

WHAT COULD THE CRISIS CHANGE IN EMPLOYEE TRAINING MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES?

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Abstract

The article describes analogues of short-term thinking and the unreflective use of inaccurate indices in training management. It shows that basing on the systematic model of the training process (with some simplifications) and using ROI to evaluate trainings has now become analogous to these two phenomena. It indicates other trends in the training tradition as a potential alternative, the significance of which should grow in the post-crisis era.

CO KRYZYS MOŻE ZMIEŃĆ W ZASADACH ZARZĄDZANIA SZKOLENIAMI PRACOWNICZYMI?

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Słowa kluczowe: szkolenia, kryzys, systematyczny model szkoleń, zmiany w szkoleniach.

Abstrakt

Myślenie krótkoterminowe i bezrefleksyjne używanie wskaźników o niejasnej trafności często są uznawane za źródłowe przyczyny kryzysu. W artykule wskazano analogiczne fenomeny w zarządzaniu szkoleniami, pokazano również, jak prowadzą do nich niewielkie uproszczenia w systematycznym modelu procesu szkoleniowego oraz zasada oceniania szkoleń przez ROI (Return on Investment). Zaprezentowano obecne w tradycji szkoleniowej inne nurty myślenia jako alternatywę, której znaczenie w świecie pokryzysowym powinno rosnąć.

Introduction

The search for understanding the causes and mechanisms responsible for the crisis of 2008 will continue for many years to come but already now everybody knows that short-term perspective in the activities of people managing businesses was one of the factors favouring the actions that lead to the crisis. Striving towards maximising all short-term results dominated the actions taken by managers and was amplified by the mechanisms of corporate supervision and the compensation methods applicable to managers¹ (SMOCZYŃSKI 2010, p. 38). Short-term, at the most quarterly “beauty contest” that converted an important perspective that the evaluation of the company standing through the stock exchange value of its stocks or shares is into almost the only perspective for evaluation of all actions was favourable for applying various indicators without adequate care for their pertinence. Communication using numbers that are indicators representing high level of aggregation coupled with the lack of care for the source data and assumptions made in creating them loosened the requirements concerning ordinary human honesty in communication (ŻAKOWSKI 2010, p. 23).

The review of equivalents to the short-term perspective and abuse of indicators with unclear properties in the field of training management is the aim of this paper. On the base of the analysis of selected literature on training the reasons why recommendations formulated within the framework of the dominating theory of training lead to the focus on short-term evaluations based on indicators of low value will be indicated. It is not alleged that this practice has its sources in exactly the same style of thinking that was marked in the financial sector as one of the causative factors of the current crisis. Nevertheless the analogy between the styles of thinking present in those two distant fields of economies may be supportive to introducing changes in managing training programs under the influence of the critique of factors responsible for the financial crisis. The probable directions of potentially possible changes for the field of training will be indicated.

¹ K. Obłoj in the conference presentation points out at slightly different factors: focus on highly ambitious short-term targets, compensation systems linked to achievement of those targets and presidents of companies assuming the role of celebrities. Those two later factors create the motivation system that favours supporting achievement of (excessively) ambitious targets by using data without excessive care for the quality of them.

The systematic training process model and its simplifications

The so-called systematic training model represents the dominating way of thinking (SLOMAN 1997, pp. 40–43, ARMSTRONG 2000, pp. 451–468), determining the vision of goals and methods for conducting actions in the training process. It assumes separation and independent conduct of the natural training process phases: problem analysis, preparation of training matching the problems identified and delivery of training and evaluation of the outcomes. It does not contain any indications concerning the time for conducting the activities or the character of decisions that have to be taken and as a consequence it did not prevent simplifications that were easy to reconcile with the short-term perspective of the financial evaluation.

