

# Effective training of front-line service employees

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Service quality is the primary driver behind customer satisfaction. Because training is the single most important driver behind higher service quality, it is one of the most important internal processes for a company to get right.

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# Executive summary

Training is the most important factor behind higher service quality and customer satisfaction. If employees are trained effectively, they will be more productive and more engaged and therefore stay longer in their jobs, and they will be more service-orientated. Customers should therefore pay close attention to training processes when choosing a service provider. It has a significant impact on the long-term success of the partnership.

Most service providers train their employees but very few do it effectively. For training to be effective, it must be designed and implemented well. A four-stage process will ensure effectiveness. The stages are: 1) analysis of strategic training needs, 2) design and development of the training programme, 3) delivery and implementation of training programme, 4) measurement and evaluation of training outcomes. The strategic-needs analysis and proper evaluation are lacking in most training programmes.

This paper has identified nine best-practice training processes which are described in detail and which any effective training programme should include. These processes include how to assess strategic needs, the design of the programme, involvement of customers and supervisors, use of external providers, the inclusion of 'soft' skills, training methods and tools, follow-up processes and effective evaluation.



# Introduction



Knowledge is the single most important economic resource in today's society. The term "knowledge-based economy" stems from the recognition of the importance of knowledge in modern economies. Today, most political and business leaders talk of improving productivity through innovation and knowledge.

At the organisational level the production and deployment of knowledge is also recognised as the primary driver of profit and success. Indeed knowledge and innovation is today considered the ultimate competitive advantage for most types of companies. This has long been supported by management thinkers such as Peter Drucker who asserted that businesses need to turn themselves into 'organizations of knowledge specialists'. Other management thinkers have for many years now written about 'the learning organisation' where that of learning and using a new level of knowledge is the strategic focus itself. So when companies state that people are their most important asset, what they really mean is that the knowledge their people possess is their most important asset.

Many associate terms such as 'knowledge-based organisation', 'innovation' and 'learning organisation' with white collar industries such as IT, banking, pharmaceuticals, etc. Fewer associate this with service companies such as Facility Management (FM) service providers. This is a mistake: service companies innovate and produce knowledge to improve their productivity and many times this is done systematically through knowledge-based processes (Andersen & Queck, 2010).

However, it is not merely the creation of knowledge itself which is valuable. It is the ability to take knowledge, distribute it across the organisation and turn it into new services and new behaviour which is valuable. This is what potentially makes training important and valuable. As a result, large service companies have set up 'universities' – internal academies – to train and educate their employees and have developed training programmes in which all employees must participate.

While it is easy to train employees, it is more difficult to do it effectively. Customers of FM services must be able to tell the difference between the two. The effort of distinguishing between training and effective training is still relatively new to this industry and is only taken seriously by a few. Indeed although knowledge and training is often hailed as very important, in practice few understand what effective training of front-line service employees really is.

This White Paper will discuss training in the context of front-line service employees in facility management and answer three questions:

1. Why is training of front-line employees important?
2. What is effective training?
3. How do you best train front-line employees?

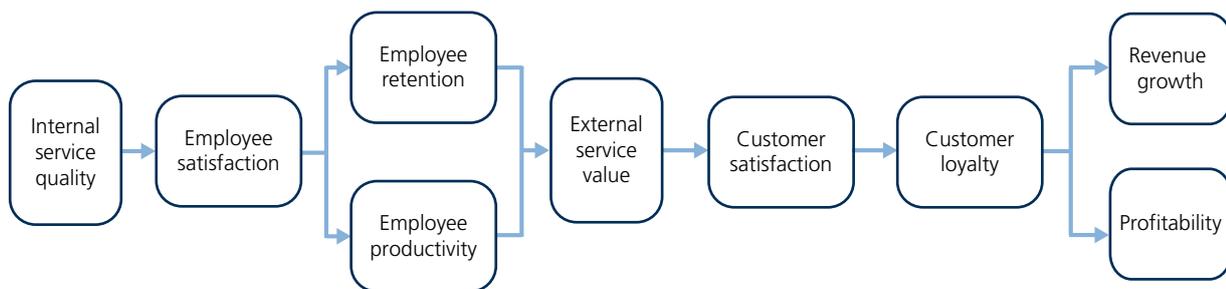
# Training creates service quality and customer satisfaction

