Is Measuring Soft-Skills Training Really Possible?
By Mark Onisk

"Is measuring "soft-skills" really possible?" The question is as ambiguous and vague as many training programs bearing the same name. For many a senior manager, the concept of "soft-skills" training conjures images of the Sunday morning infomercial and/or "motivational" seminar that instill participants with eight hours of inspiration, but offer few reusable tools to be applied on the job or add value to the company who's paying for it. In the IT world, the outcomes can be readily quantified, returns are often immediate and the abatement costs are so frightening that the implicit value of these programs is intuitive at nearly every level of the organization. How can soft-skills training, whose outcomes are often intangible, returns are gradual or deferred and abatement costs present few immediate threats possibly achieve the same relevance as its IT counterpart? The answer lies quantifying and measuring the returns of soft-skills programs, as well as translating their benefit into the universal language of business, dollars & cents.

What are "Soft-Skills"?
The very term "soft-skills" is often generically applied to anything that is "non-IT". The true irony is that the term is often used to classify subjects that are more quantifiable or mathematical than many IT topics. The following table classifies soft-skills into five broad categories, Behavioral Development, Professional Development, Company Specific, Compliance, and Job/Task Specific.

Category	Description	Examples
Behavioral Development	These programs are designed to improve or enhance the underlying social behaviors and influencing capabilities of the participants.	• Leadership Development • Teamwork • Coaching Employees • Change Management
Professional Development	These programs may be required for an individual to obtain or maintain a professional certification or accreditation.	• Project Management • Professional • Certified Public Accountant • Legal
Company Specific	These programs feature company specific information, policies and procedures.	• Company Human Resources • Policies & Procedures • Employee Orientation
Compliance	These programs are designed to help employers become legally compliant with various legislated safety or work environment standards.	• Sexual Harassment • Office Ergonomics • Lockout/Tagout
Job/Task Specific	These programs relate to the actual performance of a specific task or job function that is a fundamental component of the employee's responsibilities.	• Entering purchase orders • Responding to a customer call or inquiry • Assembling product

Who Needs Soft-Skills Training?
Nearly every employee needs some level of training to perform their job, develop competencies, or understand the risks and/or regulations of their work environment. The following matrix provides a simple overview of various soft-skills topics versus job roles. This matrix is far from an exhaustive training map, but is included in this document to provide a brief context for the discussion.

Potential Student Soft-Skill Categories

Potential Student		Soft-Skill Categories				
Job Role	Example	Behavioral Development	Professional Development	Company Specific	Compliance	Job/Task Specific
Executive	Vice President	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	
Middle Management	Department Manager	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	
Supervisory	Team Leader	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Individual Contributor	Programmer		⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Professional	Accountant		⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙

Why Measure Soft-Skills Training?
As noted earlier, the outcomes and benefits of soft-skills training tend to be mildly intuitive and/or tangible. This being the case, the training champion is charged with task of validating the program's value. There are three basic questions that organizations need to ask in assessing a program's value.

- **Is the training effective in transferring the knowledge and competency as intended?**
  Capturing empirical evidence that verifies the student has enhanced their competencies and/or skills substantiates the effectiveness of the program. Organizations funding these programs demand verification there has been a tangible outcome of training. Measuring the outcome of training can validate that a transfer of knowledge has occurred.
- **Are the outcomes of training relevant to the needs of the organization?**
  The outcomes of training need to be valued by the organization for the program to remain viable. Measuring the outcomes of training illustrates a quantifiable relationship between the program and the greater needs or values of the organization.
- **Are the costs of the program worth the competencies obtained?**
  Specifically, there is a need to quantify both the results of the training and the delivery costs (direct & indirect) to ensure that the program is yielding a favorable return to the organization. It is virtually impossible to determine this return without measuring the outcome of training.

Why do Organizations Implement Soft-Skills Training Programs?
In order to develop effective measures of soft-skills training, it is important to understand some of the drivers for implementing these programs in the first place.

