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Measuring the Business Impact of Your Learning Programs

How to Build a Framework That Evolves With Your Learning Activities

Thomas Patterson, *Content Specialist - Docebo*

Introduction

It's perhaps the biggest question for all learning and development departments: "How do we make a positive impact on the business through our efforts?"

Research from LinkedIn has found that CEOs most want to see the business impact, followed by ROI. The problem is, **only 8% of CEOs say they see the business impact from their L&D programs, and only 4% say they see ROI**.

The ROI Institute has outlined a methodology for calculating the return on learning and this has long been the standard perspective for trying to quantify the value of learning. The ROI Institute's 8-step framework is focused on identifying specific business measures that would change to showcase specific program value and impact. But this approach is centered around the idea of simply distributing learning as a standalone function, in a formal environment, with an expected result.

Unfortunately, the results of learning aren't always so clear-cut. It can happen anytime, anywhere and, most importantly, it's continuous – even if we don't realize it.

This guide will dive into a modern look at the 8 steps to achieve, measure, and optimize the impact of your learning programs, with actionable steps along the way.

The ROI Institute's Original 8 Steps

1 Start with Why

2 Make it feasible

3 Expect success

4 Make it matter

5 Make it stick

6 Make it credible

7 Tell the story

8 Optimize results

What's interesting to note is that these steps have been around for years and, in that time, there have been significant changes in our industry in terms of understanding how learning happens and how to tap into this to achieve learning outcomes.

Aligning The 8 Steps with Modern Learning

While we agree on the methodology behind these steps, there's an opportunity to align them with today's learning priorities – a modern approach that is tuned to the continuous nature required to make learning more effective in today's workplace.

Our basis for these steps is to look at learning programs as an opportunity for continuous improvement, rather than a linear process that starts at one end and stops at the other.

Each of our steps correspond to different stages of the continuous improvement loop, starting with planning and outlining the strategy, executing it, checking how it performed, and finally using that data to take action and improve what was done before.

1 Outline goals & embrace continuous learning

2 Identify the best approach

3 Know the impact you're looking for

4 Spur reaction & learning

5 Design for application & impact

6 Determine immediate impact

7 Provide a snapshot

8 Review & optimize

Aligning The 8 Steps with Modern Learning

"We need to create a stronger link between ongoing employee development and the measurable business impact. The more employees continue to learn, the greater their developmental potential and contribution to performance over time."

Michael Rochelle,
Chief Strategy Officer and Principal HCM Analyst, Brandon Hall Group

