

# Beyond seagulls

by Helen McPhun

**In a world where sustainability screams from every second headline and crams the commercial vision statement of any organisation worth its salt, those same entities are mostly blind to the need to add that word to their training intention.**

The universal outcome of every training initiative is for the learner to change a behaviour. That behaviour may be as simple as using a new sales technique to sell more products, using better interpersonal skills to more effectively deal with conflict, or using a basic skill on the computer. No matter what the industry or business, all training is in place to affect some sort of change in behaviour.

So you have to wonder why, when so much is invested globally in training interventions, so few companies actually measure to see if learning did occur in the sessions. Perhaps more importantly, you have to wonder why most companies do not develop programmes to ensure the learning translates into measurable, monitored and sustained behavioural change at work.

Many companies sign up year after year to an assortment of training initiatives that could be classed as 'seagull solutions'. You know the style – trainers

arrive, create excitement, pick up the crumbs (e.g. dollars), hit some of the group with splurges of content and then fly off to do it all over again further along the beach. Training is no more than a quick landing or 'bumps and circuits'.

The training may have been 'dynamic', 'edgy', 'creative' and 'engaging'. The participants may have been interested, motivated, excited and eager. However, training alone cannot guarantee on the job performance or changed behaviour in the workplace.

Great training needs to incorporate elements to assess learning. After all, if a company is investing in training, it is, in essence, really investing in the belief that learning will occur, behaviours will change and performance will improve once the employee returns to work.

Few trainers incorporate measurable learning activities in their delivery – only too happy to deliver the training (that really, is the easy part). To actually turn around and measure how much learning

occurred, in a manner that is also engaging, pragmatic, motivating and enjoyable, is often seen as too hard. Perhaps it is a lack of formal training in the design of integrated and effective assessment tools, or perhaps it is a lack of wanting to take ownership of the true results of the training, or perhaps it is something as simple as leaving the learning as an optional thing on the shoulders of the participant.

No matter what the reason, training interventions that do not measure learning are just training. It's a bit like the cartoon of the little boy and his puppy: "I taught Spot to whistle!" the little boy said excitedly. Of course, Spot, the dog, doesn't whistle so the boy adds when questioned, "I said I taught Spot to whistle, I didn't say he learned."

For those trainers with a true passion for excellence, measuring the effectiveness of the training to see the level of learning that occurred is one of two critically important post-course steps. Assessment does not have to take the form of a traditional exam resulting in 'pass' or 'fail', a percentage result, or a list of 'rights' and 'wrongs'. Instead, a variety of creative and realistic workplace activities can be completed and evidence can be collected that demonstrates the participants' competence with the newly-learned skills or knowledge. Reviewing these documents will show participants' areas of skill or weakness while



also providing trainers with some insight into their own ability to transfer theory and skill through the session into demonstrated participant ability at work.

### Lingering longer

However, assessing learning alone will not provide an ongoing assuredness of improved performance. The outcome of any robust and successful training session, once assessed using well designed assessment tools, needs to be cemented as a long term practice by a targeted and effective coaching programme.

Monitoring participants to see how and when they are applying their new skills and abilities is an important criterion in ensuring that learning lingers longer. Coaching participants to ensure they are using these skills and abilities well, consistently and with ease, is what makes all the difference.

This last step will mean the money invested in training will definitely result in measurable changes in behaviour. Coaching can consist of an in-depth, long-term process handled by dedicated and trained coaches inside the company, or by the trainer or supervisor/manager offering long-term coaching components designed to fit the organisation's style and needs.

Great training must always include practical, realistic and engaging measures to assess learning and then once back

on the job, participants must be coached for a period of time to transform the newly-learned behaviours to the normal method of responding.

With all the hype about sustainability... perhaps it is time that more trainers focused on delivering training with sustainable outcomes. Great training needs to be assessed in the workplace to measure learning. The learning must then be maintained through a coaching process synthesised into everyday operations.

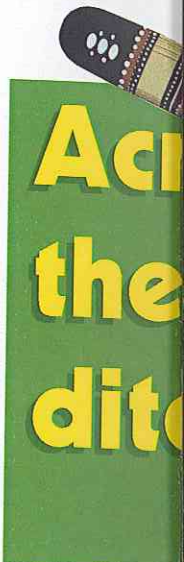
Many people can deliver training but not many are brave enough to measure the learning and promote sustainable learning outcomes. All it takes is a bit of 'TLC':

- training that engages and motivates the learners;
- learning that is assessed with creative and effective assessment tools;
- coaching that is in place to sustain learning and maintain a high level of performance.

That busy buzz of promise at the end of a great training session can transform into a roar of measurable improvements when learning is assessed and performance is monitored and maintained through coaching.

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### Getting quality Is it worth it?

A recent National Research report for Vocational Research reports on costs and benefits for a vocational training (VET) course. It finds that generally, students do not have an adequate incentive to enroll.

The best returns are for students who start a level qualification (Level III upwards), and complete it in a shorter time.

Among the findings:

- The rates of return on advanced diplomas are correspondingly lower than reported in earlier studies.
- Rates of return on part-time study are lower than full-time study.

Full-time students incur additional costs and forego the opportunity to work while studying. The income they receive is about four times that of part-time students.