Treatment of training in the systematic model as the response to the problem encountered by employees in performance of their operational tasks simplified the categories of objectives formulated for training and the method of evaluation of training results excessively. The postulate of preceding every training with the analysis of training needs (identification of problems encountered in their work by employees, characterisation of those problem as concerns the quantity, importance and intensity to identify in them the training and the structural component) to determine the appropriate objectives is justified rationally. Thanks to that analysis it is possible to indicate what changes in knowledge and skills (as well as attitudes) of the employees should be implemented so that the problem that initiated the idea of the need to organise training could disappear. Only thanks to the analysis of the needs training adjusted accurately to the current problems found in the organisation could be prepared and the “training gap” – the shortages of knowledge and skills of the employees that represent the cause of the employees; weakness in coping with those problems can be defined precisely. However, understanding of the “training gap” as the gaps in knowledge and skills ordered defining the goals of training in the form of precisely determined educational objectives (ARMSTRONG 2000, p. 454), formulated in the form of specific tasks characterising the knowledge and skills that training participants would possess after training (e.g. the participants will know what the *procedure A* is and will be able to carry out all the steps that it requires). This meant bypassing the dimension of difficulties in work that result from inappropriate “attitudes” (KIRKPATRICK 2000, p. 62). That was natural as for changes in attitudes the theories of training possess neither simple methods for measurement of the postulated changes nor simple training methods leading to such – precisely specified – changes (WOŹNIAK 2009, pp. 196–201) because if the training objectives are defined by means of a short list of specific procedures of action

that training participants are to master than it has been known for long that instruction provides the effective method of training.

Under the influence of trends stemming from humanist psychology and andragogy the training literature decided that instruction does not exhaust the methods for delivery of employee training. Nevertheless in both thinking on defining the training needs and the tools applied for training evaluation it was forgotten frequently that training based on instruction is just one type of the employee training. The space was left for training focussed on the development of interpersonal and social skills reserving for such training even a separate name – the “soft training” – to highlight that they represent a specific type of training but it was expected that their goals would be defined precisely in the form of educational objectives and that the evaluation of their results would not require separate recommendations.

The discussion that rolled through the English training periodicals during the years 2002–2005 showed clearly (WOŹNIAK 2009, p. 203), that the expectation in case of employee training to show clearly how they change the financial results of the organisation was difficult to achieve in case of soft training. In their case it was not only difficult to define objectives that would not be banal, but also to justify that they offered outcomes that justified the funds invested. Independent of those difficulties the postulate to evaluate all training activities by means of the ROI was not rejected in that discussion².

Nevertheless, it had not undermined the popularity of the systematic training model. As a result of it the presentation of training as **only** the tool for reacting to problems that the management considered sufficiently cumbersome for the organisation to justify the investment in training was spread. The systematic model, dismissing the issue of time entirely, in which training is to reveal its influence, did not limit the temptation to conduct control of the training effects quickly. The focus on the necessity of the financial evaluation that was to rationalise all the investments resulted in changes in the traditional approaches to control of training effects and proliferation of the postulate to evaluate training in one way – through the ROI (KEARN 2005, p. 141). This is present clearly in the recommendations by the *American Society for Training and Development* (ASTD), the largest association of people involved in training in the world (WOŹNIAK 2009). In Poland that method of evaluating training is promoted by the Institute of Management representing the training professionals (2003).

² Wider analysis of that discussion can be found in the work by WOŹNIAK (2009). P. Kearn was the main supporter of the ROI model referring to J. Phillips and ASTD recommendations.

Traditional methods for controlling training effects and their practice

Theoreticians postulated two approaches to managing training as two separate methodologies for control of the effects (BRAMLEY 2001, pp. 23–39): training effectiveness evaluation understood as favourable relation of outlays to the effects and the evaluation of the efficacy understood as consistency of the results and intentions. However, the contemporary training ideology³ postulates evaluation of training by estimation the ROI for them ROI (PHILLIPS et al. 2003).

It can be believed that multiplicity of interest groups the goals of which frequently differ in the organisation makes easy evaluation of efficacy impossible, however, training efficacy evaluation can always be conducted separately for each of the groups or – at the stage of training preparation – actions can be conducted to reconcile common goals. That model of thinking about controlling the effects of training was inconsistent with the standards of “financial thinking”, it lead to using many measures designed separately and frequently not quantitative and as a consequence the evaluation results were difficult to apply for comparison with other investments. Spreading domination of “investment understanding” of the systematic training model in a natural way supported spreading of the effectiveness approach obscuring the sense of that second tradition. The ROI tests for training activities was in the natural way compatible with the focus on short-term evaluation of investment effects and matched well the needs of management based on the analysis of simple and uniform financial indicators.

