Some sort of evaluation is needed any time there is learning. How else would we know what and to what degree participants learned? The final assessment of any training, of course, needs to match the intended learning and the organizational setting. This is truer today than ever before with more scrutiny given to all aspects of organizations. To assess learning in a way others can trust and show that results point to training’s impact can be as simple or complex as one wishes, but regardless of the case, the evaluation strategy must be a deliberate attempt to isolate the outcomes of training from other effects, such as a change in a related procedure or a supervisor not requiring employees to implement what they learned.

In my early years of training adults in the workplace, I (Scott) thought that “training evaluation” was merely a survey at the end of class to collect data. The survey in and of itself constituted “evaluation” and the results provided sufficient evidence of the training’s impact on the organization. Over time, I learned that while such survey data did provide some indication participants’ perceived value from attending the training, it did not provide evidence that training solved any sort of learning gap or contributed to the organization in a meaningful way. What I took for granted as a trainer was no longer sufficient as one who would eventually become a bona fide evaluator. This realization stirred great interest to learn more about evaluation and how to conduct it in such a way as to produce credible results indicating trainings’ influence.

Once I learned there is more to evaluation than I thought I knew as an early career trainer, I began reading articles and books on the subject. Here, I discovered that evaluation is a major field embedded within the training world with many theories and models describing how to properly perform the tasks necessary to determine training’s impact. I read from some of the most notable scholar-practitioners in the field, such as Donald Kirkpatrick and Jack Phillips, who proposed that isolating training’s impact from other change influences is an important part of evaluation. This proposition requires a systematic approach to obtain such evidence. Initially, I thought this was an impossible endeavor, but as I started practicing what I read I found the opposite to be true – that one can, in fact, isolate training effects and
provide sufficient evidence of training’s role to improve workplace inefficiencies. In learning this, I also realized I wanted to know more so I can help organizations learn. I decided to continue my education in this direction and learn more about evaluation.

Since entering the evaluation field, I’ve learned from classes, from independent study, from collaborating with others, and from trial and error; however, what I learned most was that being an evaluator meant also being an advocate for evaluation. I dedicated my life’s work to helping organizations and individuals associated with training to understand the important role evaluation plays in the training enterprise and to see it as an asset rather than a liability. I helped organizations see that while evaluation can demonstrate training’s positive contributions, it can also uncover things that were unexpected or undesired – and this was an asset as well. I advocated for a proactive, rigorous, and systematic evaluation approach to begin at training’s inception rather than a retroactive, haphazard, superficial approach. The former providing deep meaningful learning about training, which we put so much time and effort into conducting, while the latter frequently ends up being a quest for positive affirmation that training solved everything yet we scratch our heads when employees are no more capable than before.

Over the years, I took what I learned from others about conducting training evaluations and organized the different approaches into a consolidated evaluation lifecycle, which guided my practice since. This lifecycle emphasizes the need to think about evaluation in parallel with training development rather than something conducted after training takes place. A cyclical process involving seven major phases, the lifecycle guides an evaluator through a systematic inquiry process that helps to answer the most pressing questions people have about training effectiveness. This systematic inquiry to answer questions is what evaluation is really all about.

This lifecycle begins with a discovery about the training’s goals and learning objectives, understanding the context in which trained people work, identifying the relevant stakeholders, determining what important data variables would help in providing credible evidence, and most importantly, articulating the desired lessons stakeholders want to learn about the training. This last point is the entire reason we conduct evaluations and is how people connect value to the training enterprise. Without this, training is a mere activity that may or may not contribute value to the organization or its employees.

Once this information is understood and the all-too-important evaluation questions have been articulated, the work to design an appropriate evaluation strategy can begin. Here, evaluators can follow various evaluation taxonomies to determine what “level” evaluation is appropriate, but regardless of which model one chooses to follow, the key is to devise a strategy of proper data collection and analysis methods to answer the stated evaluation questions. This strategy includes a logic map
connecting the training event to hypothesized outcomes and proposes appropriate testable scenarios to provide evidence of impact.

