

Cost - Benefit Analysis of E-Learning

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Abstract

For a long time, organizations paid lip service to the human resource motto that "people are an organization's most important asset." Now senior executives have come to believe that employees and the intellectual capital they create can uniquely differentiate their company in the marketplace. Training expenditures now are viewed as critical investments in human capital, and an effective method of increasing employee retention. Commensurate with the increase in training expenditures, senior executives are demanding more accountability from their training departments. In fact, 93 percent of training professionals said they are increasingly being asked to show the return-on-investment (ROI) of their programs. Training managers need to be able to answer direct questions about total costs, benefits, and bottom-line impact. Visionary training managers embrace cost-benefit analysis as a way to justify bigger budgets for technology and new training programs. This paper covers mainly the measurement of total cost of e-learning, measurement of e-learning benefits, cost comparison, cost - benefit ratio and ROI. This will focus on the overall total benefits to the company by using Technology - Based Training (TBT) when compared to Instructor Led Training (ILT).

Key words: Technology -Based Training , Instructor Led Training

I. INTRODUCTION

Proponents of technology-based training have long touted its many benefits: reduction in learning time, increase in knowledge retention rates, cost savings. Quoted in the latest issue of HR Magazine, "There's about a 50-percent reduction in time and cost over classroom training". This type of quantifiable measurement of value is critical in the overall management of a training function, and a powerful tool that can be used to keep or expand available training resources.

II. KEY CONCEPT OF COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

At the simplest level, cost-benefit analysis answers the question "Was it worth the money?" In other words, what were the total costs to develop the program, and what were the total benefits realized? Financial benefits can be in the form of cost savings, or increases in productivity or revenue. The following key concepts are factors in a cost-benefit analysis.

Life of training: Every project needs to be measured across some time period. Technology-based training programs don't last forever. Their shelf life will be determined by things such as changes to content, changes in technology, and changes in business need. According to research conducted over the last ten years, most ROI studies show technology-based training is more expensive to develop and deliver over the short-term, but pays off over time. Typically, three-to-five years of use is an accepted time period to apply for evaluating a training program.

Alternate delivery options: Perhaps the most

common method of showing the financial impact of technology-based training is to compare it against the costs for other forms of delivery. To come up with a comparison means, ask the question, "If we don't deliver the training via the Web, what would it cost for us to deliver it in a classroom setting?"

Size of audience: With technology-based training, the cost of development is not dramatically affected by the number of students using it. The cost is basically the same to develop a two-hour CD-ROM or Web-based training program for 10 people as it is for 1000 people. The only additional costs may be in the form of CD-ROM duplication, student tracking, and end-user support. However, the size of the target audience is extremely relevant when comparing the costs against instructor-led delivery. With live workshops, the number of students has a direct impact on expenses related to instructors, locations, and travel.

Seat time: The total amount of time students will spend with the course is called seat time -- how long they will be in their seats. Seat time is always specified for instructor-led training, but is an estimate when given for self-paced, technology-based training. After all, a course that takes one student two hours to complete, might take another only 90 minutes. Increasingly, effective Web-based training is blurring the lines between instruction and just-in-time performance support. This factor makes estimates of seat time additionally tenuous.

Burdened costs: This accounting term refers to the total cost of an item, which may include some hidden costs. For example, you might quickly estimate that a

classroom facilitator who earns a Rs. 60,000 salary costs Rs.230 per day, simply by dividing the salary by the total number of weekdays (Rs. 60,000 , 52 weeks , 5 days). But the burdened cost for the instructor will be higher once you take into account payroll taxes, insurance, and other benefits. Additionally, when calculating day rates, make sure to subtract company holidays, vacation time, and sick days to get an accurate estimate of the burdened cost for each productive workday.

Estimated revenue impact: Often the impact a training program has on sales and expenses is indirect, or difficult to measure. In these cases, the impact on revenue is projected or extrapolated from known data. For example, assume that a quality control training program was shown to reduce the number of defective cell phones produced each year in a factory from 5000 to 3000 (net reduction of 2000 defective phones a year). Although the training program directly reduced errors, which led to a drop in the number of defective phones, you would have to estimate the revenue impact. To do this, you would need to research costs associated with wasted materials in each defective phone, labor time for the manufacturing, identification of, and disposal of each defective phone. With this methodology, a defect-reduction number can be translated into a revenue-savings number.

