National Seminars
TRAINING

Putting Points on the Performance Scoreboard:
Why Context Is Critical to Increase Learning Application in Your Organization

A White Paper by National Seminars Training

The Problem: Organizations in the U.S. spent $156 billion on employee learning in 2012. However, a stubborn gap persists between what is learned and what is applied, resulting in billions of dollars of lost value from learning efforts.

The Opportunity: By decreasing the gap between what is learned and what is applied, organizations can significantly enhance the return on training and development investment and improve business results.

The Solutions: To make sure learning is applied, training efforts need to be contextualized and specified. This means: (1) thinking beyond the individual trainee to consider the other stakeholders in the skills improvement effort, and (2) giving consideration to what happens before and after the training event.

By aligning the elements of training and context, training professionals can deliver what their organizations are most after: improved results in the workplace.

Putting Points on the Performance Scoreboard: Why Context Is Critical to Increase Learning Application in Your Organization

Training directors and organizations have a big and very expensive problem. Over $156 billion was spent on training and development efforts in 2012[1] – yet a stubborn gap persists between what is learned and what is actually applied to generate improved business results.

| THEORY | THE "GAP" ⟷ | PRACTICE |

In 2000, Stanford professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton published their book *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action*, in which they highlight significant knowing-doing gaps in the organizations they studied. Fast-forward to the present day, and we can see this disconnect continues as reflected in various studies, including a 2011 evaluation of 21,000 managers. In that study, which measured their ability to apply management knowledge they already have, **the average score was a mere 32 percent!**[2]

Consider how enormously investment in training has increased in the decade-plus since Pfeffer and Sutton published their book.

	1999	2012
Total T&D spending by U.S. organizations	$60 billion	$156.2 billion
Business books published in U.S.	1,600	11,000
MBAs awarded	80,000	150,000

Across almost all measures, it sure looks like people are learning a lot more, yet the gap persists; organizations, departments, and individuals are failing to apply a large chunk of what they've already learned. While specific data as to what this gap costs businesses is difficult to come by, it is safe to assume that it is in the tens of billions of dollars.

By doing business differently, training directors can recapture much of that wasted money and deliver strong performance improvement to their organizations. The key is to build an application framework in which the context around the training activity and the training are aligned.

[1] *2012 State of the Industry*. ASTD, 2012.

[2] Timothy Baldwin, Jason R. Pierce, Richard C. Joines, and Shameem Farouk. "The Elusiveness of Applied Management Knowledge: A Critical Challenge for Management Educators." *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, December 2011.

What's Gone Wrong?

If we review the training industry literature, we should not be surprised to see that most of it is focused on the topic of training – how to enhance it, how to adapt it for younger generations, how to utilize technology, and so on. The only problem is that while we are in the business of training, our real objective needs to be to generate new behavior in the workplace to enhance business results – and as presented in our *Complete Learning Center*[3] model, training is only one part of that equation.

… while we are in the business of training, we're really in the business of generating new behavior in the workplace to enhance business results.

Although training is essential, organizations need to take off the blinders and look beyond the training session itself if they are serious about producing the improved business results they need to stay competitive. We can no longer pretend that training, even excellent training, will solve vital performance challenges on its own.

Context Is King

Think of training as a seed. No matter how high quality the seed is, it must be planted in the right soil and in the right season, and tended to the right way for it to bear fruit. Also, seeds don't grow overnight, but rather, take time to develop. The context of the planting is as important as the seed itself.

W. Edwards Deming once said, "Put a good person in a bad system and the bad system wins, no contest." Studies suggest that up to three-quarters of the factors that hinder individual results in the workplace are systemic matters rather than personal ones.[4] The stubborn persistence of the knowing-doing gap reflects a bad system of uncontextualized training and learning. It's learning in a vacuum characterized by:

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✔ Poor targeting of training efforts
✔ Limited to no discussion or planning about deliberate practice
✔ Limited to no involvement among stakeholders around the learning
✔ Organization cultures that discourage stepping out of the comfort zone to apply new behaviors

A primary question that we regularly see unasked by our training clients is ***"What is the specific workplace behavior change that we are trying to create with this training effort?"***[5] Without anchoring the training effort to specific proficiencies that an individual must develop to generate a particular desired business outcome, how is it possible to know the participant is taking the right training?

