

Continuous Skills Improvement

Developing relevant skills in a changing business environment



Questionmark Viewpoint

January 2021

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
The problems with skills improvement programs.....	5
Skills data is central to the continuous improvement cycle	6
Equipping leaders to drive improvement.....	8
Smart data and better decisions	9
Conclusion	10
About Questionmark	11

Introduction

“An organization's ability to learn and translate that learning into action rapidly, is the ultimate competitive advantage.”

Jack Welch, former General Electric CEO

The last year put the future of workplace training in jeopardy. It also made the case for it.

The challenges of Covid-19 and the resulting remote working initially made training harder to deliver. But the employers that invested in their people's skills are also those that have shown the greatest resilience to economic uncertainty.¹

Continuous business success very often depends on the continuous improvement in the individuals that work there. Successful training has a direct impact on business performance.

“Static” training is failing to respond to business needs

Too often though, workplace training fails to reach its potential. Of the \$130 billion spent on corporate training each year, research finds just 25% to be effective.² Programs are too generic. They often fail to equip people with what they need. They struggle to respond in real time to the shifting demand for new skills.

Too many skills development programs fail because they start with a quest for perfection, believing it possible. In reality, whenever a training program sets out to reach a “perfect” end point, it will fail. By the time the goal has been reached, the goalposts will have shifted. What started as a perfect idea will be disconnected from tangible business realities. Yesterday's perfection can become tomorrow's irrelevance.

Continuous improvement delivers real-time development

This paper sets out a different approach: continuous improvement. This recognizes that perfection does not exist. Instead, it puts the focus on developing a cycle of ongoing

¹ <https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/50504-businesses-that-have-invested-in-training-during-lockdown-expect-to-recover-more-quickly>

² <https://trainlikeachampion.blog/infographic-why-corporate-training-is-a-colossal-waste-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

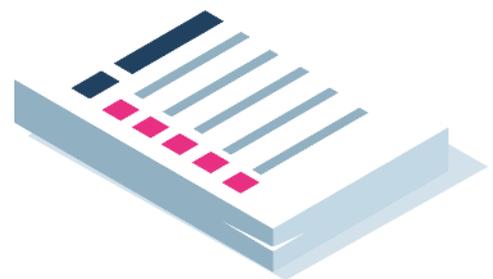
improvement. This means employers can respond to changing needs and new requirements far more quickly than if they rely on static programs.

Continuous improvement programs are based on the realities of the skills employers require. They are driven by data about the employee skills: real information on the current strengths and weaknesses among the workforce.

The world of 2021 remains an uncertain place to do business. By integrating training into a cycle of continuous improvement, employers can ensure they stay nimble and can succeed in an ever-changing business environment. They enable themselves to equip their workforces with the skills they need to thrive in today's world.

Questionmark Viewpoint

Questionmark Viewpoint is a series of white papers and reports that we produce to explore the challenges that our customers are facing, and which we help them address. These papers are based on what we are hearing from customers, and on research from other experts.



The problems with skills improvement programs

Too often skills development programs are failing to deliver. Only 14% of CEOs feel they have sufficient talent and leadership skills coming up through the ranks.³

Three common problems diminish the success of skills programs.

1. **Employers are not training the right skills** – The World Economic Forum found that less than 30% of employers had the digital skills they needed among their workforce.⁴ According to the Open University, almost half (47%) of UK employers are less agile than they desire due to a staff skills shortage.⁵ Employers are either failing to identify the skills they need or to train them effectively.
2. **Employers fail to future proof skills** – labor market analysts, Gartner TalentNeuron predicts that 30% of the skills workers needed three years ago are nearing irrelevance. The World Economic Forum places the figure at 42%.⁶ Skills programs are simply not keeping pace with shifting requirements.
3. **Training is too generic** – too often training follows a one-size-fits-all approach. It is only partially relevant to an employee's job role.⁷ Analysis by LinkedIn shows that \$97.5 billion is wasted every year on ineffective training.⁸

Each of these problems arises from a failure to fully connect training to the changing realities of business and external circumstances. With better data about what skills are required and the current state of play among the workforce, employers can respond to evolving needs in real time. They can focus on shaping a cycle of continuous improvement.

