Beyond the happy sheet

Adopting an evidence-based approach to training and development evaluation
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Introduction

It’s the end of the financial year and the CEO corners you in the lift and asks:

‘How’s that £2 million training programme going?
What impact has it had on our productivity?’

Would you be able to answer?

UK businesses invest significant sums in training and development every year (around £43bn in 2013). Yet despite the scale of these investments, recent research from the CIPD has highlighted a lack of robust and joined-up evaluation.

The CIPD’s Learning and Development 2015 Report points to organisations relying on the ‘happy sheet’ – where they simply ask training delegates what they thought about the training – rather than looking for the wider impact of training and development on business outcomes and performance.

Yet according to another CIPD Report, around half of the employers surveyed see training and development and improving leadership and management capability as key ways of boosting productivity – which, despite high employment and a growing economy, is substantially lower in the UK than in the USA, France and Germany. What’s more, 55% of those surveyed said they plan to become more productive by using existing employees more efficiently, rather than by hiring new ones.

Seen in this context, it’s clear that knowing whether or not your training and development programmes are working is a critical business issue.

In this paper, we highlight the need for taking an evidence-based approach to this key activity, and present a model you may find useful when carrying out your own evaluation (and answering difficult questions from your CEO in the lift).
Evaluating training and development

Evaluating training and development activities is key for HR professionals, their stakeholders and their organisation as a whole. With many organisations offering everything from executive coaching and leadership development to graduate and technical skills training, we’re talking about significant investments in people – and each investment should be objectively reviewed to calculate a return.

However, the CIPD’s Learning and Development Report for 2015 illustrates that evaluating training and development initiatives is far from widespread in the UK. According to this report, one in seven organisations surveyed undertake no form of training and development evaluation at all. And over a third of organisations reported limiting their evaluation activity to measuring the satisfaction of employees taking part in the activity – what’s often referred to as the ‘happy sheet’.

Why is evaluation important?

Evaluating training and development is important for a number of reasons:

» Fundamentally, if you invest in training and development and don’t evaluate it, you’re spending money on a service without any idea if it’s delivering what it promises. How long would you do this with your own money?

» Organisations want to get a return on their investment, and training and development constitutes a major investment for most organisations. Evaluating training outcomes can help with complex ROI calculations and put HR metrics on a par with other critical organisational functions.

» As Henry Ford reportedly said, ‘If you keep doing what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.’ Well, without any insight from evaluation, you won’t even know what it was you had in the first place, never mind know where to start making improvements. You’ll continue to roll out training without knowing how or if it’s working, relying instead on blind faith that it’s delivering what you’d hoped.

» Evaluation helps organisations understand who is benefiting from what kinds of development activity. This helps target investments appropriately, but also identify other training and development methods where appropriate. It represents a move from ‘sheep dip’ development to development based on individual needs and the methods that are appropriate for a given role.

» Evaluation allows you to see how delegates’ learning is applied in the workplace and what impact this has on your key organisational performance metrics. This raises the narrative on training from ‘cost centre’ to ‘contributor to our success’.

04 / Beyond the happy sheet
Why aren’t organisations doing this?

If you’re among the practitioners who look at training evaluation with some trepidation, and especially if you want to do it properly, we can definitely empathise. It can be difficult to translate the theory into practice and it can seem like a complex and time-consuming activity. You may simply be put off by the perceived complexity, or your stakeholders might not be asking you to evaluate. And with the heavy workloads most HR and L&D professionals already have, is it realistic for you to raise your hand and pick up additional work in the form of training evaluation? (In the CIPD’s Learning and Development Report for 2015, 45% of those surveyed said that other business priorities prevented them from evaluating their L&D initiatives, while 21% cited ‘other L&D/HR priorities’ as a barrier.)

Pressing timelines and investment may also contribute to the problem. If you deploy a training or development programme regularly throughout the year, it may seem like there’s no time to evaluate its impact. The prospect of getting negative feedback about the value of the training, may represent an unwelcome outcome, pushing evaluation further down your list of priorities. And if you’ve advocated an investment in the training in the first place, do you also want to be the person who reports its failings to senior stakeholders? That sounds like an uncomfortable position to be in.

