
Training evaluation: clients' roles

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Abstract

Training evaluation is an elusive concept, especially when it comes to practice. The practice of evaluation in training has received a lot of criticism. This criticism is largely explained by the unsystematic, informal, and *ad hoc* evaluation that has been conducted by training institutions. In Malaysia, training activities are monitored by the government. Organisations are required to obtain training services from approved training providers registered with the government. Examines the clients' demand toward evaluation, the commitment given by training providers, and the overall practice of evaluation by the training providers in Malaysia. Finds that the government, client and economic situations have influenced the evaluation practice in a positive direction.

Introduction

This paper addresses the issues of training evaluation practices in general, and examines the training evaluation in Malaysia through a case study.

The Malaysian government since her independence in 1957 has manifested her commitment toward education and human resource development. The emphasis was on education, because the government believed that it was the key input to national development. The government has recognised the importance of human resource development in its quest for achieving developed nation status. This commitment was translated into the establishment and growth of training agencies in the country.

In Malaysia, as of 1999, records show that it has about 300 training institutions registered as training providers to various companies in the country. For a country like Malaysia, this number is considered large and it has made the training industry very competitive. The establishment of these institutions may have resulted from the government's new legislation, which requires every company to promote training for its workforce to ensure that it is competent and can further contribute to the country in realisation of Vision 2020. For that, the Malaysian government has passed an Act of Parliament entitled the Human Resource Development Act 1992, which requires companies to contribute a 1 per cent equivalent of its monthly payroll to a fund which would then be used to promote training. A special council was set up to manage this fund and to monitor the training activities for private companies in Malaysia. To facilitate the monitoring activities, companies are advised to obtain training services required from the

council registered training providers only. This has caused the number of training providers in Malaysia to increase rapidly to cater for the demand.

The practice of training evaluation

Training evaluation is a systematic process of collecting and analyzing information for and about a training programme which can be used for planning and guiding decision making as well as assessing the relevance, effectiveness, and the impact of various training components (Raab *et al.*, 1991). Training evaluation may be taken for a variety of reasons. Research indicates that the most popular reason for evaluation is to gather information that helps decision-makers improve the training process and to facilitate participants' job performance. Training institutions may conduct evaluation for the purpose of maintaining training (Smith and Piper, 1990). A training provider needs to evaluate himself and his product, to improve training and to build a reputation and maintain management's commitment to training.

Evaluation practice is one of the major dilemmas faced in the field of evaluation because it receives much criticism. As Philips (1991) states, when it comes to training evaluation, there still appears to be more talk than action. In many organisations, evaluation of training either is ignored or is approached in an unconvincing or unprofessional manner. Previous literature (Smith, 1990; Davidove and Schroeder, 1992; Shelton and Alliger, 1993; Shamsuddin, 1995) demonstrates that the practices of evaluation in training are unsystematic and they are based on simple means. Gutek (1988) states the need for conducting evaluation is very low, and there



is little or no demand on the part of the organisation to evaluate a training programme seriously. Their clients do not request one. Participants attend training, enjoy it, forget it, and carry on working exactly as before. One of the reasons why clients do not demand evaluation is because of the clients' basic belief that a well-trained employee will be a productive employee (Barron, 1996). Another possible reason why evaluation is not conducted in training is because there is no serious enforcement; thus training providers can go without it.

Almost universally, organisations evaluate their training programmes by emphasising one or more of the model's four or five levels. Chen and Rossi (1992) comment that evaluation knowledge found in the literature is not being fully utilised in programme evaluation practices. For example, out of more than 50 evaluation models available, the evaluation framework that most training practitioners use is the Kirkpatrick Model (Philips, 1991). However, currently, most employees' training is evaluated only at the reaction level. Evaluation at this level is associated with the terms "smile sheet" or "happiness sheet", because reaction information usually is obtained through a participatory questionnaire administered near or at the end of a training programme (Smith, 1990).

