QUALITY MANAGEMENT BUILDS SOLID ETRAINING

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ABSTRACT

History has shown effective training techniques can produce significant business results especially in customer service, product development, and capability in obtaining new skill sets. This linkage of training to business strategy has given many businesses the needed competitive edge in today's global market. In today's technology age, information and communication processing is easier than before and many times more cost effective. It is only logical for businesses to incorporate distance training and etraining to reach their training objectives. The key to utilizing these methods is how to sustain the programs without diminishing the results of the training goals. Quality management initiatives provide a feasible path for incorporating distance training, whether via the Internet, audio conferencing, video conferencing, or postal delivering methods. This paper will explore the manifestations of quality management processes on sustaining distance training in a business environment.

Keywords: Quality man; global market; e training; sustaining distance training.

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The concept of quality management has been in the business sector for a long time, however, International Service Organization (ISO) officially recognized it in 1987 (Engineers International, n.d.). Since then, the standards have been routinely updated and improved and continue to reflect the culture of quality in business, workforce, and ultimately the final product. These published guidelines provide vision for creating styles, frameworks, and methodologies an organization is capable of reaching and more importantly sustaining. Stakeholders contend quality management provides the roadmap to obtaining a sharp, clear edge over any competitors.

Currently, many businesses use standard business models for strategic planning, organizational structuring, and performance measurements. Examples are Deming's Total Quality Management (TQM), Six Sigma, and European Foundation of Quality Management Excellence Model (EFQM, 2002), with each instituting a special framework centering on quality practices. Strategic planning, defining organizational structure, and implementing performance measures are cornerstones to the success of these models. These methods ensure businesses define their capabilities and meet their performance objectives. Quality methods are versatile because they can be tailored to fit any business whether it is manufacturing or customer service.

For the purpose of this paper, distance, or etraining, means a separation of trainer from trainee. Training is the action of teaching and training through instruction, observations, or processes focused on providing needed skills and knowledge to meet immediate business goals. In contrast, education is systematic, formal, study focused on gaining knowledge for the most part, but not with any particular or immediate business problem or performance improvement targeted.

Sustaining distance training in an organization can be a daunting task. The definition of sustaining in this context means the ability of a business to continually maintain, improve, and or modify its distance training program to meet the changes required to keep in step with the business objectives.

This paper will provide a benchmark distance training system, which incorporates best practice methods and creates a culture sensitive to opportunities using distance training to achieve a quality workforce for today's businesses. The vision for this system is a circular one composed of four interconnected links: capabilities, performance measures, change management, and support.

TRAINING BUILT AROUND INTERNAL FUNCTIONS

A capability describes the components needed to reach the what, where, when, why, and how a specific objective will be met. It differs from a goal because it congruently assesses the systems current or visionary strategic plan and identifies gaps and needs. It is a concept distinctly focused to meet the clearly stated objective. Strategic planning links several key components to its vision and develops how this will be sustained (Berge, 2001).

Implementing quality-managed practices easily identifies internal business functions. Business training managers are grabbing the latest off the shelf distance-training program available within its budget constraints. The difficulty with expanding technology is product flooding which is exactly what has occurred with distance training. Spanning the last ten years many inventive methods have been introduced with little emphasize around the unique competencies a business is comprised of or can obtain. Internet Time Group (2002) provided an extensive breakdown of current etraining products in an attempt to lead training managers towards profitable investment strategies in distance training while excluding the hype laden marketing ploys.

With respect to developing the proper distance training system, business managers must be equally involved as the training managers. A precise path of reaching the capability must be laid out and each process defined, analyzed, and stacked against the strategic plan (Bhalla, 2006). This type of analysis is most often referred to as a process benchmark. Six Sigma uses this design approach and has proven very successful in helping a business maximize its functions. It must be designed after gaps and needs have been analyzed against current and future business objectives. Only then, can a sound choice be acquired. Implementing anything without meeting this key step will be frivolous and costly. The advantages of assessing the competencies are the baseline to move towards the final objectives.

Ideally, workplace training will consists of a blended training approach; a on the job training methodology is utilized as well as distance training especially in required soft skills. The variations can be as little as a basic power point presentation delivered on the businesses intranet to something more sophisticated like a video television conference or simulations. More and more business is choosing the Internet to deliver its training programs. It is convenient, low cost solution to integrate business strategy with training results. Online training is an aspect of the businesses total training objectives. Online training takes the form of computer based soft skills with more and more businesses utilizing these delivery methods to improve effectiveness and costs.

The fundamental capability of the business is distinctly related to the vision. Each capability must be addressed separately and defined clearly. This can be accomplished by clearly stating the mission, goals, and results required to meet or exceed the established performance measures.

MEASURING EFFECTIVELY

The objective of any organizations training program is to train their employees to meet the needs of the optimum profit potential. This can entail a formidable data collection phase.
Meeting quality capabilities by measuring the right data sections is paramount to this success. Data results when a process is broken down step by step to produce something, which is measurable.

