

How to Make the Business Case for Safety Training Programs: The Glenn Commandments



Worker training is arguably the most significant element of any workplace health and safety program. But it's also among the most expensive. To win financial support for a training program, you must be able to show your CEO that it's "worth the money." Historically, OHS coordinators have tried to make this case by arguing that training enhances the company's productivity and thus, ultimately, its profitability. And indeed it does. But the link is indirect and hard to quantify. So, you need to look for other arguments to persuade your CEO.

To start, you might want to look at an important study that explains why companies invest in training. What makes the study so valuable to OHS coordinators is how it reveals what persuades companies to spend money on training and, just as importantly, what doesn't. Here's a look at the study and how to use it to bolster your own business case for safety training.

Study Reveals Best Way to Get Companies to Invest in Safety

Training

Titled “What Convinces Enterprises to Value Training and Learning and What Does Not?”, the study unfolds in 2 stages. In the first stage, the authors interviewed the principles of 10 companies that placed a high value on training. Each of these companies had made a major investment in training programs and reaped handsome financial rewards. The authors asked them why they spent big bucks on training and why the strategy paid off.

In stage two, the authors interviewed 19 companies who were skeptical about the value of training programs. They told the skeptical companies about the successes of the 10 companies in stage one to see if it would persuade them to change their mind. In fact, the case studies of the 10 phase one companies had a dramatic impact on how the skeptical companies viewed training.

Companies Value Demonstrable Outcomes, Not Productivity

The study results revealed some surprising things about how companies value training. Management from all 29 of the companies in both stages reported that they wouldn’t spend money on training unless they were sure that they’d be “getting value” out of the time, money, and effort involved. That wasn’t surprising.

But what **was** surprising is how the companies defined “value.” The important takeaway for OHS coordinators is that none of the companies thought training was valuable because it improved productivity and profitability. “Enterprise profitability, even productivity, depends on so many factors . . . that it is difficult [for management] to isolate and identify. As a consequence, it is not where they look for

outcomes,” according to the study authors.

What the companies **did** see as constituting the value of training was outcomes that they could see with their own eyes, including demonstrable changes in:

- Workers’ behaviour.
- The way they do their jobs.
- The way they talk about their jobs.

How This Study May Help OHS Coordinators ‘Sell’ Safety Training

What does any of this have to do with you? What this study is suggesting is that management will invest in training even if it can’t directly measure how it will improve a company’s overall financial performance. Trying to show how much a particular training program will boost productivity and profitability is practically impossible. Thus, this study is great news for OHS coordinators because it suggests that you may not even have to bother making the attempt.

But that’s not all. The study also reveals what does persuade management to invest in training: case studies. Remember those stage two companies that didn’t think it was worth the time and effort to invest in training? All 19 of those companies changed their minds when they heard case studies about the successes of the 10 companies in stage one. Seven of those companies were so impressed that they decided to revisit their training programs; five were persuaded to at least try “snippets” of new training ideas; the remaining four companies said that while they weren’t prepared to make immediate changes, they would change their “approach.”

Case Studies May Be Your Best Ammunition for Persuading CEOs

One of the most important findings of the study is that when it comes to persuading CEOs, CFOs, and other corporate decision makers (which we'll refer to collectively as "CEOs") of the value of training programs, case studies are the most convincing evidence you can use. But be careful: Not just any case studies will work. The respondents stressed that the case study must be "honest and real" if it's to have any influence. What makes a case study "real"? The study cites 3 characteristics:

- **Balance:** The case study must tell the whole story of the training program experience, both the downsides and upsides.
- **Specificity:** CEOs want concrete details. It's the specifics that make the case study memorable and persuasive, they say.
- **Range of Evidence:** Perhaps surprisingly, CEOs responded best to case studies reporting the experience of companies from a range of industries and companies different from themselves.

Takeaway

OHS coordinators have been criticized for trying to use "soft" and "subjective" factors such as impact on behaviour rather than hard economic data to sell their programs. But, surprisingly, when it comes to training, evidence suggests that case studies illustrating the impact of training on the behaviour of workers at other companies work better than trying to quantify the link between the training program and profitability.