Opportunity costs: These costs are the lost revenues or increased costs associated with opportunities that will be missed because of the training program. This measure is increasingly being used in the competitive world of sales. Traditionally, for a sales rep spending time in training, a main measure of cost is the salary of the rep while in the training program. However, a more advanced analysis measures the opportunity cost of the rep not being out in the field. Therefore a major advantage of technology-based sales training is its ability to maximize time in the field and minimize the opportunity costs of sales training.

III. MEASURING THE TOTAL COST OF E-LEARNING

The first step in cost-benefit analysis is simply to measure all of the direct and indirect costs involved in the design, development, delivery, and maintenance of the program. Because different industries have different ways of doing business, this process calls for some careful examination of how your organization goes about its daily work activities. So often, time is money. If you can more efficiently train employees then the time saved can be used for productive work. More work time is then translated into a financial benefit.

IV. THE TRUE COST OF PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

In order to generate an accurate and valuable cost

analysis, you must take into consideration all of the direct costs of program development, as well as the indirect costs associated with delivery and maintenance.

For example, some hidden costs of instructor-led training include the costs of student transportation, meals, and room rental. Indirect costs associated with CD-ROM training include the duplication and distribution of CD's to the students. Costs associated with Web-based training include the purchase or maintenance of the server-computer that hosts the program.

STEP ONE: Gathering Assumptions and Baseline Data The first step, shown in the figure below, is to clarify certain assumptions or to gather certain data that will be required for the analysis.

Step One: Assumptions	
Item	Assumptions
1.1) Life Span of Course	3 years
1.2) Total Number of Students	800
1.3) Student Learning Time in Classroom	14 hours (2 days)
1.4) Reduction in Seat Time	50%
1.5) Burdened Compensation for Instructor	Rs.304 per day
1.6) Burdened Compensation for Student	Rs.164 per day

STEP TWO: Determine Design and Development Costs :After documenting assumptions, the second phase is to estimate the costs for courseware development. The figure below shows the budgets required to create a customer service program in both workshop and self-paced delivery options.

Step Two: Design and Development		
Item	Instructor-Led Training (ILT) (Rs.)	Asynchronous e-Learning (Rs.)
2.1) Create Courseware	49,000	3,50,000
2.2) Train the Trainer	10,560	---
Phase Two Total	59,560	3,50,000

Create Courseware: To determine the cost of developing instructor-led training on customer service, we could obtain bids from various vendors, or total the time and expense of using in-house developers (assuming staff

is available), or use some kind of benchmark from their previous experience. In this case, we use past experience and another training rule-of-thumb to estimate that it costs about Rs. 3,500 per finished hour to have an outside vendor develop this type of instructor-led courseware. Using the 14-hour estimate obtained in step 1.3, it is calculated that 14 hours of training x Rs. 3,500 per hour = Rs. 49,000. Similarly, to determine the cost of developing technology-based training on customer service, we could obtain bids from various vendors, estimate the costs of in-house development (if possible), or use an assumption from their previous experience. we had previous multimedia training projects cost around Rs. 50,000 per finished hour Using the 50 percent time-reduction estimate specified in step 1.4, it is assumed that the CD-ROM training would only require seven student hours. Therefore, estimated cost of development is 7 hours x Rs. 50,000 per hour = Rs. 3, 50,000.

Train the Trainer: It is planned to use own training managers to deliver the course in a workshop format. However, the training vendor will need to conduct a train-the-trainer session in which the managers are themselves taught the content, given a chance to practice facilitation techniques, and review the daily course schedule. We will only need five managers certified in the delivery of the customer service program, so they are budgeting for a single three-day train-the-trainer session. Prior experience indicates that it will cost Rs. 6,000 for the course and materials. It also will cost the company the compensation of the training managers while in the three-day program, or 3 days x 5 trainers x Rs. 304 per day = Rs. 4,560. Thus the total cost for training Acme trainers will be Rs. 6,000 vendor fees + Rs. 4,560 salaries = Rs. 10,560.