A fundamental lack of understanding may also contribute to the problem – the belief that delegate feedback is evaluation. If this is the case, you and your stakeholders might think evaluation is taking place, but you aren’t actually linking training to outcomes within your organisation.

Finally, how much can you trust the data you gather (cited as an issue for 32% of the respondents in the CIPD survey)? And there’s the capability of the L&D/HR team to conduct an evaluation (a barrier for 25% of survey respondents).

The limitations of the happy sheet approach

If you rely on what delegates report immediately following training – the ‘happy sheet’ – you miss out on other, very rich sources of data and evidence from the training experience.

Typically, delegates complete a short survey about their experience of the training, how useful they found it and what observations they have about factors like training venue, facilitator and materials. This kind of information gives you a snapshot of what the training experience was like, very shortly after the training is completed.

But what does this tell you about how much delegates learnt, remembered or applied in practice? Very little, if anything. It’s useful information to gather, but it represents just one piece of the evaluation puzzle.

Let’s look at this another way: are you investing in training and development activities to raise employee satisfaction with training? Is that really your key metric? Probably not. You should be measuring outcomes at a more detailed level, focusing on the factors that are important to you, your delegates and your organisation.

Reliance on the ‘happy sheet’ is superficial at best. It doesn’t tell you how much the training is working, for which employees and in what way.
Introducing evidence-based practice

While not a new concept in itself, evidence-based practice in the workplace has grown in popularity in recent years. It means focusing on the evidence behind interventions (e.g. training and development), evaluating this evidence and using the outputs of evaluation to inform decisions. Evidence-based practice means you don’t have to rely on blind faith or gut feel. Or, for that matter, ‘happy sheets’.

We know that practitioners don’t set out to make poor decisions, but solutions are often put in place due to a host of external pressures (e.g. time, demanding stakeholders, lack of awareness) and faulty decision-making due to lack of information, focusing on the wrong information or using intuition.

Adopting an evidence-based approach means we rely less on what has always been, instead questioning assumptions, seeking evidence, weighing up data and making decisions with the intention of reviewing outcomes and learning from our experience.

‘We don’t have time to do this any other way’

‘It’s what the competition are doing’

‘We’ve always done it this way’

‘It wasn’t invented here’

‘It’s best practice’
Evidence can take many forms, including scientific data, stakeholders’ perspectives and your own professional experience. Combining multiple sources of data and evidence will give you a more rounded picture of any organisational challenge and prevent you from making decisions based on a single data point.

Introducing evidence-based practice may be made more difficult by the culture of the organisation (e.g. fear of change), an absence of in-house technical skills (e.g. statistical analysis) and the typical organisational need for quick decisions and even quicker implementation.

These factors don’t necessarily make evidence-based practice impossible, but they do point to the need for planning, stakeholder management, seeking external support where required, and a commitment to continual learning and skill development.

Fundamentally, evidence-based practice gives your organisation increased clarity about what works, for whom and in what way.
Our model of evidence-based practice

We may have painted quite a gloomy picture so far – but all is not lost! Our model of evidence-based practice, can be used in a variety of organisational contexts and activities.

The model has six components, each representing a set of activities and decision points. It promotes a cyclical process, where the learning gained from one examination of the evidence informs and influences the next.

We’ve designed the model to provide you with a guide for organising your thoughts, resources, stakeholders and data in a way that gives you the best possible result.

If you apply this model to training and development, it will help you to clarify your evaluation goal, understand what data will be needed, design an approach to evaluation, run the evaluation and understand what it’s telling you.

You can then incorporate lessons learnt into future training and development activities. So, let’s take a look at each stage of the process.

1. Goal
   What is the aim of the evaluation? This might seem an odd question – after all, aren’t we just interested in seeing whether the training worked?

   Well, an evidence-based approach means moving beyond ‘Does this training work?’ to something more specific. It’s about working out what question you want to answer.

