



## Are we getting “right” participants for our training programs?

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### Introduction

There has been a growing recognition that employees are not a mere pair of hands, but are resources – human resources of the organization. There has also been a growing recognition that unless there is a continuous development, these unlisted assets would rust and are likely to become liabilities to the organization. The result is that organizations are placing more emphasis on human resources development than ever before and spending significant amount of monetary resources on this activity. As is well known, training remains the main tool for human resource development and is being widely recognized as an important function receiving greater attention.

Here we are first examining the training scenario. The common perception about training programs is outlined next. The issue of selecting the right participants for the training programs, which forms the focus of this study, is discussed next.

### The present scenario

So far, training is given to employees to impart a specific set of skills needed by him to perform his job satisfactorily. Organizations have been taking care to impart only those skills, which are not a part of the curriculum at the educational institutions for the employee. This training was usually offered at the time of entry into the organization, or only when a relocation of the employee became necessary. Executive training is usually restricted to attending seminars or sponsoring persons to public domain training programs conducted professional bodies or training institutions. The effectiveness of these training programs was rarely measured. The effectiveness of the skill training programs was seen in the performance of the employee on the job and the supervisors were filling in the gaps, if any, in the training programs. The effectiveness of the executive training went largely unmeasured. However, training is necessary for effective performance of the present job as well as preparing the employee for future requirements. These future requirements received little, if any, attention from the training departments, until recently. But the situation is changing with the organizations going in for expansions and, as a sequel, they are forced to train their employees to handle the new job requirements.

When it comes to evaluate the effectiveness of a training program, the institution conducting it always tries to evaluate the training program in terms of course content, course material, training methodology, the environment and the faculty, which helps them to improve their future programs. The organization sponsoring the participants is interested in the evaluation of the level of learning of the participants. However, more often than not, the participants are not evaluated since the participants would be reluctant to write any type of examination and have the results reported to their management. Also, the training institutions on their part, unsure of the reception of the participants, do not wish to put to test their own credibility by conducting a test to the participants. Once the participants go back to their organizations, usually no formal methodology exists to evaluate how a particular training program benefited the organization. Thus, it is not surprising that the training institutions pay more attention to food, course material and carry bags that are given during the training program than to the course content. And they concentrate on pleasing the participant rather than on imparting the skills / concepts in order to get an excellent rating for the training program.

### Common perceptions about training programs



There are varying perceptions about the training programs being conducted by the organizations for their employees. Some of these are –

- **Training programs are paid holidays** – Most of the training programs do not have any evaluation of the participants and no confidential reports are sent to the sponsoring organizations. Attendance is also not maintained strictly, nor is it reported. The sponsoring organizations, on their part, do not insist on the evaluation of the participant. Thus, the participants are likely to take it easy during the training programs and enjoy the training period as a holiday, albeit a paid one.
- **Nomination to training programs is a reward** – When a person cannot be motivated through increments or promotions, many executives resort to nominating a person to a training program at an exotic locale. The authors have met some participants who had come to the training programs to enjoy the hospitality, rather than an eagerness to learn.
- **Training programs are organized as a favor to the institutions** – Some times training programs are conducted because someone in the organization, powerful enough to award the contract, gives it as a favor to a friend. These programs have rarely any relevance to the organization's skill gaps
- **To be nominated to a training program, one must either be idle or be influential** – it is common to see the same faces in a variety of training programs conducted for the same organization. Some executives, when required to nominate, tend to send the whosoever is spareable rather than on the basis of a genuine need. Also every organization has its share of blue-eyed boys who corner all training nominations.
- **Training programs are rarely conducted to fulfill an existing / future skill gap** – Many organizations do not have a formal mechanism to assess the training needs of the organization and resort to hunch-based finalization of the training programs, or take what is popular and available in the market.
- **Training activity is only a cost center and only large profit making concern can afford training** – many organizations do not formally evaluate the benefits that accrue to them through a formal methodology. Therefore, this perception persists. It is often seen that whenever there is an economy drive, training activity and budget are the ones on which the axe falls.

As stated, the above are only perceptions. Not many studies have been conducted to ascertain the veracity of the above perceptions through collection and unbiased evaluation of such data using the scientific method.

