enhance

Training and Development

"Training can never have a strategic role within organisations – Enhance T&D position"

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Summary:

At Enhance T&D, we believe that under the right conditions, training will bring added value to the company and ultimately contribute to its bottom line profits, thus playing a strategic role within an organisation. The first condition for this to happen is that training objectives must be aligned with the organisation objectives. The aligning process doesn't happen by chance but follows precise rules which are well highlighted by the work of Wognum and Fond Lam, according to whom, the aligning process is characterised by three phases: 1. Identifying organisational strategies, problems and developments; 2. Examining these in relation to possible HRD implications; 3. Making strategic choices about the way in which strategies, problems and developments can be supported by HRD programmes or other learning activities. This is achieved through participation of the relevant HRD stakeholders, gathering and sharing information at all organisational level, formalisation of processes, and decision-making. The other important conditions for training to have a strategic role are the attitude of top management and the HR function. Top management need to realise the impact of training activities on the variables that affect the way in which the organisation works and therefore feel the need to review training initiatives and include them in the company strategy. The HR function needs to assume a more proactive role and change a short-term perspective in favour of a more organisation orientated, long-term attitude. Moreover, training professionals (internal and external) should bear in mind that the activities they provide should be always evaluated in terms of checking the return on investments.

"The aeroplane will never fly". This quotation was attributed to Lord Richard Burdon Haldane (1856-1928), Britain Minister of War from 1905-1912, four years after the Wright Brothers achieved the first sustained powered flight in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on 17 December 1903. A 'never' statement has very often the power to raise a certain degree of scepticism in the reader, as the irrefutable character of its content seems to eliminate any possibility of one being surprised.

At Enhance T&D we believe that under the right conditions training can indeed have a strategic role within organisations. In order to identify the context which favours the development of those conditions, the role of training within the organisation will be examined. It is in fact at this level, generally translated into the training policy of the company, that we begin to understand if the training function is, or is not given the strength and power to play a strategic role. But what does it mean to play a strategic role? As training professionals in a company, we would see our function as a key contributing factor to the direction our organisation takes. Our contributions would help the organisation achieve its overall 'vision', 'mission', and 'values', or in more down to earth terms make a valuable contribution to corporate objectives and bottom line profits. As already mentioned, for this to be possible, certain conditions need to be put in place. The second part of this article will concentrate on these conditions and the various factors which can contribute to the alignment of training programmes with the organisation objectives.

According to Buckley and Caple, training is a 'planned and systematic effort to modify or develop knowledge/skill/attitude through learning experience, to achieve effective performance in an activity or range of activities'. Its purpose in the work environment is to enable an individual to acquire abilities in order that he or she can perform adequately a given task or job. Most would agree that both the employee and the organisation can benefit from a training and development initiative which responds to a real need.

From an employee's point of view, a successful training programme can bring several benefits linked to an increased level of personal satisfaction for a job well done and for the acquisition of new skills. Moreover, these new abilities, which should lead to an improved

performance, can eventually be translated in a promotion or in a salary increase. From the organisation point of view, benefits from training can include 'improved employee work performance and productivity, shorter learning time which could lead to less costly training and employees being 'on line' more quickly; decrease in wastage; fewer accidents; less absenteeism; lower labour turnover and greater customer or client satisfaction' (Buckley and Caple, 2003, p.4). It would therefore seem logical to infer that an organisation has all interest in investing in training and development programmes for its workforce, in order to increase the overall level and quality of performance, and enjoy the benefits that this involves. Reality though is not as straightforward.

The attitude toward training and development varies from country to country and from one organisation to the other. Not all organisations consider T&D as part of their business strategy. On the contrary, many view T&D as just another source of expenses, which can be cut the moment profits are threatened. In many organisations training interventions respond to training needs more in a reactive than in a proactive way. Following Buckley and Caple's definition, a reactive response 'arises out of an immediate and urgent on-job production or productivity shortfall for which a behavioural cause has been identified and separated from other possible causes. By contrast, proactive training may be closely associated with an organization's corporate strategy and a manpower plan. It is very much future orientated' (Buckley and Caple, 2003, p.27). When the response is only reactive, training interventions appear to be just one of the possible solutions (and very often an expensive one!) to an immediate problem. At times of financial difficulties, when cuts to the budget generally occur, these interventions are normally the first to go. This is exactly what might happen in a company X which faces a general decrease in sales: funds for training and development purposes are likely to be drastically reduced exactly at a time when the sales force most need training and tools to overcome difficulties. It is apparent that in such a case T&D initiatives are not part of a corporate strategy but considered as just another overhead, which can be easily cut at a moment of crisis.

