

PRODUCTIVITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

The harsh reality of corporate life is that to remain competitive we must continuously seek to produce more with less, or risk oblivion.

This often means longer hours, bigger workloads, less expenditure, and more of the same next year. For decades we have heard the mantra “work smarter not harder”, but rarely is this backed up with guidance on “how to work smarter”, and thus staff burn out, while management feel vindicated that they weren’t cracking the whip hard enough

The key to working smarter lies not with technical expertise or methodologies, but with stakeholder engagement. As with any other skill, becoming accomplished starts with good training. Because the returns on soft skills training are not easy to measure, they are often under-valued leading to under-investment and lost opportunity.

MEASURING COSTS

Using the JHW three days Engagement Skills Workshop as an example, there are two main areas of cost. The fee equates to approximately 1.5 - 2.5% of the participant’s annual salary (plus any on costs). The three days lost from “business as usual” to attend the workshop adds a further 1.4% of the working year. Thus if the productivity increases by more than 4% as result of the training, there is a positive return on investment (ROI) in one year. If productivity increases 8%, then the training has paid for itself in 6 months, and thereafter the productivity increase is all free. Should the productivity only improve 2% of the ROI would take two years to justify the cost.

“As CEO of a small/medium software company we needed to find a solution to the ever increasing failures of new software releases. Initially we identified the failures as technical and process issues, but as the discussion progressed it transpired that poor communication with stakeholders was causing us to implement technically excellent solutions to the poorly understood problems. The lack of stakeholder engagement was masquerading as an expertise / methodology issue.

We had been investing in the wrong intervention to solve the problem. Once we understood that the solution was easy”

“I made a commitment to proactively build stakeholder engagement following my participation in a workshop. I made a point of going for coffee with other members of the team. I moved out of the Risk Management Office and took a spare desk on the project floor. I made time available to engage. It might just be coincidence, but over the last few weeks I have been invited to a number of project reviews and strategy discussions by the project team. This is huge! I’m from Project Risk. No one ever invites us to project reviews.

I am now able to proactively help get the solution right, rather than reactively telling them what they need to re-work”

“By observing the preferred styles of the various stakeholders, and conducting meetings to satisfy their preferences I was able to speed up the process of gaining consensus and sign off. This one instance probably saved three work days because one meeting went really and alleviated the need for rework. If I hadn't done that, the team could have missed the project deadline, which would have meant waiting another six months for the next implementation opportunity.”

NB: If the organisation was hoping to save \$1million per year by implementing the project, a 6-month delay would have cost half a million dollars

“After this course I recognised that I had to modify my approach to people, depending on their preferred style. I did this recently and was successful in getting a work placement approved in less time with less effort. Understanding the stakeholder was of a gregarious nature, I took the effort to engage and build rapport, rather than my usual more direct business approach. I was astounded at how easily the stakeholder was persuaded to retain the work placement compared with the difficulties I experienced in the past. That work placement has turned out to be a star performer and has been taken on full-time. We could have lost that person to the competition if my meeting had not gone so well. Our industry spends millions each year to attract the best and we got this one for free”

MEASURING RETURNS

Measuring returns is where many people have difficulty and give up. Returns come from the impact of behavioral change on productivity. If we don't look for them, they are easy to miss. We might put good results down to good luck or inherent competence.

JHW conducts post workshop discussions with participants to understand how their behavior has changed and how that impacts productivity. We have found that major areas for productivity improvement stem from:

- More effective use of time: Addressing the important rather than just the urgent (often low value) tasks. Focus on outcomes rather than being busy with tasks.
- Better outcomes from meetings: Getting the results, commitments and agreements we need more often, more timely and with less effort.
- Greater stakeholder/client engagement leading to greater cooperation, higher customer satisfaction, repeat business and a heightened perception of value in the eyes of the stakeholder.
- More thorough understanding of stakeholder requirements leading to better and more effective solutions and less rework.
- Reading stakeholders' and colleagues' temperaments thus reducing workplace conflict and irritation and achieving better outcomes more efficiently.

In addition, good training provides a morale boost for staff. It demonstrates corporate commitment to staff development and provides a framework of commonality to help relate better. After attending the Engagement Skills Workshop staff return to work feeling energised and enthusiastic and this is infectious. Motivated staff leads

WHAT ELSE ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

Economic reality says we need to keep producing more with less. Simply expecting staff to work harder for less has a limited life. Improving technical expertise will only help if our staff lack technical competence. Restructuring is a costly way of moving the deck chairs around. It might buy you some breathing space but rarely delivers. Off-shoring and outsourcing makes the function more remote from its target customer and thus reduces the value of the service albeit reducing the cost.

Improving the communication and engagement skills of staff can make a quantum difference to effectiveness (value as perceived by the stakeholder/client), resulting in less pressure to reduce cost. The productivity gains will nonetheless provide a welcome impact on costs.

Most of the case studies cited demonstrate a massive ROI based on just one intervention. Most participants agree that they are each using many of these interventions every day. Assuming that we take steps to refresh every now and then, we will continue to get these rewards year after year.

If you make the effort to understand the true ROI of skills training you can invest more wisely. You might:

- See training as a strategic investment that you do not switch off every time the world economy takes a slight wobble
- Invest smartly by providing increased staff training during less hectic periods.
- Prioritise training as an important (non-urgent) function that makes us more competitive and so takes priority over tactical crisis, short term chargeability or sudden project issues.

Only so much can be achieved by simply squeezing the lemon ever harder.

The key to working smarter not harder lies with better engagement with key stakeholders. When you track the true returns of working smarter it becomes very easy to justify ongoing staff training.

“Following my participation in the workshop, I realised that I was spending too much time in reactive mode, dealing with urgent but low value tasks. I have now become more strategic and selective on what I spend time on. As result, I now spend around 20% more time working on my KPIs. I now finish work on time most nights, which has given me the time to take up cycling again. I have lost 5 kilos since the workshop!”

“As Project Manager, I was the meat in the sandwich, The personality clashes between the vendor lead and the business sponsor was killing any chance of me pulling this project off. The Engagement Skills Workshop was just in time. I immediately recognised the personality styles of my two protagonists. Whilst they are never going to be best of buddies, I am now able to coach each one on how to succeed with the other and we are now back on track.”