Admittedly evaluation can never completely ascertain a training programme's effectiveness or its efficiency in achieving a beneficial effect. What worked at one time at one training location with a unique group of participants cannot necessarily be transferred to another time, setting and group and be expected to work as well. Still, evaluations build a case of support for training by providing an approximation of its value.

However, things are changing now. The importance of evaluating training ranks high among training consultant and top management as a means of justifying training investment. More than ever, training evaluation must demonstrate improved performance and financial results. Since training does not come cheap, it is understandable that top managers wish to see value for money and they demand justification for training cost. Training providers need to show clients that they are getting good returns on their investment in training. The demand for accountability has been the major impetus for training in the past few years. Fiscal constraints have increased the competition of companies' activities for the available dollars and raised the question of value for money from their activities. Training professionals are no longer enjoying the best times as before.

Evaluation model

In the past, evaluators were urged to use one preferred set of methodological principles and procedures, those of the experimental model for them to assess the extent to which programmes had attained their goals (Greene and McClintok, 1991). Today, evaluators can choose from a repertoire of more than 50 approaches to evaluation, representing a widened range of philosophical principles and scientific methodologies.

Evaluators face many options about when to do evaluation, what questions are relevant, which questions to ask, which stakeholders to consult, what methods to use, what to measure, and how to facilitate use (Shadish, 1992).

Most of the evaluation models focus on and advocate the use of formal, systematic, and sometimes comprehensive evaluation in order to make full use of the evaluation advantages.

Case study

Malaysia has a vision to be a fully developed nation by the year 2020. To achieve this vision, Malaysia needs a highly educated and trained workforce. This effort is shared by both the public and the private sectors by not only allocating greater budget for training but also by making a contribution to the Human Resource Development Fund. Since a vast amount of resources has been committed to training programmes, and with the prevailing situation of economic constraint, the demand for justifying training expenses is gaining impetus. Being an agency responsible for human resource development and training for the private sector in Malaysia, the Human Resources Development Council is aware about the training programme needs. For this purpose it has designed a standard evaluation form and it requires all training providers to fill in this form and return it to the Council for further analysis.

The author conducted a research project to find out what the practices of training providers in Malaysia are. The study covered all the training providers, who were registered with the Human Resource Development Council as approved training providers. The actual sample for this study was 262 institutions. The response rate was 49 per cent.

This study used a specially constructed questionnaire with a five-point Likert-scale (Cronbach's coefficient alpha $\alpha = 0.7310$ during pre-testing). In the first part of the

questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently each of the evaluation methods listed were used in the evaluation they conducted. The results show that the respondents used all the evaluation methods commonly found in the literature. Trainee feedback was the most frequently used evaluation method (mean 4.19) by the respondents, as shown in Table I. Besides trainee feedback, other frequently used methods were observation (mean 3.84), interview (mean 3.65), performance analysis (mean 3.56) and reaction form (mean 3.49).

The second part includes questions to find out how the evaluation was planned, and how frequently the evaluation was carried out. Stufflebeam (1985) suggested that evaluation should consist of context, input, processes, and product evaluation. These evaluations are done at different stages during the programme development.

Table II shows the percentage of responses to each statement asked. Respondents agreed that they evaluate their training right after the training is completed (88.3 per cent and mean 4.49). Evaluation during the implementation was the second agreed by the respondents (mean 3.70). Some respondents did evaluate their training during the planning stage (mean 3.57). Each statement relevant to formal, comprehensive and systematic evaluation was then computed as a total score and the results are depicted in Table III. It indicates that respondents did to some extent conduct formal, comprehensive and systematic evaluation.

Much of the literature has highlighted that clients seemed not to demand that the training providers conduct evaluation for the training they provided (Smith and Piper, 1990). This study attempted to find out some information about clients' demand towards evaluation from the training providers' perspective. Eight statements initially contained in the questionnaire, but three of the statements were deleted due to their reliability. The five statements asked and the responses received from respondents were depicted in Table IV.

