

The Unity Of Knowledge

Why is it so hard to measure training's ROI? To intentionally oversimplify, all you have to do is answer two questions: What do your people need to learn? And, is it worth doing? "Ay," Hamlet might say to that last question, "there's the rub."

In other words, can the sales team live without a class covering the company's latest product offerings? What would happen if clerical staff members became more proficient with the latest office software? Will the company suffer, or end up on the SEC's hit list, if executives skip leadership training?

Yet, much of training ROI measurement can seem like an answer in search of a question, particularly with some e-learning solutions. Many systems likely have been sold with training efficiency in mind—promised savings in travel, facilitators' expenses and administrative costs from the training budget as procurement justification. But what happens next year when you've already stricken such fat from the books?

Other all-inclusive knowledge management systems, I'm sure, have been pitched to stimulate performance-change rather than respond to need. Yet, without a clear idea up front of what knowledge you're going to manage—let alone what you hope your employees will do with it—this "cross that bridge when we come to it" approach to ROI can leave companies waiting for a bolt of lightning and looking to vendors for some serious explanation.

Jim Collins writes in his successful book, *Good to Great* (HarperCollins, 2001), about the most successful companies over time organizing around one core business or market, a term he dubs the hedgehog concept. None of the companies studied relied solely on technology to establish business or open new markets in order to become great. Not one. Technology certainly enhanced processes and accelerated business practices, but its use fit into the market and goals that were already well established—the hedgehog.

Apply this same concept on a smaller scale to look at a training department. That "hedgehog" is what you do: developing human capital (for lack of a better term) within a specific company in a unique industry to benefit employees and bolster the corporate bottom line. Technology should fit

neatly into that equation, not stand alone as the end-all, be-all answer for its own sake.

Odd as it sounds, could it be that training has become a separate process apart from the business of business? As many companies shift to e-learning environments, are justifications being made without original needs in mind?

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Metaphysical Club*, (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001), Louis Menand profiles thinkers who helped shape American culture following the Civil War. Among them is John Dewey, the philosopher best known for his theories of pragmatism with regard to learning. While Dewey never considered himself an educator, his attempts to test a learning theory—one based on his idea of the unity of knowledge—earned him the designation. By unity of knowledge Dewey meant that knowledge is a byproduct of activity. Therefore, education should be based on this idea.

Yet, traditionally things considered worth knowing are handed down from teacher to pupil as disembodied information, Menand writes. Dewey felt that knowledge cut off from the activity in which it has its meaning reinforces an erroneous distinction between knowing and doing.

Sound familiar? This traditional disembodied information approach is likely how corporations with trouble measuring ROI view training. Learning packages that offer fully formed solutions for an as-yet-to-be-named problem have no relevance to the business at hand; off-the-shelf answers for a business world filled with custom-made challenges.

One of Dewey's classes required students to produce a meal, literally from the ground up. They learned geology, biology and even math by growing plants, raising animals, and eventually cooking the meal. "Since the project was being carried out in the present, in accordance with the natural instincts of the children," Menand writes, "what was learned was precisely what was useful. Relevance was built into the system."

Seems very applicable to the workplace. Not that there is anything wrong with reducing training costs, but unless you practice some post-World-Com accounting, you can only count that once.

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