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2019/12/02/5-reasons-leadership-development-programs-fail/?sh=27ee6f7a3ca3>

⁴ <https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/SkillsGapFinal.pdf>

⁵ https://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/publications/skills_shortage_bulletin_2_final.pdf

⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/reskilling-revolution-jobs-future-skills/>

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170503-why-so-many-companies-get-training-wrong>

⁸ <https://trainlikeachampion.blog/infographic-why-corporate-training-is-a-colossal-waste-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

Skills data is central to the continuous improvement cycle

Employers that deliver effective skills development programs embrace the continual improvement approach. They recognize that perfection will never be achieved: by the time you get close to the goal, the goalposts will have moved.

Instead, they identify which skills they need to sharpen in real time. They achieve improvement and quality by focusing training on continually eliminating areas of weakness. They focus on achieving real improvement now. Not on reaching misguided concepts of perfection over time.

To do this, employers require real-time data and information on workers' skills. They can measure skills, progress and training efficacy through regular online staff assessments.

The continuous improvement cycle

The continuous improvement cycle recognizes that goalposts are constantly shifting. Focusing solely on long-term improvement goals can render training programs static and reduce their relevance.

Instead, the approach of continual improvement focuses on a regular review of required skills, identifying areas of weakness and driving improvement by eliminating that weakness.

Staff skills tests and assessments measure the initial quality and subsequent improvement. Integrating staff assessments enables employers to deliver the following continuous improvement cycle:

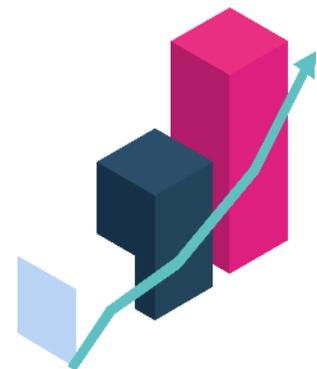
1. ***Identify priority skills:*** an employer must regularly review what the priority skills are needed for each business function. These will evolve and when the business landscape is moving quickly, could shift radically.
2. ***Isolate the biggest areas of weakness:*** through staff skills tests, managers must measure the prevalence of these skills and identify where gaps or weaknesses exist. Which team members are struggling the most? Is there a particular aspect of the skill which team members are unable to grasp?

3. **Select or create the appropriate training:** which programs will strengthen the necessary skills? Which team members need to participate? What tailored training is required for individuals?
4. **Determine whether the training was effective:** once done, did team members understand the training while it was taking place? Did they retain the knowledge after the program finished?
5. **Identify high potential and areas of strength:** although correcting weakness is the primary objective, tests will generate information that could indicate high performance. This information should be used to make better decisions on promotions, career development, and high-potential training.
6. **Regularly repeat this process:** employers can ensure improvement programs stay focused.

The continuous development cycle can only ever be as good as the data that underpins it.

Employers need to make quick decisions to respond to real-time needs. Collecting, compiling, and analyzing the data must not become a time-consuming and laborious process. If it does, it risks jeopardizing an employer's ability to move quickly and continually drive improvement.

The cycle depends on data that can be quickly understood.



Equipping leaders to drive improvement

The smart-data revolution

Employers have greater access to “smart data” than ever before. This is data that helps people make decisions straight away. It doesn’t require any further processing.

Staff assessments, when conducted through an enterprise-grade platform, provide smart data that can help employers make better decisions about the people they manage. This will help their people do better, improving their engagement in the business, and so improve the overall business performance.

Being smart with smart data

Smart data helps employers drive efficiency, improve customer experiences, and make better practical and strategic decisions.

But there is a risk. The emphasis on smart data in the continuous improvement cycle can create the impression that human input is secondary. It isn’t.

Smart data can only ever be as effective as the people using it. To ensure leaders make the right decisions from the data, employers must ensure:

- ***High data literacy among managers*** – having access to greater data streams is only helpful if decision makers know how to understand the information in front of them. Research by Accenture and Qlik found that just 21% of global workers were confident in their data literacy skills.⁹
- ***Leaders think critically*** – as external circumstances continue to change, decision makers must interrogate data and challenge assumptions. High levels of critical thinking and problem solving are required to do this effectively.
- ***Hirers recruit data literate employees*** – gone are the days when the ability to read, understand, and apply data were confined to a few specific job roles. Hirers must recruit new team members with strong data skills or the aptitude to develop them.