STEP THREE: Determine Delivery Costs After the second phase of the cost comparison, technology-based training appears to be almost six times more expensive. In fact, it is typically the case that the up-front cost to develop technology-based training is much higher than the development cost for ILT. However, the figure below shows how the delivery of the training to a large audience over time is where the tables are turned and the hidden expenses of classroom-based training are revealed.

Number of ILT Sessions : The first step to determine delivery costs is to ascertain the total number of workshop sessions that would be required. To get this number, we divide the total number of students by their ideal student-to-instructor ratio, which is 12.800 total students, 12 students per class = 67 required sessions over the three year life of the course.

Instructor Costs : This number is calculated by multiplying the number of hours required to deliver each

workshop by the compensation rate of the instructor. At the institute, the students would be required to travel to the home office for training, rather than having the instructors fly to various meeting locations throughout the country. So we estimate that, in addition to the two days of actual training time, each instructor would need to spend a half-day preparing for the session. Therefore, total instructor costs are 67 sessions x 2.5 instructor days for each session x Rs. 304 instructor cost per day = Rs. 50,920. Because no instructors are necessary for institute's CD-ROM based program, this cost is zero.

Student Costs: In the case of instructor-led training, the FSEs will be required to travel to the home office for training. Acme is assuming that in addition to the two days of training time, each student will spend an additional day traveling to and from the training, for a total of three days

Step 3: Delivery		
Item	Instructor-Led Training (ILT) (Rs.)	Technology-Based Training (TBT) (Rs.)
3.1) Number of ILT Sessions	67	0
3.2) Instructor Costs	50,920	0
• Prep and travel time		
• Time delivering training	9,69,600	1,31,200
• Travel costs		
3.3) Student Costs		
• Time in training	0	0
• Opportunity cost		
• Travel costs		
3.4) Location Fees	0	0
• Room rentals		
• Shipping	6,400	3,200
• Storage		
3.5) Equipment Fees		
• Projectors		
• Shipping		
• Storage		
3.6) Student Materials		
• Workshop handouts		
• CDs		
Step Three Total	10,26,920	1,34,400

Costs of student salaries will be 800 students x 3 days of time x Rs. 164 =Rs. 3,93,600. Additionally, the students will incur travel-related costs for airfare, transportation,

lodging, and meals. For each student, we estimate that these expenses will be Rs. 400 for airfare + Rs. 160 for two nights in a hotel + Rs. 60 for transportation + Rs. 100 for meals = Rs. 720 per student. Total travel related costs will be Rs.720 x 800 students = Rs. 576,000. Total student costs for instructor-led training will be Rs. 3,93,600 in salaries + Rs. 5,76,000 in travel = Rs. 9,69,600. With technology-based training, the training is taken to the students (in the form of CD-ROMs) rather than the students going to the training. Thus, travel costs are eliminated. Additionally, instead of three days of total student time, each FSE will be required to spend only seven hours with the CD-ROM program, or approximately one day. Thus, 800 students x 1 training day x Rs. 164 compensation per day = Rs. 131,200.

Location Fees: Many instructor-led training programs are delivered in rented hotel conference rooms or resort centers. Fees to rent small meeting rooms can range from Rs. 200 to Rs. 500 per day. Often organizations have internal charge-backs to departments that use internal training facilities. In this case we are planning to use our internal training rooms, but there are no associated fees. This cost is zero.

Equipment Fees: Because we use in-house facilities we will not have any additional equipment costs related to the delivery of instructor-led training. If external locations are used for training, the cost of renting overhead projectors, flip charts, LCD projection panels, TVs and VCRs, and slide projectors can add many hundreds of dollars to each day of the workshop. For technology-based training there can be costs associated with the purchase of computers and software. This is especially true if a special multimedia learning center is being built to support a particular training initiative, or if a new server-computer will need to be installed to support Intranet-based training. In Acme's case, the training would be delivered via CD-ROM using the FSEs' existing laptop computers, so the cost of equipment would be zero.