Step 1-3

PLAN

Step 4-5

DO

CHECK

Step 8

ACT

Step 6-7
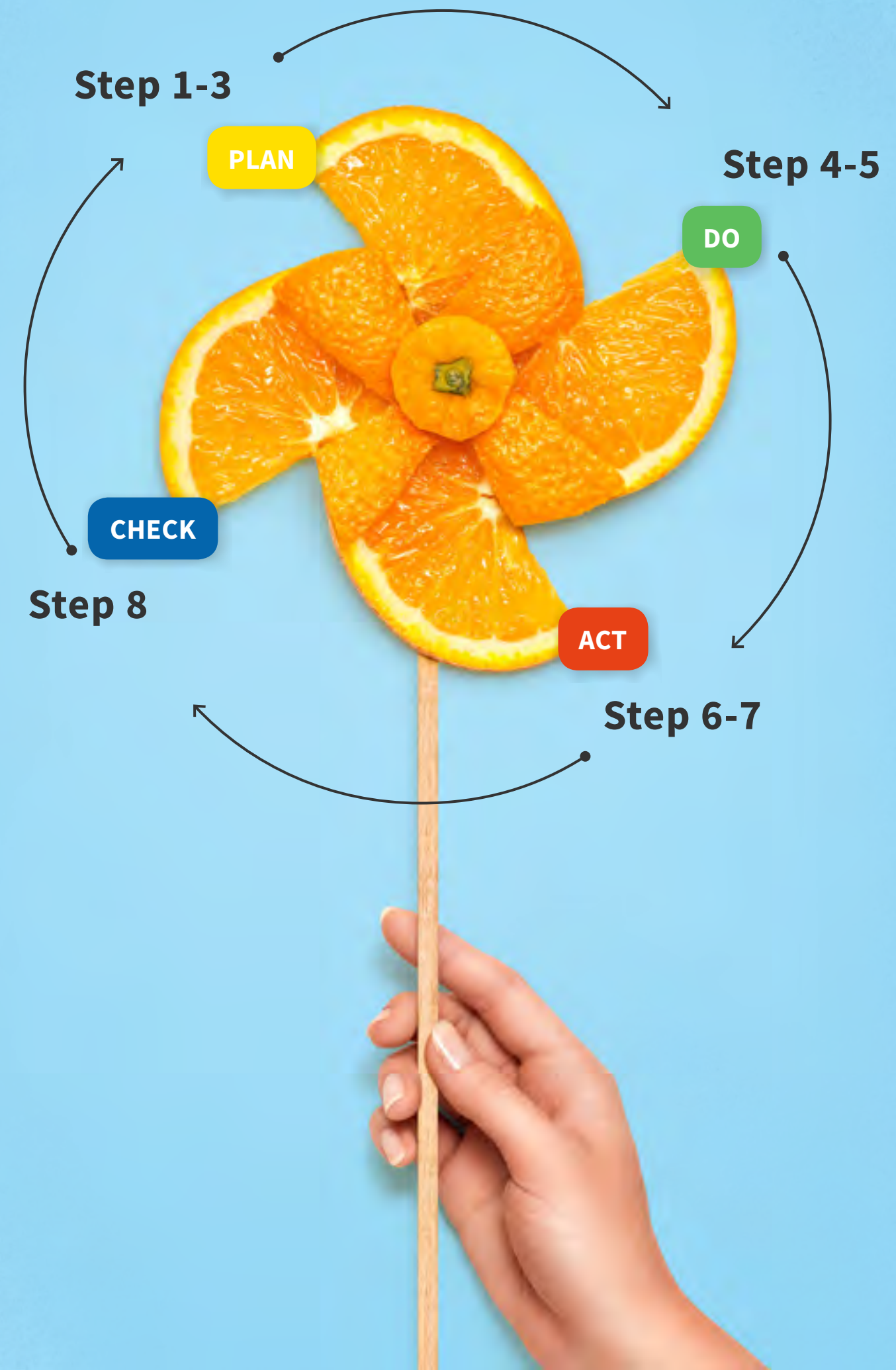
Step 1 - **Outline Goals & Embrace Continuous Learning**

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to defining your program's result. Instead, it's important to outline the goals you are working towards and, at the same time, embrace the continuous nature of learning.

In today's organizations, a person's career is no longer the end product of an education. Instead, a career is an education itself for workers, and it has to be a constant process of learning and development. The pace at which technology evolves means a skill may be outdated within a few years, so it's now essential to promote and enable ongoing learning opportunities.

When outlining goals, L&D professionals must also figure out what the rest of the business is measuring. You can do this by partnering with one of the business leaders in your organization, bringing your separate disciplines together, and asking how decisions about L&D impact business outcomes. It's important to communicate regularly with other business units to ensure the information you are providing continues to be relevant and useful.

This forces L&D to reinvent itself from being a trainer (and pushing courses on learners) to an enabler that leverages business-focused and technology-enabled ways to support workers (and how they work) to deliver business results.

40%

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Artificial Intelligence is expected to increase labour productivity by 40%.

60%

NEW GENERATIONS

By 2020, 60% of the world's workforce will be under 40.

85%

NEW JOBS

85% of the jobs that will exist in 2030 haven't been created yet.

Step 2 - **Identify The Best Approach**

Most L&D functions focus heavily on helping employees consume content: but when they focus instead on influencing the conditions for learning, their opportunity for impact increases. When we think about the optimal conditions, it leads us to this idea of learning in the flow of work.

When it comes to developing and executing a learning strategy, many companies continue to look at things completely upside-down. The vast majority of the learning delivered within organizations is through formal classrooms and e-learning courses, which only account for about 10% of the learning that occurs. Even within that 10%, retention rates for single, formal learning events are abysmal, with most learners leaving 90% of what they learn on the table (**The Forgetting Curve**).

The 70:20:10 model outlines a reality for how people learn on the job, no matter what the learning function does. This means companies need to realign their learning strategy to leverage, promote, facilitate, and find value in the informal and experiential learning that is occurring within the organization.

The other key consideration in adopting the framework is in its execution. It is not something designed to be a sequential rollout, where the formal class is delivered, some informal learning occurs, then the learner fills in the gaps on the job as they go.

Instead, it must be a blended, cyclical rollout where parts of the classroom or course experience are collaborative and informal. Then, the work environment (where the new skills and behaviors are demonstrated) must include collaborative elements, such as coaching and formative, on-the-job learning.

10%

FORMAL LEARNING

Structured courses.
Readings.
Outside the flow of work.

