



Chartered Institute  
of Personnel and  
Development

# Reflections

## New trends in training and development



Experts' views on the 2004 training and development  
survey findings

# Contents

|   |         |
|---|---------|
| Foreword  | Page 3  |
| Training: the economic context<br>John Philpott                         | Page 5  |
| Evaluating the power and impact of training<br>Iain Thomson             | Page 11 |
| Coaching – dispelling the myths<br>Eric Parsloe                         | Page 17 |
| The impact of government skills initiatives on employers<br>Alison Wolf | Page 23 |
| Helping people learn<br>Martyn Sloman                                   | Page 29 |
| References  | Page 33 |

The Reflections series aims to provide members with more context and understanding of issues raised by the CIPD annual surveys. We intend these publications to stimulate thinking about what current trends mean for practitioners and their organisations' activities.





# | FOREWORD

The CIPD identifies and explores current and emerging issues and trends facing the training profession through its annual training and development survey. To provide CIPD members with more context and background to the survey findings, we invited five leading commentators to reflect on different aspects of this year's survey findings, and to draw out important themes and issues. We also asked them to identify what they see as the key implications arising from the survey findings for organisations and the training practitioners working within them.

**John Philpott**, Chief Economist at the CIPD, discusses how the economic outlook has impacted on training spend and priorities for public and private sector organisations in the last year, while also offering a forecast for the economic climate in 2004.

Trainers continually lament the difficulties of evaluating the impact of training activities.

**Iain Thomson** considers the survey results on the perceived benefits of training, and challenges training practitioners to extend their influence with managers and boards of directors in order to gain greater impact from their training activities.

Coaching has experienced a rapid rise in popularity in recent years, but is it just a fad? **Eric Parsloe** looks at whether the survey results can help us answer this question, as well as dispelling some popular myths about coaching in the UK corporate world.

The CIPD's annual training and development surveys are available free to download from the CIPD website: [www.cipd.co.uk/surveys](http://www.cipd.co.uk/surveys)

The Government has launched a variety of education and skills initiatives in the past year – most notably the Skills Strategy. Past experience, however, suggests that such initiatives often pass employers by, and many remain sceptical of their value. **Alison Wolf** discusses the survey results about how well the various agencies/bodies are meeting the needs of employers.

One of the most significant trends the training profession is currently encountering is a move towards a learner-centred approach to training and development. **Martyn Sloman** discusses how far organisations are embracing this new approach and considers practitioners' views on how to promote and encourage effective learning at work.

We hope you enjoy reading these short 'think-pieces' and that they provide you with further insights into current topical issues. We also hope they will stimulate your thinking about what current trends mean for your organisation's training and development activities.

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**John Philpott** was appointed Chief Economist at the CIPD in November 2000. He has a doctorate from the University of Oxford and is Visiting Professor in Economics at the University of Hertfordshire, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a member of the Society of Business Economists.

Before joining the CIPD, John was, for 13 years, director of the Employment Policy Institute, an independent policy think-tank. Before that he spent four years as a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer in labour economics. His research and publications have covered labour market trends, long-term unemployment, welfare to work, full employment, employability, productivity, minimum wage setting, the euro and Social Europe. He is a long-standing media commentator on these issues, and currently writes regular articles for both *People Management* magazine and *Personnel Today*.

John is a former specialist adviser to the House of Commons Select Committee on Employment (from 1993 to 1996) and has also advised numerous other UK and international bodies, including the United Nations, the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

# 1 | TRAINING: THE ECONOMIC CONTEXT

John Philpott

Ask most informed observers for their take on the UK economy in 2003 and the response is likely to be: 'Very decent outcome after a lousy start, but with substantial government spending making up for weak business investment and only modest recovery in much of the private sector, especially manufacturing.'

Most would therefore probably be surprised by some of the findings of the CIPD's 2004 training and development survey. On balance, 2003 was a better year for training managers in the private sector than for those in the public sector. More public sector (39 per cent) than private sector (36 per cent) organisations experienced tougher economic times. And while the proportion of training managers who saw their budget rise was similar in both sectors (at around 18 per cent), a higher proportion in the public sector suffered a budget cut (30 per cent) than their private sector counterparts (27 per cent).

What might explain this, at first sight, puzzling, outcome? A look at the different market and financial pressures facing private and public sector organisations provides some clues – and offers pointers to training trends in 2004.

## A 'WAIT AND SEE' YEAR FOR BUSINESS INVESTMENT IN SKILLS

In focusing on what the survey says about the relative experience of private and public sector organisations, it is important not to forget that the findings confirm the general impression that 2003 was a difficult year for many businesses. Only 13 per cent of private sector organisations experienced

better economic circumstances (less than the 16 per cent recorded for 2002). But unlike in 2002, when the economy slowed, 2003 did at least prove to be a year of emerging recovery.

The findings confirm the general impression that 2003 was a difficult year for many businesses.

Although the year started slowly because of the uncertainty that accompanied the build-up to war in Iraq, the pace of economic activity eventually picked up strongly. By the end of 2003, the economy as a whole had grown by 2.1 per cent, up from 1.8 per cent in 2002. Significantly, the manufacturing sector began to break free of recession and expanded along with most other parts of the private sector. And, while business investment merely stabilised, this was nonetheless an improvement on the 3.5 per cent net cutback recorded in 2002.

When the CIPD training and development survey was conducted in autumn 2003, many businesses will have looked back on the preceding 12 months as a period of overall stability rather than one of either overall continued decline or rapid improvement. This squares with the survey finding that the proportion of private sector training managers reporting worsened economic conditions was considerably lower than the 52 per cent figure of the year before. It also helps account for what emerges from the survey results for the private sector as a 'wait and see' attitude to the need for increased investment in training.

