Importance of non-technical training and tracking effectiveness - shifting organisational focus

Padmaraja Usha M, Research Scholar, Department of Human Resource Management, Andhra University

Abstract

Recognition of an employee as a 'resource' elevated 'training' to be one of Human Resource Management's development functions. Training was regarded as being important for an employee, but limited to what was required or demanded by the job role for efficient and effective task completion. Later, any training imparted for a future job role demand was considered a 'development' activity. This trend led to the popularity of the phrase 'Training is for the present while development is for the future'. It has been found that organisations and employees alike, whether in the public or private sector have come to value the incorporation of soft skills or life skills training as a vital part of the human resource development function.

Keywords: *Hard skills, Soft Skills, Life Skills, Attitude Training, Development*

1. Introduction

Training is the act of increasing the knowledge and skills of an employee for doing a particular job (Edwin B. Flippo). Training is also defined as a planned intervention that is designed to enhance the determinants of individual job performance (Chiaburu and Tekleab 2005.p 29). Studies by d'Arcimoles 1997, Bartel 1994, Holzer, Block, Cheatham and Knott 1993, indicate that training all by itself, can enhance performance outcome of firms. They have also observed that several empirical studies of enterprise training and performance have found no necessary link between employee training and the use of other management practices like compensation, recognition and rewards. Most practitioners initially understood the term 'training' as similar to HRD and the term 'training and development' has been popularly used to label departments and seen as synonymous to HRD. In the recent times the term 'human capital'

has gained momentum and it means 'human resources or people are assets of value which can be enhanced with investment'. Human capital development is the process of developing and retaining existing skills, abilities and competencies of employees. It needs to be noticed that the term 'knowledge' does not feature in the above definition. It is about that kind of training and development which raises the general level of skills and thus enhancing the human capital of an organisation. This conventional 'training' is required to cover essential skills which are by and large work-related techniques and knowledge. At this point the three domains of learning termed as Blooms taxonomy are worth noting-

Domain 1-Knowledge which is purely 'cognitive' meaning mental acumen and a reflection of theoretical or practical understanding of a subject

Domain 2- Skills which are 'psychomotor' meaning manual or physical skills which

are proficiencies developed through experience and also training

Domain 3- Attitudes which are 'affective' meaning responses expressed through feelings or emotions

1.1 Emotional Quotient alongside Intelligence

Beginning in the early 1980s, management consultants and scholars began challenging the notion that people with high IQs are most likely to have business and career success. Instead, they found that individuals who use what the management journal *The McKinsey Quarterly* called "the soft S's of style, skills, staff, and shared goals" (Watson, 1983) generally outperform those who rely only on technical knowledge, organizational structures, and systems.

Emotional intelligence is given the same weight as IQ and learning and development teams are making efforts to ensure that training initiatives focus on developing both technical as well as non-technical skill sets.

EQ is the level of ability to understand other people, what motivates them and how to work cooperatively with them, according to Howard Gardner, the influential Harvard theorist. Self awareness, Self regulation, Motivation, Empathy and Social skills are the five major categories of emotional intelligence skills recognized by researchers in this area. (www.psychcentral.com)

1.2 Soft skills - Misconceptions

Initially, the word 'soft' associated with skill was originally led to the misunderstanding that these skills are easy to acquire, where as this word is supposed to reflect the intangibility associated with these skills. Most of the organisations assumed that people knew how to behave on the job and how to fit in as well as how to be on time, take initiative, and rank as a high achiever or top performer. However, because the same organisations have become less dictatorial and more social in their structures, the value of soft skills to an organization is growing. In addition, in order to gain a competitive edge, employers want people who know how to handle themselves at work and how to relate to customers and colleagues.

There's a common myth that capabilities like interpersonal communication, leadership, or coping with change are innate or born traits and can't be taught or learned.