Service quality is consistently ranked as the most important driver for customer satisfaction. Research shows that, in approximately 70 per cent of cases, the identifiable reasons why customers quit doing business with a company in any industry have nothing to do with the product or the operational procedures but are rather due to poor service delivery. In service management industries – such as facility services – this figure is higher.

Training is the single most important driver for service quality and it is therefore one of the most important internal processes a company can have. Training is not just about basic competence-skills-training, i.e. ensuring that the employee can deliver the service, it is also about training in service-management skills and other 'soft' skills such as social skills, attitude skills and language skills.

Another way to understand the importance of training is to look at how value is created in service industries. Graphically this is probably most eloquently described through the concept of 'the service profit chain'. It proposes a series of relationships which links training (internal service quality) with customer satisfaction (hence customer value) and profitability (hence shareholder value). As figure 1 shows, profitability and revenue growth are derived from loyal customers, and loyal customers result from customer satisfaction, which is influenced by the perceived value of the service. Service value is created by satisfied, committed, and productive employees, and employee satisfaction is generated by investing in, among others, training and employee empowerment.

Figure 1: The service profit chain



Source: Heskett et al., 1997

The service profit chain highlights two important aspects about value creation in service management:

- 1. Value is mutually constructed** between the front-line employee and the service employee. The service employee must deliver a service which must be perceived by the customer as adding value. The important thing about knowledge is not so much what is stored inside the head of a particular employee, but is what that employee does with the knowledge and how this is perceived by the customer.
- 2. Training is a key component to value creation in service management.** The customer experience is in large part a function of effective training. Training of front-line employees is therefore critical in service management, and training and development are critical components in any service relationship.

The service profit chain identifies how external service value is affected by training, generating increased productivity and increased retention. The following will look at both in more detail.

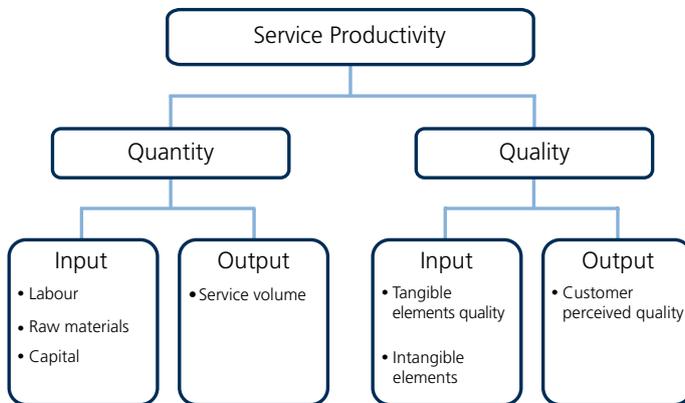
### **Training drives productivity**

Productivity is a difficult concept to define – especially in the service sector. This is because it is difficult to standardise the input and output and because it primarily is quality which is more difficult to measure compared to quantitative units – such as is the case in production companies.

Service productivity can be defined as “the ability of a service organisation to use its inputs for providing services with quality matching the expectations of customers” (Li & Prescott, 2009). This implies that it is providing service quality which matches the expectation of the customers. This is in line with the service profit chain shown above.

This can also be illustrated (as in figure 2) in the following way: Service Productivity = (Quantity of Output and Quality of Output)/ (Quantity of Input and Quality of Input).

Figure 2: Elements of service productivity



Source: Rutkauskas & Paulaviciené, 2005

Training is one of the most important intangible qualitative inputs a service company has and therefore is one of the most important potential sources of productivity gain.