20%

SOCIAL LEARNING

Development through peers.
Collaboration.
In the flow of work.

70%

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

On the job learning.
Experience-based.
In the flow of work.

The Flipped Classroom

IN CLASS

OUT OF CLASS

OUT OF CLASS

BEFORE
LEARNING EVENT

Learners do pre-work, such as watching videos or reading resource material before the formal classroom event. They can also communicate and discuss the content ahead of time in a central platform.

DURING
LEARNING EVENT
(in-person or virtual)

Already have an understanding of the material and can begin collaborating on scenarios and problem-solving. Instructor acts more as a facilitator.

Source: The University of Texas at Austin

AFTER
LEARNING EVENT

Learners continue the discussion within the digital space with questions, insights, and feedback as they apply what they have learned.

HOW DO YOU SUPPORT THIS?

KEY LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS CORRELATED WITH HIGH-PERFORMING ORGANIZATIONS.

They support proactive learners - employees who take responsibility for their own development and seek out learning.

Provide easy-to-use tools that present employees with opportunities to connect to formal and informal knowledge sources throughout the organization.

Present each and every employee with opportunities for development based on personal strengths, weaknesses, job roles, or interest from sources that go beyond their immediate leaders.

Source: Brandon Hall Group

ORGANIZATIONS LOOKING TO SUPPORT LEARNING DIRECTLY IN THE FLOW OF WORK ARE:

4X more likely to report that they are responding faster to change.

3X more likely to report an improvement in staff motivation.

2X more likely to report a customer satisfaction increase.

Source: Towards Maturity

DOCEBO COACH & SHARE

From a solution standpoint, we need to move away from pigeonholing learning technology as simply an LMS that delivers courses. Extending learning into the flow of work requires a social learning element that becomes a destination for people to ask questions, solve problems and share insights.

Docebo Coach & Share provides users a means for fluid, informal knowledge transfer and feedback from internal experts to support learning as it happens. Learners can engage in discussions with subject matter experts in an online, always-accessible environment so that learning becomes a 2-way conversation.

Learners can also create and upload their own content - maybe a short video showing how they complete a common task, which is then reviewed by experts, before being shared with the organization. Other learners can watch and leave further insights in the comments, helping to foster a culture of knowledge sharing.

LEARN MORE ABOUT DOCEBO COACH & SHARE

Step 3 - **Know The Impact You're Looking For**

Continuous learning needs continuous feedback. People are learning all the time and we need to find out if they're getting better. Measuring the impact of informal learning is not that different than measuring more traditional types of learning. Here's what you should be asking:

THE BASICS

- How many people participated in the program?
- Did they like it?
- How did they do on the assessments after participating?

INFORMAL-SPECIFIC

- Which learners are participating the most?
- Who do people turn to most often for information?
- What content is getting shared the most?
- What are people searching for?

PERFORMANCE

- Are people better at their jobs after participating?
- Are learners getting to competency or optimal productivity faster since the informal learning program was initiated?

These metrics give an organization insight into how learners are using informal tools as well as how effective they are, because effectiveness isn't just dictated by completion - it's about assessing if there was a behavioral change. You want to be looking at whether an action was taken because of what they learned.

WHAT TO UNCOVER AT EACH LEVEL OF THE KIRKPATRICK MODEL:

LEVEL 1 **REACTION**

- Relevance and importance to the job
- Coach's effectiveness
- Recommendation to others

LEVEL 2 **LEARNING**

- Uncovering strengths/weaknesses
- Translating feedback into action
- Involving team members
- Communicating effectively

LEVEL 3 **APPLICATION/ IMPLEMENTATION**

- Complete and adjust the action plan
- Identify barriers and enablers
- Show improvements in skills

LEVEL 4 **IMPACT**

- Productivity/efficiency
- Retention of key staff
- Customer satisfaction

We'll talk more about how to get these tangible insights in Step 6. But by first understanding what the impact of your learning programs should look like, you have a clear idea of what to base your initial outcomes against.

Step 4 - **Spur Reaction & Learning**

Engagement requires an emotional connection between content and the learner – the only way to do that is by knowing what drives people to put time, effort, and energy into learning your content.

It's not just keeping learners busy, it's keeping them motivated by giving them the tools they need to learn, and helping foster a sense of pride in achieving personal goals.

When they're committed to learning without a reward other than learning itself, they're engaged.

When learning takes place outside the confines of a single-person bubble (i.e. it's not pushed from the top down, but happens organically), it's more likely to be retained and this is where content plays a key role.

An effective way to enhance engagement is to embrace and leverage user-generated content.