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[3] www.NationalSeminarsTraining.com/completelearningcenter

[4] Rick Contela. "Performance-Based Coaching." *Chief Learning Officer*. December 2012.

[5] Roy Pollock and Andy Jefferson. "Ensuring Learning Transfer." *Infoline, American Society for Training & Development*. August 2012.

Then there's the often overlooked issue of practice. In what other field of human endeavor is there the expectation that people go to a training session and emerge proficient? Athletes and musicians spend hundreds of hours in structured practice to reach peak performance. This type of practice is called "deliberate" practice – the "considerable, specific, and sustained efforts to do something you can't do well – or even at all."[6] Reflect on how basketball players have to systematically develop shooting and dribbling with their left hands – that's the type of practice we're talking about and *it doesn't happen by accident.*

"It only comes with experience … What we do you can never learn out of a book."
– Crane operator Hub Dillard from *Working* by Studs Terkel

In turn, sustained skill practice requires a framework of engaged stakeholders, coaching, opportunity, and a culture that encourages individuals to try new behaviors that will feel very awkward at first. Without that framework, individuals won't practice and will instead default back to what they're comfortable with, no matter how good their intentions. What we end up with is the equivalent of basketball teams that only shoot and dribble with their right hands.

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Understanding Context

What aligning context does is make sure all the elements that support changed behavior are in place. What are these elements? The elements of context can be looked at in roughly two categories or dimensions: (1) the level in the organization, and (2) the point in time relative to the training event. Each of these has various subcategories as outlined below.

Two Categories/Dimensions of Behavior-Change Context	
1. Level in organization/ stakeholder level	Organization/enterprise level (including training director), work group/manager level, individual learner level
2. Point in time	Before training event, during training event, after training event/"moment of apply"

The elements of these two categories or dimensions can be charted as follows, thereby creating nine separate areas of context that can be harmonized to support the desired changed behavior outcome.

[6] K. Anders Ericsson, Michael J. Prietula, and Edward T. Cokely. "The Making of an Expert." *Harvard Business Review*, July 2007.

Context Conversation Guide		Time Context		
		Before the Training Event	**During or Specific to the Training Event**	**After the Training Event/ "Moment of Apply"**
Organization/Stakeholder Context	Organization/Enterprise Level (Including Training Director)	**AREA**	**OF**	**OPPORTUNITY**
	Work Group/Manager Level			
	Individual Learner Level		**HISTORICAL FOCUS OF EFFORTS**	

As the above chart demonstrates, by focusing so exclusively on training the individual, we risk ignoring over eight-ninths of the context picture! No wonder application of learning continues to be so difficult to obtain.

Ask the Right Questions

When the elements of the behavior-change context are laid out and identified as in the chart above, all the stakeholders in the desired training outcome will be in a position to ask productive questions about how to align the various elements of context most favorably to generate that training result. Until you get the questions right, the answers may not matter.

The attached **Appendix A** has approximately 50 questions outlined on the matrix above that can help align the various elements of context. Take a moment now to flip back and take a quick look at this resource. This list is by no means all-inclusive, and, very likely, it will trigger many questions of your own. For the time being, notice how much the focus of inquiry is expanded to include the enterprise, the manager, and the time periods before and after the training.

Going through each of these questions in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, so to keep things concise, here is an example of how context might be aligned around a hypothetical training situation. As you read the following scenario about Heather – pay attention to how many aspects of the situation deal with the context outside the actual training event and involve other stakeholders in the organization.

