There has been increasing emphasis over recent years for organisations to be able to more strictly interrogate the return on investment of the training and development they offer to staff. Softer skills training such as leadership development can be seen as a ‘nice to have’ rather than an essential element, and harder skills such as project and risk management are often seen as a box ticking exercise, not always followed up in the workplace to assess effectiveness.

This article will discuss some of the techniques employed in both hard and soft skills training, in terms of delivery method, training design and evaluation, including the benefits and pitfalls of each approach. It will then explore which of these techniques and benefits could be transferred to other aspects of training and development for greater efficiency, demonstration of return on investment and the sustainment of skills.

Traditionally, hard skills training has been easier to quantify in terms of immediate impact – if you can successfully write a project plan or Gantt chart following project management training, consider the box ticked. But how is that learning sustained back in the workplace? Equally, for soft skills, the ability to manage conflict, conduct effective meetings and influence upwards are skills that participants can readily demonstrate back in the workplace, but how do you calculate a return in monetary or efficiency terms?

For example, building in training around the concept of influencing upwards and managing conflict as part of a risk management workshop could have a demonstrable impact not just on improving those skills but also in achieving sustainable behaviours back in the workplace to the benefit of managing risk. Essentially, demonstrating the impact of soft skills training on the productivity of teams and efficiency of the wider organisation can help secure budgets for essential management development in the future.

There is a place for both the soft and hard aspects of training and development as part of an organisation becoming truly agile. The benefits brought by hard and soft skills training do not have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, those cost-reduction, efficiency and change programmes that appreciate the need to use **Lean** to reduce cost, **learn** to skill up their staff to effectively manage the changes, and **lead** to empower managers and leaders to engage and motivate their staff, are far more likely to be effective, keep the shareholders happy and bring staff along with them. So how does this work as part of staff training?

Let’s first explore hard skills training, such as project management, risk management, financial skills and procurement. The outputs of these workshops or sessions are easily quantifiable and measureable – at the end of the workshop you have a template risk register that participants designed during the day. Great. All done and dusted. Box ticked.

There is real merit to this kind of training. It is consistent, has often...
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been refined after many years of being delivered in similar ways to similar people, and can often be more easily split into beginner, intermediate and advanced sessions. In terms of training design, an organisation can set very clear expectations of what return it wants to see, and can expect clear metrics around cost, time, value and risk mitigated – it is more of an ‘exact science’.

But what about the pitfalls? Hard skills training can tend to employ an attitude of ‘you’ve learned, now go and do!’ – but do they? It may be that the skills that have been developed during the workshop don’t need to be utilised in the workplace for several months afterwards and, with the dreaded ‘business as usual’ getting in the way, the passage of time can be very unkind to our memory!

These courses tend to result in new templates to monitor projects or risk but don’t necessarily result in better-managed projects or any reduction in the impact of risk. This is largely attributable to their lack of focus on the behavioural shift needed to manage complex projects, for example.

The format and design of hard skills training can also be a potential stumbling block for many learners. With an often rigid syllabus to plough through, the risk of ‘death by PowerPoint’ can be a very real possibility! This style of delivery can be a real turn-off, particularly when there is no opportunity to try out the tools and techniques being delivered in real time. There can also be little scope for moulding training to the needs of a particular group with this format, which may miss the opportunity to really tap into the needs of the participants and make it easier to apply to real projects back in the workplace.

Let’s now look at soft skills training. This includes subjects such as leadership development, conflict management and coaching skills. These can be run either as stand-alone workshops or as part of a wider management development programme. They can be targeted, experiential, build on real work issues and give participants the chance to share knowledge and experience with their fellow delegates.

The structure tends to focus on learning techniques rather than procedures and offers the opportunity to be introduced to a topic or model, discuss how it could be used, then have a go at using it in the safe environment of the classroom. This form of training tends to be done with smaller groups, allowing for greater discussion and evaluation of models to embed real understanding.

In having this opportunity to ‘learn, do, review’, and watch how others perform during these exercises, can give people a strong sense of self awareness in terms of their own and others’ behaviours. There is often that lightbulb moment of ‘oh so that’s why Joe and I don’t get on’, and the action planning following these sessions then gives participants the chance to discuss with the group and facilitators how they plan to take this new learning and discovery forward.

Looking at behaviours rather than at processes enables learning to be transferred back to the workplace. It is not a case of having to remember a strict set of procedures and rules but, in our experience, observing how the smallest change in the way you approach a difficult conversation, or ask a particularly clean coaching question, can really stick in a participant’s mind and make him keen to try it out back in the workplace.