As the survey clearly demonstrates, there is no doubt that private sector employers have, in the vast majority, bought into the ‘training means business’ case. Four in every five private sector organisations surveyed have a training budget. Two-thirds of these are spending more than £100,000 on employee training each year, and on average employees working in the private sector receive more training (six days annually) than public employees (five and a half days).

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But decisions on how much to spend in any given year are clearly sensitive to short-run market or financial considerations. This is illustrated by the fact that there was little movement in the size of training budgets from 2002 to 2003. In other words, the greater overall economic stability experienced by businesses in 2003 resulted in stability in their training spend. However, one in three private sector training managers say they expected to enjoy a budget increase in 2004, which probably reflects not only greater optimism about demand for products and services but also the tightness of the labour market and related skills shortages.

### ARE BUSINESSES DOING ENOUGH TO ANTICIPATE SKILLS NEEDS?

Net recruitment by the private sector was muted last year, with manufacturing employers shedding around 120,000 jobs. But large-scale public sector recruitment and a big jump in self-employment kept the national unemployment rate low at around 5 per cent, with many local labour markets at full employment. The result was mounting recruitment difficulties for employers attempting to add staff, replace staff, or restructure their workforce.

From its wider body of survey evidence, the CIPD finds that, notwithstanding relatively weak economic conditions, 96 per cent of manufacturing employers and 90 per cent of private sector service employers experienced recruitment problems in 2003 (CIPD, 2003b). Lack of specialist skills proved to be the most significant recruitment problem, a third of manufacturing employers, for example, struggling to find skilled manual staff. Moreover, around two-thirds of private sector employers also report employee retention problems as competitors tried to attract staff away from them.

Because relatively few businesses actually increased staffing levels, average earnings in the private sector rose by only 3.2 per cent in the year to November, not much above inflation. The concern is that wage costs will rise in 2004 as a stronger economy boosts demand for people with skills where there is already a limited supply. Optimists think that this will act as a spur to employers to invest more in training and development in order to raise productivity and thus keep wage costs in check. Pessimists, by contrast,

fear that training activity will prove to be insufficient. Unless employers invest more in training, we could see adverse implications for inflation, interest rates and ultimately for growth and job creation prospects in the economy as a whole.

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Deficient skills are of course as much the fault of inadequate vocational education and training provision as employer practice, making it costly and difficult for businesses to quickly make up for any shortfall. But it can be argued that a higher proportion of employers should have increased their training budgets in 2003 in anticipation of impending skills deficiencies rather than simply wait for these to appear.

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Realists in turn argue that, to counter the pessimistic scenario, more will have to be done to encourage investment by the one in five employers that, according to the CIPD survey, don't have a training budget, plus those whose training budget is small relative to their size. This implies an important role for public policy and publicly funded initiatives

promoted by agencies such as Investors in People, Sector Skills Councils and Learning and Skills Councils. In this respect the survey findings are encouraging insofar as they indicate widespread contact with the various agencies. But there is a question mark over the quality of help on offer from some agencies and nothing in the survey per se to suggest that agencies are reaching the no/low training budget businesses.

#### **PUBLIC SECTOR TRAINERS CONFRONT 'PARADOX OF PLENTY'**

The job of government agencies that aim to promote the business case for investment in skills is not made any easier when, as in 2003, a higher proportion of public sector organisations cut their own training budgets. While the survey finds that public sector organisations are slightly more likely to have a training budget than private businesses, public sector training managers appear to have encountered an odd kind of 'paradox of plenty' last year. Only 13 per cent felt an improvement in their economic circumstances (down from 21 per cent in 2002) and almost a third (30 per cent) had less to spend on staff training (up from 20 per cent on a year before) even though the Government pumped an extra 10 per cent of funding into the public sector in order to improve the quality of public services.

It seems that public sector training budgets were squeezed as expanding organisations increased pay levels in an effort to confront mounting recruitment and retention difficulties, while also having to respond to pressure from existing staff for higher pay. For example, over 90 per cent of public sector

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employers reported recruitment difficulties to the CIPD last year, and over 80 per cent reported retention problems (CIPD, 2003b). Partly as a result, average earnings in the public sector increased by 4.8 per cent in the year to November – much faster than in the private sector – which will have reduced the amount of cash available for training.

A training cutback could probably be justified by hard-pressed public sector bosses on the grounds that pay hikes to attract and keep skilled staff offer a cheaper solution to short-run labour market pressures than investing in skills. However, continued cutbacks could store up problems for the future by hindering productivity growth and damaging the quality of public service provision. Aside from the fact that training is vital to staff development – and, as CIPD research shows, is crucial to motivating workers to engage in the kind of ‘beyond the call of

duty’ behaviour essential to high performance (Purcell et al, 2003) – the offer of training is itself a useful recruitment and retention tool.