It is used for the primary purpose of comparing, analyzing, and assessment. According to Sheppard (1999), measuring performance for etraining can be challenging for most managers yet critical because training leads to business profit. He suggests a five level evaluation process for training encompassing sound measures of performance-based criteria.

Are there modifications to commonly practiced measuring techniques required with distance training? Bersin (2002) suggests measuring etraining requires variation in common training measurement standards largely because of the separation of trainer and trainee. For example, with distance training often times body language is removed along with dialogue thereby leading to challenges with measuring the effectiveness of the training. Of course, in some instances online training is synchronous and these barriers can be removed, it does not however eliminate the psychological impact distance produces. Trainees and trainers are fully aware of this impact and measuring it should be apart of any solid evaluation technique. It very well could identify a gap in what was ideal to what might need to be restructured because of its impact on the skill sets outcome.

This actually will drive most of the business capabilities and managers must be willing to critically evaluate this idea. A customer service business would require training in customer service techniques, handling complaints, or alternative dispute resolutions where a product based business might need product quality testing training or assembly training. One capability may demand immediate training, while the other is capable of lesser time constraints for achieving its objective.

Defining the capability to be measured ensures the door to improvement remains open; the function desired from the distance training is to train employees to meet a desired skill set. The competency needed to reach the objective is where the planning must be critical of several influential factors. A perfect example of this would be distinguishing the evaluations used for methods taught during a face-to-face program as compared to those evaluation techniques used for a distance training session.

Using Six Sigma strategy and TQM will prepare managers to implement effective distance training principles into the current programs. The theory behind TQM is to empower people with their own processes. This can be accomplished by reaching down to employees requiring the training and asking them what do they need to learn, what do they want hands on training to consist of, what can be taught at a distance. Management will have a good idea of skill and talent required to perform the job, but the employees doing the job know where the weak links are in the training program. Their feedback is critical to data collection and analysis because it identifies gaps and needs.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

According to Asgarkhani (2003), the success of etraining is contingent on the effectiveness of performance planning and measuring. The three fundamental aspects surrounding this approach are process classification, selection of proposed methods, and delivery. Distance training is comparable to etraining in respect to trainer and trainee being at two different locations.

This presents a function easily identified when processes are validated against measuring criteria and performance results. Bates (2001) describes a type of skill set required to function in a distance training program effectively. A learner capable of distance training must be self-motivated, disciplined, a good communicator, sensitive to others ideas, and goal oriented.

The business planning must evaluate whether this skill set is available in order to transfer the training to a distance-training program. Comparatively, if the skill set is not available change management must be introduced to create the desired skills. One quality way to introduce change management is to simply give everyone a stake in the business strategy.

Empowering employees accomplish this according to TQM; employees feel pride and are inclined to show it while absorbing skills necessary to improve it. Change management relies on effective tools strategically focused on gaining complete buy in from all levels-management down to employee.

Best practices contribute greatly to empowering employees and instituting a culture resulting in effective change management. Edmond (2004) addresses the importance of making distance training, such as e learning, into a benefit in several different ways. Focusing towards change management which includes complete user support for any move from a blended learning approach to a complete online training methodology. Each best practice identified should be incorporated in distance training programs where feasible. This action he contends will assist with producing sound business results.

TECHNOLOGY FACTS AND FICTION

The advancements in technology are providing the necessary work force skills at a far more efficient rate than ever before. One of the most recent training programs is Rapid etraining. The uniqueness of these courses is the remarkably short time from development, design, to implementation; they use simple power point and some use Macromedia flash for simulations. They have to train a specific skill very quickly. It has proven to be quite effective with businesses, which historically have a high turn over rate.

Deming's (2002) TQM principles pertain directly to the skill sets required to maintain distance training. As a manager, employees should be enabled to improve the system. This system includes the distance-training portion of the entire business system. What factors contribute to quality training might also be answered from the employees view, not simply management. Establishing performance measures can help managers identify where the training has been successful, what worked versus what didn't?

One of the fourteen principles Deming (2002) describes is "build quality" not quantity. This is particularly important with distance training because having the most technology or best does not represent the capability of the distance-training program. The idea of implementing a quality program of distance training can significantly out weigh the benefits of a haphazard program.

Deming suggests build quality in the first place as a strength associated with any business. The concept of quality would need to be assessed. Another key principle is removing barriers to grab the knowledge and training, which can be shared. In today's terminology, practice the formidable Knowledge Management

Another important principle is providing feedback at all levels. This can be obtained with distance training programs. Feedback is a complete process where all involved contribute to it. It is not solely the responsibility of the trainee but the trainer as well. Again, evaluating the feedback given, making adjustments, and trying to get closer to the capability are the ultimate in quality management.