In training practice it has been postulated for years to conduct evaluation of training effects as the survey of training outcomes in each of the so-called four levels of training influence described by D. KIRKPATRICK (2001). That taxonomy of training effects that is of key importance for training practitioners identifies four areas of training influence of which two concern the influence of training on the individual and two – on the organisation. The influence of training on the individual is measured at the end of training by investigating two issues: the so-called reaction, i.e. the opinion of participants concerning satisfaction with training treated multidimensionally (e.g. satisfaction of expectations, practical use of the contents learned, chances that the opportunities for practical use of them will occur) and achievement of the didactic objectives of training (i.e. the increase of knowledge and skills), which

³ It should be pointed out clearly that this idea is clearer in popular works (e.g. L. Rae) and industry reports (e.g. ASTD reports and the periodical of that organisation – T+D) than in the scientific analysis and academic course books. Academic course books do not present, however, arguments against estimation of the ROI for training, e.g. (ARMSTRONG 2000, POZTOWSKI 2007).

is usually referred to as the first and the second level of training outcomes. The next two areas of training influence are formed by its consequences in the field of phenomena within the organisation. Those outcomes emerge after a certain time but the theory does not define the length of it. They are measures in the two further areas: by measurement of the transfer of skills acquired during training into the daily work practice (level three) and the measures of outcomes of such transfer for the entire organisation (level four).

Research works on training conducted during the last fifty years have shown that despite the recommendation to measure all four levels of training outcomes repeated many times usually only the surveys of the first level are conducted, i.e. opinions by the participants concerning usefulness of the training completed and their satisfaction with participation in the training are surveyed. Following a long period of critique of that practice, according to the current status of knowledge of the theoreticians (based on the meta-study (ALLIGER et al. 1997)) it is considered rational – opinions of participants formulated on training completion evaluating suitability of the training in their work represent the indicator correlated with the future application of training content (i.e. the results of level three surveys). Although the discovered correlation is not high, the survey of participants' opinions provides organisations – in a cheap way – the established opinion, which in typical decision-taking processes conducted after completing training usually suffices. It can then be believed that that the method of focussing the attention of the survey of training outcomes on the survey of opinions of the participants in it (the first level of outcome) accepted in practice is closer to the approach to control of training outcomes through analysis of the efficacy than the effectiveness – the survey of reactions provides the prognosis of application (transfer), while the objectives for training are defined by groups of interests usually in the categories of the required behaviours and not the financial benefits for the organisation.

Although, then, the dominating style of thinking about managing organisations prefers simple indicators of financial projects effectiveness evaluation, the theoretical reasons could also be found for which the training practice has defended itself for years against performance of those demands. Training investment effectiveness evaluations based on identification in the changes of certain indicators of the organisation status of that part of their value which is said to be caused by the training are based on numerous premises, usually poorly justified. They assume reconstruction of the cause and effect relation between the change at the levels of knowledge and skills as well as in the attitudes of employees and their practical activities and results of that activity measured as the values of the organisation status indicators that lead to the change in profit. Allocation of a specific part of organisation profit to training

requires reliable estimation of which part of the change noticed on the Kirkpatrick's fourth level is caused by training and expressing the consequences of that change in financial categories.

Already in 1960, KIRKPATRICK (2001, p. 87) highlighted the unrealistic demands that in the studies on training outcomes the part of the organisation profit value for which training is responsible should be identified in an unquestioned way. Nevertheless, the pressure on creating indicators that could be presented to the management (and indirectly – the investors) opened the field for programs of research on the ROI of training activities. The method by J. Phillips (PHILLIPS et al. 2003, pp. 193–220) could be considered the flagship example of creating indicators based on the data of strongly doubtful value. Referring to the best practices of the qualitative methods in field studies he proposes that the evaluation of the financial value of changes implemented in the life of the organisation thanks to training should be left to the participants. Treating the participants as the “good informers” allows expecting that they would be able to assess a few issues:

- what has changed in their work as a consequence of training,
- hat financial effects for the organisation have been created by those changes,
- what is the probability of the accuracy of the estimates formulated by them.

If the estimates created by the participants had been accurate than computing the financial consequences of training on that base would have become easy. However, the accuracy of those estimates cannot be assured in the questionnaire based survey distributed by mail – which is the method for collecting the data proposed by Phillips. It is not controlled whether the respondents identified changes in their daily behaviours accurately or were they just completing the questionnaire form without taking care of the numeric values input in it. Lack of meticulous care⁴ in creating the data on the base of the analysis of which the training effectiveness indicators are generated raises suspicions that the goal of the survey is not to obtain reliable estimates but to obtain estimates that are persuasively useful – numeric indicators that can be presented to the company management board⁵.