User-generated content (or UGC) is everything now in digital content. Yelp reviews, Facebook and Instagram posts, YouTube videos - the list goes on. And it works because people want in.

Today we are craving a role in media and we're focused on experience. Think about the way that brands are now targeting influencers on social media to create content and post about it on their blogs, Instagram, etc. rather than sticking to typical top-down marketing strategies.

Not only do people want to engage and contribute, but from the perspective of someone who receives that content, people are more effectively reached and engaged through user-generated content.

In a corporate learning context, seeing assets created by your peers about their experiences helps establish trust, connect people, and prove relevancy, rather than serving up generic content.
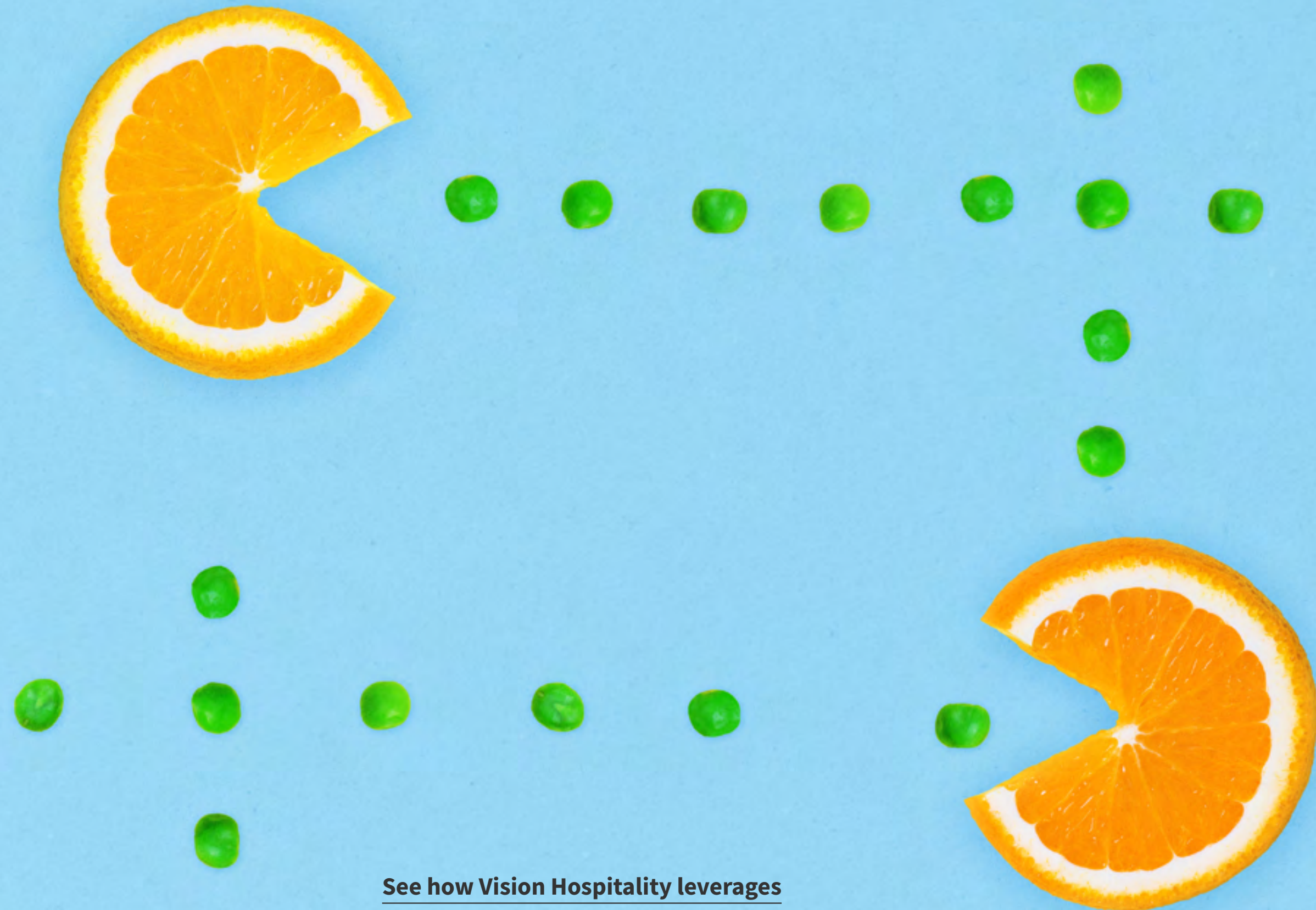
See how Vision Hospitality leverages user-generated content for their learning activities.