> *After five years with your company, Heather has been promoted as a team leader in her work group. As part of your organization's leadership development efforts, Heather took an assessment that showed a gap when it comes to delegation, a key proficiency that top team leaders in your organization consistently possess. To help her develop this skill, Heather will go to a half-day delegation skills workshop.*

Before the workshop, you and Heather discuss the relevance of the training to her performance and her team's results, and how it will contribute to her future opportunities with the organization. You also discuss how crucial it will be for her to systematically practice what she learns. Heather is in agreement. Her day-to-day duties provide continuing opportunities to delegate work assignments. As a structured practice framework, she agrees to delegate five to seven separate work assignments each week for a period of six weeks and discuss the outcomes with a coach. You also point out that while practicing the new skill may be awkward at first, your organization encourages and recognizes efforts to apply new skills.

You also visit with Heather's supervisor, Janet, to discuss the upcoming learning and the practice plan. Janet indicates that William, another more experienced team lead in the department, can serve as a coaching resource for Heather. You point out that as Heather develops in her practice of delegation, there may be some "dropped balls," but in the long run, both Heather and the work group will benefit from Heather's new delegation skills. With that in mind, you suggest that Janet may want to chime in if certain less critical work assignments may be more suitable for practice than others.

The workshop Heather is enrolled in has a role-playing component that will give Heather some simulated experience in practicing these skills. Heather comes prepared to discuss a specific situation she is concerned about, which is delegating to some of her team members who are 20 years older than her. The training also identifies the triggers for delegating and provides a framework for categorizing work assignments most suitable for delegation. Finally, the training materials include job aids on delegation for Heather to reference in the workplace.

You make a note to follow up in a few weeks with Heather, Janet, and William to see how things are progressing on the application plan.

Now juxtapose the story of Heather with the story of Rachel, who attended the very same delegation workshop.

Rachel is required to take 15 hours of professional development training each year. In August, she decides to take a half-day off-site delegation workshop, because August is a slow month for her department. The class sounded interesting and her friend Beth is taking the same class. Rachel's manager, John, checks in with her before the training to make sure that her duties are covered and that he'll be able to reach her if any issues pop up. When Rachel gets back in the office, John asks her how the training went. Rachel says, "It was really interesting," and she "got a lot out of it." John says "Great!" and walks down the hall to get a fresh cup of coffee.

So who do you think is going to be more likely to generate a business result from her learning? Which employer is going to realize a higher ROI on learning efforts? Obviously, the context alignment around Heather is going to produce a superior outcome compared to Rachel, who is learning in a context vacuum.

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Is the process of examining and aligning context more work? Certainly, but then again, flushing money down the toilet doesn't take much effort – and that's what we're doing if we fail to contextualize training efforts properly. Building the practice of training contextualization can require a shift in how training managers and learning and development departments do business.[7] It is a process that takes time, but by starting to ask the right questions now, you can begin that transformation today.

The Bottom Line

Truly contextualizing learning efforts in an organization is not an overnight process, nor one that involves one individual or even one department. It is a long-term process comprising the entire enterprise. To answer all of the questions on the attached appendix will take time, but if you're serious about increasing your return on training investment, the process of asking these questions should start *right now*.

In the meantime, here are the key points to keep in mind:

✔ U.S. organizations are leaving billions of dollars on the table every year as they fail to convert their training investment into enhanced performance results.

✔ The main contributing factor is not the quality of the training but the fact that training is taking place in a contextual vacuum.

✔ To truly realize maximum return on training investments, organizations need to align the context around the training activity to create a framework for application.

✔ The key dimensions of context are organization/stakeholder level (enterprise, work group, individual) and time (before, during, and after the training).

✔ By engaging the other stakeholders and asking targeted questions relating to each of the elements of context, you can identify opportunities and resources to dramatically increase the amount of learning that is applied in your organization.

While this approach is simple, it's not without additional effort on behalf of all the stakeholders involved. It is that extra effort, however, that delivers the goods in terms of improved performance and business results.

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[7] Dana Gaines Robinson and James C. Robinson. *Handbook of Human Performance Technology*, p. 903: Wiley, San Francisco, 2006.

