

Robert Brinkerhoff

Professor Emeritus, Western Michigan University
Senior Consultant, Advantage Performance Group
Richland, Michigan

Brinkerhoff, a former naval officer, is well-known for his innovative ideas on training evaluation, including high-impact learning and the Success Case Method, which measures the effectiveness of training by focusing on the least and most successful learners. Many well-regarded companies such as Bank of America, Cisco Systems, Dow Chemical, and State Farm Insurance have adopted the Success Case Method.

Brinkerhoff published his first book on training evaluation in 1983, after earning his doctorate in program evaluation. At the time, he was teaching at Western Michigan University and doing consulting work on the side. Since then, he has published multiple books in the field including his most recent, *Courageous Learning*, co-authored with Tim Mooney. This year's recipient of the annual ASTD award for distinguished contribution to workplace learning and performance, Brinkerhoff is currently in the process of transferring his intellectual property to two firms.

Q: What was your first job, and what lesson did you take away from it?

After I graduated from college, I joined the Navy, and went to officer candidate school. My first real job there was as a training officer. I saw that training really could work. I also saw an awful lot of training that didn't work. People would go off, get trained for a week or two, come back to their base, and their commanding officer would tell them: "You know, there are two ways we do things, the way we do 'em here and the way you learn 'em in training."

One of the lessons I got from that was that no matter how good the quality of the instruction was, the training might not work. I began to see subconsciously that context had everything to do with whether training worked or not. You had to design the instruction well, but it didn't mean you were going to get results from it. That was a fundamental lesson, and I didn't really understand it until years later.

Q: How did you become interested in training evaluation work?

In graduate school, I got very involved in anti-poverty and working with inner-city kids. I was very committed to social action and social justice. I saw that the problems there were just so immense.

I started to study program evaluation as a result of that. It struck me that you have to find out what was working and what was not, and dig the gems out. I began to understand the power of evaluation as a learning process and a learning tool.

As I worked with these programs in schools in Philadelphia and New York City, I could see how people really started to make a difference. So often these people would go home exhausted, at the end of the day, and wonder, "What difference did I make?" Evaluation was giving them the feedback. We would tell them stories of how they were really changing the lives of kids, and it not only helped them see what they had to do more of, but it was also motivating to them and to myself as well.

Q: Tell us about the research history behind the Success Case Method?

I did my doctorate and all my graduate school assistantships in evaluation, and I was doing evaluation of all these big national and federal programs. I saw that so much of that evaluation work never got used. These reports got reviewed by a congressional committee, and then they went ahead and made the decision that they were going to make anyway.

I saw the same thing going on in the training and development industry companies as I got involved in the private sector. People were doing evaluation because they felt they had to, and they never did it in a way that was useful to them to help guide action.

That's when I began to see all the ROI methodologies emerging. We asked, "what's the ROI of all this ROI stuff?" We asked people, "What did you do with the data? You spent \$100,000 getting this ROI study done."

They said, "Well, we reported to the senior management."

We'd then ask, "And so, what was the result of that?"

To which they responded, "We got our budget approved."

But it was like looking at a rear-view mirror, and it didn't tell them what they needed to do better. So we started thinking, if you were doing a evaluation in a way that was really going to guide your future rather than just tell you where you've been, how would you do it?

Just from evaluating hundreds of training programs around the world, I was learning that my training worked, not just because it was good, but because it was used well and supported in organizations.

The research showed that too often people were evaluating the training when what they needed to be evaluating was whether the training was getting used or not, and why. Because the failures of training were so rarely explained by failures of the training itself, we changed the focus with the Success Case Method. We didn't use it to evaluate the training, we used it to evaluate how well the company was using the training to get results.

After what was probably 10 years of research, we finally came up with what was not only a quicker and easier method of getting results but it was actionable, and people could make better decisions about using training resources in a way that would pay off.

Q: What is a future change you'd like to see in the field of human performance improvement?

Throughout the last 30 or 40 years, learning and development in organizations has really matured so that it is often its own function. There are corporate universities and training departments.

There's an implicit myth that's gone along with that growth and success, which is that you can delegate accountability for results from training to the training department. The reality is that it's the whole organization's responsibility to get results from training. It takes action from senior leaders, line managers, the trainees themselves, and the training department.

That also leads to some corollary changes that training has to be operated as a process. What you do before the training and after the training accounts for more of whether it works or not, and whether the training itself is any good. That involves accountability and responsibility from people outside the learning function. It means, for example, that managers have to hold their trainees accountable for using training.

Another corollary is that companies need to start using evaluation constructively, not as a way of defending the budget or proving their value. They need to use evaluation to teach the organization what training worked, why it worked, and who did what to make it work, so that senior leaders can begin to relearn the lesson that they also have to do things to make training work.

Q: How do you think context can dramatically affect the impact of a company's training programs?

About 20 years ago, I was working with a small group of people doing evaluations. We contracted with different training centers such as DDI and Blanchard Learning.

We began finding that we could go into company A one week and do an evaluation of the impact and business value they were getting from using one of these vendor supply training programs, and the next week, we'd go into company B, that was using exactly the same training program, training with exactly the same trainers, and using the same materials, but one company was getting great results and the other company wasn't.

Even more poignantly, we found that even in the same class of people in the same course, you could find one person that went back and used the training really well and another person who didn't do anything with it.

One time, I followed up with two people who were both very bright, young, emerging leaders. They had both aced the test in the training. They both reported on their evaluation that it was the best training they'd ever gone through.

When I followed up with both of them, I found that one of them was just doing phenomenal with the training—using it in many different ways, improving performance, and doing a great job with it. I went and followed up with the other person, and not only had he done nothing at all with the training, but he was getting totally demotivated, and was, in fact, looking for a different job. How can you have two people that learned the training well, looked forward to using it, and then had such different results?

The differences were explained by the relationships they had with their managers, and the extent to which their managers had prepared. One of them had been forced to go to the training, and he had to give up taking his son to a baseball game on his birthday with his friends in order to go to the training. So there were all these context factors that just doomed the training for the one person, and absolutely turned the training into phenomenal results for the other. I think that experience really changed my view of things.

When I went back to the company and they wanted the evaluation done in order to see what they would have to do to get better results, I said, "Well, you need more managers like Employee A's manager, and you need fewer managers like Employee B's manager. That will make all the difference." There was nothing wrong with the training. The reason it worked is all because of the leadership of one person.

Q: What inspires you to continue learning?

As I'm approaching the end of this career working in the corporate environment, I think what inspires me is going back to working with families and schools again. I'm starting to get involved in antipoverty efforts and working with some immigrant families in the community, and it's inspiring me to learn more about what everyday people have to do to make a difference.

Q: Are you working on any new books or projects?

I'm working a lot with Advantage Performance Group and BTS, a Swedish-owned training company that's bought Advantage Performance Group. I've partnered with them, and we've created a user group of about 50 companies, and we've done the high-impact learning and the Success Case Method. These are companies like Dell Computers, Nike, 3M, and Kellogg, and I've been training them and working with them to form a user group. It's now two years old. We're really seeing a lot of progress people are making.

Q: How do you enjoy spending your free time?

I'm working hard to make more of it. I want to start growing more of my own food. I have 10 acres of land here in a rural part of Michigan, so I'll be expanding the garden. I'm getting back into music; I used to play folk music in bars. I'm also an avid tennis fanatic so I play a lot of tennis.