### Selecting the participants

The effectiveness of the training program depends mainly on the faculty and the participants. In order that the training program should be successful, the participant –

- Should be motivated to learn
- Should have the basic education and the ability to understand and assimilate the content the training program has to offer
- Should be able to use the newly acquired skill in the near future. Otherwise the participant forgets the acquired skills, if the participant fails to practice the skill for a long time.

That he should be able to use the skills in the near future depends, to a large extent, on the management of the organization, in the sense that he should be working in the area in which the training has been imparted and the onus of providing the infrastructure and facilities rests with the management. Even if the program is well designed, with proper mix of theory and hands-on / case studies, with excellent infrastructure and renowned faculty in a congenial atmosphere, the organization cannot reap any real benefit unless the participant uses the skills in the near future for



achieving improved productivity / quality, though they may have acquired new skills to a very high degree of specialization.

Thus in the absence of a formal methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of the training program, the selection of the participants to the training program is crucial and vital importance, if the organizations desire to reap the real benefits, tangible or intangible.

But are the organizations paying real attention to this vital aspect? When someone seeks to confirmation in the formal channels, the answer is yes, but is it true? In one large organization (in India), where the authors have first hand knowledge, for a skill training in Germany, it was seen that totally unconnected persons were deputed who, on return, were never required to perform the functions for which they were trained. If in such a costly training unconnected persons were nominated, this sort of thing could be happening for less costly training programs as well. Also, it happened on one organization, it could well happen in other organizations as well.

### Objectives of the study

The present study delves into the selection of participants to ascertain whether the participants are selected to bridge an existing skill gap to be used for the organization in the near future, or otherwise. This may not clear away or establish the above listed perceptions, but certainly throw some light on at least some of those aspects.

This paper attempts to bring out the perceptions of participants of training programs in terms of usefulness of these training programs in their day-to-day functioning. Instead of trying to ask the participants whether a training program is useful or not (to which question, most participants answer “useful”) an attempt has been made to determine the time period within which the participant would apply the skills acquired during the training program. Further through confidence winning and indirect questioning the real reason for attending a training program was also obtained to assess the real meaning of “usefulness”. Thus, an indirect approach has also been employed to determine whether the selection / nomination of participants to the training programs is appropriate. If wrong people are nominated to a right program, it will not be useful to the organization, no matter how well it is conducted. In this paper we report the results of this study in the effectiveness of training programs from organization’s standpoint through such an indirect method.

### Description of the study

Twenty-three training programs conducted by a nationally reputed organization, which conducts corporate training programs as an adjunct to its consultancy services were studied. These programs were conducted for the employees of six medium-to-large organizations out of which four organizations are in public sector and two were in private sector. They were conducted between January 1990 and December 1992. The total number of participants in these programs was 322. The training programs fall under the skill-building category as they were building computer skills. These are futuristic oriented as these organizations were in the process of introducing computerization in their operations and the participants were expected to man these positions and spearhead the computerization in their respective organizations.

### The types of Training Programs

The programs that were conducted are as follows –

| Ref No | Title of the Program | Number of Programs | Percentage | Ratio of theory to hands-on |
|--------|----------------------|--------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| 1      | UNIX & C             | 2                  | 8.69       | 50:50                       |



|   |                             |           |               |       |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------|---------------|-------|
| 2 | PC Software                 | 15        | 65.24         | 50:50 |
| 3 | Computer Awareness          | 4         | 17.39         | 75:25 |
| 4 | Software Quality Assurance  | 1         | 4.34          | 80:20 |
| 5 | Software Project Management | 1         | 4.34          | 80:20 |
|   | <b>Total</b>                | <b>23</b> | <b>100.00</b> |       |

(As can be seen, all of the above were skill building programs and even for those which are oriented to awareness, the hands-on training is of a very high order compared to theoretical exposure. A minimum of 20% practical exposure has been provided in these programs)

### Durations of the programs

The durations of the training programs studied are given below –

| Duration of the program in days | Number of Programs |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| 3                               | 4                  |
| 4                               | 2                  |
| 10                              | 9                  |
| 12                              | 2                  |
| 18                              | 6                  |
| <b>Total</b>                    | <b>23</b>          |

Only six out of twenty three programs of three or four days duration – all the remaining range from 10 to 18 days. These programs have been selected for study to investigate steady-state phenomenon rather than a transient one.

