“Learning interventions are only then successful when people actually start doing something differently in their day-to-day work.”

An interview with Robert O. Brinkerhoff on how to determine the impact of training interventions.

Suzanne Verdonschot and Diede Stevens

For five years we have been carrying out impact research. We examine for our clients what the carry-over effects are of the leadership programmes, training programmes and change interventions that they execute in their participants’ working environments. We also subject our own learning interventions to this kind of evaluation. More often than not, we use the Success Case Method, which was developed by Robert O. Brinkerhoff, together with different variations on this approach. At the core of this method lies the initial development of a diagram of the impact you are trying to achieve. The next step is to conduct a survey to get a broader impression of the way that people have gone about changing (parts of) their work. This is followed by a series of interviews to create a deeper understanding of the different story lines. The basic idea is that a better knowledge of what people have started doing differently in their work helps to increase the impact of an intervention for the organization. In other words: if you have a better understanding of the movement which you have brought about with your intervention, you will be more capable of purposefully strengthening that movement. In the past few years, we have frequently used the books that Brinkerhoff wrote about the application of this method. However, as is often the case with activities that you start to specialize in: on the one hand, you become more and more proficient, but you also start to ask more and more critical questions. For this reason, we contacted Brinkerhoff and put all our questions before him. During two conversations, he shared with us his views on learning in organizations, encouraging and motivating employees, and determining impact. His views were incredibly enlightening and that is why we want to report his and our most important insights.

Interviewing Robert and Lynette Brinkerhoff

This article is based on two Skype conversations. The first conversation took place in February 2017 when Danice Winkelhorst had an interview with Robert Brinkerhoff. The second conversation took place in March 2017. At that time, Diede Stevens and Suzanne Verdonschot interviewed Robert together with Lynette Brinkerhoff, Robert's daughter-in-law who does a lot of impact research. Both times we emerged from the conversations filled with a sense of energy. It was inspiring to hear how these professionals look at developing and learning in organizations, and how impact studies can support this. Part of the interviews dealt specifically with the impact map. This is a method to visualize the impact that you are pursuing. The parts of the conversations that dealt with this topic, have been incorporated in a separate article.

The wisdom of the group

The questions that we asked during the interviews didn't just come from us. In the past years, we have been working on impact research with an ever increasing group of people. Once every two weeks, a group gets together which more and more starts to resemble an impact research *community of practice*. We have students who do impact research with us, clients for whom we are doing impact research, and colleagues who as professionals perform their own impact research. Sometimes, we have a small group discussing the progress they make in their respective impact researches. At other times, we have a big table with fifteen participants who, for example, work in smaller groups on impact maps. During our preparations for the interviews, we asked all these people for their questions. In addition, we put out a call for questions via twitter and LinkedIn. The input that we collected this way was turned into an interview guideline which we used during the conversations.

Why is there now, seemingly suddenly, such a great interest for determining impact of learning interventions?

I don't know whether it is really sudden. I think it has always been there. But it is true that this year we are busier than we have ever been doing impact studies. I don't know what is driving that. I think part of it has its origin in the new methods and new technologies used for learning. Organizations are moving away from classroom training to online training, and they are experimenting with new methods like 40 minute videos instead of bringing people in for a longer training. There is a lot of scepticism whether or not that is working. I think organizations want to find out whether these new methods are paying off and if it justifies the investments. What also might play a role is that in many organizations there is not much expected value of training. They don' t really expect that training can make much of a difference but they know that they must do it. If you ask many senior leaders what they expect from training they just say 'we want to keep our cost limited. We know we have to organize learning trajectories because we cannot recruit and retain people without these interventions'. They look at it more as a overhead and a staff benefit than that they see it as a business improvement tool. And one of the things the impact map is doing is that it helps better explaining to their customers and clients the rationale for it. It does not say how they are going to do the training, but

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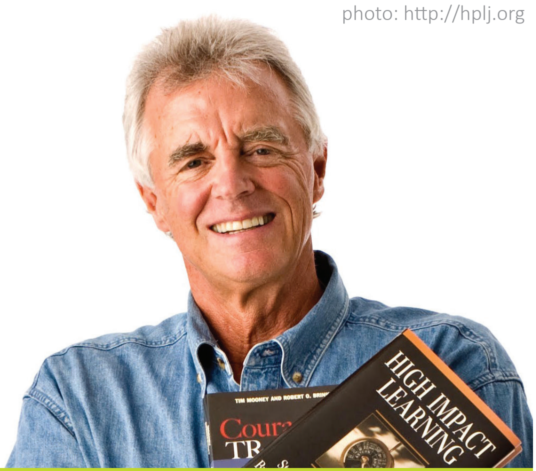
is says why. I once heard Jack Phillips working with a group of people [Note of the authors: Jack Phillips is well-known for his books on determining ROI of learning]. Someone asked 'what should we do if executives are asking us whether our programs make a difference?'. And he said 'I think you should work on your resume.' What he meant is that you are going to look for a new job if this is the first time you are paying attention to this question.

How do you determine the impact on the organization and how do you make this a convincing story?