- **Employee & Management Development.** Many organizations implement Behavioral and Professional Development programs to foster the ongoing career growth and maturation of their employees. Organizations may identify key values and/or competencies that they want to foster within their management team (or other employees). An organization may identify customer-focus, ethics, perseverance, creativity and problem solving as some key competencies they would like build. Using these competencies, the organization would then build a training program to instill the values within their participants.
- **Certification of Employees.** Some organizations may require their employees to obtain specific certifications to hold their positions. For example, a defense contractor may require that it's project managers obtain their Project Management Professional® certification before they are allowed to manage products autonomously. To achieve this goal, the company would develop a Project Management Professional® training program to prepare their employees to sit for the exam.
- **Legal/Regulatory.** In instances where various safety regulations mandate some level of training on a particular subject, organizations may implement a program to become compliant with the mandates. Organizations may develop training on various workplace hazards or employee rights to raise awareness. Sexual Harassment training is an example of Legal/Regulatory training.

Organizations implement these programs to meet regulations, build awareness and mitigate their risk of employee suit.

- **Productivity & Competency.** In cases where an employee needs to know a specific procedure or process to perform their job, an organization may implement a training program. Product training is a prime example of this. In order for a salesperson to sell their product, they need to know the various features and attributes of the product, as well as competing products. An organization may implement a training program to build product expertise with the salesperson.
- **Communicate Policies & Procedures.** An organization may also build a training program to relay various policies and procedures to their employees. This is the function of many employee orientation programs.

Developing Objectives for Soft-Skills Training Programs

To measure the outcomes of a soft-skills program it is critical to have objectives as benchmarks. In the absence of clear objectives for the program, the benefit to the organization is reduced to the anecdotal comments and perceptions of the participants. This has the potential to undermine the program. If the success of the program is gauged only on the basis of student comments, there may be little measurable data to report on. Consequently, the value of the program becomes less obvious. If there are specific and quantifiable objectives for implementing the program in the first place, there will be meaningful parameters for measuring the program later on. The following bullets are some guidelines for developing objectives for soft-skills programs.

- **Strategically Relevant.** The objectives for a soft-skills program should be strategically relevant and grounded in the ultimate values & mission of the organization it serves. For example, a software development company, whose goal is to produce custom applications for its clients, would probably not implement an electrical safety program, since it is may not be relevant to their overall business.
- **Outcome Focused.** The objectives for the program should be focused on the end-result of training. A focused objective might relate to a specific certification that will be obtained after training. In the case of a compliance subject, the focus of the objective may be to comply with a specific labor standard. A less effective objective would focus simply on the training program itself, rather than the outcome. For example, "*to have a best-in-class leadership development program*", does not address underlying need for the program in the first place.
- **Measurable.** The program's objectives should have some quantifiable attributes. If the objective for the program is to certify the participants in a particular discipline, there should be a target certification rate that program strives to maintain. (90% of the program participants will obtain their Project Management Professional® certification) This creates a standard to measure the program's performance by.
- **Achievable.** The objectives of the program should be something that is realistically attainable through training. Professional certifications may be a realistic outcome of a company sponsored training program, but a doctorate in astrophysics is probably not.
- **Cost Centric.** The objectives for a soft-skills program should address the delivery and opportunity costs of training. These costs should include the *direct* costs of conducting the training (courseware, administration, LMS, learning services, etc…) as well as the *indirect* costs of the program (labor costs of having employees in training, opportunity costs of having employees in training rather than on the job).
- **Time Bound.** The objectives should also include some type of timeline or schedule for achieving the outcome. (90% of the program participants will obtain their XYZ certification *within the first 6 months of the program*)

Techniques for Measuring Soft-Skills Training

Perhaps the most widely adopted framework for assessing training is the Kirkpatrick model. The Kirkpatrick model breaks assessment techniques into four primary levels. Developed in the 1950s, the Kirkpatrick model was later modified by Phillips, Pulliam-Phillips and Zuniga[1], who added a fifth level. The following table defines each level and provides examples of the various techniques.

