

Enhancing the value of training –

it's not just about the 'what' but the 'why' and the 'how'



KATE FLEMING
HuthwaiteFleming
kate-f@ridleyfleming.co.uk

In today's tough economic climate, every aspect of a professional services business can benefit from improved skills.

In highly competitive markets, in which products and services have become increasingly commoditised and with more demanding and knowledgeable buyers, the need for client development and negotiation skills is self-evident.

In such an environment, it is critical that every fee earner understands their role in client management. They need to know how to build and strengthen client relationships, recognise how to leverage maximum value from that relationship and now more than ever, be able to negotiate effectively when their fees and service levels come under pressure from clients – as they surely will in this current climate.

Training of course has its place in helping fee earners to develop what are now regarded as business critical skills. However, the value of training is not just what skills the fee earners are developing but how the training is implemented. If firms are going to up-skill their fee earners and ensure that the learning and behaviour change is sustained, training needs to be linked to broader business objectives, rather than treated as a series of one-off training events which simply meet the demands of individual departments.

The business will get greatest value and return on investment of money and fee earners' time if training is linked to other development activities such as coaching and integration activities and is delivered over a period of time rather than one-off events – skills development is a process not an event.

As well as the 'how', the 'why' is also important. Any successful training initiative must tackle real as opposed to perceived skills development needs, which is why challenging the 'why' is important.

Challenging the 'why'

It is not unusual for the training or marketing team to be approached with a request for specific training for a particular department. In the case of negotiation training for fee earners, it is likely to be fairly clear cut – all fee earners need to be able to negotiate either on behalf of their clients or around fees and many of them have difficulty in this area.

However, where there is a more generic demand for networking training, for example, it is far less certain that the solution will necessarily meet the true needs of the department making the request. It is essential therefore that such approaches are challenged, by adopting a questioning technique designed to uncover the real - as opposed to the stated - need.

Almost certainly the internal client will be better able to articulate the problem they face than the solution options available and so will need help in determining the most appropriate training to address the relevant skills shortfall.





Don't forget the 'how'

In any such discussion, the focus will typically centre on the content of the training required – the 'what' – with little or no consideration given to the way in which such skills improvement activity should be undertaken – the 'how'. Yet critically, it is the delivery of the training - at both preparation stage and on the course itself - that will determine how well the content is received and whether or not it has a lasting benefit.

Put simply, in our experience dealing with professional firms, without exception successful training is as much about having a strategy for effective implementation as it is about content.

Most firms can increase the value they get from training by putting in place more rigorous implementation strategies. Lack of effective implementation contributes to higher drop out rates, lack of any meaningful change as a result of the training, no sustainability of skills, cynicism among partners and fee earners as to the value of soft skills training and diversion of the soft skills budget to other areas.

So what steps are necessary to ensure that both individuals and the business gain the maximum value for the money and time invested?

Six tips for successful training implementations

1. Plan the training initiative with care

Training initiatives often fail because insufficient groundwork is put in before the training begins. Time spent analysing the business to discover what skills are needed to support the business objectives and identifying the potential obstacles to success will greatly improve the chances of producing a positive result.

Having a clear plan to remove obstacles and tackling these well before the training will ensure that the programme gets off to a flying start, rather than struggling against unexpected difficulties and opposition.

2. Get commitment from the start

In most firms, there are pockets of resistance to soft skills training which need to be overcome before any training begins. Whilst you may believe your proposed training initiative will be of value to the firm, partners and fee earners you are trying to persuade may not see that value.

If they think that the cost of your proposed training initiative – in time, money, effort or hassle - outweighs its perceived value, partners and fee earners will not buy into it. So do your research well and make sure you focus how the training addresses real needs and delivers real benefits for them and not just the organisation.

3. Get commitment from the top

Having the full backing of senior partners and key influencers in the firm can help to establish the expectation that your training initiative is a priority, which needs to become part of individuals' personal development programmes.

Support needs to be visible and ongoing. All too often, projects begin in a blaze of internal publicity and lots of support from the top, which proves to be short-lived as management allocation is diverted elsewhere. Senior management attention on a regular basis is one of the most effective ways of ensuring the training is seen as a priority.

Making it difficult for individuals to drop out will reinforce the priority placed on soft skills training. Insisting on the permission of a head of department and assigning the cost of cancellation to departments, for example, will have a material impact on attendance levels.

4. Target the training

If you can pinpoint the individuals who need the training, can use it and will use it, you will materially enhance the values of any training initiative. So start with the willing, by identifying those individuals who are receptive to the training and leave the people likely to be resistant until last as they may become less resistant as they see the benefits their colleagues gain from the training.

A common mistake is to focus initial training on poor performers, since they are the most visible. Yet all the evidence shows that the biggest improvement in results comes from moving average performers into the best. This group is likely to show fastest improvement for the effort put in. The impact of moving this group of people from average to good is likely to provide an excellent return on the investment.

And communicating such early success will help to reinforce the value of the training, energise the project and give it momentum.

5. Don't stop once you have started

Attending training is only the start. The real value for individuals and the firm is the application of skills to ensure a visible and sustainable change in behaviour.

There are a few simple things which need to happen after training to ensure that employees apply what they have learnt. Ensure every delegate completes a Personal Development Action Plan, which clearly identifies what they have learnt, what they plan to do and when they plan to do it, plus any further support they need.

Encourage delegates to work in groups to support each other after the training, to provide coaching and mentoring support to help them implement what they have learnt.

6. Measure and track results

Measure individuals' progress. The objective of most soft skills training is to develop new behaviours, which are observable and measurable, so implement activities which will enable you to do this. Questionnaires will identify how individuals have applied their new skills; similarly, business simulations and short refresher sessions will help you measure and reinforce the impact of training.

And remember to communicate success regularly, which will build momentum and commitment to your training.

Kate is a Director of HuthwaiteFleming, a company specialising in BD training and consultancy for the legal sector. For more information visit www.huthwaitefleming.com.