That is a really good question about a complex phenomenon. When people say things like we need some hard numbers or bottom line impact, what they typically mean is that they are being pushed to prove their value to the organization. They often think that means that they have to translate this into numbers and quantitative measures of profit. They may be feeling that pain and they think figures and numbers are the answer. But it is never the only answer. When people say we need bottom line evidence, that is a very good sentiment for us to hear because it means they want to do something. Now we have to show them what will help them to meet the demand. But that won't necessarily be what they think it is. What I find in practice is that the most robust measure of effectiveness of training is sustained behavioral change. Take for example a sales company. Whether total sales go up or down, is not necessarily an indicator of related behavior. You could be succeeding with your sales training but because of a changing market the sales stay the same. Behavioral change is always what we are after, and there is a risk in the desire to link it to the sales performance. People typically like it both ways; when sales are up you want to claim it is the training that caused this. When sales are down you want to say it is because of extraneous factors. The reality is that the right behaviors will sustain you in a market that is toxic or going down. So what you want is sustained behavior. Sometimes our impact map gets us into trouble, when it leads us to overly focus on the organization goals. That portion of the map (business goals) is not a determinant of the success of a learning program. In almost all cases, the behavior change data is plenty satisfactory for any senior leader.

photo: http://hplj.org



Robert O. Brinkerhoff is an internationally renowned expert in the field of evaluating and the effectiveness of learning. He is the founder of the Success Case Method, an approach to evaluate the effectiveness of learning programmes and processes. He has written over fifteen books on this subject and does consultancy work in this field for organisations in the United States of America, South Africa, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and different countries in Europe.

Lynette Brinkerhoff works together closely with him and does a multitude of impact studies for a variety of principals. Her home base is the United States, and Lynette states their shared ambition as "to teach our clients the language of evaluation, not just the name of an evaluation tool or strategy." For more information, please turn to:
http://brinkerhoffevaluationinstitute.com/

Recently, there is more and more attention for learning on the job, informal learning, and the 70/20/10 principle that Jennings introduced. How can we include workplace learning in doing impact research?

The 70-20-10 model is a useful model. There is no doubt that a lot of learning happens on the job. At the same time, there is also a lot of learning you don't want to happen on the job. For instance people learn how to take shortcuts, or they learn how to ignore safety rules. So part of the challenge is to manage on-the-job-learning in such a way that it is aligned with the goals of the organization and the individuals. With an impact study it is possible to measure learning on the job. The idea is to be open and ask where people learned and what they learned. For example, first ask about the outcomes: what do people feel they have learned or what do they think they do differently? The next step in your inquiry process is to trace the outcomes back to behavior. These things don't happen randomly, they happen because you've made changes in your behavior, you're doing things differently. Then ask: what is it you think you do differently that is causing the outcomes, for example making your customers happy? Then you're asking someone to describe their behavior. And after that you can ask: where did you learn to do that? Now I'm getting to the stimulus of the change in behavior. If there is a change in behavior, there is always some sort of stimulus. This may be a learning intervention, somebody told you to do it differently, you learned it from a colleague, or you learned it from watching a television show. It doesn't matter where you learned it but we will discover it and document it and explain how the learning happened, on the job or otherwise. We are always guiding our inquiry from the same structure, indeed we are trying to link behaviors to results and learning to behavior. This helps to trace the path. If we don't know how it happened, we are not able to manage it or assess whether it should have happened or how to make it happen. You might find out that the stimulus was a question or feedback that a colleague gave you. This would be a sign of a good, healthy, learning workplace.

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An impact study takes a lot of time. We are often being asked whether it is possible to do a quicker version of the impact study. What is your opinion about this?

Normally, a research takes us about six weeks or 50 to 60 hours. We do understand that companies don't want to, or can't, invest a lot of time. They like to show the impact with a few cases. But a so-called "light" version of Success Case Method is really just a search for a few good examples of success to use in marketing or otherwise "selling" the benefits of a training program. A proper evaluation study has to be balanced and this requires looking at what is not working well in addition to what is working well. In fact, most time is going to the interviews. There are two purposes of doing the interviews. First, we want to uncover the success stories. What are the stories when an intervention worked and the employee is using the new behavior? Second, we want to find out when it is working, and, especially, why is it working. Ideally, we want to conduct interviews and collect stories until we learn nothing new.

What could be the role of managers in order to increase impact?

In theory, as a manager you have the possibility to say "I am your manager and you're going to do a training." But in practice it is not good to work like that. It is important to talk with the trainee about the reason of participating the training. A trainee can ask himself or herself the question: "If this training is successful, why would I care about it?". Employee and manager should come to shared values and expectations about participation in the learning intervention. Trust is important as well in this relationship. When you build this trust, the trainee knows that the manager cares about his or her successes and helps him or her to be successful. The manager becomes an invested stakeholder. Trainees will do their best to beat the stakeholders' expectations. A good question for both sides is: "What's in it for me, and how can we both (manager and trainee) achieve some worthwhile benefit?".

Often, HRD professionals take the initiative to do an impact study. Then, often, the expectation is that this HRD professional is also the person who should take follow-up actions to improve the impact. How can we stimulate participants and their supervisors to take initiative for this?
That is a really good question. First, I think that it all comes back to building the right expectation. Often, they think the expectation is participating and completing the training. Afterwards they fill in an evaluation form and never use what they have learned. The manager needs to shape an expectation before, during and after a training. So, what does the manager expects from a person when he is using the training in his job? The manager should make a guidance with questions like: ‘when do you use it’ and ‘why do you use it’. If managers don’t hold the accountability, there is no impact. Questions that also can help to ask the employee are: ‘What parts of training do you think are important to use in your job?’, or ‘Imagine, in two weeks time, what do you think you will still use?’. Second, I think that social pressure will help to realize behavior change. The employee should have an invested stakeholder to share the plan of the training. This stakeholder expects the employee to use the behavior and should ask him what he or she is doing. Ideally this is the manager, but if it’s not, it can be a colleague or a partner. This partner knows the expectations and can motivate and support the participant.

Words of thanks

We would like to thank Robert Brinkerhoff and Lynette Brinkerhoff for making the time to answer our questions and to review the texts that we wrote. We left the two interviews full of energy thanks to their inspiring views. We would also like to express our gratitude to Danice Winkelhorst for the work she did in collecting the questions and writing up the interviews.

More information

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