Appendix A: Context Question Chart

Context Conversation Guide		Time Context		
		Before the Training Event	During or Specific to the Training Event	After the Training Event/ "Moment of Apply"
Organization/Stakeholder Context	Organization/ Enterprise Level (Including Training Director)	What are the specific business results that we are trying to generate as an organization? What specific proficiencies does the individual need to develop in order generate the desired organizational results? What baselines can be set with regard to this individual and this skill set to measure application of learning and improved performance? What quantitative measures or benchmarks can be used? What qualitative measures can be used? Who in our organization does this well? What do they do that other individuals don't?	How can we compress the time between the training event and opportunity for application to the greatest extent possible? To what extent can the learning be embedded into the work environment? How can we avoid dumping too much information on the learner at once? How can we break up larger learning modules to allow opportunity for processing and practicing? How can we build spaced repetition and blended learning delivery so the learner is exposed to the material multiple times? How can we model the desired behavior in the training session and give the learner the opportunity to practice skills in the training session?	How can our organization encourage individuals to take measured risks in developing without fear of negative consequence? What training successes that have led to improved business results can we celebrate as an organization? How can we incorporate the learner's application intentions data into training evaluations? What job aids and quick reference materials can we arm employees with? How can we connect learners with common objectives to help support their development?
	Work Group/ Manager Level	What specific business results are we trying to generate as a department? What specific proficiencies does the individual need to develop in order generate the desired departmental results? Who else in the department has a similar need and can "buddy" with the employee? Who in the department has a strong skill set in this area and could therefore serve as a coach or mentor to the developing employee? How can we help the employee clarify the purpose of the training and the expectation that he or she practice and apply the learned skills and knowledge? What format should this conversation take? Written learning contract? Verbal agreement?	How can I help the employee establish a framework for practice and continued development of skills learned in the training session? What additional resources might the employee need to be able to confidently apply the learned skills? Additional role playing? Shadowing? Mentoring or coaching? Additional support and research materials? How can I help the employee identify the prompts and triggers for applying the new skills or knowledge? What additional practice opportunities can I create to help the employee solidify the new skills? What work situations should the employee keep in mind while at the training?	Have the employee and I discussed a skills application plan with specific action items? How is the employee tracking vis-a-vis the application plan? How can I help the employee "go outside his or her comfort zone" in terms of applying the new learned skills? How can I create a safe environment in our department for the employee to try out new behaviors? What opportunities might there be for the employee to teach others in our department about the training topic in order to reinforce retention? How will we measure progress? What might some key target milestones be? How can we celebrate and recognize the employee's improvement in the specific skill area?
	Individual Learner Level	What knowledge or skills do I already possess related to this subject? Where do I measure in terms of this skill right now? What skills do I anticipate I will acquire in the training event? How will improved skills and knowledge in this area impact my contribution to the department's objectives? The company's objectives? My success in my current position? My opportunities for advancement? My satisfaction in my career? What specific opportunities will I have to practice the skills and knowledge learned in the training session?	What particular work situations relating to the training subject can I discuss with the facilitator and other participants? If it's an online or self-directed learning format, how can I best reduce distractions and eliminate multitasking so I can focus my undivided attention on the learning module? How does what I've learned relate to what I previously knew about the subject? What items surprised me? What are the prompts, cues, and triggers to practice these skills or apply this knowledge?	What concerns do I have about practicing this new skill set in the workplace? How might I address them? What challenges might arise that hinder me from practicing these new skills and competencies? How might I respond to these challenges? What specific improved performance results or demonstrated proficiency will I be expected to generate as a result of training? How will I record my experiences, victories, struggles, and continuing insights that occur as I apply this skill set?

Appendix B: The Complete Learning Center Model

While an effective training program will be anchored with a dynamic IDP system, it can't end there. The training director needs to take a big-picture view, recognize the other tools in the toolbox, and analyze how to best apply each tool for optimal training program results. That's where the *Complete Learning Center* model comes in.

