



# Why do we waste so much money on training?

by Simon Harris, PMP

Have you given much thought to getting real value from training course? If not, argues Simon Harris, you may be wasting your money.

I frequently wonder why people waste their money on training. It is an expensive endeavour; there is a cost straight to the bottom line of the training fee and the loss of otherwise productive, perhaps revenue-generating time.

## Zero preparation

As someone whose services include training delivery (in project management) I'm surprised how often I get a nil response when I ask trainees 'what preparation have you and your boss done for this event?'. Equally I'm not very surprised when I ask in debriefing exercises 'how will you apply this at work', to find little thought has been spent considering the question and then, when it is posed, the response from the majority is often: 'it will be hard'.

## Extracting value is hard

It is true: for many topics extracting the value from a course is hard to do, it takes coordinated efforts by a variety of stakeholders, and probably involves 'change' – something people generally dislike. It may actually, in the short term be counter-productive until the faltering stages of turning knowledge into skills are past.

## Maximise returns

The steps and techniques are easy to describe, are set-out here and are worth the effort in most cases. After all, as the PMBOK (the Project Management Institute's Project Management Body of Knowledge) tells us, 'money spent is a sunk investment'. Without some basic steps your investment is frequently sunk without much if any return.

With a few simple steps the return on investment may be multiplied many times over.

## Before the event

Spend time considering 'why training is being attended and funded?' What post-training impact is desired? Who and what is expected to change as a result of attendance?

*Opportunity and incentive:* Attendee and boss should consider how, after the training event, newly discovered knowledge can be practised, and who they should warn that 'we will be trying out new techniques soon, expect some mistakes and perhaps a short term slow-down'.

*Incentives for the boss!* Perhaps modify incentives from productivity to implementation of new ways of working (for attendee and attendee's boss!) to encourage transition of ideas from classroom to work place.

## During the event

The key focus at the event should be to understand what is being discussed moment to moment. It isn't possible to listen to what is said at the start with knowledge of what will be said at the end, but the two are almost certainly linked. So reviewing each session's and each day's material is a valuable activity, as is reading ahead.

*Read ahead:* As a guideline, at lunch or at the end of day one (assuming a multi-day event) take the course notes and scan through to the end of course to get a feel for the structure and content. The aim is not to read all the words, but to provide your brain with enough of an idea of the structure of what is to come to ease its 'labelling' and storage. Easy topics (lots of familiar vocabulary and concepts) and unfamiliar topics (perhaps more difficult

topics) should be identified. Perhaps questions can be formulated off-line. During a class, if you know what is coming, it makes assimilating the topic in context easier and more complete.

*Re-visit yesterday:* At the start of every day scan the materials covered so far. Our brains are wonderfully capable of storing what we understood 'in the moment', but poor at recall. Plus, after 'sleeping on it' the massively parallel capabilities of the subconscious will have forged links between topics. The morning after scan should take just five minutes (it really is about *scanning*). That scan should flag-up questions of comprehension between inter-related topics that were not possible moment by moment and will build your capability to recall.

*The conscious mind cannot multi-task:* A speaker will generally speak at around 200 words per minute but when we think in words we manage (so I'm told!) circa 800 words per minute. The conscious brain is single-stream and these speed differences mean it appears to cope with listening and thinking concurrently. In fact it doesn't. More than a little time spent thinking about what has just been said necessarily stops the listening process. This is when we miss points: so ask for a repeat at the point of 'return to a listening focus'.

*Tell the boss you are 'out':* A good instructor will strive to make complex topics simple by breaking them up into bits, illustrating them with striking and unusual examples and relating them to your existing knowledge. Any new topic will take you a lot of effort to grasp the pieces, reassemble them and map them to the less logical, less tidy reality of the workplace. You need free mental CPU time

to process all of this. Diving back into the familiar 'office-issues' at breaks is a sure way to drive the newly heard out of the head. If you cannot be spared from the work place for five, or four, or two days, how will you ever get promoted or take a holiday? Tell your subordinates and the boss how to delegate and decide or escalate in your absence.

## After the event

**Payback time:** When your three-day or five-day project (course) is over, then benefits harvesting should start. You return to work full of new ideas and run smack-bang into cynicism from all your work colleagues whose attitude, comments and even body language tells you that return on investment is harder than just using techniques that are unpractised. Faltering usage will leads to mistakes that will be subject to public ridicule, Techniques that took an experienced instructor's skills to convey to you in half a day cannot be convincingly reflected by you to the cynics in 20 minutes. It's far easier to revert to the old ways and 'that's how it's done here'. Next time do the pre-course stakeholder analysis and preparation!

**Create a Benefits Realisation Plan:** On return to work 'revisit yesterday' a few times and sketch-out: 'What would have to change (roles, meeting agendas, process steps)? Who would have to change and why would they?' Don't try all those new found processes and techniques on the most critical and visible piece of work, instead work with the boss to find space to practise on tasks without other pressures.

**Classic approach equals classic issues, perhaps a new way may be worth trying:** Bide your time to introduce new ideas. Wait until a 'classic' problem occurs, or is imminent, and suggest 'there is another way to do this'. Say, I learnt it on a course, so there's no guarantee of fluent application but it is worth a go . . .! As someone said: 'each crisis is a valuable opportunity – don't waste it'

**The learning cycle:** There are four steps to learning that revolve in a cycle: Concrete experience (which should be the course exercises); Observation and reflection (which should be what you do after an exercise); Conceptualisation (which should be what happens in the exercise debriefs) where you consider 'how to deploy at work'; and Experimentation.

## Conclusion

Training is expensive. A good instructor creates the potential for return on investment, but a good boss (team, peers or customer) creates the context for the return on investment.

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*Simon is a veteran of 30 years in IT and business change. His experience ranges from large-scale blue-chip environments within finance and banking, defence, government or oil and gas. He can be contacted on 0845 2 57 57 07*



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