Step 5 - **Design For Application & Impact**

How do you make sure learning will stick and have an impact? Where's the best place to start? Go to the source - your learners!

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Surveys: a great way to determine how a group of learners have responded to a specific formal training activity – and whether or not they found it effective. They can be particularly useful in helping you wean out activities that aren't connecting with your learners, while helping you pinpoint the types of activities that are.

Questionnaires: usually more detailed than surveys and can be used to uncover a wide variety of data in open-ended and forced-response options.

Action plans: developed through feedback on the program and implemented once the program is completed. Following up with an additional survey once the action plan is put in place helps you to understand the impact a specific activity is having and whether or not a learner (or group of learners) have applied it on the job.

Performance monitoring: particularly useful where various performance records and operational data are monitored for changes.
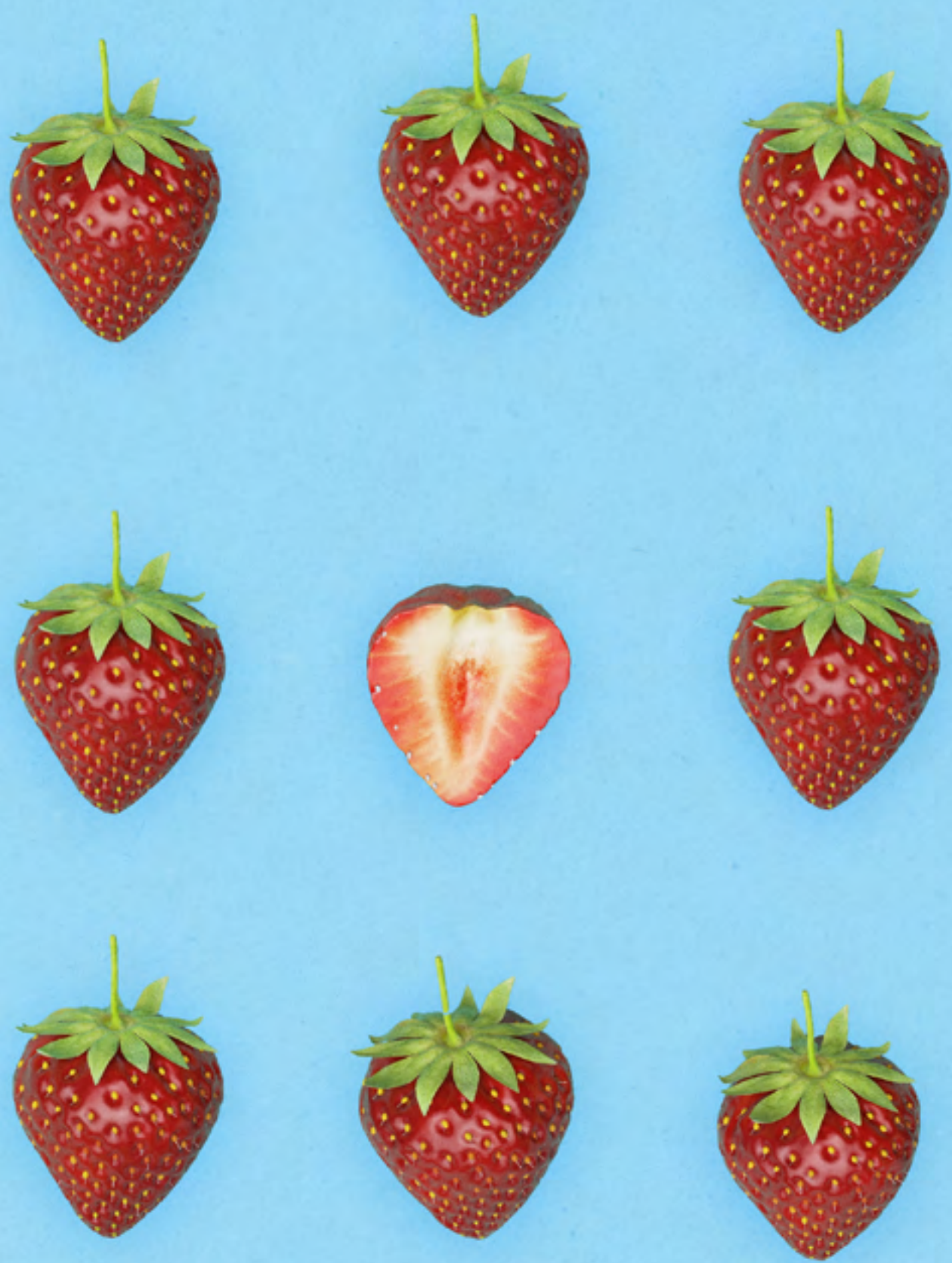
HOW DO YOU GET RESPONSES?