   A good starting point is to look at why stakeholders wanted training/development in the first place, what it promised to deliver, why this initiative or intervention was chosen over another solution, and why this group of delegates were chosen to attend. The key is to be specific and focus on what the training/development was designed to achieve.
2. Inputs
So what information will enable you to answer your question? If you just ask delegates if they enjoyed the training, or even what they thought about the facilitator and the training materials, you won’t be answering the core question: ‘Did the training achieve what it set out to?’

That’s why we recommend identifying what kind of data will give you an indication of how your training has affected delegates’ behaviour at work. Some of this information may already be available, if your organisation regularly collects it for other reasons, but you may need to gather other data just for this evaluation. To be most effective, an evidence-based evaluation should be based on more than a single source of data.

At the Future Work Centre, we recommend including the best available scientific evidence, valid and reliable organisational data, practitioner reflection and expertise and stakeholders’ perspectives. We include ‘happy sheets’ in this list, too – they don’t answer the core question on their own, but when you combine them with other sources, they help to create a rounded perspective.

3. Methodology
Once you understand the question you’re trying to answer and have clarity on what kind of data you’ll need, you can design your evaluation process, or methodology, and come up with a project plan.

Ideally, you’d start with the end in mind – design your evaluation around your end goal and start the process before the training is delivered. That way, you can gather before and after data, with a comparable control group who don’t take part in the training.

You might use a number of methods to do this, including surveying training delegates to get their feedback, interviewing senior stakeholders about their aims and objectives for the training in the first place, and gathering and comparing objective performance or behaviour-related data.

4. Implementation
You then need to implement your plan. This will require some tact and diplomacy with your stakeholders.

Consider this: if you didn’t request, design or run the training, how will it feel for others to get your feedback?

This doesn’t require you to hide the results, but to be sensitive to how you’ll gather the evidence and to clearly communicate – as positively as possible – why you’re gathering the information in the first place.

But implementing your plan will invariably mean hitting obstacles and setbacks. After all, you’re not working in a laboratory environment, where everything is tightly controlled. This is why pragmatism is a key quality of evidence-based practitioners. Make sure you pay attention to what might be interfering with your plans and factor it into your evaluation – the next step in our process.

5. Evaluation
It’s now time to gather the outputs from your various surveys and interviews, compare the performance metrics collected and review your original question. The analysis you’ll perform on the data will depend on whether the data is qualitative (e.g. the outputs from interviews) or quantitative (e.g. performance metrics), and is an area where you may need expert support.

There are lots of statistical analyses you can perform with data. The expertise comes in knowing which analysis will give you a useful answer. Guidance on this extends well beyond the scope of this paper, but it’s an area we’re well placed to advise on. Get in touch if you’d like some help with data analysis.

Once you’ve worked out what the data’s telling you, it’s important to be able to tell this ‘story’ to others. You may need to spend some time considering how you can identify the key points and create an accessible and compelling narrative for your colleagues. Consider what they need to know and how they like to receive information.

6. Learning
In this final step of the process, you identify what action can be taken in light of your evaluation, what lessons the organisation can learn and what you, as a practitioner, can learn about your evaluation process.

In terms of organisational learning, think what you want to share with which stakeholders, considering their interest in the training and their awareness of your evaluation. How much will you feed back to senior sponsors, delegates and facilitators?

You may also identify some key lessons learned for your next training evaluation – make a note of these so you can implement them when the time is right. And don’t be too disappointed if you see lots of things you could have done better. We’ve already highlighted that evidence-based practice is all about continuous improvement.

By making the move away from happy sheets to using an evidence-based approach, you’ll be much better placed to answer the question ‘Has this initiative achieved what it set out to?’ And you’ll have learnt valuable lessons about the evaluation process that will help to shape how you do it next time – as well as prepare you to answer the next difficult question from your CEO.
Mark is head of learning and development at a large manufacturing firm. He comes in one morning to find an email from his CEO saying that one of his divisional directors has just been on the company leadership development programme and says it was a waste of time.