### **Training drives engagement, retention and satisfaction**

The second way training directly affects the external service delivery is in helping employees become and remain engaged. Engaged employees stay longer in their jobs, are more productive, more service-orientated and take fewer days off work. The service profit chain illustrates how this is important to the overall customer value proposition. In short, engaged employees are the key to excellent customer service. This is why many organisations rely heavily on the learning and training function for engagement support.

Initial or new-hire training can initiate an employee's engagement and general training as well as other professional development opportunities which can help keep employees engaged. However, training and development alone does not guarantee employee engagement. A good relationship between employees and immediate supervisors is recognised as a top driver of employee engagement. Training of front-line service employees therefore includes managerial skills for front-line supervisors and managers.

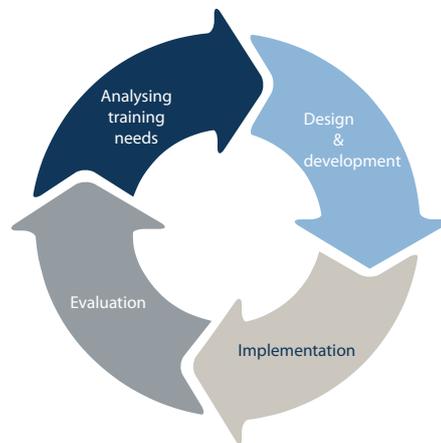
# Processes which make training effective

From the section above it can be concluded that the overall purpose of training is “to meet operational standards, to improve employee engagement or to improve performance levels”. If training fulfils this purpose it will in turn lead to better service value, improved customer satisfaction and higher profits.

Each training initiative must have a specific, clear and measurable purpose and goal to improve on one of those three areas.

In order for a training programme to be effective, it must be designed and implemented with care. This is illustrated by the four-stage process shown in figure 3.

Figure 3: Training cycle



Source: ISS

## 1. Analysing strategic training needs

A needs analysis may be conducted by interviewing line-managers, front-line service employees or customers. An alternative may be to observe the behaviour of the front-line employees and perform a gap analysis. These needs must be aligned with the organisation’s strategic goals thereby best optimising the value of the programme.

## 2. Design and development of training programme

Once the needs have been identified clear measurable objectives can be set. These should include desired behavioural changes in the service employees as well as a desired organisational impact – both for the customer and for the service organisation. Once established, the training programme can be designed and developed. At this point alternative training methods must be evaluated and a choice made to deliver the programme internally or through an external training provider. Finally the training content must be produced.

### 3. Delivery and implementation of training programme

The delivery of the training programme is more than just employees attending a course. Effective training includes pre-training motivation for the course, follow-up processes with feedback on behavioural changes, involvement of customers and line-managers in anchoring the training, and identification and removal of barriers to implementation of new behaviour. The elements which are outside the actual course itself are more than 60 per cent of the success of any training programme.

### 4. Measure and evaluate training outcomes

Measuring, tracking and evaluating the training programme are key components in effective training programmes. As W.E. Deming stated “you cannot improve what you cannot measure”. The base-line data must be collected before the training and can be collected at an individual or at a team level. If the objective of the programme is “to get help-desk-request accuracy to 90 per cent”, you need to know how to measure it and at what level it is now. After the training programme, data can be collected and an evaluation can take place by answering the following questions. Was the training effective? Did it change the behaviour, improve the service value or any of the other strategic needs it intended? Did it add financial value? Which parts of the programme were effective and which parts were not?



Figure 3 has been drawn as a cycle. This is intended: a key point about the cycle is that it is a feedback loop and meant to be a closed system (Kearns, 2008). In other words, the whole training process is only complete when the training outcome has been evaluated against its intended purpose and goals AND this evaluation is to be performed on a constant basis to improve the training programme.