⁹ <https://www.dataiq.co.uk/articles/articles/the-importance-of-data-literacy-in-the-workplace>

Smart data and better decisions

Regularly testing the skills of workers helps employers measure the progress of their skills development initiatives. Understanding the present is the cornerstone of continuous improvement.

Working with Questionmark, our customers have been able to improve their overall business performance by getting a better understanding of how to improve individual and team performance:

- **Identify areas of strength and weakness** – the results of staff assessments provide an empirical read on where problems are occurring. They can pinpoint the specific “pain-points” across teams and business functions. They make it easy to see patterns and trends.
- **Create and tailor relevant training programs** – generic training is the death knell of a workplace development program. By pinpointing the development needs of each individual, assessments allow employers to tailor individual and relevant training plans. Creating these plans is now realistic thanks to a wealth of online training resources.
- **Use ready-made assessment content to test crucial skills** – employers can use our ready-made assessment content to test core business skills such as digital marketing, sales qualification, and customer care.
- **Measure levels of critical thinking among leaders** – Questionmark Thinking Skills by Cambridge Assessments helps employers test the critical thinking and problem-solving abilities of team members and potential recruits.
- **Identify high potential team members** – assessments reveal which team members develop skills quickly. Tailored tests can indicate high potential and help employers make better decisions on promotions and leadership development programs.
- **Improve the quality of hire** – by testing potential recruits before deciding to hire them, employers can make better decisions about who should join the team. When employers focus on the priority skills for the business, they can ensure that these are prevalent among those they recruit.

Conclusion

Employers cannot always predict what challenges the future will bring. But they can be confident that the skills workers relied on previously are unlikely to suffice in a changing world. That means continued business success will depend on continuous improvement for individuals.

The continuous improvement cycle recognizes that goalposts are constantly shifting. Focusing solely on long-term improvement goals can render training programs static and reduce their relevance.

Instead, the approach of continual improvement focuses on a regular review of required skills, identifying areas of weakness, and driving improvement by eliminating that weakness.

Delivering workplace training as part of a continuous improvement cycle can ensure that training is precise, relevant, and timely. It depends on smart data generated by ongoing staff skills assessments. Those managing the process must make good decisions based on the data and information. They must possess the skills to do so.

We have worked with employers around the world helping them develop dynamic and data-informed training. Please get in touch with us to discuss how we can help.





About Questionmark

We help organizations and their people unlock their potential to deliver better performance.

Questionmark provides a secure enterprise-grade assessment platform and professional services to leading organizations around the world, delivered with care and unequalled expertise. Its full-service online assessment tool and professional services help customers to improve their performance and meet their compliance requirements. Questionmark enables organizations to unlock their potential by delivering assessments which are valid, reliable and fair, which can be defended.

Questionmark offers secure powerful integration with learning management systems (LMS), learning record stores (LRS) and proctoring services making it easy to bring everything together in one place. Questionmark's cloud-based assessment management platform offers rapid deployment, scalability for high-volume test delivery, 24/7 support, and the peace-of-mind of secure, audited U.S., Australian and European-based data centers.

Working with Questionmark

To further explore how Questionmark could work for your organization, or to book a free consultation and demo, please see: <https://www.questionmark.com/request-demo/>

Questionmark

United States

35 Nutmeg Drive
Trumbull, CT 06611
Tel: (800) 863-3950
Fax: (800) 339-3944
info@questionmark.com

Questionmark

United Kingdom

Moor Place, 1 Fore Street
London, EC2Y 9DT
Tel: +44 (0)20 7263 7575
Fax: +44 (0)20 7263 7555
info@questionmark.co.uk

Questionmark GmbH

Germany

Hopfenstr. 8,
80335 Munchen
Tel: + 49 (0) 89 220 61272
info@questionmark.de

Questionmark

Australia

Tel: +61 2 83173387
info@questionmark.com

Legal note

This document is copyright © Questionmark Corporation (Questionmark) 2021.

Although Questionmark has used all reasonable care in writing this document, Questionmark makes no representations about the suitability of the information contained in this and related documents for any purpose. The document may include technical inaccuracies or typographical errors, and changes may be periodically made to the document or to the software referenced. This document is provided "as is" without warranty of any kind. See your Perception support contract for further information.

Company and product names are trademarks of their respective owners. Mention of these companies in this document does not imply any warranty by these companies or approval by them of this guide or its recommendations.