There's also an organisational tendency to avoid what's difficult to measure. It's easier to see an immediate, tangible result from training someone to use a new software program, to operate a new machine or to master a new technical skill, than it is to track the benefits of teaching someone to be a better leader. The typical professional values technical (hard) skills in the workplace and that their performance evaluation is based primarily on technical output. This belief is reinforced by the fact that companies continue to hire on the basis of technical skills to meet their immediate needs.

The way in which the word 'skill' is defined or understood has undergone a subtle but profound shift in meaning seeing the growing prioritisation of softer social skills and the possession of generic cognitive skills such as communication, problem solving and the ability to use IT over manual dexterity. This trend is an outcome of skill based technological change stemming from progress in information and communication

technologies (Kelly 2007, Corvers and Merikul 2008)

2.1 Developing People not Skills following the Fourth Philosophy

A corporate philosophy of training originates at the executive level. Training departments are typically based on one or more of the following philosophies:

I-To prepare employees to develop specific skills necessary to perform effectively in their current job assignments

II-To build skills and impart knowledge that will make employees more effective in a variety of possible job roles

III-To prepare employees to take on broader or more demanding job assignments in the future

IV-To help employees recognise and realise their full potential as human beings

These philosophies are ordered from the most concrete to the most abstract. While the first one takes care of the employee's current job roles, the second and the third equip them for broader roles in future. It is the fourth philosophy which adds value to employees, as those skills contribute to personal mastery and are transferable to any number of different jobs. (Zemke, Ron. 'In search of a training philosophy' Training magazine 1985 pp93-98). These are what we call 'People skills' and are needed for everyday life as much as they're needed for work. Organisations are facing great pressure to change their philosophy these days - to facilitate and encourage whole-person development and fulfilment - beyond traditional and conventional training. The challenge of developing

greater confidence, initiative, solutions-finding, and problem-solving capabilities among their people is looming over their heads.

2.2 Soft yet Difficult

Despite the research and recognition that good soft skills have received, formal education has been very slow to respond. For almost a decade, various organisations have been sounding the alarm about how unprepared university graduates are for the workforce, despite being highly educated. Engineers and MBAs frequently come out of colleges with excellent technical and quantitative skills, for example, but an underdeveloped ability to communicate, build teams, negotiate with colleagues, or lead groups. A study in a superpower country, when 20,000 new hires were tracked, 46% of them failed within 18 months. But even more surprising than the failure rate, was that when new hires failed, 89% of the time it was for attitudinal reasons and only 11% of the time for a lack of technical skill. The attitudinal deficits that doomed these failed hires included a lack of coachability, low levels of emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament. Hence by default, most people learn soft skills on the job, either through formal training or informal means, such as mentoring or observation. The educators, employers and students should work in tandem if the employability rates have to be bettered.

3.1   Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the study are to explore: The need for soft skills training alongside technical training across different kinds of organisations, the effort put into planning and execution of training programs across organizations , the

various scenarios highlighting the increased relevance of soft skills training in general

3.2 Methodology and Limitations

This is an exploratory study for which

Primary Data was collected through personal interviews and observations in a variety of organisations. Secondary Data is drawn from literature and articles from newspapers and World Wide Web.Data is drawn from experience as a trainer and resource person in various organisations ranging from a local governing body, a couple of government departments, Banks, Insurance Company, Software companies, BPO and academic institutions. personal interviews/interactions with top management from the above mentioned organisations

3.3 Analysis and Findings

	Private Sector	Non Private Sector (Public and Government Sector)
Number of organisations	3	3
T & D budgets	Rs.50,000-Rs.1,00,000 p.a	No clear annual budgets earmarked/Need based
Cost Break up-Technical and Non Technical Training	3:1	No clear breakups
Homogeneity among the target groups	Yes	No
Training Evaluation and TNA	Yes	No
Trainer Technical	In- house	In- house
Trainer Non technical	Outsourced	Mostly outsourced
Purpose of Non Technical Training	-Need based -Rejuvenating employees -Sensitising on critical issues	-As a compliance -Need based

Table 1- Comparative analysis of non technical training initiatives taken up at Private and Public Organisations