Most training programmes suffer due to a lack of focus on key aspects of the cycle. Many programmes are initiated without a proper strategic training needs analysis – they are often initiated based on random wishes and beliefs. With no base-line data the evaluation of the programme is impossible. The implication is that most training programmes are not effective.

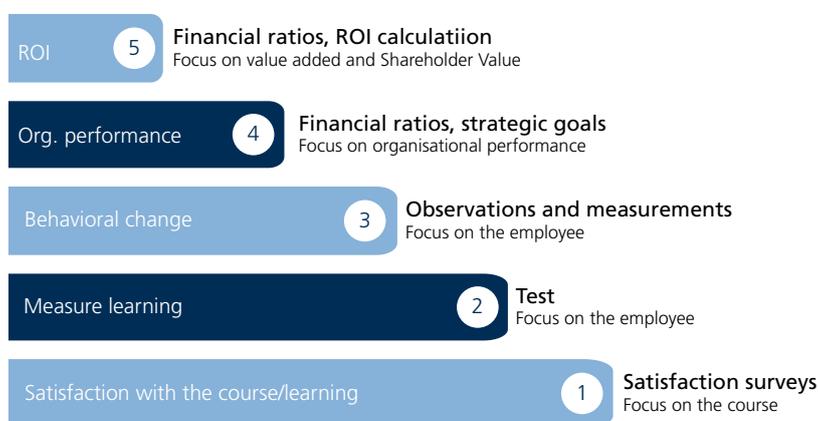
As well as proper needs analysis and evaluation, another important point about effective training programmes is that many suffer as a result of lack of buy-in from the nearest line-manager. Lack of participation, involvement and ownership often result in a) improper cover for the people who are away participating in the course, b) incomplete needs analysis and c) insufficient desire for changes to hold fast after the programme is finished. It is a key conclusion in this paper that the immediate line manager is very important.

# Evaluating training

It is only possible to assess the effectiveness of a training programme through proper evaluation. While most service providers say they evaluate and show processes which include this, the reality is that most service providers do not execute this step well.

Donald Kirkpatrick – one of the “fathers” of training evaluation – stated that a definition of evaluation would be ‘the determination of the effectiveness of a training programme’ (Kirkpatrick, 2006). Evaluation of training can be conducted in many ways but only a few of them are relevant and contribute to effective training. Figure 4 illustrates the five levels of training evaluation.

Figure 4: Five levels of training evaluation



Source: Aspector

The five levels in figure 4 should be understood quite literally; level 5 is the most- and level 1 is the least-effective way of evaluating any training programme.

- **Level 1: Satisfaction.** The most basic level of evaluation is to ask the employees if they liked the training programme. This is typically done through written surveys which are handed out right after the course, where the participants are encouraged to write comments. There will often be questions about the training form, instructors, presentations and learning environment. The problem with satisfaction surveys is that studies have shown that the correlation between satisfaction and learning is very close to zero. Sadly, most training programmes are evaluated using satisfaction surveys.
- **Level 2: Measure learning.** At this level the purpose is to examine if the employee has learned the material. After the training programme examinations can be made – this can be written, oral, performance tests or role-playing – to test if what has been taught has been understood and can be applied. The test should be objective with quantitative results which can be compared before and after the training.

- **Level 3: Behaviour.** The next step is to evaluate if the employees actually use and apply the new knowledge. Training is essentially about changing behaviour in a desired way. Kirkpatrick (2006) suggested that five requirements must be met for a change in behaviour to occur: 1) desire to change, 2) knowledge of what to do and how to do it, 3) the right job climate, 4) help in applying what was learned during training and 5) rewards for changing behaviour. Studies show that only 15–20 per cent of people attending a course subsequently change any behaviour.
- **Level 4: Organisational performance.** Based upon the premise that the objective of most training programmes is to meet operational standards, to improve employee engagement or to improve performance levels, it would be most relevant to evaluate the training programme against these desired organisational results. The data collected at this level may best be a combination of interviews and data already available from internal databases. The result is more likely to be evidence than proof.
- **Level 5: ROI.** The final level evaluates whether the training programme “was worth the investment”. Return on Investment (ROI) is a simple but effective way to answer this question. ROI is simply stated:  $(\text{benefits} - \text{investment}) / \text{investment}$ . Investment is the value of the time spent on the training and the cost of the programme including material, external facilitators and possible productivity loss. Benefits include the financial value of the benefits identified at level 4.