### Locations of conducting the programs

| Locations          | Number of Programs |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| At client location | 20                 |
| At the institution | 2                  |
| At a hotel         | 1                  |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>23</b>          |

Almost all the training programs were conducted at the client’s premises as shown in the above table.

### Profile of participants

The next three tables present the profile of the participants.

| Age in Years | Number of Participants |
|--------------|------------------------|
| 20 – 30      | 71                     |
| 30 – 35      | 87                     |
| 35 – 40      | 93                     |
| 40 – 45      | 52                     |
| 45 – 50      | 10                     |
| 50 and above | 9                      |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>322</b>             |

| Level of Education   | Number of Participants |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Less than graduation | 72                     |
| Graduate             | 190                    |
| Post Graduation      | 60                     |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>322</b>             |

| Designation             | Number of Participants |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Non-Executives          | 106                    |
| First level executives  | 97                     |
| Middle level executives | 93                     |
| Senior executives       | 26                     |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>322</b>             |

As can be seen, the modal age falls between 35 and 45 years, a fairly mature age group. The education level for 78% of the participants is either graduation or post graduation. About 67% of participants are in the executive category right from first level to senior levels.

In addition to skill building, the participant profile indicates mature, educated and responsible members of the organizations.

### Other relevant details

All the above training programs were non-residential in nature. The faculty was drawn from within the organization conducting the program. All the programs were paid-programs – paid for the by the organizations sponsoring the participants.

### Methodology used in the collection of data

One of the authors is the lead faculty and the course coordinator for all the above training programs. In order to obtain accurate information, first of all, rapport was built up with the participants and confidence was built up in them to the extent that confidence could be exchanged. Thereafter informal questioning was utilized and no notes were taken explicitly in order to make the participants feel that their confidence would not be betrayed to their bosses. Points were noted at the next immediate discreet opportunity and analyzed later on. Also, to eliminate any bias of the participants, discussions were held with the organizational executives, namely, the administrators of the training department and in some cases with the superiors of the participants which was possible in the case of about six programs. The intention was to obtain factual reasons other than the officially stated ones, behind the participation of all participants, If factual reason could not be obtained from any particular participant that item was discarded and not included in the data. The emphasis throughout the study was obtaining, not just quantitative data amenable to statistical analysis, but qualitative data that is revealing.

### The analysis of the data

The responses were grouped into eleven categories of reasons of the participants. These are given below –

1. **Skill acquisition for immediate use in the next two months** – These people are going to implement the skills acquired during the training program and from whom the organization reaps immediate and real benefits. In our study, there are **73 (22.67%)** participants falling under this category



2. **Skill acquisition for use with in three to six months** – These participants will be of benefit to their organizations, if not immediately, but in a short time. Our study found **45 (13.98%)** participants in this category
3. **Skill acquisition for use within six to twelve months** – These participants are short listed for use by the management for possible use of skills acquired during the training program. It is likely that organization derives benefits from these participants, some time. Our study found **58 (18.01%)** participants in this category.
4. **Skill acquisition to supervise** – These persons are not required to use the skills, but management felt that they should possess the skills in order to effectively supervise their subordinates using the skills acquired during the training program. Our study found **29 (9%)** participants in this category.
5. **To improve existing skill** – These participants are already carrying out the tasks using skill acquired personally through trial and error and to give them formal learning, these persons are nominated to the training program. These will immediately give benefits to the sponsoring organizations. The number of such participants in our study was **6 (1.86%)**
6. **Not to acquire skill but to fill space** – These participants are not likely to use the skills either now or in the foreseeable future. Sometimes, the sponsoring organization contracts for a given number of participants. Not being able to find so many, may sponsor these persons to fill space in the training program. Our study revealed **36 (11.18%)** participants out of a total of 322.
7. **Not to use skill but the participant obtained nomination using his / her clout** – Our study found some participants who liked to attend training programs and used their influence with their bosses or the training department to get nominated to a training program. These people are enamored of the food, bag etc that are given free to participants. The number of such participants found in our study was **34 (10.56%)**
8. **Not likely to use the acquired skills for the organization but to use it for personal use** – Since the programs were of skill building category, some participants obtained nomination with a view to using those skills for their personal benefit. The number of such participants was **18 (5.59%)** in our study of 322 participants
9. **Not to impart skill but to motivate** – Often nomination to a training program is used as a motivator. Especially in those cases where a particularly dedicated employee is ill-treated by the organization, the boss arranges his / her nomination to a training program to mollify that employee. Sometimes it so happens, that an employee does not get a chance to attend any training program for a long time. That employee makes noise when the boss is considering nominations for a training program and to placate, the boss includes that employee in the training program at hand. It may be surprising, but we found some of the participants having not attended a single training program since joining the organization. It was also found that a person about to retire from the organization in the next six months was also nominated, solely for motivating him. Our study found **13 (4.04%)** such participants.
10. **Nominated to keep the employee in good humor** – Every organization is likely to have its share of troublemakers, be they from the union or big bullies. To keep them from troubling the boss or rake up industrial unrest, they are sent to training programs. Training departments also, on their part, in order to win union support for their budgets, sponsor union executives for training programs. Our study found **8 (2.48%)** such participants.
11. **No tangible purpose – attends because he / she can** – The employee is free and has no accountable responsibility. A training program is a better place to spend time as it provides good food and environment with an entertainer (faculty). So he attends the training program. In our study we came across **2 (0.62)** such persons.