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With public sector organisations now set to face stiffer competition in the labour market as the private sector recovery gathers speed, cuts in training spend are therefore ill advised. One of the more worrying findings of the survey is that over a quarter (26 per cent) of public sector training managers expect to suffer a further cut this year (higher than the proportion expecting a rise), mindful perhaps of the Treasury’s ever louder calls for economy and restraint in the face of a sharp rise in public borrowing. It would be a perverse irony, however, if, having made the correct decision to heavily invest in public services, the Government’s aim of improved service quality were to fall short because public sector organisations failed to equip their staff with the skills to do the job.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- In making the case for increased investment in training, practitioners should continually stress that organisations must anticipate rather than simply respond to emerging skills needs. The trainer's dictum should always be: 'It'll be too late if you don't anticipate.'
- Not all organisations can do it for themselves. There is a valuable array of publicly funded agencies with advice, help and support to offer on training. But organisations must be clear about what they want – and complain loudly if what they want is not being offered. Agencies should be put under pressure by employers to deliver a top-quality service.
- Public sector organisations must avoid short-termism when it comes to training. Training managers need support in demonstrating that investment in skills is vital to improving public sector productivity and performance. The preservation of training budgets – assuming as always that they offer value for taxpayers' money – should be a priority for the public sector.

**Iain Thomson** runs his own consultancy firm, specialising in all aspects of performance management, but particularly in improving the potential contribution of training. From 1994 to 1999 he was Head of Training and Development at the Bank of England, where he established new approaches to training and a range of practical ways to evaluate training.

He has written and lectured widely on training evaluation. He has contributed to the CIPD's flexible learning material published in 2002 and wrote a CIPD Topic for Trainers titled *Training Evaluation: Making it happen* (Thomson, 2003). He also wrote the distance-learning section on the evaluation of training for the MSc in Occupational Psychology run by Birkbeck College, University of London, where he regularly lectures on various aspects of training and development.

Iain has carried out evaluations for organisations in all sectors of the economy. He is currently engaged in writing a book on training evaluation, bringing together his academic and practical experiences, and his belief that we should be measuring and reinforcing learning from training.

## 2 | EVALUATING THE POWER AND IMPACT OF TRAINING

Iain Thomson

The current business climate is marked by a growing scramble to recruit and retain talent. A drop in the availability of experienced workers, and the constant drive for greater cost efficiencies and competitiveness have created a situation where business leaders want clear answers about what it takes to develop and maintain a flexible and highly skilled workforce.

Respondents to the CIPD training survey recognise the need to provide evidence about the relative value of training and development interventions to meet these challenges. Nevertheless, HR and training functions may need to extend their influence with line managers and boards of directors in order to gain full value from training and development initiatives.

Evaluating training – through engagement with influential stakeholders and developing real dialogue between managers and staff – is a way of combining the assessment of the impact of training and development, while raising the profile and influence of the HR and training function.

### THE VALUE AND BENEFITS OF TRAINING

Over half (58 per cent) of the survey respondents believe that the training delivered in their organisations is very good value for money. While this is good news, practitioners may find it helpful to gather some evidence to justify this view – both to fight threats to funding and to negotiate potential increases.

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three benefits of training. Improved technical skills could easily be linked to concrete business returns – measures such as greater productivity, innovation and less wastage provide a clear focus for the evaluation of skills-related training. The evaluation of higher competence and improved behavioural skills is less obvious.

Even harder to evaluate are benefits such as increased motivation which are reported to be ‘a great benefit’ by 50 per cent of organisations. Motivation is often related to other organisational benefits such as satisfaction, retention, commitment and lower absenteeism. These are issues of critical concern to many managers and directors, but the survey results show a poor correlation between training and these kinds of benefits. Furthermore, sadly, only 39 per cent say they get a great benefit from training in the shape of improved quality of services – surely a key measure to track. This suggests that some customer care training is failing to meet needs and requires redesigning – or the underlying issues resolving.

There is increasing anecdotal evidence that, in many organisations, a ‘purchasing manager’ mentality is being applied to training decisions. Costs and time now seem often to override quality and impact. Many influential players see training at best as ‘the solution’ to most ills, and, at worst, as a necessary

cost. These issues are reflected in the fact that three-quarters of all respondents see solutions to heavy time pressures in reducing course length and providing bite-size chunks of learning.

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But are practitioners doing anything to ensure quality is maintained? Ally this to the 'tick box' approach that is often applied to training – 'let's just tick the boxes and move on' – and the result will be little interest in looking to evaluate training in great detail.

#### REINFORCING TRAINING IMPACT

The evaluation of training can be seen to have two main purposes – to prove that training works (and costs are controlled), and to improve training practices and reinforce its impact. The former purpose requires reliable figures gathered over time, while the latter can be based on subjective, but immediate, information (Easterby-Smith, 1994).

Immediate ways to reinforce the impact of training include refining end-of-course reviews to focus on action planning, establishing 'buddy' support systems and other strategies to overcome resistance to the transfer of learning, and finding more time for follow-up reviews with managers (for example, by dropping the empty ritual of 'happy sheet'

collation). Where managers are encouraged in follow-ups to seek out longer-term returns from training, they are likely to find them. This is not entirely scientific, but it can be effective.

One way to achieve reinforcement of training activity is to incorporate a set of Kirkpatrick-level questions into the annual appraisal (a performance management system employed by 97 per cent of respondents). An additional box asking managers to specify any training and development received by their staff, and to provide evidence of its impact on the person (levels 1 and 2), their job (level 3) and the department or organisation (level 4) can be very effective. If managers find it difficult to produce any evidence of the impact of training on their staff, what does it say about their identification of training 'needs' in the first place, their understanding about the power and value of training, and their use of a costly resource in time (if not money) terms? But if managers are made to look for the evidence, they're more likely to find it, and, by discussing it in appraisal meetings, to reinforce training impact.

If managers find it difficult to produce any evidence of the impact of training on their staff, what does it say about their identification of training 'needs' in the first place?