# Best practice effective training processes



When surveyed, most Facility Management (FM) customers say that training and development of service employees is high on their agenda when they choose a service provider. However the level of details required during the tender process is, in general, still low. Prospective service providers are required to state what training they intend to provide and sometimes also the processes they will use to ensure this, but rarely in any great detail. Although many state that training is important, price continues to be the main or only 'deal breaker'. So although most state that it is high on their agenda, in reality it is not prioritised as highly as it should be.

This will change. In only a few years' time customers will increasingly use training processes as a key selection criterion and service providers will be required to have solid and effective training processes in place. Training is increasingly acknowledged to be the key to a successful relationship between customer and provider and those who do not master this will not be selected.

Effective training processes in facility management are different from general training processes. This is because FM is quite unique in many ways. One important and unique aspect is the fact that the training has to be done primarily at the customers' sites in order to avoid disruptions to the services. A second element is that many of the employees do not have much in terms of formal education and may not even have mastered the local language. Finally, the customers' sites and demands vary to increasing degrees, making general training more complicated.

We have identified nine important training processes which customers demand from their service providers.

## **1. Based upon needs and not availability**

Most training programmes are designed based upon what is available in the training catalogue of the service provider or its preferred training suppliers. It is also often based upon the personal wishes and preferences of the service employees or their supervisor. Both approaches are wrong. The design and development of the training programme should be primarily based upon the need of the customer and secondarily on the needs of the employees.

The needs of the customer are best identified in discussions between the customer and the service provider. The customer may not always know or understand their needs and the service provider can facilitate this awareness. The service provider has experience in what is possible, and ideas can be discussed.

The needs of the employees may be identified during the individual annual review where the desired job-competency level is compared to the employee's own competency level. The strategic training need is indicated by the resulting gap analysis, and thus gap-filling plans can be made.

## 2. Use a variety of programmes, learning tools and methods

Historically, training of front-line service employees was either conducted in a classroom or through informal unstructured on-the-job (OTJ) training. Today and increasingly going forward, designs must be varied much more. Research has demonstrated that employees learn in different ways – i.e. they have different learning styles – and training is more effective if designed to take these differences into account. Also, some material is most effectively taught and learned in different ways – not all skills are best learned in a classroom (in fact most are not). Evidence also points to the fact that teaching the same material in different ways, i.e. exploring several methods, is more effective than just learning a new skill in one way. Finally, new technologies have made more learning tools available for this particular kind of training. Examples of different tools and methods are given here:

- **Films/Videos** can show correct or best ways of interacting with customers or doing a job. If the films are produced effectively they can inspire learning. The films can be made available on the firms' Intranet and the employees may review them several times. Films are most effective when followed by a group discussion.
- **Role-play** allows employees to act out issues that could occur in the workplace and is effective in connecting theory and practice. The role-play can be re-enacted several times with different outcomes.
- **On-the-job training** provides the supervisor a way to show the employees exactly how to do something in a practical and often informal way. Some people learn more efficiently if they learn hands-on, rather than listening to an instructor. Generally, skills-training for front-line service employees is most effective when combined with OTJ training. The employee gets immediate feedback and can be corrected on the new behaviour.
- **Formal training/presentations** are effective in getting a lot of information to many people in a short space of time. It is probably the least effective of all training methods but is appropriate as an element for learning some types of skills.
- **E-learning** is emerging as one of the most effective training methods. Training possibilities using technology are almost unlimited. The material can be tailored specifically to the needs of individual employees both in terms of language, learning style and pace. In practice, most front-line employees in FM do not have access to a computer so the administrative challenge can be significant; this must be overcome.
- **Magazines/books** can inspire and give new information. Written material may also benefit in cases where language barriers are high as the employee can read the material (in their native language) several times.