Improving response rates is critical for post-learning program data collection. When used consistently, the following techniques can achieve a 70-80% response rate for questionnaires and surveys.

• Provide advance communication about the follow-up data collection. Let your learners know there will be a simple evaluation involved from the get-go.

• Clearly communicate the reason for the evaluation and how the data will be used e.g. 'this will help further improve our learning efforts going forward to ensure you are as best equipped for your roles as possible' - tell them that this is ultimately beneficial for them. The better and more informative their responses are, the more insights and actions can be taken to improve their experience.

• Keep things simple (and as brief as possible)

• Keep responses confidential - this allows people to be more open and honest with their feedback - it's still important that they are not anonymous because you can then assess the individual impact and ongoing activities.

Step 6 - **Determine Immediate Impact**

After a training course, approximately 80% of the participants are satisfied. But only 42% actually implement what they have learned. After coming back to the workplace, people often get caught up in their daily life. Making the decision to change requires motivation, support, and the right methodology.
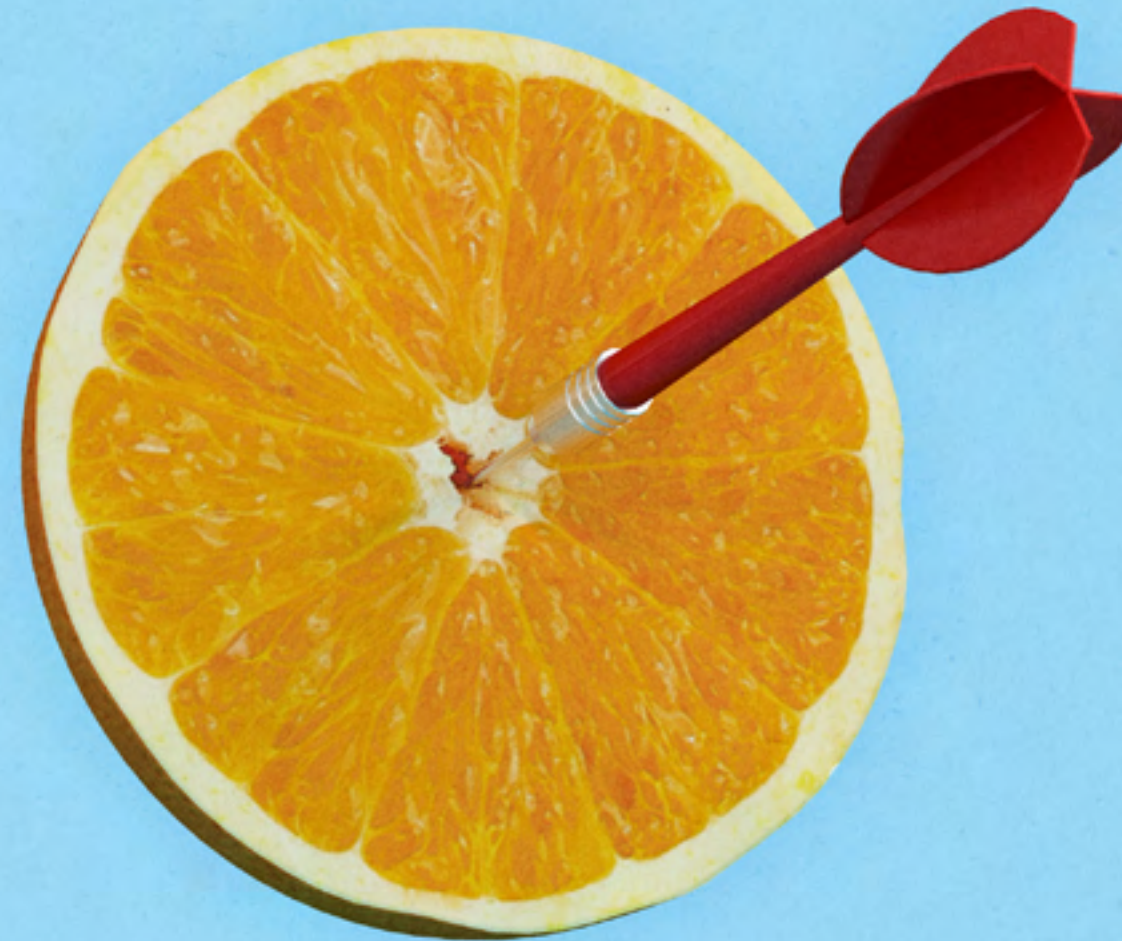
The learning evaluation step becomes critical at this stage to determine the immediate impact and to form the baseline for what you will work with in further determining impact down the road.