Student Materials: It is planned to provide each workshop participant with a detailed student manual. After consulting with a local print shop, it is determined that each manual will cost Rs. 8 to produce. Total costs for workshop materials will be Rs. 8 x 800 students = Rs. 6,400. If we deliver the customer service training on CD-ROM, it will cost Rs. 4 per CD. This includes the CD duplication, label, jewel case, an insert that provides an overview to the program and loading instructions, and postage required to mail the CDs to the students. Total material costs for technology-based delivery would be Rs. 4 per CD x 800 students = Rs. 3,200.

STEP FOUR: Administration and Maintenance

Costs The final details to include when totaling the direct and indirect costs are those related to administering the training program and keeping the program current and valuable. The figure below shows the break down for these items.

Tracking : Organizations track registration or scheduling for instructor-led training workshops in a variety of ways from very simple index-card systems to complex computer databases. Similarly, the culture of some companies lean toward using tests for self-assessment purposes, while others maintain detailed records of student performance. For customer service training, it is assumed that all students will be scheduled by a training manager, and managers will be responsible for grading students' final tests. Total time per workshop for these activities will be an additional 2 hours. Therefore total time for administration would be 67 total sessions x 2 hours = 134 hours, or approximately 17 days. The cost of this time is 17 days x Rs. 304 per instructor day = Rs. 5,168. Tracking costs for a CD-ROM-based solution is almost zero. All students take the courses concurrently, so no scheduling or pre-registration is required. A built-in student log-in screen will be linked to a final assessment that is automatically scored by the computer. A simple printout of the score report or completion certificate will be submitted to the training department.

Technical Support: For workshop delivery, no technical support is required. For CD-ROM delivery, some form of

Step Four: Administration & Maintenance		
Item	Instructor-Led Training (ILT) (Rs.)	Technology-Based Training (TBT) (Rs.)
4.1) Tracking		
• Student registration		
• Testing	5,168	0
• Certificates		
4.2) Technical Support	0	8,000
4.3) Updates to Content	0	0
4.4) Updates to Technology	0	8,200
Phase Four Total	5,168	16,200

Technical support is a must. In this case, we will use their in-house help desk to answer basic questions and fix

simple problems. The help desk is managed by the information technology department, which has an internal charge back of Rs. 50 for each call handled. A technical support rule-of-thumb is that 10 to 20 percent of a target audience will encounter some kind of problem and call for help. We conservatively estimate its technical support costs at 160 help desk calls (20% of total audience size) x Rs. 50 per call = Rs. 8,000.

Updates to Content :We assume that no change in content will be required during the three-year life of the training. For subject matter that changes frequently, such as product training or new-hire orientation training, updates can be quite expensive. In addition to new design and development costs, there are repeated distribution costs, too. This is where Web-based training has a major benefit. Because the content sits on a central server-computer, it is easily and affordably updated. There is no need for new CDs or workbooks to be distributed again to the target audience.

Updates to Technology: Instructor-led training by its nature does not require an investment to update technology. However, with technology-based training, the speed of technical innovation often requires rapid revisions to the program. Typical scenarios include upgrades to student computers that involve a new operating system, new screen resolution, improved capability for multimedia, or a new Web browser. In this sample case, we assume that there will be one major upgrade to student computers which will require a revision to the CD-ROM. Costs are estimated to be Rs. 5,000 to a vendor for revisions + Rs. 3,200 for reduplication (same cost as initial duplication and delivery of CDs) = Rs. 8,200.

STEP FIVE: Total Cost Comparison The final step in the cost comparison is to simply transfer all the sub-totals onto one worksheet to obtain a total cost comparison. In this case, the figure below shows that the cost of creating and delivering instructor-led customer service training workshops would be approximately Rs.1.1 million. The cost for equivalent training delivered via self-paced CD-ROMs is just over Rs.5, 00,000. It is now a simple and defensible decision to invest in CD-ROM-based training, since it will save approximately Rs.6, 00,000 over three years.

While this case is fictitious, it accurately portrays the drivers behind costs of technology-based training. The largest cost for technology-based training is for initial development. This cost is the same regardless of whether there will be 10 students or 1,000. The cost for delivery is negligible. Thus it is easy to see that for small audiences technology-based training might be prohibitively expensive. For large audiences, however, the potential

cost savings of CD-ROM and Web-based training is incredible. In this case, if we had only 400 total students instead of 800, the decision to use technology just to save money would have been harder to make.