	Description	**Examples**
Level 1 *Reaction*	A measure of how students react to aspects of a training program.	Rating of instructor effectiveness Adequacy of training facilities Quality of audio & video signals
Level 2 *Learning*	A measure of how much a student increased knowledge, improved a skill, or changed an attitude.	Measures of performance on a written test or a hands-on assessment of skill, each compared to a before-training baseline.
Level 3 *Behavior*	A measure to the extent to which there has been a change in behavior due to participation in a program.	Surveys of supervisory or subordinate personnel or on-the-job observations.
Level 4 *Results*	A measure of the final results that occurred due to participation in a program.	New business (in terms of dollars) and/or clients secured in a consulting business as a result of employee certification from training Reduced fines and/or litigation as a result of compliance or safety training
Level 5 *Benefit*	Compare the results of the training to the costs of the training.	New business (in terms of dollars) and/or clients secured in a consulting business as a result of employee certification from training, less direct and indirect costs of the program. Reduced fines and/or litigation as a result of compliance or safety training, less direct and indirect costs of the program.

In addition to this model, the performance of the training program can also be measured using the objectives defined for the program. The criteria applied when developing objectives can be used to develop key metrics for the program's effectiveness. The following table delineates the relationship between the program's objectives and key metrics to measure the ultimate success of the training.

Objective: *The outcome of the XYZ program is to enable 90% of the participants to obtain their XYZ certification within six months of the completion of training at a cost of $1,000 per participant.*

Guidelines for Objectives	**Related Metric**
Strategically Relevant	Is the XYZ certification still relevant to the ultimate strategy of the organization?
Outcome Focused	Are the participants leaving training with enough knowledge to sit for the XYZ certification exam? (Kirkpatrick Level 2)
Measurable	What percentage of the participants has obtained their certification? Is this consistent with the objective of 90%?
Achievable	Is obtaining the XYZ certification attainable within six months of training? Has this changed since the program's inception?
Cost Centric	What is the cost per participant in terms of both direct and indirect costs? Is this inline with the program's objective?
Time Bound	How long after training do participants obtain their certification? Is this inline with the program's objective?

Use Metrics to Monitor and Control the Program
Once key metrics have been established, it is important to measure and control the program to ensure that it remains viable to the organization and retains the support of management as well as staff. Listed below are a few guidelines for doing so.

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- **Periodic Reporting.** Maintain a periodic and systematic reporting process. These reports may include key metrics based on the program's objectives, the Kirkpatrick-Phillips framework, or a combination of both. In any event, reports of these metrics should be communicated on a monthly, quarterly and/or annual basis to generate interest in the training program, determine trends, and provide an ongoing justification to management.
- **Periodic Evaluation of Program Objectives.** To ensure that the soft-skills program remains consistent with the needs and expectations of the organization, it is good idea to periodically review the program's objectives. This prevents the program from losing its relevance, achievability, or effectiveness.
- **Rely on the Facts.** Use the metrics as the basis for change, rather than anecdote or perception. Although feedback is an important component of improving and sustaining the training program, it needs to be collected in a systematic and disciplined fashion in order to make rational decisions based on the interests of the entire group, rather than a vocal minority.

Is Measuring Soft-Skills Training Really Possible?

Although the outcomes of soft-skills training can be intangible or subjective, measurement is indeed possible through the careful development of focused objectives and metrics. This can be a challenging process since the objectives and outcomes of training may not be simple to define and impact several stakeholders with divergent needs. In addition to this, the relationship between competencies applied on the job and the outcomes of training may be influenced by factors outside the program's control, such as the underlying desire of the participant to apply what they've learned and their ability/opportunity to do so. Despite the challenges, measuring soft-skills training continues to be a critical component of leveraging support and resources for these programs.

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