Some of the learning impact tools available can be integrated with your learning platform, giving you access to learning surveys so admins aren't spending their time building new surveys for each learning program. These are automatically sent out to learners allowing them to voice their feedback on course content, structure, design and more.

WHEN IT COMES TO SURVEYS, SOME IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK ARE:

- **What elements will you be able to use from your training?**

- **Do you think this will have an impact on the quality/ efficiency of your work?**

- **If so, how?**

These items are useful for L&D because they showcase the actual intention of learners following training. Learning evaluation tools can analyze these responses and produce reports highlighting which activities are deemed relevant and which are less applicable to what the learners will be doing in their roles.

This also helps to identify what content and modalities are resonating with learners, for example, you may see that a 30-minute video isn't being viewed to the end but shorter 5-minute videos are receiving positive engagement.

If you connect survey responses to a particular group of learners in a certain role, this will help identify what an effective learning path will look like e.g. what topics to cover and best methods to use in order to address particular knowledge/skills for that audience.

Then, as an admin, you use this information to build action plans and learning paths, and this becomes your benchmark for ongoing activities.

By further looking into the information you gather from learners here, you also start to figure out where you should be expecting direct impact going forward.

If we think about Step 1 and outlining your goals while embracing continuous learning, you can make a direct link to what you have set out from here.

The immediate impact should be tracking towards the goals outlined and the continuous improvement and refinement (both of the program and the learner's skills) can be addressed by following up with further learning evaluation activities. Eventually, you want to go over and above the initial objectives.

Step 7- **Provide a Snapshot of Your Learning Impact So Far**

By now, we know that learning is a continuous exercise. When it comes time to communicate the outcomes of your learning program, instead of searching to pinpoint an exact result to a specific action, it's a good idea to outline what you have done in Steps 1 to 7 and then provide a snapshot of where things stand right now.

YOU CAN DRAW ON THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT DATA YOU COLLECTED IN STEP 6 AND USE THIS AS THE FOUNDATION TO SAY:

"This is what we have seen so far and this is prompting us to take actions 'X' and 'Y'. We will continue to refine the program and go over and above our objectives and goals."

Learning's impact should not be determined by a set destination.

You must also recognize that the impact to the business isn't always as simple as outlining what went right or what didn't work, it's also about knowing what needs to be improved.

Using data to establish an action plan that never stops - a continual cycle of taking action, gathering feedback, and finally, further refinement - will close known and potential gaps down the line. Consider onboarding as an example: what if you uncovered how satisfied new hires are with their onboarding experiences? What did they find useful (or not)? How do we extend those insights not just to future onboarding efforts, but also wider L&D functions such as professional development and retention, or even compliance training?

The answer lies in understanding the continual process required to achieve it, how the results are meant to be refined, and how technology enables that with minimal manual effort.

Step 8- **Review & Optimize**

Step 1-3

PLAN

DO

Step 4-5

CHECK

ACT

Step 8

Step 6-7

The value of those initial learning evaluation activities is only realized when you circle back to continue the conversation. It's important to bring the learner into the discussion of how they want to improve.

That means coming back to the learner and following up on their initial answers when you first determined the immediate impact.

A follow-up survey will be necessary 1-3 months later, and could include questions such as:

"You believed the following elements to be useful… - were you able to use them since then?"

"Evaluate to what extent or not you've applied what you've learned on the job."