Next, the evaluator needs to reconnect with the various stakeholders, especially those with decision-making responsibilities and those whom have a vested interest in training impact results, to share the proposed strategy designed to answer the evaluation questions. The purpose for this is to communicate the strategy to all involved and/or impacted and negotiate the evaluation’s scope. Typically, this negotiation involves the scarce human resources needed for data collection, such as borrowing time from employees for interviews or focus groups, which may require some revision to the initial evaluation strategy. Once the strategy is reviewed and any negotiations settled, a formal agreement between the evaluator and stakeholders is obtained. Now, stakeholders know what they can expect from the evaluation and the evaluator(s) have their marching orders when it’s time to commence.

With a mutually agreed-upon evaluation strategy plan in hand, the evaluator can begin collecting data when the time is right. Timing is completely dependent upon the training with employee implementation and performance maturation being two key considerations. Additionally, during the data collection phase, challenges will undoubtedly arise despite how careful one plans. When these challenges do arise, such as not having sufficient employees to conduct focus groups or incomplete performance data due to a computer glitch for a period of time, the evaluator must make decisions on how to compensate in order to preserve the strategy’s integrity and resulting conclusions made from the results. Finally, the evaluator must compile all data and prepare it for analysis.

With data prepared for analysis, the evaluator can begin the data analysis work. Whether qualitative or quantitative in nature, the analysis is to provide information needed to answer the stated evaluation questions. Much like during the data collection phase, the evaluator must be prepared to deal with unanticipated challenges, such as when data do not support initial hypotheses or when insufficient data are available to conduct robust enough tests. At this point, the evaluator should refrain from making conclusions about what the data means, but rather form some initial impressions to take back to the stakeholders in the next phase. Finally, the evaluator prepares relevant information to present to stakeholders for a dialogue to answer the evaluation questions.

In the sixth phase, the evaluator leads a session where the data and analysis results are presented and discussed collaboratively. The intent is to present the findings as bias-neutral way possible so that the group can use the information to answer the evaluation questions. In this process, assumptions are called out, contextual meaning is explored, and alternative explanations can be called out so that mutually agreeable answers to the evaluation questions result. By taking this approach, the stakeholders are central actors in the evaluation process and play a key role in
making meaning of the results by adding insights from their experience to explain unexpected findings. Additionally, the stakeholders are present to proposed any new evaluation question, which may involve extending the evaluation project or initiating a new project.

Finally, once the previous phase is completed, the evaluator prepares an executive summary of the project, to include a summation of the training’s intended learning outcomes, the evaluation questions, a summary of the results and collaborative conclusions, limitations from the evaluation strategy, and any recommendations for the organization moving forward. As the final deliverable, all stakeholders have a tangible document from the evaluation effort – a written archive to use in a variety of ways. Stakeholders can use this as the “evidence” of training impact and share with their colleagues as insights to help steer their next move. The training department can use this to guide training revisions or as an artifact of their contributions to the organization. Evaluators can use this as a means to refine their evaluation practice, especially in terms of designing effective strategies or to review during evaluation quality assurance efforts. In any case, the reporting phase concludes the evaluation lifecycle and serves to document the efforts for future consideration.

**THIS BOOK’S ORGANIZATION**

The foundation of this book rests on the notion that evaluation is a systematic inquiry process of data collection and analysis to provide answers to pressing questions about training contributions needed to operate organizations effectively. There is no single correct way to conduct training evaluations, but there are many best practices from which aspiring, novice, or experienced evaluators can glean impactful lessons to share their practice. This book is a collection of what currently occurs in the training and evaluation field. We feel it is important to connect theory with practice in order to see how others did it so we can replicate in our own contexts. This way, we share with others in the field and we all learn – evaluation novices and experts alike.

