

# Evaluation Strategy for Online Courses

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## INTRODUCTION

Any program that includes online learning, or indeed any type of training, benefits from a strong evaluation strategy. Collecting evaluation metrics enables an organization to measure against and report on Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation (participant reaction, learning gain, transfer of knowledge back to the job, and achievement of business results) (Kirkpatrick, 1994), as well as determine the return on investment (ROI) for the program. Any organization should be able to justify the existence of its training program, not only to ensure that the quality of the training is acceptable and maintained, but also to assure stakeholders that the money spent on such a program is defensible. This can mean the difference between having funds for the program increased or losing those needed resources.

The evaluation strategy should include not only the system for capturing evaluation data, but also a plan for analyzing the data and communicating the results. The strategy should take into consideration organizational needs, including: what courses should be evaluated, how participants will access and complete the evaluations, where and how the data will be stored, the frequency and level of detail of evaluation reports, who should access the reports, and how they should access them. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy; the needs of a small organization with few courses and stakeholders will likely be different from a very large organization with hundreds of courses and many stakeholders. There may also be differences depending on whether the training program primarily uses online courses or a blend of

classroom and online experiences. And the organization's technology capabilities as well as its technology needs should be taken into consideration. It is important to have the needs of the organization and the evaluation strategy well planned before embarking on a comprehensive evaluation program. If the evaluation strategy is poorly designed, not only could the result be incomplete, misunderstood, and inadequately reported evaluation data, but it could also mean the loss of funding for the training program. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the full benefits and results of a poorly evaluated training program. A program with an evaluation strategy that is lacking cannot be adequately justified.

The evaluation strategy described in this article is based on the experiences of a small evaluation team for the central learning organization of Accenture, a leading global management consulting and technology services organization. The ideas and suggestions outlined here are described in more detail in Waddington, Aaron, and Sheldrick (2004).

## DEVELOPING, DISTRIBUTING, AND COLLECTING EVALUATIONS

Evaluating courses can be a time-consuming task. Because of the time involved in designing, developing, distributing, and analyzing the results of a course evaluation, it may not be possible to manually evaluate every course that a company offers its employees. Technology can benefit both the development of online learning and the evaluation strategy supporting the training program.

## Creating a Learning Management System

Before June 2001, course evaluations at Accenture were done on a case-by-case basis. The evaluation design process often included considerable iterative input from the course sponsor and others in an effort to provide quality client service, and many hours were spent in discussions regarding the wording of particular items or number of questions. The surveys were distributed manually via e-mail, and the evaluation reports were created and updated manually as well. This process enabled the organization to evaluate only a handful of the courses offered. In order to justify the money spent on the training program and assess the ROI for the entire training program, as well as provide comprehensive evaluation services, it became necessary to evaluate all of the courses offered in the program. This could not be handled manually by a small group of people.

At the same time, Accenture was developing a Learning Management System (LMS) to better enable its employees to take the training they needed. The sheer number of employees had made the process of delivering required and recommended training complicated, and employees were demanding better access to their learning assets. The LMS was designed to meet the needs of both the employees and the training stakeholders. The system not only provided improved access to training, but also provided evaluation services for all of the learning assets provided by Accenture and gave the evaluators the chance to provide more valuable services to the company at large.

In June 2001, Accenture rolled out myLearning, a personalized, Web-based portal that gave its employees immediate access to information related to company-sponsored learning assets. The myLearning portal includes:

- A Course Catalog and LMS, which provide a list of required and recommended courses based on an employee's role within the company and gives employees the ability to register for courses online;
- A Decision Support Center, which provides a comprehensive and immediate snapshot of learning metrics, including expenditures per

area and course evaluation ratings; and

- A Course Evaluation System, which provides "5-star" ratings and detailed course reviews to guide employees in their learning decisions.

The 5-star ratings and course reviews provided by the Evaluation System are based on participant responses to end-of-course surveys. These surveys are automatically distributed by the LMS upon course completion; a SQL server warehouses the data, feeds 5-star ratings and course reviews back into the LMS for publication to end users, and transfers learning metrics data to the Decision Support Center reports.

Four distinct surveys were created based on the following types of assets:

- Instructor-Led Training (e.g., classroom training);
- Virtual Training (e.g., Web-based seminars);
- Online Courses (e.g., CBT); and
- Books/Publications.

In order to create brief but psychometrically reliable surveys, it is necessary to base survey question selection on thorough statistical analyses. These four surveys were the result of analyses of evaluation data collected over many years. Sponsorship and support from key leaders is also essential in articulating the value that will be realized from adopting these changes.

myLearning's Decision Support Center (DSC) provides evaluation reports automatically. The DSC integrates information from a variety of sources – including course evaluations, accounting, and global personnel tracking – to make immediately available the information that learning stakeholders need to make better education investment decisions. The reports are pre-formatted as Excel pivot tables that can be customized by user groups to examine their learning programs from a variety of perspectives and make appropriate modifications. Executives can quickly create reports that provide an organizational summary of educational spending and effectiveness, learning sponsors can easily manage the day-to-day learning activities of their employees, and course owners can determine which courses provide the greatest benefit, based on course selections, evaluations, and expenditures.

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