Now, you can look at the data collected at this stage and compare
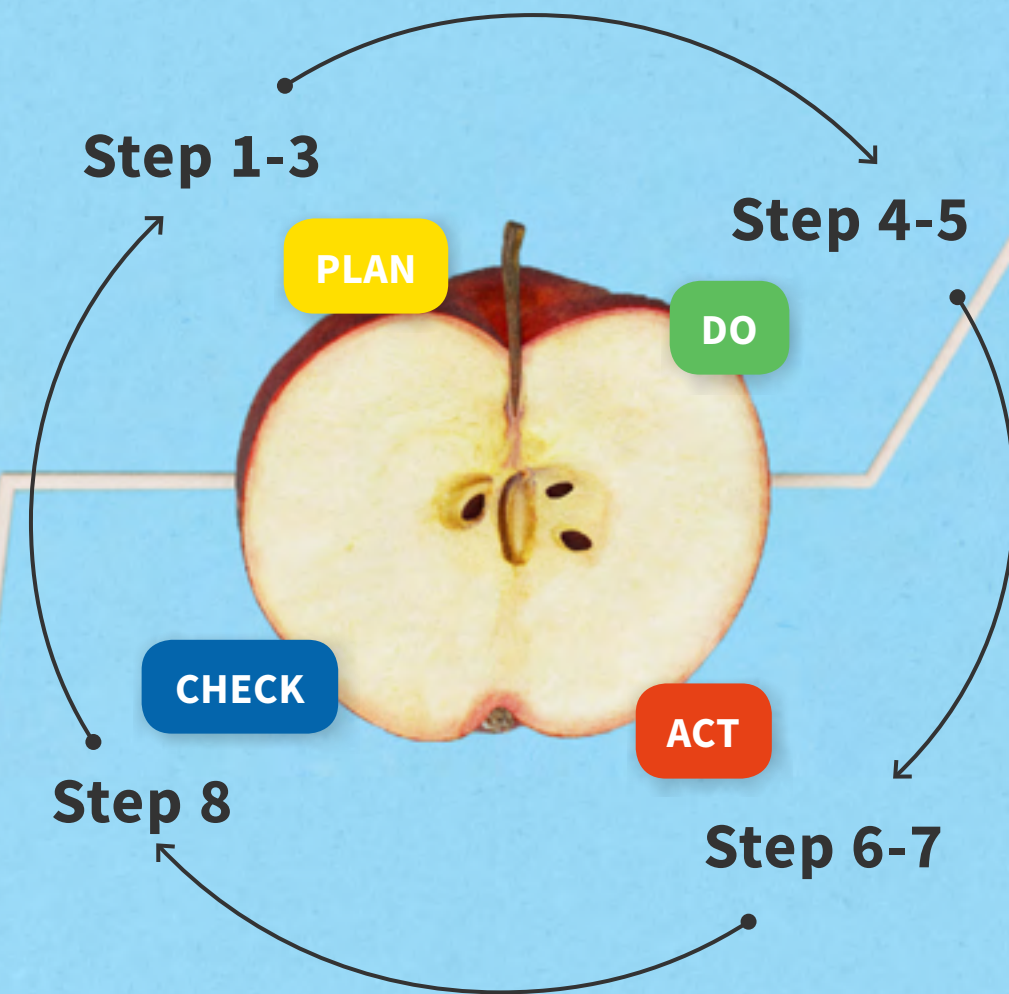
it to benchmarks derived from Step 6. You could also compare the results to responses from people taking the same course. Use this information to review and optimize the action plan for each learner.

For example, you may have a learning plan of A-B-C-D-E. But, based on survey responses, in some instances it could be more impactful for learners to start at step A, and then skip to D and E, based on competency levels. Understand how people are moving along that journey and adapt to match their progress so they aren't completing courses they don't need to.

Additionally, artificial intelligence has the potential to influence this process by analyzing results to determine an optimal learning path based on competencies in certain areas. Learner's skill gaps then become apparent and the AI-powered learning platform can suggest content to help bridge those gaps. Based on the learner's behavior, AI would continue to refine what it serves up to them.

"Employers want productivity and a commitment to results, and employees want interesting work, recognition and professional growth. Organizations today don't just need learning content that's tailored to an employee's needs and interests, but a learning technology platform that delivers that content in the way and at the pace at which the employee learns best. In fact, by 2021, at least half of LMS customers will be planning to replace systems that lack the ability to personalize and contextualize the learning experience.

The employee journey is rarely linear and predictable, as it is basically the intersection of an organization's business drivers with an employee's personal drivers, both of which can be quite fluid."

Steve Goldberg,
VP and Research Director, HCM, Ventana Research

There Is No Set Destination

Indeed, there is no singular way to determine business impact in your learning programs, because every organization is working towards different goals. Establishing a framework for how you can reach those goals, however, will not only help you answer the question of "how does learning make a positive impact on the business?", but also help uncover opportunities for continued improvement. By working through the steps outlined here, organizations begin building the foundation for a culture shift in how learning is viewed and carried out. This enables your learners to embrace your initiatives and engages them to keep the momentum going.

Make Learning Your Competitive Advantage

Trusted by more than 1,600 companies worldwide, the Docebo Learning Platform brings together the enterprise LMS you need, the social learning experience your learners want, and the power of Artificial Intelligence to make learning your competitive advantage.

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