Many practitioners worry most about 'how' to evaluate training. Without the 'why' and 'for whom', however, evaluation will take place in a vacuum, and any questions posed – face-to-face or via appraisal forms – are likely to be general or

vague. In general terms, HR and budget holders are interested in proving and controlling investment in training, trainers are concerned with improving its impact, and managers should be concerned with finding ways of reinforcing it. The former audience want answers to the past: 'Did the training work? Was it good value for money?' The latter audience wants pointers for the future: 'How is this training contributing to raised performance?' Thoughtful evaluation distinguishes between these questions, acts as part of the training design discipline, seeks greater value from training activities, and begins to raise the profile of HR/training.

All evaluators should recognise that the business world moves on too swiftly to wait for retrospective evaluation (often a year or more later) to demonstrate conclusively that any particular course worked. Lengthy and complicated evaluation processes will simply not work.

#### **TACKLING THE 'EVALUATION LAMENT'**

Sixty per cent of respondents report that the HR/training departments have the main responsibility for driving learning and development activities, compared to only 18 per cent who see line managers as responsible. There are worrying implications about ownership and expectations here, as well as the likely enthusiasm for evaluation activities.

Lack of management support is one of the hurdles to evaluation efforts that is lamented year after year in surveys. The answer is simple: get out and talk to line managers, and help them to see 'what's in it for them' if they take steps to harness people's learning

from training. Another hurdle is difficulty in establishing measurable criteria, but it can't be that difficult to agree 'able to describe/do ...' criteria for knowledge and skills training, and for interpersonal and management training simply to ask the people involved about changes in relationships and results. Finally, the problem of time. The answer? Make it! Dump 'happy sheets', stop endlessly tweaking competency sets, encourage more coaching and be less concerned about filling formal course quotas.

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#### **ENGAGING MANAGERS AND DIRECTORS – LESSONS FOR PRACTITIONERS**

When asked about the most important factors for effective learning, 74 per cent of respondents are concerned about a supportive (but possibly vague?) culture to support learning and development. Only 58 per cent chose getting managers' (concrete) commitment to learning and development activities. HR/training need to get out and engage with managers and directors, particularly if they want to have real impact on the business (Garavan et al, 1993).

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Take a simple example: 83 per cent of respondents think that competencies provide a useful framework – what would a busy technical manager say, and how would a shop-floor foreman with casual workers respond? Practitioners could make themselves more valuable and attractive to internal customers by focusing on outputs and outcomes instead of inputs, activities and systems.

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Training is seen as crucially important at induction, for health and safety and for technical skills development. Its reported value in reducing absenteeism (42 per cent, 'some benefit', 39 per cent, 'no benefit'), however, highlights another of its limitations, as opposed to firm management discipline and clear leadership. HR/training need to gather some basic evaluation information about what training can achieve, and then, with managers and directors, identify and begin to resolve the real issues in achieving business outcomes such as growth, cost efficiencies and innovation. This way they will be able to make credible suggestions about the best ways to improve individual and corporate performance.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Busy line managers and directors will be more likely to respond positively to swift evidence – rather than laboured proof – that any training is working. Don't overcomplicate evaluation.
- Worry less about how to evaluate training, and more about the purpose and audience – but remember that proving/controlling purposes will provide conclusions about the past, whereas improving/reinforcing training will produce better results for the future.
- 'Training' is now much more multifaceted. Its power, value and cost–benefit need to be assessed in comparison with other learning methods, rather than merely course by course.
- Make time for evaluation, focus it on the achievement of performance outputs and corporate outcomes, and use it as an opportunity to engage with managers and directors.
- Courses are not the answer to all performance issues – be prepared to dump 'bread and butter' training courses and switch to real value-added activities. Raise the profile and credibility of HR/training by showing results.

**Eric Parsloe** is Chief Executive Officer of the Total Learning Group and the founder of the Oxford School of Coaching and Mentoring, one of the UK's leading professional development organisations. He is a trustee and executive board member of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council.

Eric is an acknowledged subject expert, writer and broadcaster and the author of several books and learning packages aimed at maximising individual potential and performance while maintaining sensible life-balance.

Recent publications include: *Coaching and Mentoring: Practical methods to improve learning* (2000), *The Manager as Coach and Mentor* (1999a) and *Learning for Earning* (1999b).

In the 1970s he founded the Epic Group, an employee communications and multimedia company – still the largest multimedia bespoke learning production company in the UK. He has extensive board-level experience in companies as diverse as Granada, Prudential, Legal & General and GEC, and created award-winning communication programmes for Ford, IBM and BT. He maintains an involvement with the e-learning industry as non-executive chairman of Bright-wave, an e-training and blended learning production company.

## 3 | COACHING – DISPELLING THE MYTHS

Eric Parsloe

My reaction to this year's CIPD training survey findings on coaching can be summed up as: 'Hooray! At last we have some hard credible data to help dispel some popular myths about coaching in the UK corporate world.'

The survey findings provide a great deal of information. I have chosen to highlight the data that provides us with useful information on three popular myths about coaching, but I strongly urge the reader to try and digest the many other valuable and interesting findings that need more detailed discussion than this essay can contribute to.

### **MYTH NUMBER ONE: 'Coaching is just another "HR fad" that won't last.'**

The fact that 78 per cent of respondents now report using coaching as part of their learning and development activities, and 57 per cent report an increase in using it over the past few years (with a further 20 per cent reporting a large increase), does not itself disprove the accusation that coaching is just the latest in a long line of transitory 'fads' in the training and development world. But consider some other findings:

- Ninety-nine per cent agree that 'coaching can deliver tangible benefits both to individuals and organisations.'
- Ninety-three per cent agree that 'coaching and mentoring are key mechanisms for transferring learning from training courses back to the workplace.'
- Ninety-two per cent agree that 'when coaching is managed effectively it can have a positive impact on an organisation's bottom line.'
- Ninety-six per cent agree that 'coaching is an effective way to promote learning in organisations' and indeed 21 per cent go as far as to claim that coaching and mentoring are the most effective ways that people learn in their organisation, compared to only 16 per cent who believe that formal training courses are the most effective.