Whether it's declining revenues, increasing complexity, or changes in work force demographics, organizations face unprecedented challenges in work force development. Powerful new technology promises solutions, but how do you pick the right approach, and can you even afford it? On top of it all, attention from the executive suite is higher than ever.

It's easy to fall into "flavor of the month" thinking, either in terms of a specific challenge or a solution. But in doing so, you lose sight of the big picture and risk committing to a strategy that may be ineffective, narrowly focused, or inflexible, thereby costing your organization time, money, and the frustration of unmet expectations.

This also leaves you vulnerable. By focusing in a reactive manner on putting out the most pressing fire, you can't respond to the challenge that may be coming in from the side, nor plan how to deal with ones that are coming in the future.

Consider this quote from CLO Jeffrey Vargas: "In this business, you have to be both focused and flexible. There are no absolutes in the learning world; at any time, funding profiles can change or mission priorities may be enhanced, so your success is based, in part, on your ability to adapt to change."[8]

This necessity of adapting to change is what drives the need for a new model for keeping your training program in proper balance so that you anticipate changes, respond to them, and deliver the needed training results for your organization. The *Complete Learning Center* model was developed to help you find and maintain that critical balance in your training strategy.

The model incorporates the best practices of training program managers as observed by organizational research, industry journals, proprietary surveys, and our nearly 30 years of experience in working with clients across all industries.

By employing a new model for training and development, the *Complete Learning Center*, you can position your organization to generate opportunity out of the current challenges you face, and be well-positioned to respond to future shifts in demographics, technology, and municipal initiatives. Furthermore, the *Complete Learning Center* model can help you identify multiple areas for improvement and enhancement in your training program, allowing you to harvest low-hanging fruit while planting seeds for tomorrow.

The Complete Learning Center Model

For more information on the Complete Learning Center Model – please visit NationalSeminarsTraining.com/completelearningcenter.

[8] *T+D,* February 2012.

About Us

For almost 30 years, National Seminars Training has been one of the nation's leading providers of employee training and development solutions to companies and organizations across North America. Our focus is on providing interactive, skill-building learning solutions for businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies to close knowledge gaps and address specific performance challenges – for performance improvement that lasts.

The experience and versatility of our staff enables us to help clients in a variety of industry sectors, including:

- Corporate administration
- Manufacturing
- Federal, state, and local government
- Insurance
- Construction

- Financial services and banking
- Higher education
- Health care
- Retail
- Not-for-profit

Our mission is to provide the results-producing training you need, when and where you need it, that is cost-effective to you and your organization. In the past year alone, we've provided more than 6,000 seminars … 300 webinars … more than 2,500 on-site training days … and more than 75,000 All-Access Training Passes.

Our offering of Classroom Training, Online Learning, LMS Functionality, and Social Media solutions allows us to provide *Complete Learning Center* solutions for our partners, including the following:
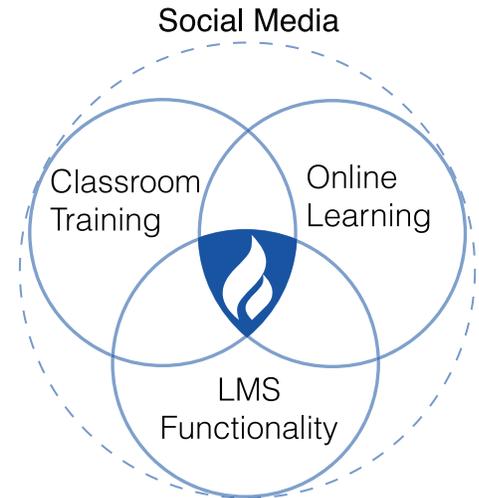
For more information on the Complete Learning Center Model – please visit NationalSeminarsTraining.com/completelearningcenter.

To speak to one our training consultants about how you can build a *Complete Learning Center* for your organization, please call **1-800-344-4613**, or visit **www.NationalSeminarsTraining.com**.