a monetary value on learning and development benefits is first and foremost in executives' minds. "How quickly can someone learn a skill and apply it on the job?" is the question executives want answers to. The pressure is on—now more than ever—to ensure employees learn, learn quickly and immediately apply the skills. One way to do that is to be aware of what learners already know before the training event. It makes it that much easier to measure just how much they gain as a result of the process.

### **The Silver Bullet: Buy-In**

One of ESI International's learning partners, KnowledgeAdvisors (KA), has developed a model of predictive learning that helps organizations better gauge the impact of learning even before participants return to work. Their research has identified three areas that bear a positive influence on learning:

1. Participant "buy in"
2. Course materials
3. The instructor.

Interestingly enough, buy-in—by which learning participants are eager to complete PLAs and attend training sessions and actually want to get something out of them—has the most weight in the success of learning. According to KA, buy-in is "almost one and a half times more impactful on participant learning than producing quality course materials, and almost six times more impactful than instructor effectiveness." Powerful evidence that learners who endorse their training programs are better poised to actually learn new skills and apply them on the job. Couple this with PLAs and one can expect a higher probability of learning program success.

### **Application of Evidence: The Role of Benchmarking**

Not surprisingly, participants need to make a direct connection between the knowledge learned and its application to their job before a change in performance can take place. The best way to measure change is to establish a baseline of knowledge and skills prior to the training event.

PLAs can better prepare the learner for any training session, are key tools to inspire buy-in and show the learner where he or she stands relative to the training's objectives. The process can also help emotionally and intellectually prepare the learner for the program. When participants merely "show up" for a course without adequate preparation, it is highly unlikely that self-directed learning will occur. Oh, they'll get a certificate of completion, but documentation is hardly evidence that real learning has taken place. While buy-in is essential to success, benchmarking will track the progress of knowledge learned and measure on-the-job application.

Because training sessions are not isolated events, but are more a part of an integrated learning framework, it's not enough to do PLAs before training. Each training event should also be followed by 30- 60- and 90-day assessments, building upon the initial baseline to measure how far learners have progressed, what they've learned and the extent to which learning has been applied. The concept of preparing people to learn, learning and then testing is age-old and takes a new level of significance when learners are eager to continue participation throughout the entire process.

### **Final Thoughts**

What is the ultimate end game for organizations in terms of learning and development? Application, adoption and improvement. In this context, the strategic use of PLAs can demonstrate the extent to which organizations are gaining quantitative benefits from their learning programs. In benchmarking,

PLAs are a key part of the validation process enabling HR professionals to demonstrate overall improvement results and ROI once learning programs are complete.

The concept of applying PLAs to learning programs is not new, is not rocket science and is certainly not complex. It's wonderfully simple. But, the challenge with effective application of PLAs is in people actively and willingly participating in the appraisal. While learning and development professionals can encourage and motivate ideal behavior, participants must want to participate in both PLAs and subsequent learning programs in order to bring value to organizations. When they do, effective learning for both individuals and organizations truly takes place.

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