V. MEASURING E-LEARNING'S BENEFITS

The second half of cost-benefit analysis is identifying and measuring the beneficial results from a training program. Benefits come in two types. Tangible benefits are those that can be measured and assigned some kind of number or dollar value. Intangible benefits are benefits that can not be measured or even quantified.

Tangible Benefits

Tangible benefits are ones that can be measured and ideally quantified in dollars. For example:

- A sales training program increased sales by 2 percent.
- A customer service program increased customer satisfaction survey results by 10 percent.
- A safety training program reduced the number of accidents over one year by 30 percent.
- A quality control program reduced defects by 20 percent.
- A software training program reduced calls to the help desk by 30 percent.
- A communication training program increased the ratings of managers by their direct reports by 10 percent.

Sales training. If a sales training program increased revenue generated in the control group by 2 percent, this increase can be applied to the entire sales force's revenues. For example, if in the previous time period sales totaled Rs. million, a 2 percent increase would be worth \$10 million.

Interviewing skills. A training program on recruiting is shown in the control group to reduce turnover from 20 to 15 percent due to interviewers ability to find a better match between company and contact -- a 25 percent improvement. This reduction can be applied to the total anticipated turnover rate. If in the previous year 1,000 people left the company, after training that number should drop to 750, a net savings of 250 employees retained. Additional research into HR issues might uncover that it costs on average Rs.18, 000 to hire and train each new

Step Five: Summary		
Item	Instructor-Led Training (ILT) (Rs.)	Technology-Based Training (TBT) (Rs.)
Design & Development	59,560	3,50,000
Delivery	10,26,920	1,34,400
Admin. and Maintenance	5,168	16,200
Phase Five Total	10,91,648	5,00,600

Employee. Total cost savings can then be projected to be 250 employees x Rs. 18,000 = Rs. 4,50,000.

Intangible Benefits: These types of benefits are the ones that are usually assumed to result from a training program, but are difficult or impossible to measure. Although specific dollar values can not be attached to intangible benefits, they are still important to discuss and to document. Examples of intangible benefits from specific training programs might include:

- An increase in morale and employee engagement resulting from new hire orientation training.
- Improvements in teamwork resulting from diversity training.

Total Cost Savings with e-Learning
Formula
<i>Classroom Training Costs - e-Learning Costs = Total Cost Savings</i>
<i>Rs. 10,91,648 – Rs. 5,00,600 = Rs. 5,91,048</i>
Total Savings = Rs. 5,91,048

- Additional sensitivity and a more professional workplace resulting from sexual harassment training.
- Less stress among students who complete conflict management training.
- Less anxiety after completing a change management program.

VI. CALCULATING AN E-LEARNING COST COMPARISON

The most basic and frequently used analysis is a

simple comparison of how much money e-learning will save over more traditional classroom-based workshops. Using the fictitious case it is described in other articles, the figure below shows the formula and presentation method for this data.

VII. CONDUCTING AN E-LEARNING BREAK EVEN ANALYSIS

Doing a simple cost savings analysis -- even when positive -- does not, however, tell the whole story. Because e-learning is typically more expensive to create initially than instructor-led training, the payback often doesn't begin until year two or three. Using a break-even analysis will identify at what exact point in time the program begins to "save" money. The value of this measurement is usually in terms of the number of students it will take to train in order to reach break-even. To put break-even analysis simply, it answers the question, "How many students will we have to train in order for our up-front investment in technology-based training to begin to pay-off." Using the fictitious case presented in other articles, the figure below shows the three-step formula for calculating the break-even point. Note that in this analysis, the calculated cost to deliver the training to each student factors in both standard delivery costs, as well as administration and maintenance costs. The final result of 263 students as the break-even point is another indicator that the investment in e-learning is a wise one since in our model case there are 800 total students to be trained. If less than 263 students were to be trained in the three-year period, classroom-based training would make more sense from a financial perspective.