Referring to Table IV, the item that has the highest mean was "clients require reaction evaluation" (mean 3.71). The responses for other items were relatively high, all the means being above 3.00. The five statements were then computed as a total score, for the purpose of examining the overall demand from clients. On the overall score, the clients' demand was moderate (3.38). In the respondents' opinion, clients did to some extent demand that they conduct evaluation.

This study involved corporate clients who hired training providers from the Human Resource Development Council, and it is found that clients definitely preferred a training package that includes evaluation, because they pay for the training. Training providers have to oblige the clients' requirement, if they want to provide the training services to these clients and plan to continue doing so.

The other part of the questionnaire attempted to find out training institutions'

Table I

Distribution of respondents by evaluation method

Methods	Percentage of responses					Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	
Survey	6.4	10.6	34.6	26.6	22.3	3.48
Interview	3.2	8.5	26.6	43.6	18.1	3.65
Observation	1.1	7.4	21.3	46.8	23.4	3.84
Document review	4.3	18.1	31.9	30.9	14.9	3.34
Organisational audit	22.3	20.2	31.9	19.1	6.4	2.67
Performance analysis	6.4	10.6	29.8	26.6	26.6	3.56
Expert review	19.1	17.0	37.2	19.1	7.4	2.79
Panel checklist	28.7	14.9	24.5	23.4	8.5	2.68
Site visit	11.7	21.3	26.6	29.8	10.6	3.06
Pilot tests	28.7	11.7	25.5	26.6	7.4	2.72
Trainee feedback	5.3	1.1	12.8	30.9	50.0	4.19
Simulation	23.4	22.3	26.6	19.1	8.5	2.67
Self-report	10.6	22.3	35.1	21.3	10.6	2.99
Work samples	18.1	19.1	25.5	27.7	9.6	2.91
Peer report	14.9	26.6	35.1	18.1	5.3	2.72
Supervisor	12.8	14.9	34.0	27.7	10.6	3.08
Competency test	18.1	12.8	28.7	23.4	17.0	3.08
Reaction form	11.7	8.5	28.7	21.3	29.8	3.49

Notes: 1 = not at all, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, 5 = very frequently; N = 94

Table II
 Distribution of respondents by evaluation schedule

Formal evaluation	Percentage of responses					Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	
Comprehensive:						
We evaluate our training programme before we plan for the training	17.0	7.4	16.0	33.0	26.6	3.45
We evaluate our training programme during the planning stage	13.8	3.2	12.8	52.1	18.1	3.57
We evaluate our training programme during the implementation stage	13.8	5.3	8.5	41.5	30.9	3.70
We evaluate our training programme right after the training is completed	3.2	3.2	5.3	18.1	70.2	4.49
We evaluate our training programme sometimes after the training	14.9	17.0	12.8	36.2	19.1	3.28
Systematic:						
We evaluate all of our training programmes	2.1	10.6	8.5	25.5	53.2	4.17
Not all of the training programmes need evaluation	10.6	30.9	13.8	13.8	30.9	3.23
We have a regular evaluation schedule for certain programmes	6.4	10.6	12.8	40.4	29.8	3.77

Notes: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = mildly disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = mildly agree 5 = strongly agree; N = 94

Table III
 Summary of statistics of respondents by comprehensive, formal and systematic evaluation

	Mean	Std deviation
Formal	3.71	0.6970
Comprehensive	3.70	0.8413
Systematic	3.72	0.8247

Note: N = 94

commitment towards evaluation. Eight items were asked for this purpose (Cronbach coefficient alpha $\alpha = 0.8089$). It was found that training providers' commitment was moderate (mean 3.05). More than half of the respondents strongly agreed (66.0 per cent) that effective training ensures improved performance (mean 4.44). Most of the respondents (80.9 per cent) strongly disagreed (mean 1.30) that conducting

evaluation is a waste of time. The eight statements asked were computed as a total score. Overall commitment as shown in Table V, respondents' commitment towards evaluation, was moderate (mean 3.05).

