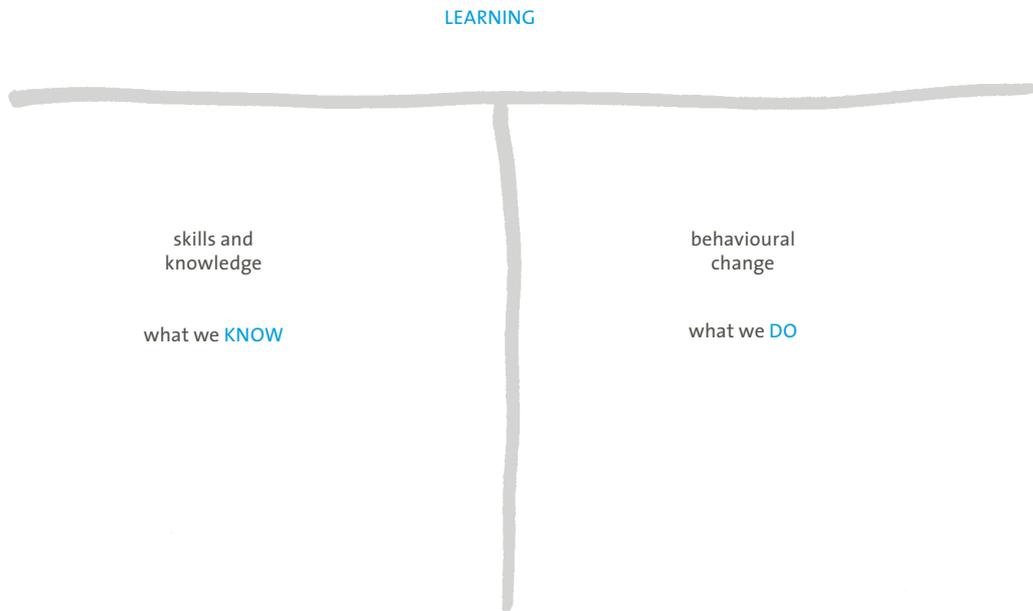


“Four billion dollars is spent by Australian businesses each year on training – of that, two billion dollars is completely wasted.”

According to research, as little as 10 to 20 per cent of all training is ever transferred from the training room into the workplace. It's not that participants don't leave training courses inspired, motivated and committed to implementing new ways of doing things, but rather that when they return to the workplace, faced with the usual challenges and constraints of the day, that motivation fades and they quickly fall back into old habits and established ways of behaving. As business is beginning to understand, training programs are just the beginning of the learning process – to fully realise the benefits of staff training we need to begin thinking of the training program itself as just the first step.

THE COMPONENTS OF LEARNING



THE MISSING LEARNING LINK

Training design has improved markedly over the last decade, and most professional training programs today make very effective use of adult learning principles. In fact, teaching techniques are often so effective in building skills and knowledge that participants retain the content long after the training program has finished. However, there is a key component missing in most training programs.

There are two distinct components to learning:

- skills and knowledge
- behavioural change

Or put another way:

- what we know
- what we actually do

While training is a very effective way to teach skills and knowledge it is inherently limited in its effectiveness in securing long-term behavioural change. Most companies invest heavily in the skills and knowledge component, but fail to invest in the behavioural change component. All that is needed to rectify the problem, and to help companies reap the rewards of their training investment, is the understanding that while skills and knowledge can be learnt in the training room an investment in the post-training period, where behavioural change is secured, is also required.

MAKING A CHANGE IS EASY...IT'S JUST A WHOLE LOT EASIER NOT TO

Change can happen in an instant. Occasionally, a person will read something in a book or meet an individual who has such a huge impact on them that they change instantly and effortlessly. More often however, change takes place over a longer period of time.

After attending a training course and learning new skills and knowledge, people return to the workplace and try to use that learning to change a habit – whether we're trying to give up smoking or to change any of our workplace behaviours the challenge is the same, and it is rarely successful. While the catalyst for change may certainly occur during a training course, a continued effort is required over a period of weeks to ensure that the change is permanent.

THE STAGES OF LEARNING

You may be familiar with the learning model in which training takes an individual from being in a state of unconscious incompetence (that is, they don't realise what they don't know until it is pointed out to them), to a state of conscious incompetence. This is the stage at which participants faced with new realisations often comment, "Wow, I never knew it could be done like that!". The next stage is conscious competence, where participants know what to do, and if they remain focused are able to do it. The key to successful training however, is when participants get to the final stage, where they are unconsciously competent – that is, they can use the new skill and knowledge without even thinking about it – it has become a habit. To create habits takes a longer period of time than it does to learn new skills and knowledge, and so there is clearly a gap between the end of the learning cycle and the development of a new behavioural habit.

BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Let's briefly look at four of the primary barriers to change that people face back in the workplace after a training program:

- **Urgency:** Typically, after having been away from the office for a training program, a backlog of work awaits us upon our return. 'Catching up' becomes the top priority and once back in the flow of everyday office activity the training course quickly becomes a memory.