- **Coaching and mentoring** gives employees a chance to receive training one-on-one from someone with experience. This usually takes place after another more formal process has taken place, in order to expand on what the employee has already learned.
- **Job rotation** is a way to learn by doing other jobs. In practice this can easily be applied at large sites or where communities of companies – such as banks – are located close to each other and are serviced by the same provider.
- **Feedback** reinforces learning by making the employees recall information and apply it in specific ways. Positive feedback reinforces successful application of learned skills and negative feedback stops incorrect application of new skills. Feedback is a very effective method but requires training of the supervisor.

### 3. **Involve the customer in the design and implementation phase**

Training is essentially about changing the behaviour of employees in a way which improves customer experience. The customers' input in the design process is therefore valuable as they often best know what would improve their experience or what is currently giving them a poor experience. The design phase should therefore always include input from the customer.

Customers can also be involved in the actual delivery of the training. The customer can "sit and listen-in" during the training. This could be any employee from the customer site who interacts with the service employee. This would strengthen the understanding of what skills and knowledge the service employees have (or should have). Another way to involve the customer is for the customer to teach at the courses. This is very effective and is highly recommended.

### 4. **Use external providers**

It is easy to design and deliver a training programme. It is significantly more challenging to do this in an efficient and effective way. The service providers should outsource a portion of the design and training delivery where possible to competent providers. New training methods arrive (such as e-learning), training evaluation is difficult and time-consuming and pedagogical approaches change. The effective design and implementation of best-practice training requires a constant up-to-date knowledge about training methods and design, and the service provider should form long-term external training partnerships. The service provider should identify which competencies it is able to provide, and use external providers where the resources are not available in-house.

### 5. **The importance of the supervisors (the immediate line manager)**

Historically service-industry supervisors were promoted due to the fact that they were excellent front-line workers. This has changed in recent years, and the reason for this is clear, it is because customers want specific standards of service

that are unique to their businesses. This has created a demand for a higher quality of supervision, which has driven more effective supervisor-training programmes. The support and guidance of supervisors who passionately buy into the principles of training front-line staff should not be underestimated: it is a critical factor in training effectiveness.

Supervisors can be the single point of failure in training effectiveness, which is why progressive companies have recognised this factor and put in place training programmes that include not only adequate coaching techniques, but also gives the supervisor a clear understanding of how motivated, enabled staff deliver excellence of service to customers. An empowered supervisor can quickly pick up any changes to service-delivery demands; once these are understood the training programmes can be adjusted to support these changes and ensure the needs of the customers are constantly met.



## 6. Include 'other' skills

Front-line service employees add value not only through the technical knowledge and skills they possess but also through a range of service-management and other 'soft' skills. These may include:

- **Customer service training** which makes the employee more aware of the needs of the customer and to gain the ability to interpret what is required to meet this need.
- **Basic literacy training.** Most jobs today require the ability to read at a tenth- or eleventh-grade level. A significant group of front-line service employees are not able to read at this level and service providers increasingly need to provide basic literacy training in the areas of reading and mathematics skills.
- **General technology training.** New technologies have increased the need to upgrade and improve employees' computer and technology skills. This range from general and basic computer and mobile-phone skills-training to more advanced and specific technology training.
- **Interpersonal skill training** is necessary to work well with others. Most employees work in a team, and their performance depends on their abilities to effectively interact with others. Also many have daily customer contact and need communication skills to more effectively interact with customers.
- **Problem-solving training.** Today's employees often work as members of self-managed teams who are responsible for solving their own problems. Problem-solving training has become a basic part of almost every organisational effort to introduce self-managed teams.



