Brandon Hall Group

STRATEGY BRIEF

Linking Learning to Improved Performance

2022

Learning & Development

Talent Management

Diversity & Inclusion

Leadership Development

Talent Acquisition

Workforce Management/HR

CURRENT STATE

For too many organizations, the intended outcome of learning is the learning itself. Companies are only concerned with how many programs they can deliver, how many people they can get through them and how quickly they can do it. There is little or no connection to performance outcomes, let alone the overall goals of the business. It becomes a vicious cycle where learning isn't linked to outcomes because there is no mechanism to measure it and outcomes are not measured because there is no link to the learning. The entire process happens in a vacuum where impact on the business is incidental at best.

What percentage of your learning is considered to have met its objectives by showing its direct impact on business outcomes?

0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%
45%	27%	21%	7%
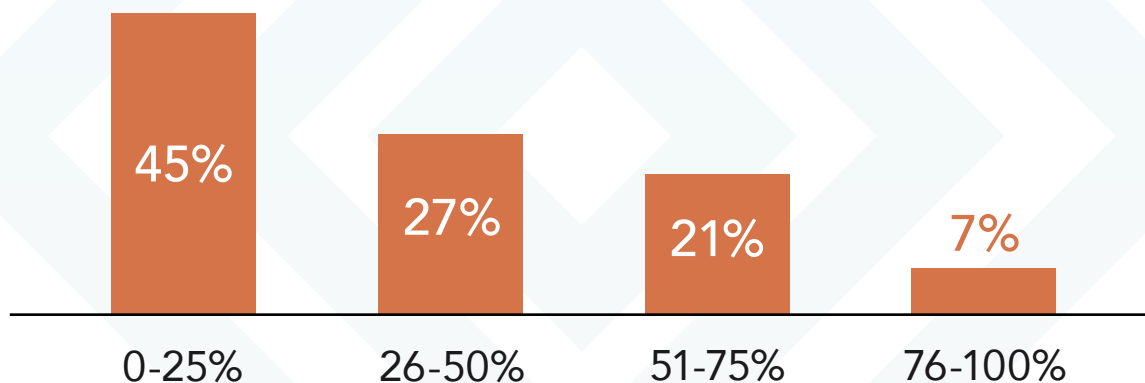
Source: Brandon Hall Group, Learning and Performance Study

COMPLEXITIES

The biggest pushback against measuring learning based on its impact on the business is that there are simply too many other variables that contribute to those outcomes. But this is really an admission that no link was established between the learning program and the things the business requires to be successful. It is challenging because the distance between an outcome such as "increased revenue" and a learning program appears to be so vast that there is no way to connect them. But there are really several, closer links that can be made to complete the chain.

Still, companies struggle with even these closer connections. For instance, before you get to the specific outcomes of a learning program, first there are talent development objectives or the development of specific competencies and skills. Then there are the learning performance outcomes or what learners should be able to demonstrate to show they have mastered the competency or skill targeted by the learning. Unfortunately, in many cases, these links are weak or nonexistent.

To what degree are the following linked together?

45%
Learning performance outcomes to learning objectives

38%
Business objectives to talent development objectives

32%
Talent objectives to learning performance outcomes

Source: Brandon Hall Group, Learning and Performance Study

CONSEQUENCES

This lack of alignment makes it next to impossible to connect the dots between learning and business outcomes. This leaves Learning leaders armed with nothing more than completion reports and smile sheets to demonstrate the effectiveness of learning programs. While this data can be important, on its own it does not help make the case for further investment in learning. An inability to measure learning's impact has a negative on effect learning's ability to have an impact. If Learning leaders don't know what is working and what isn't, they can't adjust the learning strategy to build on success and rectify failures.

Which of the following are challenges to achieving critical learning outcomes?

Inability to measure learning's impact

70%

54%

Lack of alignment between learning and outcomes

Source: Brandon Hall Group, Learning Strategy Study

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- Does the L&D function fully understand the goals and objectives of the business?

- Do we know what learning performance outcomes will drive achievement of those goals and objectives?

- Do we know what skills and competencies will drive business outcomes?

- Do we have a process to measure the effectiveness of the learning approach in achieving specific business goals?

- Do we have a process for evaluating the success of each blend?

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If organizations want learning to have an impact on the business — and demonstrate that impact — they will need to strongly align their learning programs with business outcomes.

Work with business stakeholders to define business performance outcomes.

A working understanding of the goals of the business is critical. It is not enough to ask what they are. L&D leaders must work closely with the business to determine what talent and learning objectives are required to meet business goals. Even the smallest, seemingly insignificant learning program must have a business reason to exist. For example, it is not enough to deploy a program on improving communication skills simply because it is a nice thing to have. L&D must articulate the business implications of good communication and use that as an impetus for the program.

Identify specific behavior and performance goals for learning programs.

Organizations must do a better job of identifying and defining the skills and competencies required to make the business successful. This is the first stage in turning business outcomes into learning objectives. By defining what mastery is, the company has a target for the learning programs. A lack of specificity makes learning programs hit or miss and keeps the organization operating on the assumption that the programs are effective simply because they exist.

Identify learning objectives.

Quite often, organizations establish learning objectives for their programs without making the connection to talent or business objectives. Learning programs should be designed to develop or improve specific behaviors that will drive performance. It is not enough to ensure that people took a course, passed an assessment or liked the program. Learning initiatives should point to specific, measurable outcomes.
For example:

▶ A demonstrable knowledge of a new sales technique

▶ Ability to identify all features of a new product/service

▶ An understanding of the use of a new software platform

Use these links to build a framework for measurement.

If these links are established in the creation of learning programs, they can be used to measure whether the programs are effective. The entire process mitigates the "too many variables" problem with learning measurement. While there may be other variables, these clearly defined links make it much easier to draw a straight line from a learning program to business outcome and establish the learning program's role in achieving them. By measuring the state of the business, talent and performance outcomes before and after deployment of the program, learning's impact becomes clear.

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ABOUT

Brandon Hall Group Strategy Briefs answer the critical questions learning, talent, HR and business leaders must address to manage their human capital. To tackle these critical questions in more detail, we built tools, frameworks, research summaries and business builders based on up-to-date research and case studies for you to implement best and next Human Capital Management (HCM) practices. To gain access to these valuable resources, contact success@brandonhall.com.

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