She was out of the office for a week, which meant she missed some key meetings, and wasn’t available personally to deal with a problem on the production line. All for something she doesn’t think will have an impact.

Unfortunately, Mark only has ‘happy sheets’ to make his case for why the firm invests £150,000 a year in this programme. After each residential week, delegates are asked to complete a one-page survey on what they thought about the event.

A quick review of the responses collected over the last year doesn’t tell Mark much – apart from the fact that the venue’s catering is popular with delegates!

So he decides to apply our evidence-based model to evaluate it properly.
1. Goal
When Mark goes back through his records, he finds that his predecessor introduced the leadership programme in response to problems with identifying possible successors to the existing leadership team. He contracted with a consultancy to design and run the programme for the business’ senior managers, to develop their potential to take a step up in the coming years. Mark quickly realises that there isn’t one simple question he could ask to see if this aim has been achieved. So instead he sets out to answer two questions:

‘Do managers who participate in the programme get better performance feedback than those who do not?’

and

‘Do managers who participate in the programme rate it positively in terms of their professional development?’

2. Inputs
Mark considers the various sources of data he could combine to answer these questions.

A review of existing performance appraisal data is disappointing, as it hasn’t been collected consistently or with much objectivity (he makes a mental note to speak to the HRD about this!). Instead he focuses on gathering new performance data specifically for this evaluation, along with ratings from the programme facilitators and coaches, as well as the delegates themselves. He also thinks he should check how the senior executives of the business view the programme and whether it’s achieving the objectives set out by his predecessor.

3. Methodology
In an ideal world, Mark would gather data before the training starts, so he can compare it against the outcomes after it’s ended.

But it’s far from an ideal world and he doesn’t have time to start from scratch before another cohort of managers joins the programme.

Demonstrating a pragmatic approach, he gathers post-programme data via survey (stakeholder ratings of delegates’ performance, delegates’ views of the impact of the programme) and interview (facilitators’ and coaches’ views of how the programme is working and what delegates are doing well, along with executive stakeholders’ perspectives).

He also notes the need to improve this process to carry out a better evaluation, the next time the programme is run.
4. Implementation
As his predecessor is now head of HR, Mark needs to be careful about how he justifies the evaluation. There are also some so-called ‘high flyer’ managers on the programme, so he needs to bear that in mind too. Finally, he can’t respond to the CEO with ‘I don’t know’ or ‘It’s working perfectly’. So he positions his evaluation as the company fulfilling its obligation to shareholders to invest wisely, as well as showing that it takes its investment in people seriously. In explaining his approach, he uses the company’s stated value of ‘Continuous Improvement’ as a natural rationale for even asking these questions. He sends out the surveys electronically, waiting for the first week of September in the hope that the majority of key respondents are back from summer holidays.

5. Evaluation
When Mark pulls together all the data he’s collected, he finds that while he doesn’t have enough evidence to answer his question definitively, he can see that delegates who attended the coaching and classroom sessions, got better post-programme feedback than those who just went to the classroom sessions.

Managers who attended the programme in any form seem to have outperformed those who didn’t attend, indicating that it’s having a positive impact. Feedback from delegates supports this and there are some great examples of managers making real changes to their approach after attending.

In addition, delegates from HQ (e.g. finance and marketing) seemed to perform better than managers from the company’s regional operational hubs. Operations delegates frequently complained about the disruptive nature of the programme. Interestingly, the more successful delegates were also the ones who actively requested a place on the programme. All of this provides Mark with some intelligence to share with the CEO. Feedback from delegates and facilitators highlighted a few ‘quick wins’ regarding scheduling and preparation that are likely to lead to further improvements.

Mark thinks about how best to present his findings to the CEO. He decides to position them as what he knows now, but to suggest that he runs the evaluation again in six months’ time, using a more robust approach. He is keen to understand how long this positive change lasts, so intends to continue gathering and analysing this kind of data so he can understand the longer-term impact of the programme.

In summary, some delegates really seem to benefit from the programme and it’s important to know what could be done to improve outcomes for the others.