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As quality advocate Seddon states, " The new ISO 9000 maintains a philosophy of planning and control, whereas we should be encouraging managers to learn about the 'what and why' of current performance as the basis for learning rather than control." The ISO 9000 standard can lead management away from the true function of quality when it stands alone.

By seamlessly integrating the ISO 9000 standards into the quality planning process, the feedback will be apparent at all levels. Many etraining programs fall by the way side after the initial drive of the training is complete. Persons trained are skilled and don't look back at the training received rather press with training new skills. It is a break point in the system when employees and management must take pride in ownership of the processes and ask for feedback. Every employee should have a stake in the business objectives.

Six Sigma involves similar core competencies as TQM but uses them to shape the business instead of shaping the business on those criteria. It is a strategic planning methodology involving six levels. The purpose of this model is to eliminate, reduce, and prevent wasteful business practices. The levels are: defining, measuring, analysis, improvement, controls, and standardize. It is essential to understand the process of control in this quality management model. Control does not mean explicit decisions by management but rather control of the impact it produces. The element is gather statistical data to justify, improve, and increase a capability. For example, with distance training, proper assessment of training skills gained will identify patterns or gaps in the trainings efficiency. This will lead to a continuous improvement process to align the training with the capability need to meet the strategic plan.

SUSTAINING DISTANCE TRAINING DEPENDS ON FLEXIBILITY

Each framework for quality is dependent on the success of its previous stages and the repeatability of each stage. For example, in the practice of Six Sigma, the defining stage is equally critical as the standardization stage. The concepts are intertwined creating a complete system. As systems, distance training whether standing alone or as a part of a business system is contingent on being able to attain linkage to each of the stages or levels. If it cannot be measured, for example the system will break down.

One of the most difficult areas to achieve success in etraining has been in the area of measurement. Several strategies exist depending on the type of course design implemented. Key players in business planning and strategy visionaries are finding innovative ways to measure the success of their etraining programs. A hallmark example discussed by Berge (2001) Nortel's time to market Web based training specific measurement and evaluation criteria were established.

Objectively, the development team chose key factors directly connected to the business goals and vision, used strategic planning principles as a guide to define what needed to be measured. The success of this program is supports the implementation of quality practices for sustaining distance training.

Deeply rooted in quality initiatives is the best practice technique where a business uses proven measurements of effectiveness (Bersin, 2002) and tailors the concept to their strategic planning process. Asgarkhani (2003) develops this idea further when he discusses the prevalence of knowledge management securing a closure to exclusive opportunities for improvement. The key once again is strategic planning. Other measurements used for etraining include learner responses such as overall satisfaction, or management measures like rate of return for the investment. An example would be implementing an etraining process to train more people faster and at what cost.

Applying quality management practices builds the training based on quality from the beginning of the etraining project, which exemplifies the best possible rate of return on the investment and enables business results that are measurable.

REMEMBER THAT SUSTAINING IS CIRCULAR

Strategic planning is often referred to as the main link for driving an effective business plan. Performance management is what results when the strategic plan and capabilities desired are systematically connected. It involves several key capabilities necessary to manage, train, and develop the complete business process and obtain its vision. Effective execution requires implementing quality principles and shaping them towards the vision while expressly keeping current and future capabilities at the forefront. The process is circular in nature and requires continuous improvement efforts. In an effort to obtain this capability, all functions must be linked to processes and evaluated for opportunities to implement best practices.

Coinciding with the strategic planning principles, quality insists tasks should be measurable. If it is not measurable, it cannot be managed or improved upon. The key to sustaining distance training is quality not only in the product or type of distance training approach, but in the capabilities used to meet the vision. It is circular, flexible, and adaptable to changing demands of the business processes.

CONCLUSION

It is important to consider the ISO standards did not provide certification of the resulting product or service as a "quality" one, but rather the vision of business systems. Many businesses today incorporate quality practices in their daily work force training programs. In addition, quality management principals have been key in the development of successful business strategies. A business operates to meet profit goals and must identify rates of investment to rates of return in order to continue to flourish. Although, many businesses have questioned ISO standards, they have utilized them effectively and have thus far survived in today's information age. Therefore, this paper contends sustaining distance training in an organization is dependent on the techniques applied during these quality management principles. The idea of implementing a quality program of distance training can significantly out weigh the benefits of a program designed around a control methodology.

Many training managers recognize the advantage of using capabilities to define their performance measures. With comprehensive analysis of measured data, gaps and needs can be evaluated and implemented using quality processes like best practices. Closely linked is creating a culture accepting of new and innovative processes for avenues never used before where trainer and trainee are separated by distance perhaps creating the future of simulation models?

A benchmark system capable of sustaining distance training in an ever-changing work force provides necessary advancements to workers, empowering them to own the course of their skills development, and meeting management's strategic planning objectives.

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