- **Comfort zone:** The familiar office environment represents a comfort zone, and although it's easy to experiment and try new things while away from this environment the impetus to change often wanes when back in familiar surroundings.
- **Reflection:** Reflection is a key component of adult learning, looking at what has gone well and what could be done differently next time is a very valuable process, yet this is rarely achieved without some external stimuli.
- **Support:** Managers and colleagues do not support change. Even the best managers will often only have a hurried conversation with an individual asking them for feedback on the training course, which does nothing to secure change. Also, back in the workplace participants are surrounded by colleagues who are used to them behaving in the 'old' way and they don't generally support an individual's attempts to try out their new behaviours.

SO WHAT CAN BE DONE TO OVERCOME THESE BARRIERS?

There are two main strategies that can be implemented to overcome the challenge of wasted training dollars. They are the development and use of:

1. Action Plans
2. Action Sessions

ACTION PLANS

Action Plans are often completed by participants at the end of the training course and are intended to detail the key goals or targets that he or she wants to implement back in the workplace as a result of what has been learnt. But unfortunately, back in the workplace these Action Plans rarely leave the training folder and are never implemented.

Part of the problem is the way that 'next steps' sessions are incorporated into training programs. It is usually something done as a group activity with the trainer, and is generally done as an afterthought or formality rather than as a key component of the training itself. It's also usually done at the end of the course when participants are low in energy and counting down the minutes until they can head home. For trainers, the process finishes once the training program is complete

but for participants it is just the beginning, so in order to establish the foundations for lasting behavioural change to occur post-training, a new approach from trainers to gaining 'next step' commitments is essential.

At their most effective, Action Plans can be specifically designed to increase the level of implementation by ensuring that they are driven by the individual and that they are targeting work that can be owned by him or her. While the chosen actions need to be in line with the company's goals, first and foremost they need to be actions that the individual believes will assist them in their role.

It is often said that it is not the goal that motivates an individual but the 'why' that sits behind it. So, individuals need to get really clear on 'why' the action is so important for them – this creates leverage for change.

It is also important to consider how many behaviours can be effectively changed following a single training course. I often hear participants and trainers say, "If you take just one thing away from this training course then that's great," but in my opinion, if a participant has invested two days in a training course they really want to be taking more than one new skill away with them. Ideally, individuals should be aiming to nominate three actions for implementation back in the workplace following a training course.

[Action Sessions ensure that the Action Plan implementation process gains momentum over time.](#)

Once the Action Plan is in place, it is the Action Process that works to secure lasting behavioural change. One of the simplest ways to improve the use of Action Plans is for individuals to place their plans in their diary or on their desk where they are visible and easily revisited every day. The plan therefore needs to be in a format that encourages this, such as on a page that can be removed from the training workbook or manual, rather than something created and stored electronically.

ACTION SESSIONS

Action Sessions ensure that the Action Plan implementation process gains momentum over time. Ideally, an individual would be supported for six to eight weeks following a training program, by which time they will have been able to change old habits and replace them with the new learnings. Action Sessions may be delivered face-to-face, by telephone or by email – the important thing is that they are regular and repeated.

The ACTION process

Before we look at how Action Sessions work, let's look at the stages of the ACTION process:

- A – An **accountability** structure is created for the implementation process.
- C – Goals are set and **calibrated** post-training by the participant, defining how they will use their new skills.
- T – The **target** is identified in each Action Session – participants know what they are aiming for.
- I – They reflect and gather **information** about what is happening in the workplace to assess accurately where they are now.
- O – The **options** are brainstormed to plan a way forward.
- N – Commitment for the **next steps** that will take place in between Action Sessions is gained and monitored. This secures a behavioural change owned completely by the participant.

Why does the ACTION process work so well?

The key points that Action Sessions address, and the reason for their effectiveness, is that they:

- give the participant a structured opportunity to reflect on and review their progress
- act as a sounding board to help the participant identify solutions that overcome the challenges they face in implementing their new skills and knowledge
- keep the new skill or knowledge in the forefront of the participant's mind
- encourage the participant to look closely at what is holding them back
- assist the participant in measuring and monitoring their success

- act as a supportive cheerleader to help participants stay motivated toward making positive changes
- effectively deliver change implementation in a way that suits the individual and his or her role and circumstances.

HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

The flexibility of Action Session delivery means that companies have great flexibility in how they are conducted and by whom. Many companies assume that the responsibility lies with participants' managers, which is often a mistake as managers are generally not appropriately skilled, or lack the time, to provide this vital support. In addition, due to the nature of the relationship between a manager and staff member, the manager is generally placed in the role of being the 'expert', which immediately reduces the ownership and level of change that the individual takes responsibility for. Not only this, but staff members are often reluctant to openly admit their weaknesses to their managers for fear of impacting their future prospects within the organisation. A more effective way to engage managers in helping staff to implement new behaviours is to match participants with managers from other parts of the organisation who do not have a bearing on their day-to-day role and future career prospects.

When companies are clear on the differences between the skills and knowledge component of training and the behavioural change component, they can identify ways to better manage it, whether it is through up-skilling managers, incorporating it as part of the HR function or outsourcing the role to a specialist company.

THE BOTTOM LINE

By considering the two distinct components involved in learning – skills and knowledge, and behavioural change – there is much that companies can do to reverse the trend of wasted training dollars and begin creating real results from their training investment by turning all company learning into action. ☺