Other findings support the view held by many of us that we are in the process of experiencing a profound shift in attitudes and practices relating to organisational learning and development. Consider:

- Ninety-eight per cent agree that people learn in all manner of ways, including training.
- Ninety-six per cent agree that individuals need advice and support if they are to take more responsibility for their own learning.
- There has been a 47 per cent net increase in the use of e-learning.
- There has also been a 42 per cent net increase in the use of mentoring and buddy systems, but at the same time, only an 8 per cent net increase in formal classroom-based training.

To me, this pattern is unmistakable evidence that the traditional instructor-led, 'one size fits all' and 'sheep-dip' approach to learning and development is rapidly being replaced by an individual-centred, holistic approach.

This survey provides strong evidence that, while coaching is not being seen as a panacea, it is not seen as a 'fad' either, but rather as an essential and valuable feature of a modern organisation's learning and development strategy.

The traditional instructor-led, 'one size fits all' and 'sheep-dip' approach to learning and development is rapidly being replaced by an individual-centred, holistic approach.

**MYTH NUMBER TWO: 'Most of the coaching that takes place is executive coaching that is only available to the most senior people in the organisation. It is an expensive luxury.'**

There have been numerous books, case studies and articles in the professional press that have highlighted the high prices paid by organisations for the services of external executive coaches who generally have high-profile experience in the world of business, sport and sometimes the arts too. The notion that Olympic or world-class standards of performance can be achieved by exposing senior directors and executives to these high-priced executive coaches has proved attractive both to corporate buyers and to the media headline writers. Energetic and often glossy self-promotion by those individuals, training organisations and specialist

companies wishing to jump on the perceived 'coaching gravy train' has strengthened the myth that corporate executive coaching is mainly and necessarily a luxury product.

So what do the survey findings tell us?

**Which of the following types of coaching best describe the coaching that takes place in your organisation?**

| Type of coaching                | % of respondents |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Performance and skills coaching | 67               |
| Developmental coaching          | 59               |
| Executive coaching              | 34               |

**At what levels in the organisation is coaching provided?**

| Employee groups                                | % of respondents |
|--|------------------|
| Middle/junior manager, team leader, supervisor | 64               |
| Director                                       | 37               |

**What proportion of coaching activities do the following groups deliver?**

|                          | All or some (%) | None (%) |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| Line managers            | 95              | 5        |
| Trained external coaches | 57              | 42       |

Assuming, and this would be a very, very generous assumption, that most external executive coaches are trained and qualified as coaches, these findings help put high-priced external executive coaching in perspective. It is sometimes expensive but it is a minority activity in the whole spectrum of corporate coaching. Far and away the main objectives of coaching activity are individual performance, skills and development. The majority of coaching is provided for middle and junior managers and delivered by internal resources, primarily by line managers.

Far and away the main objectives of coaching activity are individual performance, skills and development.

The survey data also helps put some other coaching sales propaganda into perspective. Improving staff retention, reducing the cost of using external courses, and helping to achieve better work–life balance, for instance, hardly register at all as organisational objectives for using coaching.

**MYTH NUMBER THREE: ‘Coaching is now a widely accepted, well-planned and integrated aspect of corporate performance and development activity.’**

Given some of the positive data from the survey on the growth and perceived value of coaching, it might be expected that the statement above would also be true. But, alas, the survey data suggests otherwise:

- Sixty-six per cent claim to have no formal written strategy for the coaching activities taking place in their organisation, and only 6 per cent claim to have one that covered all their staff.
- Only 5 per cent claim to have ‘all’ line managers trained to coach their team members, whereas, more worryingly, 49 per cent claim to have only ‘a minority’ trained and then usually only as part of a wider management training programme.
- Only 14 per cent claim that coaching skills training was compulsory for all staff that managed people.
- Only 37 per cent claim to use assessment against objectives set at the start of a coaching initiative as the basis for evaluating success.

These findings may not come as too much of a surprise but still provide a sobering challenge for the scale of the work still to be done if the positive beliefs about the potential contribution of coaching are to be realised.

But a word of caution here may also be appropriate. There is a danger that the pursuit of another myth may obscure the real issues involved in evaluating success. I refer to the myth that all training and development can, or must, be justified by hard financial data or ‘return on investment’ criteria. As we enter an era of individual-centred approaches to learning and development, chasing this particular ‘holy grail’ becomes an even more fruitless exercise.

In an age of increased individualism in terms of both self-interest and self-responsibility for learning and development, the criteria that organisations use to evaluate success should also change. Providing time, advice and support become key corporate responsibilities. The perceived value to the organisation will be largely a matter of belief and trust as the key source of confirming data can only come from individual recipients. It is therefore heartening to discover that the most popular method (75 per cent) used for assessing the effectiveness of coaching activities is feedback from participants.

By the same token, it is indeed a matter for real concern that 63 per cent report that they do not use assessment against objectives set at the start of a coaching initiative as the basis for evaluating success. The very nature of the one-to-one coaching relationship lends itself admirably to, indeed absolutely requires, the establishment of clear objectives. A failure to take a hard-nosed approach to the objectives of a coaching initiative is therefore both dangerous and inexcusable.