Break-Even Analysis for Technology-Based Training
<p>Step 1) Per-Student Delivery Cost of e-Learning = <i>Total e-Learning Costs divided by Total Number of Students</i></p> <p>Step 2) Per-Student Delivery Cost of Classroom-based Training (or other training method) = <i>Total Classroom Delivery Costs divided by Total Number of Students</i></p> <p>Step 3) Break Even Point = <i>(Total e-Learning Costs - Total Classroom Costs) divided by (Per-Student Classroom Costs – Per-Student e-Learning Costs)</i></p>
<p>Step 1) <i>(Rs. 1,34,400 + Rs. 16,200) divided by 800 students = Rs. 188.25 per student</i></p> <p>Step 2) <i>(Rs. 1,026,920 + Rs. 5,168) divided by 800 students = Rs. 1,290.11 per student</i></p> <p>Step 3) <i>(Rs. 3,50,000 – Rs. 60,000) divided by (Rs. 1,290 – Rs. 188) = 263 students</i></p>
<p>Break-Even Point = 263 Students Trained <i>In other words, e-learning initiative in this case will achieve break even with 263 students trained.</i></p>

VIII. CALCULATING AN E-LEARNING COST-BENEFIT RATIO

The cost-benefit ratio is a simple calculation that depicts the total financial return for each dollar invested in the training program. The example that follows is based on a fictitious case of a Web-based quality training program that cost Rs. 54,000 to develop and deliver, and which saved Rs. 4,30,000 in the first year due to a reduction in defective widgets. Figure 6.9 details the calculations.

Cost-Benefit Ratio
<i>Financial Benefits</i> , <i>Total Cost of Training</i> = <i>Cost-Benefit Ratio</i>
<i>Rs. 4,30,000</i> , <i>Rs. 54,000</i> = 7.96
Cost-Benefit Ratio = 7.96 <i>In other words, for every dollar invested in the training program it returned almost Rs. 8 after one year of use.</i>

IX. CALCULATING E-LEARNING ROI

The return-on-investment analysis, commonly called ROI, is one of the more popularly used financial measures. It simply states the return on the training investment in percentage terms. The exercise below is based on a fictitious case of a Web-based sales training program that cost Rs. 4,25,000 to develop and deliver, and which increased sales by Rs. 9,75,000 in the first year. The figure below details these calculations

Return-on-Investment (ROI) Ratio
<i>(Total Benefits - Total Costs) divided by Total Costs x</i> <i>100 = ROI</i>
<i>(Rs. 9,75,000 - Rs. 4,25,000) divided by Rs. 4,25,000 x</i> <i>100 = 129%</i>
One Year ROI = 129%

X. THE VALUE OF COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS - SOME COMPELLING CASES

- A computer storage media company converted a four-day instructor-led course for 1,500 technicians into a multimedia CD-ROM format. Due to a

reduction in learning time and elimination of travel expenses, Storage reduced costs over three years by 47 percent and saved Rs.1.5 million (Hall, 1997).

- A major consultancy firm developed and delivered computer-based training for 7,000 consultants in 50 countries. The cost of the training was Rs. 106 per student, versus an estimated Rs. 760 per student for instructor-led delivery. Over the five-year life span of the program, technology-based training saved the firm more than Rs. 4.5 million (Ibid.).
- A computer reseller developed a Web-based training solution for its internal sales force and value-added resellers. Some 40 online courses were developed, complete with self-assessment quizzes. According to their director of strategies technologies, "We saw a 50 percent increase in sales across distribution and integration resellers," (Fickel, 1998).
- A branch of the U.S. military estimated that their technicians' ability to troubleshoot problems increased by 90 percent after the adoption of multimedia training. Over a period of five years, they expect at least a 20-fold return on their investment (Jerram, 1994).

XI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, ROI analysis effectively minimizes the risk of failures and financial waste, but it also reduces the chance for innovative breakthroughs and tough-to-measure results. By only focusing on ROI, Chief Learning Officers may miss some tremendous opportunities to contribute to their organization's strategic goals. To gain project support, an e-learning plan should include ROI estimates as one dimension, while focusing on overall total benefits to the company.

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