Discussion Based on the Training Experiences at Various Organizations

In public sector organisations, the largest share of training and development costs is focused on improving skills on technical lines irrespective of the employees' basic qualifications. This in itself is a laborious exercise across huge number of employees. For this reason, employees traditionally have been viewed through the budgetary lens, and therefore they have often been seen as costs to be cut rather than as assets to be

valued. This leads to reluctance on their part to invest in non technical training. Though the budgets are planned for, they cover only tangible expenditures, without including the man-hours put in by the trainers, who happen to be mostly in-house. In case of private organizations, typically ratio of technical and non-technical training budgets was observed to be 3:1, clearly suggesting the higher level of importance given to the technical training.

Training at a government department was initially at the behest of requirement raised by the top management with regard to imparting 'skills in prioritisation', complementing their technical skills leading to further efficiency. The department under question in its effort to change its public image has realised the need for attitude training. This led to a series of weekend training sessions to the frontline employees who are most affected by change. On the contrary, while it is undergoing a massive change process adapting new technologies, its focus is limited to technical skills (training and hiring) with soft skills taking a back seat. Although it has provided such training to a few employees who are termed 'change champions', need for such attitude training across all levels of employees is visible through the data collected from personal interviews and observation.

It has been observed that in public sector organisations, target groups consisted employees in the last year of service and employees who were new recruits in the organisation. Motivation level of such a group was found not conducive to a learning environment. In contrast private organisations are found to be paying more attention to homogeneity among the target group.

It has been observed that organisations in both public and private sectors meticulously plan for soft skills training programs. But these are deliberately scheduled during holidays or after office hours in order not to lose working hours of the employee in the case of private organisations. This was found acting detrimental to the basic objective with which attitude training was planned for and in fact, was encouraging the employee to refrain from the training programme. This was not so apparent in public sector organisations.

Training Need Analysis, which is a very vital part of the training cycle, is usually not being carried out as there are certain resource constraints and hence the top management decides the areas of training. Sometimes though budget or time is not a constraint, the organisation may not be neither willing to share inside information required for analysis with an external consultant nor it does have a competent internal consultant to do the same. In either case, the objectives of such training programmes have been found to be only partially fulfilled.

It has been observed that in a local governing organisation a separate department was set up for the purpose of training and development as it was mandatory by some rule or regulation. Availability of allocated funds for the purpose has driven the authorities to execute training programs (both hard and soft skills) with lack of sufficient planning for the same. The immediate outcomes were perfunctory and in the long run the entire activity of attitude training ceased thus diluting the cause of the establishment of such a department.

Very rarely it is seen that an organisation relies on feedback from a training session to carefully plan for the subsequent ones. Such organizations derive the maximum from their investment on training.

Sometimes employees use the opportunity of providing feedback on training to communicate their grievances irrelevant to the training program. There were instances when such feedback sessions were used as vehicles for whistleblowing as well. This defeats the purpose of the training feedback.

Not all organisations have training departments of their own. Soft skills' training is usually outsourced and thus its effectiveness depends to a large extent on the competence of the external trainer or the vendor training organisation. Their commitment to the purpose of the training might not be the same as that of an in house trainer. When such attitude training is taken up by trainers in-house, it has achieved greater results in lesser time as in the case of a very large nationalised bank was the is opinion of a retired banker whose services were being used as a trainer (in this context change agent) by the same bank.

Other Observations

It has been observed that organisations are not paying attention to evaluate their training programs using proven or appropriate metrics. In a BPO, attitude training was propositioned to counter an increasing attrition rate, due to competition or otherwise. It has been noticed that Soft skills training programs were used as platform for sensitising employees on critical issues like sexual harassment and work ethics. A government department also trained senior level professionals on 'Entrepreneurship promotion and planning' and 'Innovation' which was a combination of technical as well as non-technical training. The purpose was to increase the efficiency and motivation levels.