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## DISPELLING THE CONFUSION

Only 50 per cent of respondents to the survey claim to 'clearly understand the differences between all the different types of coaching on offer' and 48 per cent find 'selecting high-quality external coaches a difficult task'. Furthermore, 40 per cent believe that the 'lack of regulation and accreditation in the coaching industry is very worrying.'

Some of these concerns are inevitable as the coaching industry continues along the path of an emerging profession. Various self-interested groups, each claiming to be the 'one true voice' of corporate coaching, may add to the confusion rather than provide clarity. It is encouraging therefore that several leading coaching bodies (International Coaching Federation, the Association for Coaching and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council) are engaged in serious dialogue about these issues. The survey shows that 45 per cent agree that it would be useful if there was a single professional body in the UK. We will have to wait to see what happens as the profession grows and formalises.

I have dealt with only a few of the issues that this year's survey findings raise. I repeat my encouragement for the reader to read, reflect and act on the other findings that have not been covered here. I remember a phrase I learned early in my career: 'If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.' I look forward to monitoring the progress of coaching in future years in CIPD training and development surveys.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- If you still need to convince sceptical senior management about the value of coaching, you can now use the ‘hard’ evidence from the CIPD survey about the tangible benefits and positive impact on the bottom line that are reported to flow from coaching initiatives.
- If you need to employ external coaching resources check carefully their professional credentials, qualifications and their proposed approach to confidentiality and ethical behaviour.
- Urgently review your current training strategy to ensure coaching training is provided to line managers who are expected to deliver the majority of your coaching initiatives. This is necessary to close the severe skills development gap identified by the survey.
- Given the high effectiveness of coaching reported in the survey, consider developing the coaching skills of your line managers through specific training rather than relying on short inserts into general management training programmes.
- Most important of all, agree clear objectives at the start of every coaching initiative and insist on rigorous evaluation at the conclusion.

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Her most recent book is *Does Education Matter? Myths about education and economic growth* (2002), which has received widespread press coverage. She is also co-author (with Andy Green and Tom Leney) of *Convergence and Divergence in European Education and Training Systems* (2000).

## 4 | THE IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT SKILLS INITIATIVES ON EMPLOYERS

Alison Wolf

Workforce skills are – not for the first time – a major priority for government. Last year four government departments joined together to launch a new Skills Strategy. This will gradually be translated into action over the next few years. The Government argues that, in this country, ‘the way we develop skills and their contribution to productivity remains [sic] a serious weakness’ (DfES, 2003) and that action to create a better skilled workforce is therefore necessary. The Skills Strategy follows hard on the heels of Skills for Life, another major initiative intended to improve adults’ basic skills, with strong encouragement for programmes based in the workplace. This year’s training and development survey therefore asked for training professionals’ views on where the government is going.

Skills shortages have certainly been highlighted frequently by employers. Ninety-three per cent of respondents to the CIPD 2003 recruitment and retention survey report significant recruitment difficulties in the previous 12 months. The Government regularly carries out surveys that ask whether vacancies are hard to fill, whether employers are experiencing clear skill shortages, and whether employees have all the skills they need to perform well. The most recent Skills Survey was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council, which is responsible for skills development in England, and it reported that:

‘One in five job vacancies in England remain unfilled because of skill shortages. Skill shortages have a considerable impact on all aspects of business. According to 83 per cent of respondents, skill

shortages increase the workload for other employees; 52 per cent said shortages led to customer service targets remaining unmet; 44 per cent reported loss of business or orders going to competitors. More than one-fifth of employers say the skills of their workforce are not up to scratch ... employers identified 2.4 million people – 11 per cent of all employees – as incompetent at their current jobs’ (Learning and Skills Council, 2004).

### HIGH MARKS FOR THE BASIC PRIORITIES ...

The 2004 training and development survey asked respondents whether they agree with the four key areas which the Government has prioritised in its current skills initiatives. And, overwhelmingly, they do. Ninety-six per cent agree that the Government was right to prioritise literacy and numeracy skills; 93 per cent on the importance of intermediate, including craft and technical, skills; 90 per cent on mathematics, science and technology; and 89 per cent on improving management skills. So, at the level of basic objectives, it seems that the Government is right on target.

The survey asked respondents whether they agree with the four key areas which the Government has prioritised in its current skills initiatives. And, overwhelmingly, they do.

Moreover, large sums of money are coming on stream, most recently for basic skills provision in the workplace and for Employer Training Pilots, designed to help low-skilled employees achieve

higher skills and qualifications. Training professionals can therefore look for significant levels of financial assistance in developing their workforce's skills. In listing the benefits of training to their organisation, this year's survey respondents give first place to higher competence and improved technical skills, well ahead of raised commitment or increased job satisfaction. So again, government activity should be very welcome.

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#### ... BUT DOES IT MEAN MORE ALPHABET SOUP?

However, even if respondents are lined up behind the Government on training priorities, there appears to be a lot less agreement on what constitutes good practice in delivery. The last 30 years of government training policy has been marked by a positive 'alphabet soup' of short-lived government agencies and initiatives. Industry Lead Bodies became National Training Organisations, which in turn are being replaced by a new network of Sector Skills Councils. Industry Training Boards were mostly abolished in the 1980s. After them came Manpower Services Commission area offices, then there were Training and Education Councils, and now we have a network of Learning and Skills Councils. Meanwhile, Regional Development Agencies have been added to the pot, with Regional Assemblies a reality in Scotland and Wales and promised elsewhere. And all of these bodies have skill development responsibilities.

