

Workforce Performance & Learning

Return on learning, Part 1: Generating business impact from an enterprise learning transformation program

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From the perspective of marketplace impact and business performance, what happens when a company once renowned for its training and development opportunities begins to place its priorities elsewhere? And what is the business impact after an innovative and rigorous transformation program has reinvented the manner in which the company develops the capabilities of its people through enterprise learning and knowledge sharing?

Accenture, one of the world's leading management consulting, technology services and outsourcing companies, has also been a traditional leader and innovator in the areas of training and development. Beginning in 2001, however, Accenture experienced a series of dramatic challenges that began to affect the company's ongoing ability to provide world-class learning experiences for its own employees.

Some challenges were related to internal organization changes that had taken the training department away from the foundational education and common curriculum that had been so distinctive at Accenture. External economic events were also a factor. With the bursting of the Internet bubble and the terrorist attacks in the United States, many travel and training requests were denied for business reasons. Cost was a looming issue.

Led by the Accenture Capability Development group, the company initiated a sweeping transformation of its internal training and development programs—reinventing the way it supported its workforce with advanced and high-impact learning services, and

returning Accenture to its preeminent position as an organization that uses learning programs to drive business results.¹

The lessons, approaches and strategies used by Accenture are instructive for any organization seeking to leverage learning and other related workforce transformation initiatives to achieve high performance.

From vision to governance to implementation

Because a learning transformation program is a multi-year journey, organizations must take careful and methodical steps, as part of a phased strategy and implementation program, to maximize the quality of the learning programs and their impact on the business. Simultaneously, they must nurture the buy-in and sponsorship of the executive leadership team and manage the impact of change on the workforce. The following activities were particularly crucial in ensuring the success of the Accenture transformation program.

Establishing a vision and governance structures

A vision for learning transformation will be stronger—and will stand a better chance of being successfully realized—if it is rooted in the concerns and mindset of the executive team. In this regard, Accenture did two things that were particularly important.

First, we made the case for change by communicating with the company's leadership team in both a personal and an analytic way. The executives discovered for

¹ 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).

themselves how much the then-current training situation at Accenture had evolved away from how they had experienced training as younger professionals. This discovery was backed up with hard data from employee satisfaction surveys and training request documentation, which reinforced just how much the diminished training services were affecting both employee morale and skill development.

Second, we carefully tied the vision for learning transformation to Accenture's core values: stewardship, best people, client value creation, respect for the individual, integrity and one global network. Effectively, this said to our leadership: "Here are the implications of those core values when it comes to revitalizing our learning culture."

By creating a compelling picture both of the existing situation and of the realistic vision for change, we drew the executive team into both the challenge and the solution. These leaders then became the executive steering committee, which provided the long-term oversight and governance during the initiative.

Proving the ROI in learning

Getting leadership attention to the goals of a learning transformation program is one thing; sustaining that interest over time is another. We needed to prove to the executive team that enterprise learning would have long-term beneficial effects on the overall performance of the company. So we planned and conducted an award-winning study that analyzed the return on investment in learning.

Based on this study, which was validated by leading university professors, we were able to quantify the value of enterprise learning by measuring its impact on recruiting, retention, chargeability and performance. We discovered that for every dollar Accenture invests in learning, the company receives that dollar back plus an additional \$3.53 in measurable value to its bottom line—in other words, a 353 percent return on learning. The ROI study made it clear that enterprise learning is a strategic initiative of the highest importance.

Phenomenal learning

Accenture has a long history of innovative and award-winning training programs. Although we were transforming our training organization to deliver higher business impacts in a more efficient way, we were also determined to at least maintain, and

even improve, the quality of the learning experiences themselves. "Whatever else we do," we said to our team, "the learning programs we create have to be phenomenal." And that word became the motto for much of the revitalized content and delivery aspects of the transformation.

As we refined the idea, we detailed four critical experiential dimensions of phenomenal learning: the learning experience itself; the networking and relationship-building experience; the enculturation experience, whereby learners understand the value of the company culture and their role within it; and the "guest" experience, meaning the quality, engagement and professionalism of the entire learning event.

Running learning like a business

No one at Accenture gave us an unlimited budget and then told us to go create great learning. Quite the contrary: given the challenging economic environment in the early years of this decade, we were given relatively austere spending limits ...and then were told to go out and create innovative and high-impact learning programs.

The way we did this was to infuse the capability development group with the operational rigor that characterizes the rest of the company. We put together a strong business team, and we committed to delivering learning programs on time and on budget.

We also made use of a number of other leading-edge tactics and techniques to maximize our efficiency and impact. We achieved a better mix of learning delivery types—classroom, e-learning, virtual "webinars" and so forth. This mix allowed us to make better choices about which form of delivery had the best impact for the most reasonable cost. We also made effective use of an outsourcing relationship, giving us access to exceptional and experienced talent while also creating a supplier/customer relationship that offloaded more of our risk—thus producing high-quality results.

Innovative use of learning technologies

When we began our transformational journey, the technology infrastructure for learning at Accenture—once considered state of the art—had aged and become less reliable. So a critical part of reinvigorating learning was the creation of a new global learning management system called "myLearning." This has enabled us to centralize learning planning and administration.

Innovative decision support functionality within the system also enables us to keep our training investments continuously aligned with the needs of the business.

More recently, we have also made great strides in integrating our learning programs with our knowledge sharing and management capabilities. In the end, employees really do not care whether we call something "learning" or "knowledge." All they want is the support they need, when they need it, to do their jobs. Integrating enterprise learning and knowledge management is an important trend today, and we are at the leading edge of that trend.

Our learning transformation story is ongoing, of course. It's a journey that always seeks out new paths to high performance. We are proud of how far we've come. And we are confident that we will always be improving our ability to deliver a "return on learning."

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