By seeing what others are doing we see how we can improve from their wisdom and practices. In a sense, you are in “training” as you read this material. The evaluation is for you to conduct. Then, apply your new insights to what you do daily. Use the lessons shared from others to help you avoid possible obstacles in your work. We would challenge you to go one step further. A sign of true learning is if you are able to share with another person your new knowledge. Take what you learn in this book and share with others. Have discussions with your team on how to improve what you are doing. Simply, continue the circle of learning and evaluation.

This book is organized into ten chapters; each one describing a separate training evaluation case study in detail. Here is a brief synopsis of each chapter:
Chapter 1: This chapter describes the evaluation of a management development program from learning needs analysis, through program selection, and impact on the organization using a mixed-methods strategy. Carefully crafted questions at each of Kirkpatrick’s four levels framed the evaluation.

Chapter 2: This chapter focuses on Phillips’ learning transfer and business impact from a program designed to train healthcare workers and others, through a series of learning activities, about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases to reduce their spread in an at-risk population. This case study describes a longer-term qualitative evaluation project and outlines specific lessons learned from the data collection challenges as well as specific changes they would make for future similar evaluations.

Chapter 3: This chapter describes an organization’s first venture into training evaluation beyond learner reaction and achievement, with a focus on the organization’s cultural influence on evaluation strategy and implementation. In a financial organization context, a series of learning events, leading to certification, were aimed at changing banking associates’ skills and behaviors on the job. This case study provides background on the training implementation, change management, and details of a mixed-methods evaluation approach.

Chapter 4: This chapter describes the impact a learning response system has on the learning process in a corporate training setting. A quasi-experimental design was used to isolate the technology’s effect on learners’ experience and achievement with additional qualitative data collection and analysis to explore learners’ experience further. The approach yielded mixed results, but did clearly demonstrate the technology had a positive impact on the course design, trainer/learner interaction, and perceived outcomes resulting from attending the training.

Chapter 5: This chapter describes the results of a continuing education initiative in the legal field to improve its delivery in Kansas. Of importance to the evaluation was to determine how the continuing legal education commission could assist in improving continuing education offerings, whether the materials provided during training improved individuals’ law practice, and how the continuing education experience helped individuals complete requirements and add value. This mixed-methods evaluation used survey and focus groups to gather data and offers a practice-based model for evaluating continuing legal education.

Chapter 6: This chapter describes the evaluation of a pre-hire training program at a large retailer. Potential employees participate in training encompassing a variety of topics, technical and non-technical, to ensure job readiness. Data collected during the evaluation focused on job-performance indicators associated with five job competencies, speed, and accuracy at various time intervals via performance data and survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to demonstrate the program’s effectiveness.
Chapter 7: This chapter describes an approach to evaluate learning transfer of management skills in a global organization. Prior to attending training and six months following training, participants and their line managers completed a questionnaire, rating their abilities on seventeen behaviors taught during the program. Analysis demonstrated positive changes in nine of the seventeen behaviors and a regression analysis identified four factors, which influenced the behavior change.

Chapter 8: This chapter describes an organization’s learning management system upgrade efforts and its impact on the training evaluations conducted. Faculty at the subject university were trained on the new system for teaching online programs moving forward. Data obtained from the system provided feedback to the faculty and university as to program effectiveness. Successes and challenges with implementing the new system were addressed as it relates to conducting training evaluations.

Chapter 9: This chapter describes an evaluation of new employee training in a financial services organization to identify proficiency impact. The training program was revised to have greater impact and a quantitative comparison of the new and old curricula was conducted to determine sales improvements. A return-on-investment calculation was made to demonstrate the financial gains realized with the revised training program.

Chapter 10: This chapter describes a large-scale evaluation of a complex state-wide program aimed at helping students become more persistent, perform better academically, improve social capital skills, and enable successful collegiate or career transitions. A mixed-methods approach, involving program artifact reviews, students’ and educators’ reflections, student retention, and academic gains, were employed to determine impact. A particular focus of this evaluation was on the impact that adult educator training and certification process had on student outcomes.

Our hope is that everyone who reads this book is inspired to incorporate a new idea into their evaluation practice and can better demonstrate training’s impact on their respective organization.

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