

## Change Management/Outsourcing

# Return on learning, Part 4: Maximizing the business impact of enterprise learning

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One of the most important trends in enterprise learning today is the ever-sharpening focus on linking corporate training programs to the business. Recent Accenture Learning research into high-performance learning organizations, based on a survey of 285 senior learning executives around the world, found that maximizing the impact of learning on the business was the number one challenge of learning executives—more vexing, even, than dealing with budget constraints.

What makes it so challenging? The enterprise learning organization must transform from cost center to value center, explicitly linking its spending on training programs to overall business value created. This linkage involves two important objectives: (1) focusing measurement on performance—that is, ensuring that the results of training are measured not just in terms of the numbers of courses developed or how many employees have been trained, but also in terms of the impact of those courses on the performance of people; and (2) creating and delivering learning assets with business rigor—developing them on time and on budget, and delivering them in the most cost-efficient manner possible.

The executives overseeing Accenture's internal training function were focused on both of these objectives as they sought to transform the company's internal training programs.<sup>1</sup> Accenture had a rich heritage of developing award-winning training. On top of those expectations, however, executives needed to instill operational effectiveness into training development.

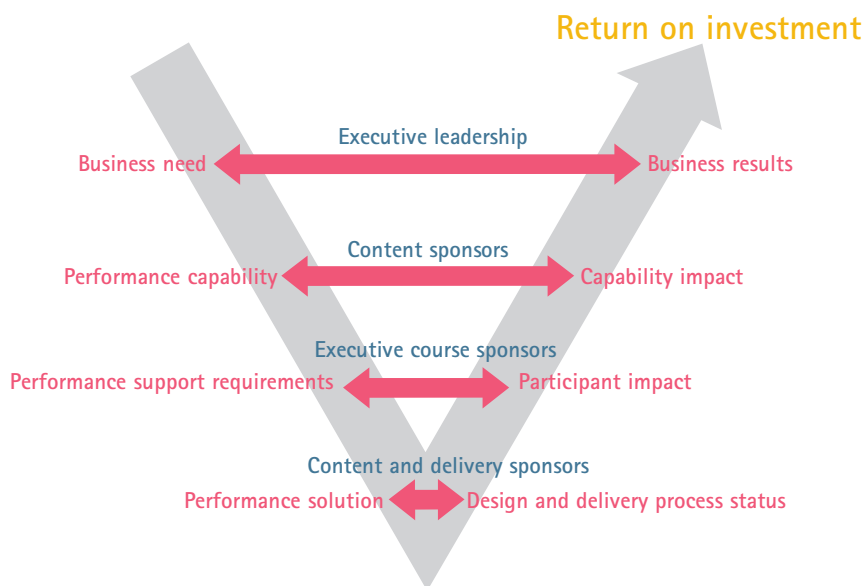
World-class training was still the goal; but so was rigorous program management that operated within strict budget and time constraints to deliver maximum business impact with maximum cost efficiency.

### Planning, tracking and communicating results

To help ensure that level of rigor, the team needed an approach that would clearly link training projects with specific business objectives during the planning phase, communicate these plans clearly to sponsors, and then guide designers during the development process. The team achieved those goals by adapting a tool from Accenture's core systems building methodology to create a unique and innovative asset, the Accenture V-Model for Learning and Knowledge Management (see figure, next page).

As a systems development asset repurposed for the development of learning and knowledge assets, the model's focus on testing rigor translates into precise specification of performance outcomes expected from training development. The V-model links business needs to the specific outcomes of the learning assets to be developed, and provides a framework for measuring results across all levels of delivery—from deployment of the solution through return on investment. The full metrics architecture conforms to leading practices in training evaluation. And, because the model comprises the entire performance space, it facilitates a crucial shift needed by enterprise learning organizations today: from a focus on the traditional "training is the solution for everything" approach to

<sup>1</sup> The full story of Accenture's learning transformation story is told in a new book, *Return on Learning: Training for High Performance at Accenture* (Agate, 2006).



The Accenture V-Model for Learning and Knowledge Management

the more precise development of learning and knowledge solutions appropriate to real performance needs.

### The Accenture V-Model for Learning and Knowledge Management

The V-model drives a process that proceeds from macro-level analysis through finer specification of detail. First, the model clearly defines the business problem or opportunity. At the same time, the model specifies the business impact metrics; once captured and compared to cost, these metrics will help determine return on overall investment.

This reflective analysis—identifying requirements and metrics simultaneously—proceeds level by level down the model. For example, the business need is met by developing a performance capability, which is enabled by developing individual human performance support, which is enabled by the learning and/or knowledge solution. The left side of the model maps the stages of analysis that ultimately result in the design and deployment of a solution that is linked to the original business goal. In these stages, the business need is translated into capability requirements, human performance requirements and, finally, into solution designs.

The right side of the model maps the metrics used to evaluate success at each of these levels. Business impact and ROI metrics are specified near the top, with implementation and individual outcomes near the bottom. The pattern and correlation of metrics between levels provide insight about particular obstacles that might impede success. Or, when business results are demonstrated, the model provides evidence of the unique impact of the solution on those results.

### Benefits of the model

The key to the effectiveness of the V-model is its symmetry. On the left side, representing analysis of learning needs and the design of solutions, the model requires that a development team also create the metrics that will link the plans with its associated results. This helps ensure tight linkages between the analysis/design phase and the measurement phase.

The model also ensures that the right sponsors and decision makers (see the middle of the "V") get the metrics and results that mean the most to them. Those who serve as sponsors for a particular learning offering will be most interested in metrics that indicate how successfully that course was administered and the impact it had on participants. Those who ask for particular business content to be reflected in a set of courses (for example, because of a market-place need in serving customers) want to see the impact of the learning experience on workforce capabilities. And executive leadership wants to see the business results coming out of the overall learning environment.

### A focus on performance needs

In most traditional training organizations, formal courses are most often presumed to be the solution to a workforce performance need, and then the training planners work backward to connect the solution to need. That can be an expensive and wasteful approach.

Instead, the Accenture V-model provides guidance to learning and knowledge development—planning, developing, delivering and communicating—without starting from the position that formal training will always be the right answer. Formal training is

expensive, and thus should be a thoughtful response instead of an automatic one, used only when it will clearly meet the business need. Often, the best response to an identified workforce need is not formal training; it might be something to improve employee motivation, knowledge sharing, mentoring or other performance supports.

The essential focus of an enterprise learning organization should be, first, to identify the performance needs in the workforce, and then to determine the appropriate responses through an analysis mapped to measurable results, within the organization's budget and resource constraints. When used properly to guide the development of training solutions, the V-model results in solutions closely linked to business needs, and metrics that are tied to performance objectives.

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