⁴ Phillips proposes control of values generated by the participants only by means of surveying the consistency of those values with other data originating from the organisation (PHILLIPS et al. 2003, pp. 193–198). The total profitability indicator may be decreased if the management presents other factors – in addition to those considered in the analyses – that could influence the organisation results (PHILLIPS et al. 2003, pp. 258–259).

⁵ Such status of achieved estimations is consistent with the position of J. Phillips presented straight forward that “the most important is how the ultimate recipients (i.e. the management – JW) will evaluate the value of data” (PHILLIPS et al. 2003, p. 258).

The program of surveying the ROI using the Phillips method is not just the idea of one consultant but a programme supported during the last several years by the *American Society for Training and Development*. Based on his method Jack Phillips established a global consulting company and the strict requirement for expressing benefits from training in the form of computations of the ROI is currently referred to as introduction of the fifth outcome level to the Kirkpatrick's taxonomy. Even if the postulate of evaluating the ROI for training projects is separated from that specific method of its implementation that is linked here to the name of Phillips, it should be highlighted that all the methods of evaluation of the ROI for the training projects implemented conduct identification and assessment of the financial value of the benefits that are the outcomes of training in a highly conventional way. Two types of estimations of the benefits are applied. One is based on the opinions or subjective computations of which the training participants or their superiors are the authors; the other involves separation of a certain part from the organisation status indicator that is subject to routine monitoring done by experts that usually are the superiors of training participants⁶.

The focus on generating numbers as evidence of the value of conducted activities without excessive care for their reliability is illustrated well by the attitude to the costs of training that must be computed to allow computation of the ROI. Usually the direct costs (wages of trainers, hotel and logistics costs) are considered while the costs of the work time lost are considered rarely and the alternative costs of lost benefits are almost never taken into account. Although the researchers have been pointing out for a long time that the lost work time represents with no doubt a significant cost of training (although estimates of that value in subject literature are highly diversified, e.g. SLOMAN (1997, p. 270) estimates the costs of work time lost at 75% of the direct costs, ALMEIDA (2009, p. 98) at 25%), frequently it is not measured at all – for example the ASTD does not include that cost in the yearly surveys estimating the magnitude of outlays by employers in the USA on training (WOŹNIAK 2009, p. 188).

It is obvious that in case of a significant number of decision-taking processes conducted in the organisation estimation of the value of the ROI for training activities is not required. Training is sometimes necessary in the organisation that is implementing new products and only the relative estimation of costs for different methods of implementation of training activities

⁶ The experimental studies postulated in the scientific literature are few (see the review of subject literature presented in the work by WOŹNIAK (2009, pp. 215–222) and they never control all the variables comparing equivalent experimental and control groups (which should not be surprising as there is no established and justified list of variables that should be controlled for the stimuli that the training programs of specified type were to be).

achieving similar outcomes is necessary for taking the decision. Training is also necessary when the employees of the organisation expect that the organisation will train them (i.e. by imitating other organisations or as a consequence of the social expectation that training is necessary for development of competences). Training is also necessary when for strategic or axiological reasons we believe that certain values should be developed in our organisation. The trend for creating indicators even where they do not serve decisions is supportive to creating indicators that are seemingly precise without much care for their reliability. That lack of care can be considered justified when those creating the indicators assume that the user of the indicator will carefully follow the development of them while preparing for making use of them. Frequently, however, the existing data create the urge to apply them without analysing their actual meaning.

What can change?

In the training tradition numerous threads of discussion with the excessive demand for creating the ROI type indicators on the base of data representing doubtful value can be found. Assuming that the general conclusions from the financial crisis causes will be supportive for abandoning the short-term perspective in evaluation of activities and care in construction of numeric indicators it can be expected that in training practice the role of two – presented in short below – trends objecting estimation of the ROI for training will be increasing.

Currently, the most pronounced of them aims at substituting the postulate of general evaluation of training through financial effectiveness indicators for investment projects by diversified actions increasing the opportunities for efficient implementation of changes through training and accompanying activities. Surveying sample description of success in application of training content is postulated to increase the extent of influence of training thanks to the analysis of limitations and obstacles in implementation of training content (BRINKERHOFF 2005, MATTSON 2005). Assistance of training specialists in activities that serve specification of expectations from interest groups is postulated (RUS-EFT, PRESKIL 2005). Finally, involvement of the management in planning the business indicators and the chain of influence on those indicators through training is postulated (SPITZER 2005, WOŹNIAK 2009).