So if soft skills training is so beneficial, why is it becoming increasingly diminished in priority under difficult budgetary circumstances? Research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development suggests that, of more than 600 organisations surveyed, 78 per cent of public sector managers had less money to spend on management training.

Reference
1. CIPD Learning and Talent Development Survey (2011)
in 2011 than in 2010 – and expected the trend to continue to the end of 2012.

It is simply harder to quantify a return on investment for many aspects of soft skills training. It isn’t seen to have an immediate impact on efficiency or on reducing headcount and, due to the smaller group sizes, can be an expensive way of delivering training. There has been a move, in the public sector particularly, to a more e-learning based model (most noticeably the government’s Civil Service Learning programme). There are certainly benefits to this approach, although largely generic and lacking in tailored content.

We will now explore how combining the benefits of approach, design and delivery of existing hard and soft skills training can further refine effective training methods and demonstrate their ROI.

Let’s first take a look at some of the constraints around hard skills training and how they could be overcome by learning lessons from soft skills training:

• rigid format not necessarily attuned to individuals’ learning styles and preferences
  We gather up-front information about why participants are there and what they want to get from the training. It can shed some light on some of the real issues people have around that subject – not simply what they want to learn about putting together a project plan or using the right kind of software, but perhaps the difficulty they have in keeping people to deadlines or influencing and managing upwards to get things done. This will enable them to challenge their thinking on how a particular tool or method may work in reality and how they could use this to better influence others

• not always structured in such a way that participants can transfer their learning back
  Berkshire Consultancy runs a number of managing supplier relationships, procurement and commercial SOR development programmes, traditionally ‘hard’ subjects, in which we have utilised many of the methods discussed in this article to positive effect. This has included building in influencing and conflict management sessions to a procurement workshop, and introducing assertiveness models to managing supplier relationships training. During project management training sessions, we encourage participants to think about what you do as a manager when things start to go wrong, how to manage the team, deal with difficult stakeholders and re-motivate a poorly performing team member. This means that, alongside method training in conducting procurement or writing a statement of requirements document, participants are also given essential skills in dealing with difficult situations, managing conflict and influencing potentially more senior stakeholders as part of the workshops

• can be difficult to demonstrate ROI following the programme
  To demonstrate a real ROI, organisations can send a small cohort of participants on, say, a risk management workshop, build in some skills practise and the opportunity

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to present to the group on a certain topic, and receive feedback from their peers and trainers. They can then take this back and deliver a similar level of training to those who may not need quite the in-depth session that they have attended. This saves money for the organisation, and also gives participants the chance to really demonstrate the depth of their understanding – as well as building in the importance of communication and presentation skills to really engage their teams.

And of course soft skills training is certainly not perfect and could learn a lot from its often stricter cousin! We identified earlier a number of issues around the delivery and embedding of soft skills training, and have some suggestions about how these could be overcome to regain the budgets so sorely needed to improve staff capability.

We work with the Institute for Leadership and Management to accredit our programmes, giving participants either full qualifications or credits to put towards further ones. As part of this qualification, participants write a report detailing how they have transferred their learning from the programme back into their organisations. These reports describe better engaged individuals, more efficient teams and more proactive and resilient leaders – all with a direct correlation back to the content of their development and training. This level of demonstrable ROI provides an excellent business case for continuing professional development.

You can attach some fairly rigorous key performance indicators at the outset to ensure you can track and realise the benefits promised.

We work with one large public sector organisation that was seeking to use leadership development to increase the numbers of a particular demographic within it at senior levels. This enabled us to specifically design the intervention to include secondment opportunities, presentations at board level and networking events to increase participants’ visibility. An added benefit was the increased visibility of the individual departments to the rest of the organisation – not a KPI to start with but certainly a real test of ROI.

We have explored the benefits and pitfalls of the traditional delivery and evaluation of hard and soft skills training, to see what lessons could be learned from, and applied to, each. What has been demonstrated is that there are some clear ‘quick wins’ to be gained by a level of tailoring and transfer of learning from hard skills training, and more rigour in the initial and review stages of a soft skills development programme.

With attention paid to all of these factors, in the future hard and soft skills training needn’t be an ‘either/or’ or a ‘nice to have’, but a fundamental aspect of the development of the leaders of tomorrow – with the ability to please the L&D department and the budget holders in equal measure! TJ