

EVALUATION AND ROI IN THE BRITISH COUNCIL

Interview with Shannon West, e-learning Consultant, British Council, January 2008

The British Council's new corporate learning and development framework

It is very fitting that the British Council is this year's host for the June ROI masterclass with Jack Phillips and Jane Massy. For on 21 January the British Council launched a corporate learning and development framework which embeds the ROI methodology for evaluation throughout the organisation—which means across the globe. Until 2005, the British Council's HR was centralised and its learning and development mostly in-house. Since 2005, ongoing development of the wider HR function has devolved responsibility for learning and development investment to operational/business units. But, Shannon West points out, the British Council still needs to report corporately on learning and development expenditure, to assess overall outcomes and value for money, to benchmark and to monitor progress against equality and diversity targets. Hence the new framework and reporting requirements.

Shannon proposed the use of the ROI methodology for evaluation within the corporate learning and development framework and his line manager John MacKenzie, Head of L&D, endorsed the decision. Supporting colleagues in taking informed decisions on how to evaluate learning and development investments at both 'event' and 'programme' level is a major element of the launch of the corporate learning and development framework.

Shannon and his colleagues decided to launch the new framework online, and to allow six weeks for online discussions with HR, L&D and global diversity network staff around the world. "We are evaluating the launch", Shannon notes. "The proof of success will be, do we get the data next year?"

Diverse applications of the ROI methodology

Meanwhile the British Council is using the ROI methodology to evaluate a change programme, several internal learning interventions and a product for external customers.

Shannon and his colleague Tanya Dunne, Customer Service Excellence Project Manager, independently selected the ROI methodology last year to evaluate pilots for a change programme and some learning interventions respectively.

New performance management system

Shannon's evaluation is of a new performance management system, potentially for all 1900 English teachers working around the world with the British Council. Up to now teachers' objectives have been stated in their job plan, which focuses on performance measurement and describes competencies in general terms. The new approach's formulas and processes represent a shift in thinking from concerns with measurement and assessment to approaches and attitudes that encourage learning. One part of this new approach is acknowledging the competencies special to teaching. It also asks teachers to specify their learning objectives for the coming year in relation to the priorities of the centre where they work, and to their own existing strengths and weaknesses. It is still early days for the evaluation but one clear result already is a very positive reaction to the focus on competencies specific to teaching. The evaluation on a pilot involving 400 teachers is providing useful feedback before the project goes live.

Shannon took abdi's two-day and three-day workshops in 2007 and is writing up his evaluation of the teachers' performance management system as his case study for ROI certification. With a Masters in education, he was already well versed in evaluation. He found the workshops added to his knowledge—but “where you learn most is putting it into practice—thinking through the business measures, explaining the methodology to people so that they see the point and collaborate in gathering data”.

Evaluating learning interventions

Shannon is also using the ROI methodology to evaluate a learning intervention, a leadership development programme for examinations managers. Another two learning interventions currently being evaluated by Tanya Dunne are those introduced as part of a customer service initiative. The ROI methodology is being used for formative evaluation of customer service learning materials and of how successfully they can be delivered by local consultants round the world. It is also being used to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of Institute of Customer Service Professional Awards.

Reviewing a product for external customers

The review of the product for external customers, Management Express, a management development initiative for young professionals, was commissioned by Sara Knowles, Manager Learners and Networks. Jeremy Harrison, one of abdi's directors, was in Uganda and Tanzania, and Chris Allinson representing abdi was in

Nigeria in January gathering data to evaluate the effectiveness of Management Express.

Despite these multiple strands of activity, Shannon sees the use of the ROI methodology in the British Council as “right at the beginning”. There are still plenty of other learning and development interventions and change projects within the organisation that are being evaluated differently or not at all. But if this first crop of ROI evaluations prove their worth, awareness is sure to grow both across the organisation and at its highest levels.