Above mentioned government department had included soft skills module in its 45 day induction training which was very well received by the participants. This was a proactive measure by the department. On the contrary, a BPO with a 700 strong base of employees provided for 2 months off- the-job and 1 month on- the- job technical training but not soft skills training. The same organisation on a reactive mode outsourced soft skills training after encountering certain human relations issues.

Very few organisations make attendance mandatory for a soft skills training program. This is leading to the training effort being reduced to a mere formality especially in large bureaucratic organisations where the importance of soft skills is not yet totally recognised. However there are certain examples where the training programs are a blend of both technical and non-technical components making it a compulsory module.

Most of the organisations seem to expect their potential employees to be equipped with non-technical skills and hence focus only on assessing technical skills. Unfortunately as studies project, job aspirants are not living up to the expectations. This gap has resulted in the birth of placement training institutes and finishing schools all over. However certain academic institutions offering professional courses have their own placement training or soft skills training labs. But it has been observed that their

efforts have been restricted to building non-technical skills required to face the interviews which is not really serving the purpose in the long run.

3.3 Suggestions Based on the Study

1) Effective delivery of attitude training is possible if employee work hours are utilised for training rather than scheduling training after office hours or on holidays.

2) Training Need Analysis (TNA) is absolutely necessary. Continuous training can be effectively managed only with TNA, using feedback of one to analyse need for the other.

3) Need for planning and understanding the purpose of training is very vital in order to save the organisation from expenditure that goes into the drain and training that becomes a farce. A meticulous effort put into scheduling and identifying the right target group would definitely yield results.

4) Relevance and purpose of feedback should be understood by both the management and the employees equally. This sensitization is crucial as feedback provides insights into the need for further training.

5) Organisations should develop and use appropriate metrics as it would give them clarity of objectives set and achieved. This would again provide the foundation of training needs for the future.

6) Disparity in the grouping of trainees should be avoided to help achieve the objectives of training. A well planning grouping or segregation effort would make learning more interesting thereby contributing to the objectives of the training.

7) A proper understanding of the spirit and purpose of training across the organisation would enhance the delivery and impact the outcomes

8) Attitude training should be given its due importance despite constraints like time.

9) An ideal combination of hard and soft skills training would smoothen the process in the organisations undergoing massive changes, technical or otherwise

10) Encouraging in house trainers who come with a relevant exposure would help achieve training objectives in lesser time

11) Training imparted as a part of change management initiatives should also be backed up with rewards of some kind. Else people will have no reason to stick their necks out and not just at the prospect of a financial reward but more importantly the Herzberg-type motivators - real extra responsibility, recognition, and involvement in new successful and interesting projects. Whereas the organisation in question did not have any kind of rewards or recognition for employees willing to learn change related attitudes.

12) As the result of attitudinal training reflects in employees' behaviour at work, it would be appropriate for organisations to develop a Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scale that can be validated against the objectives of the training.

13) With even placement training not helping the potential employees there is a dire need for including life skills in the

pedagogy right from the high school level itself.

4. Conclusion

Statistics indicate that investment in non-technical training is continuing to grow as more and more organisations realise its importance. By making soft skills a priority, organizations are trying to drive success, growth, and greater return on such training investment. Attitude is what today's companies are hiring for.   In much the same way that people upgrade software so that they have the latest, bug-free versions with the highest functionality, organisations also need to upgrade their employees so that their skills are always improving and they can provide maximal value. Top managements of various organisations are trying to see things from the employee's (asset's) point of view. They are willing to provide learning and experiences that they'd like for their own personal interest, development and fulfilment. Performance and capability are ultimately dependent on employee's attitude and emotional maturity. Helping them to achieve what they want on a personal level, as this would provide a platform for trust, 'emotional contracting' with the organisation, and subsequent skills/process/knowledge development relevant to managing higher responsibilities, roles and teams. Participative workshops are being used well in beginning this type of attitudinal development. Also work place behaviour is being monitored which could be a near to accurate metric for evaluating the success of such soft skills training.

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