The gap between T&D and business strategy can sometimes depend on the fact that the company in question hasn't got a clear business strategy but a more day-to-day approach to growth and profit. Or again it can depend on the general trend to decentralise the decision-making process to smaller and smaller entities. As a consequence, line managers assume more training responsibilities for their team, which they might tend to relate more to short-term, day-to-day work than to the general business strategy of the organisation. Another factor which may contribute to the general perception of T&D as something separated from the overall strategy of a company is the tendency of training professionals to avoid any form of evaluation of their programmes, which would give precise indications on the return on investments (Buckley and Caple, 2003). The often recurring inability, or lack of willingness of training professionals to talk the jargon of numbers certainly does not contribute to establish credibility of training programmes at boardroom level. If no effort is made to assess the benefit of training and, for example, training initiatives cannot be linked with an increase in productivity, or a decrease of customer complaints, or with any other real and tangible benefit for the organisation, T&D is further confined to a role of mere 'cosmetic – an internal public relation exercise' (Buckley and Caple, 2003, p.9), which can very unlikely take its place in the boardroom and become a powerful tool to achieve the company objectives.

Evaluation is only the last of a series of steps that training professionals need to take if they want training to make a significant impact on the organisation. In order to play a strategic role, the goals and objectives of human resources development (HRD) activities need to be aligned with the goals and objectives of the organisation. Wognum and Fond Lam state that this aligning process is characterised by three phases: '1. Identifying organisational strategies, problems and developments; 2. Examining these in relation to possible HRD implications; 3. Making strategic choices about the way in which strategies, problems and developments can be supported by HRD programmes or other learning activities' (Wognum and Fond Lam, 2000, p.99). This, they continue, can only be achieved through participation, information, formalisation, and decision-making. By participation, they mean the involvement of relevant HRD stakeholders (relevant company employees at various levels) in the aligning process. This aspect, according to the authors, is paramount, as cooperation between all involved stakeholders

normally leads to more consensus on the way problems should be tackled and creates commitment to the achievement of the intended organisational goals and objectives by means of the selected training activities. Information implies data gathering from different organisational levels in order to make informed decision when it comes to choose which HRD goals and objectives should take priority for the alignment process with company objectives to take place. The aligning process should also earn a certain degree of formalisation in order to establish procedures which can be implemented again in the future. Finally, through the decision-making process, HRD goals and objectives, the content of the training programmes and the target groups will be selected. 'It is assumed that by paying attention to these four aspects and by involving all relevant stakeholders, HRD aligning will lead to strategically aligned and effective HRD programmes and other learning activities' (Wognum and Fond Lam, 2000, p.99).

Another necessary condition for training to play a strategic role within the organisation is linked with the attitude of the organisation top management. People in the boardroom need to realise the impact of training activities on the variables that affect the way in which the organisation works and therefore feel the need to review training initiatives and include them in the company strategy. It is useful to mention here that when we talk about corporate strategy, we mean 'the methods used to achieve the corporate objectives and subsequently the corporate purpose' (Lynch , 1968, quoted in Buckley and Caple, 2003, p.11). On the other hand, the HR function needs to have a more proactive approach to its work and focus on the long-term plans of the organisation. Training activities must be planned accordingly and be totally compatible with the organisation objectives. The proactive approach must extend to the investigation of organisational problems. An effort must also be made in order to get to know line managers' needs better. This implies a more active involvement with the operational functions in order to gather enough elements to provide the best solutions for line managers themselves. Moreover, training professionals (internal and external) should always bear in mind that the activities they provide, and for which the company invest a certain amount of resources, must be evaluated in order to check the return on investments. If all the above conditions are set in place, training can indeed have a strategic role within organisations, that is, it will

bring added value to the company and ultimately contribute to its bottom line profits.

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