



Finding the True ROI in Learning

Bob Mosher

If we're going to be held accountable for ROI, let's be allowed to support ROI at its true point of impact.

This month's article has ended up being a second installment to my last column on the difference between mastery and competency. I received a fair amount of feedback from that piece, so apparently the debate between mastery and competency resonated with many of my colleagues.

In this article, I'd like to go a step further with that discussion and consider how mastery and competency may help us make a strong case for better understanding the age-old argument around learning's return on investment.

As long as I've been in training, we have been debating ROI. We have struggled long and hard to link measurable business results to learners who attend some form of formal instruction, whether it's in class or online. Why has this been so hard? Why do so many still find this exercise exhausting, expensive and often inconclusive on any meaningful level?

Perhaps the problem lies in the original goal. Maybe the direct correlation between a training event and improved business outcomes is fundamentally flawed. Is realistically measuring the leap between mastering content and being able to apply that content in an effective and productive way just too great?

Let's take a closer look at the learning journey to better understand where this might lead. Classroom training and other formal learning "events" are about gaining and transferring knowledge (which, by the way, is a wonderful and necessary thing). But this alone is short-sighted. Even though people can't become productive without first having a fundamental understanding of what they are being tasked with doing, we mustn't stop there. We must take the learning experience all the way to true business ROI.

As I mentioned in my last article, the journey to true ROI is actually divided into two parts:

- Mastery, or a learner's ability to demonstrate gained knowledge.
- Competency, or a learner's ability to effec-

tively apply what they've learned to their job or work environment.

Training has typically stopped at mastery and has not ventured as deeply as it needs to into supporting competency. But, this is where performance support delivers its real value! I would argue that training without performance support struggles to make the leap into the workflow. It also means that consequential ROI measurements are elusive.

If we only stop at mastery, all we can ever fairly measure is knowledge gain, certification, skill recall and compliance.

But, when we venture into competency with the full range of performance-support practices now available to us — meaning the tools, strategies and frameworks that complement the training experience — we can then begin to measure our impact on productivity gain, time to proficiency, lower support costs, completion of job-related tasks, increased user adoption and optimized business processes.

Now, before I start getting angry e-mails from my training colleagues, please be sure you're hearing my support for the entire journey. As I stated earlier, learning takes two critical steps: knowledge gain and knowledge application. Knowledge gain is learning's responsibility: Without it, a learner never gets to application, and hence, the learning department never gets to ROI.

My argument here is that organizations have to give learning departments time, space and funding to complete the journey before they blame them for not delivering on the total promise. If we're going to be held accountable for ROI, let's be allowed to support ROI at its true point of impact. Blaming the lack of ROI on two weeks in a classroom just isn't fair or appropriate. If that two-week experience is supported with tools and strategies back in the workplace, we have something to measure impact against. If, after that, we still have little to no ROI, we can effectively look back at all the components of the journey and make the adequate inferences and adjustments. ■

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