





# LEVELING THE LEVELS

As technology transforms learning, it also can advance how, when, and where evaluations happen.

BY ALLISON ROSSETT

When I ask workplace learning and performance (WLP) professionals about the levels of evaluation, they respond in near unison: “Level 1 is reaction, 2 is knowledge; 3 is behavior in the workplace; and Level 4 is results.” Regardless of the location, workshop, or conference, people involved with workforce learning can describe Donald Kirkpatrick’s work on evaluation. >>

>> **But just because they know about the levels, doesn’t mean they actually measure them.** A recent ASTD benchmarking forum study looked at course evaluations by level. While 94 percent of courses are examined for Level 1 and 34 percent are checked for Level 2, just 13 percent of courses are examined for Level 3, transfer of behavior. Only about 3 percent of courses reach Level 4, which measures influence in the field.

It isn't only ASTD that has noted the chasm between the many who articulate the levels and the few who practice them. Decades ago, Kirkpatrick himself pointed to a lack of action. In 1968, he and Ralph Catalanello measured how much evaluation occurred in 110 businesses. Most respondents (78 percent) reported that they actively question reactions to the learning experience; far less reported making progress in Levels 2, 3, and 4.

But instead of lamenting about learning and its influence on practice and outcomes, let's look instead at what is emerging today, and how changes in

Technology is changing the how, where, and when of learning.

In the past, the word training conjured up visions of a room with students and an instructor. Variety came from the number of students and the configuration of the seating. What is the fresh face of training? Here are several examples.

In Hamburg Germany, three corporate executives have turned to a Boston-based coach to help them make a presentation in English at a major international event. Before they meet online to practice their delivery, they listen to podcasts of similar speeches, review the coach's comments, and then



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learning grant an opportunity to rethink the ways we plan and measure.

### The new world of learning and performance

It is a new world for learning, and studies document it. Technology is playing a growing role in training and development. In 2000, almost 9 percent of courses were delivered through technology. By 2002, more than 15 percent were reported to be using technology for delivery. And by 2004, that number increased to 28 percent. While the Internet steadily advances how we gain knowledge and support, it also reduces the time participants spend with instructors in classrooms.

ASTD's 2005 State of the Industry Report (SOIR) described what BEST award-winning organizations are doing: "BEST organizations delivered 32 percent of all their learning content using technology. Approximately 75 percent of technology-based learning was online in 2004, and about 75 percent of online learning was self-paced."

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create drafts that are shared via email with each other and their coach. After the drafts are polished, the executives participate in a synchronous online meeting with their coach. Each executive delivers a speech and benefits from the immediate feedback from the group.

Certified public accountants are taking an online class about looming changes in tax regulation. They complete an e-learning module, refer to a searchable knowledge base, and chat online with each other and a coach who helps them apply the new regulations to clients' tax problems.

Another example is the United States Coast Guard. Boarding officers now learn to inspect ships and file reports by relying on a performance support tool on their personal digital assistants (PDAs). The PDAs go to sea with them and help them conduct better inspections and create more accurate, timely reports.

With sales representatives all over the world and experts in short supply, how do global pharmaceutical organizations roll out new products? Many now provide online briefings, sales scenarios, and databases with explanatory materi-

als for representatives and customers. They also schedule synchronous meetings so salespeople can discuss the product and disease state with an expert, and they provide materials for sales supervisors to use in face-to-face conversations with their representatives. Learning efforts and use of these tools are tracked in the corporate learning management system (LMS).

In another example, new supervisors at IBM turn to Basic Blue for their development. Basic Blue is a blended learning system, based on online self-assessments, vivid e-learning scenarios, an online community and mentor, and workshops. These new supervisors gain knowledge over time through structured learning and coaching experiences that are embedded in the challenges faced on the job.

Technology-enabled learning is making its way into the unlikeliest of locations, even the dugouts of America's national pastime. Sitting on the bench between innings at a baseball game, some pitchers review video podcasts for the batters due up in the next inning. If they are better able to tailor pitches to these hitters, it will be, in part, because their lessons are in closer proximity to the moment when they hurl the ball toward home plate.

Timing is another distinctive trait of technology-based learning and support. For example, pharmaceutical sales representatives use their laptops in the waiting rooms to bone up on new products and review objections just before they meet with doctors. Military veterans, also eager to get the most from their time with their physicians, now look to a website ([www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)) to prepare for appointments. The site clues them in on what questions to ask, new studies or medications related to their problems, necessary tests, and their medical histories. While these veterans still make and keep scheduled appointments with their caregivers, their health is managed informally through

the site's calendars that record effort and progress. It also offers presentations about disease states, and opportunities to chat online, look up information, and communicate with experts.

#### New world measurement

New forms of inquiry are required for development that will soon be characterized by on-demand growth, self-study, performance support, online communities, e-coaching, blogs, wikis, knowledge bases, e-learning modules, and blended learning. These are evolving forms. They make new demands on employees, supervisors, and executives. Here are five ways that these budding efforts will affect the workplace:

☒ **Erase the dichotomy between learning and work.** Training, historically, has worked like a switch. Employees were either in class or at work. They were not in both places at the same time.

Kirkpatrick's approach matched that historical reality. Levels 1 and 2 were conducted when employees were in class. They asked if participants enjoyed the class and learned the necessary information. Levels 3 and 4 measured transfer of learning to the workplace. They asked questions such as "Did employees do it on the job?" and "Did doing it matter?"

Ruhe Hao, quality and productivity engineer executive for Bank of America,

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makes this point, “Kirkpatrick’s four levels provided us a taxonomy of evaluation and measurement that emphasized learning transfer. When learners move to center stage, this transfer becomes less visible because learning is on the job, for the job, and very often, it *is* the job.”