6. Learning
Mark realises he has gathered lots of practical learning points for the organisation.

It seems that requesting a place on the programme is associated with better outcomes, so his advice to the organisation is to look to volunteers first and investigate why others would be less keen. It appears that ‘appetite’ to participate is an important point here – something that seems obvious in hindsight.

Additionally, he wants to find out how the programme can be configured so it’s less disruptive for delegates from Operations. Finally, from his review of performance data, it also seems that the performance appraisal process could do with a refresh.

Using this approach has taught Mark how much better it is to start the evaluation process before the programme has begun, and not to assume that all data is good data. He begins planning for future evaluation of the programme and thinking of ways to make the results more robust as each cohort goes through. He’s determined to build on this experience and even extend these methods to other L&D initiatives in the business.

Crucially, though, it’s shown him that it is possible to evaluate an initiative in a concrete, evidence-based way. One that gives him a fighting chance of winning over his CEO.
Now that we’ve discussed the rationale for evidence-based evaluation of training and development and outlined a process you could use to achieve this, it’s time to consider what your next practical steps might be.

We don’t anticipate you moving from ‘no evaluation’ to ‘evidence-based evaluation’ in a single step. Instead, think about the next practical step you could take to advance the quality of training and development evaluation in your organisation. In planning the next step on your journey as an evidence-based practitioner, you might want to consider the following questions:

- **What are your priorities in terms of evaluation?**
  Is it your graduate development programme or a leadership development initiative? Perhaps a specific technical training course you’ve invested in? Have you or colleagues recently decided to introduce coaching somewhere in your organisation?

- **Who do you need to convince of the merits of an evidence-based approach?**
  Who are your key stakeholders when it comes to introducing this approach and how might you approach the topic with them? Might there be any sensitivities about evaluating their work or their decisions?

- **How confident are you in your own ability to carry out evaluation?**
  Are there specific strengths you can leverage or have you identified areas where you’ll need assistance?

- **Do you have access to internal or external expertise to help you?**
  Are there colleagues in your organisation who can support this? Do they have the analytical or research design skills? Might you need to bring in some external advisory or practical support?

- **What kind of obstacles can you anticipate in advance of an evaluation?**
  Consider the very practical elements of organisation life: timelines, other competing initiatives, typical busy times or holiday seasons.

- **What kinds of data and evidence could you gather easily?**
  What data do you already have access to, which could help you shed some light on the development intervention?

- **Who in your professional network could provide guidance and share their experience?**
  Do you know someone who’s already using this approach and would they be happy to share their reflections and advice with you before you begin?

We hope this paper has shown you how evidence-based evaluation could help you and your organisation.

Register if you’d like to receive our practitioner guide or hear about upcoming events:

Sign up for our Insight into Action workshop to learn how an evidence-based approach can help you evaluate the effectiveness of training and development:

Get in touch: call [020 7947 4273](tel:02079474273) or email [info@futureworkcentre.com](mailto:info@futureworkcentre.com)
The Future Work Centre conducts innovative, high quality psychological research about people’s experience of work. By openly sharing the results and actionable insights, we hope to improve the quality and experience of work, both now and in the future.

We know that high quality research is already being carried out in academic environments, but often the data remains within this domain. This means organisations and the wider public fail to benefit from these powerful insights. The Future Work Centre aims to bridge this gap.

We believe the science of occupational psychology, underpinned by evidence-based practice, has never been more relevant to individuals, organisations and society as a whole.

**We’re working to achieve a number of important objectives:**

- To help organisations make evidence-based decisions and understand what works, for whom and in what way.
- To help the public understand the value of occupational psychology, an evidence-based approach and how they can apply its lessons to their own experience of work.
- To share our research insights with society as a whole, openly, to engage and inspire.
- To develop the next generation of occupational psychologists, creating practitioners who value evidence and who seek to advance our science.
- To campaign and lobby for change where the evidence supports this.
Get in touch

For more information about how an evidence-based approach could help you evaluate the effectiveness of training and development call us on 020 7947 4273 or email info@futureworkcentre.com

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