## Discussions and conclusions

The positive aspects of these training programs, regardless of the type of participants are –



- Awareness
- Removal of fear of computers
- Ideas for implementing computers in unforeseen areas
- Ideas for better implementation in areas contemplated for computerization
- Overcoming resistance to change

These training programs may have provided the above benefits to the organization and participants. But we must examine data more objectively beyond euphoric enunciations. Some such conclusions are presented below –

1. About 23% of the participants would be using the acquired skill in the next two months, that is, approximately only one out of every four may use the acquired skill. This is a very small figure, especially for a skill building program, in that the sponsoring organization is expending resources namely, sponsoring cost, manpower time and opportunity cost. Expending the above resources for four persons, the organization can look forward to returns from only one person.
2. About 14% (one out of every 7) would hope to use these computer skills in the next 3 to 6 months. We must understand that this is a skill-training program and any skill that is not put to use for three months is difficult to retain and recall to be used at a later date. The organization may only hope that the extent of re-training needed later may be nominal and hopes to reduce costs later.
3. A third group comprising of 18% (one out of 5) of the participants are slated to use the skill within 6 to 12 months from the day the training program concluded. The time frame is such that the skill is likely to become obsolete by that time, because of the rapid obsolescence of technology prevalent in computer industry. The organization may reap very little, that is awareness benefit out of these people.
4. About 9% of the participants acquired the skill in order that they can supervise. Supervision does not call for hands-on expertise in the field, but awareness of the operational supervisory data, such as, time required for an operation, the quality parameters etc in the area. This group obviously needs a different type of training to make them effective supervisors. As stated in Peter's principle, a good worker need not make a good supervisor.
5. About 18% (59 persons) of the participants are nominated either to fill space or to motivate or keep in good humor or because one can. This percentage is very high. This category may not ideally exceed 5%.
6. About 16% of the participants obtained a nomination with an ulterior motive either for personal use or for the goodies that are offered to the participants of a training program. One cannot hope to realize any benefits to the organization from these persons and all efforts are to be made to eliminate such persons.
7. A fact to be noted is that 26 senior level executives attended these training programs, which are intended primarily to build skills. The question is whether the senior executives need operating skills for their present or future job content. They may perhaps need a different kind of program one which gives them skills to plan, organize, staff, direct and control computerization in their departments.

While it is true that human resources development has been engaging active attention of the organizations, a foolproof method of evaluating the effectiveness of training programs still remains elusive. It is also obvious that organizations would like to ensure that every penny spent on training should prove beneficial for the organizations, especially so, when they are expending significant sums of money on this activity. When the quality of the output cannot be satisfactorily measured one has to ensure quality inputs to the process so that the output will be of good quality automatically, assuming that quality is built into the process. As no objective method of measuring the effectiveness of training programs is available to training managers, it is imperative that adequate attention is paid to the selection of right participants for the training programs. That it is



not so is evident from the above study and one sincerely hopes to see a marked improvement in this area.

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