As technology closes the chasm between learning and work, evaluation linked to defined time and place loses resonance. The levels are not levels or stages, and they do not necessarily happen in a fixed order. Questions are better asked continuously and idiosyncratically, as learning, support, and information are delivered when and where they are needed.

☒ **Integrate measurement with learning, support, and work.** Methods for judging worth and planning subsequent efforts belong when and where the action is. If e-coaching comes to a physician on her PDA or cell phone, then communication about it should occur on that device, immediately or soon after the advice is delivered.

The same is true for the Coast Guard boarding officers mentioned earlier. After the inspection, officers use software on their PDAs to create and file reports. Questions about value and improvement also should be there, baked into the assets, not an add-on for which permission to administer must be secured. Diana Wright, senior instructional designer at Welkin Associates, says, “What use is data that takes weeks to gather when the world is web enabled? The [Internet generation] won’t stand still that long!”

☒ **Go native to the process.** In ASTD’s 2005 SOIR, nearly all organizations reported that they carried out Level 1 evaluations. You can imagine why that number is so high: The forms are there, on the table or near the door. All class participants are asked to fill out an evaluation form before exiting the event.

There is no similar anticipation for field-based evaluation. In a 2006 study of the levels of evaluation for the eLearning Guild, Director of Research Joe Pulichino acknowledged the burden of gaining access to the field. His responding professionals said they lacked the time and right of entry to examine the

ultimate influence of their products and services. Chalk it up to the gulf between them and us, with learning in its place, and work in another.

As our world changes, and as learning and support mix in the workplace, inquiry can become native to the process. A select few questions can pop up on the screen, in the midst of an e-learning module, or an email can be triggered after access to the knowledge base or engagement with an e-coach.

A woman at a financial institution got it immediately. “A few questions are bolted on to the process,” she says. “That’s the way it works at Wal-Mart. As I finish my purchases and the credit or debit process is over, a few questions about cleanliness and service pop up. It takes nothing to respond, so I do.”

Western Michigan University Professor Robert Brinkerhoff’s successful case approach points to the value of a deep, narrow inquiry that examines a few employees, their experiences, and their stories about their growth and results. On the other hand, the learning LMS can enable a broader reach because of its ability to track engagement, action, contribution, knowledge, choices, satisfaction, progress, and next steps.

☒ **Appreciate appreciation.** WLP professionals routinely dismiss Level 1 as “just questions about reactions.” Oddly, the most frequent form of evaluation is unpopular.

If they are to benefit from workplace learning and support, however, employees must see the value in the assets that surround them. Appreciation is a prerequisite to voluntary participation. Workers must choose to look something up, chat with their online community, listen to a coach, use a performance support tool, work a case with a supervisor, or engage with an online learning module. If they doubt the benefits of those tools, do not share the priority, question the message, or find the system clunky—they won’t like it or use it.

☒ **Commit to doing it better.** Jeffrey Berk, director of products and services for KnowledgeAdvisors, asked practitioners why they measure. This is how he summed up their responses: “Organizations provide the results of their

learning analytics for many reasons. The most popular reason is to showcase the training's value to the organization. Another common reason is to indicate the quality of the training services provided. Additional reasons are because stakeholders request it or need to justify large expenditures."

Documenting contributions is but one motive for measuring. There are other pressing reasons, such as using system performance to improve the assets and program, providing feedback about results, usage, progress, and next steps, and planning subsequent initiatives.

Suppose you are the learning manager for a pharmaceutical company that is introducing a new product. You have decided to innovate. The experts will not be sent on the road. No more classes about the new product in hotels around the world. Instead, expert and sales-related messages have been captured in

e-learning modules, knowledge bases, and performance support tools. You have scheduled online, synchronous conversations so that salespeople can query product experts. You have developed briefings for sales supervisors to use.

It's been a big effort. Are you ready now to move to the next project? Do you dare to sit back and wait for the next quarter's sales numbers? I think not. You must inquire if the sales reps are using the resources or downloading the materials to send to their customers. You must find out if the salespeople are satisfying customers. Are salespeople and supervisors attending online conversations with experts? Are they adding ideas to the sales knowledge base?

How can you learn from this experience to make this effort and the next more effective? The time to know is now.

As other workforce learning professionals bring fresh services and

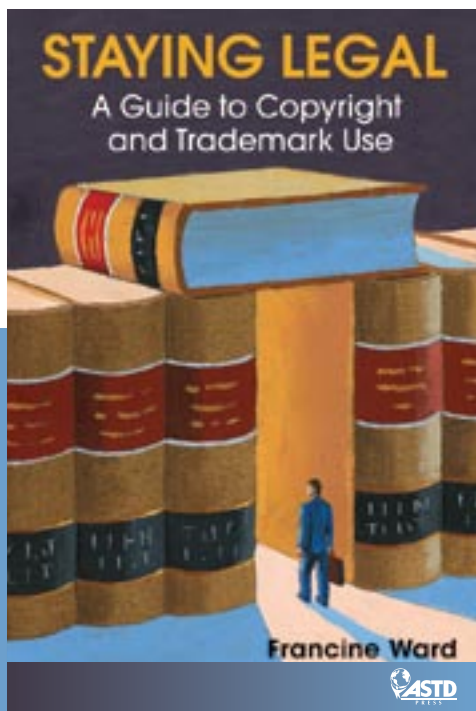
products into the workplace, they have questions that must be answered. No longer can they glance around the room and pat themselves on the back because people are present and engaged. They must use technology to help in counting, reaching, querying, and communicating.

Kirkpatrick's work has been the industry standard for half a century. But the numbers are in. Levels 3 and 4 languish. It is time to respectfully move forward, using this moment and these technologies to jump-start measurement smack dab in the middle of work. **T+D**

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