Increasing importance is attributed to activities strengthening the effects of training and continual monitoring of changes implemented thanks to training (WOŹNIAK 2009), which prevents isolating training activities from the rest of life of the organisation. Focus on more effective combination of training

with daily practice results in the postulate of combining training and coaching activities taking place after training that could also form the source of data allowing quite precise *ex post* measurement of costs and benefits. The training effectiveness analyses possess, however, the method of that measurement adjusted each time to the actually expected confidence level of findings – determined by the decision-taking needs and not the universal standard or method (KRAIGER et al. 2004, SPITZER 2005, WOŹNIAK 2009). That trend among theoreticians of training excludes creating indicators without analysis of the actual decision-taking needs they are to serve as lack of such linkage between the decisions and the indicators favours generating evaluation indicators at negligible cost which usually means lack of reliability control of the source data on which the estimates are based.

The second trend in training tradition refers to the postulate for enriching the Kirkpatrick's evaluation model with the fifth level describing the training consequences for a wider community. In this case the concept by A. Hamblin of comparing training effects with the quite precisely planned objectives at all levels and determining the actual "ultimate" objectives for training is referred to the most frequently (ARMSTRONG 2000, p. 467). That author postulated determining the ultimate goals (the fifth level of outcomes) and expanded the range of the Kirkpatrick's fourth level by important social objectives. So he allowed the idea that only some training programmes are to be mainly profitable. Numerous training programmes do not have to be profitable but they are to offer specific consequences for the organisation, interest group within it or in the environment or to the benefit of the society as a whole. That approach to training activity evaluation presents the decision taker as the person responsible for objectives he formulates. Aiming at attainment of objectives the decision taker considers right does not require profitability evaluation of that action as such evaluations are usually based on the limited time perspective, usually very short. Investments in training increasing sensitivity to social diversity implemented before the year 2000 all over the world at branches of Levis company under the leadership of Bob Haas the influence of which on the financial result was not the subject of expectations at all represent a good example of such thinking. The training was to increase the ability of the organisation to operate in the modern world full of diversity and existence of the company was the indirect measure of the rightness of objectives formulated in that way.

The tradition of conducting training programmes without expectation of direct and quick returns on investment represents striving to formulation of training practice not so much under the influence of current problems but rather the expectation of long-term influence of the training budget on the organisation. That way of thinking is present the most clearly in the tradition

of corporate universities. They are operated in two ways: as projects of multistage and long-term improvement of the managerial staff or as general education facilities (awarding scientific degrees) operated by corporations. Independent of their form and detailed objectives both those approaches search for tools of staff interpreter more extensively than assumed by short-term perspective of the systematic training model.

Conclusion

The text presents manifestations of two phenomena – short-term perspective in analysing benefits of activities conducted and low insight in creating and analysing indicators – in practice and theory of employee training programmes. It was assumed that while corresponding phenomena are indicated as causes of the current financial crisis, the flow of reforms induced by the crisis should strengthen the public influence of other trends in thinking also in the field of training management.

It was presented that in training management the proliferation of the postulate for evaluating training using indicators of the projects profitability financial analysis (e.g. ROI) had its theoretical support in simplifications that were introduced to the systematic training model. It was pointed out that the focus on specifically defined educational objectives formulated in the form of the sentences: “after training the participants will know/will be able to” and lack of indications concerning the timing for performance of training outcomes can be considered those simplifications in the systematic model that allowed implementation of short-term perspective and consent for use of indicators with unclear cognitive value.

The potentially possible changes in the method of managerial education management have also been presented. Much higher involvement of decision takers and other participants in the life of the organisation in the training programme in their common feature. The decision taker accepting the training project must assume personal responsibility for its rightness and objectives as through it he creates active changes in the known situation. In both described approaches representing alternatives to evaluation of the ROI for training projects, training projects become not only the standard reaction aimed at liquidating problems encountered in daily work. In the trend stressing the necessity of applying training intervention their final form is difficult to foresee. On the other hand projects equivalent to corporate universities are becoming the tool of wider influence on the organisation the objectives of which can be defined only roughly.

Determination in what way the practitioners will solve the tensions between the rightful expectation that the profitability of training could be

compared with profitability of other types of intervention with equivalent objectives and lack of premises allowing precise determination of timing when the influence of training should give effects for the organisation requires further research. It should be expected, however, that the financial crisis ended inconsiderate acceptance of freely created indicators that aimed at describing short-term influence of training program that represented a standard popularised by associations of trainers.

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