- **Diversity training** increases awareness and builds cultural sensitivity skills. Many facility-management teams are quite diverse and awareness training tries to enable understanding and valuing of diversity. This training must be about the specific cultural differences in any particular workplace.

#### **7. Small segments – master a little at a time**

The training should be broken into as small segments as possible at the time. Research shows that most people cannot learn and apply many different things at once. If the programme is scheduled to take four days then many times it is better to spread the topics covered over a longer time period. This requires more planning and is administratively more difficult but the payback is much higher. It gives the employee time to take in one new skill and apply it before having to master a new one.

#### **8. Follow-up**

Research shows that learned material – regardless of whether or not this is new knowledge, skills or behaviour – is best remembered and successfully applied if there are structured follow-up processes. An effective training process should therefore include a structured follow-up programme.

The follow-up can be conducted in many ways. This can be a quick repetition of the material, a monthly refresher course, a 5–10 minutes reminder at weekly staff meeting, and more. Other ways could be: to distil portions of the training into slogans and images; including pieces of paper with a sentence or two about core knowledge in with paychecks can work well with a particular training; passing around a copy of a magazine article can help employees discuss and remember important information. The manager should also remind the employee about the purpose of the training whenever possible. Much training is lost due to lack of meaning associated with it.

#### **9. Evaluation of training programmes**

An important – and often overlooked – process element is the effective evaluation of the training programme. As detailed in the previous section, this must go beyond traditional satisfaction surveys and include structured evaluation of changes in employees' behaviour and changes in customer experience.

Most service providers fall short on this process element but many accept the need to improve. Anecdotal evidence also points to the fact that customers want to understand not just how training is designed and conducted but also how it is continually improved and upon what data this is based. Training and development will increasingly be forced to become evidence-based and this will also be the case for training front-line service employees.

# Conclusion

Service quality is the primary driver behind customer satisfaction. Because training is the single most important driver behind higher service quality, it is one of the most important internal processes for a company to get right.

Training increases customer value in two ways. This is firstly through higher productivity. Service productivity is the ability of a service organisation to use its inputs for providing services with a quality matching the expectations of customers. Training is one of the most important intangible qualitative inputs a service company has and therefore is the most important potential source of productivity gain.

The second way training directly affects the external service delivery is in helping employees get and stay engaged. Engaged employees stay longer in their jobs, are more productive, more service-orientated and have fewer days off work. In short, engaged employees provide excellent customer service.

For training to be effective, it must be designed and implemented through best-practice processes. A four-stage process will ensure effectiveness through: 1) analysis of strategic training needs, 2) design and development of the training programme, 3) delivery and implementation of the training programme and 4) measurement and evaluation of training outcomes.

The training process is only complete when the training outcome has been evaluated against its intended purpose and goals and this evaluation must be performed on a constant basis to improve the training programme. This requires a proper evaluation process. This critical step is many times described in most processes but not effectively executed. Evaluation of training can be conducted in many ways but only a few increase the effectiveness of the training programme; measuring the effect on the organisational performance evaluates whether the training programme 'was worth the investment'. Return on investment (ROI) is a simple but effective calculation to answer this question.

Most, if not all, service providers train their employees but only few do so in an effective way. Customers should therefore examine training processes carefully when choosing a service provider. This paper identifies nine best-practice steps any training programme should include, and which must:

- Be based upon customers' and employees' strategic needs.
- Use a variety of programmes, learning tools and methods.
- Involve the customer in the design and implementation phase.
- Use external providers to ensure best practice.
- Train and involve the immediate line managers who are critical to the success of training.
- Include "other" skills such as service skills, social skills, language skills and many more.
- Train in small segments – let the employees master a little at a time.
- Have structured follow-up processes to anchor the learning.
- Use effective evaluation and thereby constant improvement of training the programmes.

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