In the literature reviewed it shows that training providers are not committed to providing systematic evaluation, part of the reason being that they are enjoying their best times, because never before have organisations invested so heavily in training (Brinkerhoff, 1988). This might be true during the period of the early 1990s. As of now, training institutions in Malaysia are no longer enjoying their good times, as a lot of training institutions suffered from the recent economic turmoil. They have to change to other businesses and some have to close down their businesses. The down turn in the Malaysian economy has demonstrated an increasing pressure for organizations to justify investment in training. Evaluation is

Table IV
 Distribution of respondents by clients' demand variables

Item	Percentage of responses					Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	
Clients never ask for evaluation	1.1	20.2	26.6	35.1	17.0	3.47
Clients insist on evaluation	5.3	18.1	31.9	29.8	14.9	3.31
Clients ask for indication of dollar return on training	12.8	20.2	28.7	22.3	16.9	3.08
Clients require formal evaluation for every programme	10.6	13.8	24.5	34.0	17.0	3.33
Clients require reaction evaluation	3.2	8.5	24.5	41.5	22.3	3.71

Notes: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = mildly disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = mildly agree, 5 = strongly agree; N = 94

Table V

Distribution of respondents by commitment towards evaluation

Statement	Percentage of responses					Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	
We devote significant resources to evaluation activities	5.3	13.8	20.2	36.2	24.5	3.61
We have staff assigned to evaluation	8.5	18.1	8.5	31.9	33.0	3.63
We have an evaluation unit responsible for evaluation	26.6	22.3	22.3	18.1	10.6	2.64
We encourage clients to conduct evaluation	12.8	8.5	23.4	29.8	25.5	3.47
Evaluation is the client's responsibility	35.1	22.3	24.5	11.7	6.4	2.32
Conducting evaluation is a waste of time	80.9	12.8	3.2	2.1	1.1	1.30
Effective training ensures improved performance	3.2	4.3	4.3	22.3	66.0	4.44
If training fails to improve performance it is a management failure, not a training failure	14.9	14.9	33.0	24.5	12.8	3.05
Commitment						3.05

Notes: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = mildly disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = mildly agree 5 = strongly agree; N = 94

viewed not only as an important part of programme development, but also as a tool for aiding decisions on cutting budgets.

Contribution to evaluation

There are three things that have made this study on the practice of evaluation in Malaysia different from the previous studies. The evaluation was moderately formal (mean 3.71), comprehensive (mean 3.70), and systematic (mean 3.72).

The government enforcement

The government enforcement can help monitor the activities of training providers. In this study, the survival of training providers is very much dependent on complying with the government requirement.

The clients' demand

The clients have the bargaining power of customers to ask for a higher quality of service by insisting on evaluation for every training offered by training providers.

The economic condition

The economic downturn has pushed the companies to justify training cost and return on training investment. Justification is possible through evaluation. In fact, for justification, evaluation will have to be thoroughly done by the training providers.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable information especially to the training providers in Malaysia. To encourage and stimulate the private sector to introduce training, the Malaysian government has introduced the

Human Resources Development Act, 1992, which requires organisations to contribute a 1 per cent equivalent of their monthly payroll to the Human Resources Development Fund, a fund which then can be used to promote training. This move would require the Human Resources Development Council, the body that is in charge of the fund, to ensure high quality, standards and accountability among its training providers in the services they offer to organisations. In order to ensure that training programmes offered are of a high standard, training institutions are required to conduct an effective programme evaluation.

As the findings of this study demonstrate, clients are important in the context of evaluation practice. Clients should be aware of their privilege to demand because they are not given an option to choose their own training providers, if they wanted to reimburse their training expenditures incurred from the Council. Clients' demand can improve evaluation practice positively.

Although this study demonstrates that the evaluation practice of the training institutions quite moderately formal, comprehensive, and systematic, it could be further improved. To improve the practice, the practitioners' knowledge needs to be enhanced, so that they can make full use of models available. Since each situation is so unique, the search for an ideal model for a specific situation will not end; practitioners should increase their literature knowledge, so that they can select a model and modify strategies from models which are appropriate to their situational setting and implement those strategies within their constraints.

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