The survey respondents agree with the Government's basic objectives, but are far less complimentary about the official bodies it relies on for delivery. When asked which organisations have best met their needs, they give top marks to Investors in People (50 per cent say it meets their needs), and then to higher and further education (49 per cent) and employer networks (45 per cent). The same picture emerges from rankings on 'poor at meeting my needs', with the fewest negative ratings going to employer networks – only 14 per cent think theirs is poor – while higher and further education and Investors in People again get very few negative ratings. Contrast that with the 38 per cent who think the new Sector Skills Councils are poor at meeting their needs, while the Regional Development Agencies have the lowest favourable rating, with only 19 per cent rating them as good at meeting respondents' needs.

The survey respondents agree with the Government's basic objectives, but are far less complimentary about the official bodies it relies on for delivery.

Much of this may be simply to do with time, and stability. A new organisation that is preoccupied with getting established is unlikely to understand, let alone be highly responsive to, the needs of its clients. Unfortunately, recent history shows that, by the time government training organisations have settled down, they are about due for abolition. Some of the negative ratings may simply reflect lack of contact with the latest agencies as much as active

disappointment. Thus more than a quarter of respondents report that they are not really aware of Regional Development Agencies or Sector Skills Councils, compared to less than 1 per cent for Investors in People.

However, that isn't the whole story. Only 6 per cent report that they are not aware of Learning and Skills Councils – which nonetheless come very low in the list (8th out of 10) in terms of favourable ratings. Since the Learning and Skills Councils have the most direct responsibility for delivering and funding the new skills strategy, this is a cause for concern.

Respondents' positive ratings for their own employer networks reflect a truth about training which emerges strongly from the research literature. The most effective training directly reflects individual workplace and sector needs, and is developed and delivered by people who know the sector well and are trusted by its employers. Most people know how good a job the Germans, Austrians and Swiss do in this field. But it is important to understand that, in these countries, governments play a rather small role in providing workplace training, and that the main responsibility lies with employer organisations, collaborating with employee representatives (Soskice, 1994).

The most effective training directly reflects individual workplace and sector needs, and is developed and delivered by people who know the sector well and are trusted by its employers.

The survey respondents are not only keen on employer networks, but are generally quite sure that skills issues need to be tackled on a sectoral basis, with five times as many answering 'yes' as answered 'no' when asked this. Similarly, while 84 per cent want the new Sector Skills Councils to take action on skills needs and shortages, one can see some concerns emerging about methods. Over 80 per cent would like funds for training projects, but this drops off to just over half who think that the Sector Skills Councils should do anything as specific as implementing a strategy for developing the sector's workforce.

The constant reorganising of government training initiatives reflects a series of disappointments, and failure to realise promises. A major cause is the Government's own desire for standardised, top-down delivery, with clear audit trails, and for measurable 'outcomes', which in practice has meant rigidly designed formal qualifications. This requirement runs head-on into workplaces' own needs for flexibility and for training that responds to their particular circumstances. National Vocational Qualification take-up and completion and Modern Apprenticeship completion rates have both fallen well below government expectations, and the lack of consideration of employers' needs is a major reason (Fuller and Unwin, 2003).

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It would be good to think that the Skills Strategy has learned the relevant lessons. But the omens are not that good. Training providers funded by Learning and Skills Councils are under huge pressure to meet formal targets, especially for qualifications, and have very strict funding criteria. The Employer Training Pilots are also tied to formal qualifications, which may or may not be relevant to workplace skills needs. So we can hope, but we certainly can't be sure, that this crop of government skills initiatives really will help training professionals meet their and their organisations' major skills needs.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- There will be a lot of government money available this year to help support training schemes, but it is important to understand that it has many administrative requirements and limitations attached.
- Try to get a clear, independent indication of what different government funding streams offer and demand. You can then evaluate what you are being told by external training providers who would like to work with you, and judge how well different options will fit your workplace's circumstances.
- Employer networks, and organisations which are really run by employers, have the best record, worldwide, when it comes to helping training professionals deliver what their companies need. The more your own organisations are genuinely involved in the Sector Skills Councils, the better they will be.
- The Government's priorities are very much in line with those that emerge both from employer surveys and the CIPD 2004 training and development survey. Managers in your organisation need to be aware of this, and of how widespread skills shortages seem to be.

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As author, lecturer and conference speaker, he has contributed to the development of modern HR concepts and practice. Recently, Martyn has published two books for the CIPD, *Training in the Age of the Learner* (2003) and *The E-Learning Revolution* (2001). The latter was also published in the USA by Amacon in 2002. His earlier best-selling book, *A Handbook for Training Strategy* (1994) received wide critical acclaim and has now been reprinted, translated into Polish and Chinese and published in India. A second edition appeared in autumn 1999.

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## 5 | HELPING PEOPLE LEARN

Martyn Sloman

Writing a commentary on the survey results about what UK organisations are doing to encourage and promote employee learning has proved to be a comparatively easy task. A clear and unambiguous picture has emerged on the ambitions and intentions that are governing the actions of today's training managers.

Before discussing the results, some background may assist. For some time at the CIPD we have argued that a significant shift is taking place in the role of learning, training and development in organisations. The focus is moving away from training as a top-down intervention and towards learner-centred initiatives. This idea suggests that the way to unlock individuals' potential lies not in teaching them the things the organisation believes they should know, but in enabling them to manage their own development in a supportive learning environment.

A significant shift is taking place away from training as a top-down intervention and towards learner-centred initiatives.

This shift demands both a new mindset from those involved in human resource development and the formulation of processes that encourage and support the learner.

A key section of the 2004 training and development survey was designed to gather information on current perceptions and practice in what might be called 'a focus on the learner'. One of the questions, for example, invited respondents to identify the

This shift demands both a new mindset from those involved in human resource development and the formulation of processes that encourage and support the learner.

most important thing that an organisation can do to promote learning. This was deliberately open-ended and over 450 answers were received. There was a remarkable measure of agreement. The one that appeared first on an alphabetical sort provided a good summary of those that followed. It read: 'a committed and supportive learning environment; without this nothing happens.'

Respondents were also given a series of statements about supporting effective learning at work. They were invited to indicate the ones they considered the most important. Four statements commanded almost universal agreement. They were, in order of support:

- 1 People learn in all manner of ways, including training.
- 2 Individuals need advice and support if they are to take more responsibility for their own learning.
- 3 Line managers should play a significant role in helping their teams learn and develop.
- 4 Employees need to take more responsibility for their own learning and development.

Together, these four statements could be regarded as defining the 'new learning orthodoxy'. This is what modern human resource development is about, and what training practitioners are trying to achieve. For effective learning to take place,

employees need confidence and appropriate learning skills, opportunities to turn their commitment into productive action and a positive learning climate created by the presence of supportive systems and colleagues. Learning by definition lies in the domain of the individual (only learners can learn). Hence, most of these supportive interventions will be undertaken by learners and their managers – in environments where the HRD specialist has no direct control.

However, and therein lies the rub, the HRD professional will still carry the responsibility. When asked, 'In general, who is seen as having the main responsibility for driving learning and development activities?' 60 per cent of respondents chose 'the HR/training department' as the preferred option. Line managers come a distant second at 18 per cent. Responsibility without power, it appears, may be the burden of today's training manager. However, a clear approach to dealing with this is emerging from what appears to be an increasingly self-confident profession.

Who is seen as having the main responsibility for driving learning and development activities? 60 per cent of respondents chose 'the HR/training department'.

This approach was perhaps best expressed in another response to the open question on the most important

thing that could be done to promote learning. This read: 'to create a framework that helps to give people the right skills, knowledge and attitude that links with the culture and objectives of the company'.

It is in constructing and implementing such a framework that the challenges and difficulties lie. There may, indeed, be a remarkable unity of ambitions and intentions. But when it comes to the process and procedures designed to deliver those ambitions, the position is far less clear-cut. The clear objective, promoting effective and appropriate learning, will be achieved through a variety of interventions and mechanisms, depending on the organisational culture and context. Fortunately, the picture that emerges is a positive one. We are in a state of transition not a state of confusion. HRD professionals have clear ambitions, but are seeing what works in their organisation and building up support for a learner-centred approach based on the success of their initiatives.

On-the-job training is regarded as the most effective way that people learn and coaching/mentoring comes second. It is therefore not surprising that organisations are intervening to ensure that the interested learner is supported and guided by managers with the necessary skills. There is a considerable interest in developing line managers as coaches and in mentoring. Annual performance reviews, which presumably provide the opportunity to discuss individual development, are now almost universally accepted.

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So, has the job of the human resource development professional moved away from the delivery and design of training courses? Should it now be focused entirely on creating the conditions in which learning can take place? Not altogether. A consideration of the survey results shows that the emerging new orthodoxy still finds an important place for the training course. In fact, on balance, respondents report an increase in the level of formal classroom training offered over the last few years. True, the increase was not as great as those reported for other forms of interventions. Net figures were as follows:

| Type of training                        | % of respondents |
|---|------------------|
| Coaching                                | +51%             |
| E-learning                              | +47%             |
| Mentoring/buddy systems                 | +42%             |
| Job rotation, secondment, job-shadowing | +27%             |
| Action learning sets                    | +17%             |
| External conferences, events, workshops | +11%             |
| Formal classroom-based training         | + 8%             |

In this context, the formal training course is seen as one of a number of possible learning interventions. The survey results reveal that most respondents are trying to respond to time pressures by reducing the length of training courses, providing bite-size chunks of learning (surely one of the ugliest terms to emerge in recent years!) and offering learning materials at convenient times. Given these intentions, it is not surprising that e-learning is also on the increase.

Generally, then, there is much more agreement at the strategic level than the tactical level. It is evident what needs to be done. Achieving it, however, may be a different matter. Stating intentions is easier than designing and delivering interventions that gain support and prove effective in the organisation.

Given this background, it is difficult to offer sensible general advice or guidance. The effectiveness of actions can only be judged in the context of the organisation. Can we at the CIPD do no more than echo Cilla Black's parting shot on *Blind Date*: 'Let us know how you get on'? To some extent this is where we are at present. We need to share information on what works in promoting learning, and use this to develop a view on effective frameworks.

But let's close by offering some advice, drawing on the wisdom of the great French military leader and statesman, General de Gaulle. Although not noted for his interest in what he dismissed as 'quartermaster stuff', he did leave us some management aphorisms. Two seem particularly apposite at this stage. They are: 'Never relinquish the initiative', and 'Don't get caught between the dog and the lamp post.'

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Establishing a committed and supportive learning environment is a central objective for training managers. This will be achieved through creating a framework that helps to give people the right skills, knowledge and attitudes and links with the culture and objectives of the organisation.
- A whole range of interventions that encourage learning are required and this balance will depend on the circumstances of the organisation. The learner will be the primary focus of these initiatives.
- Trainers will need to push for greater dialogue and co-operation with line managers and employees on issues surrounding learning and development.
- The formal training course still has an important part to play.

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# I NOTES



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