

 WHITE PAPER

Guide to Reducing Scrap Learning

Scrap learning—the failure of learning transfer



By Kieran King

VP, Global Customer

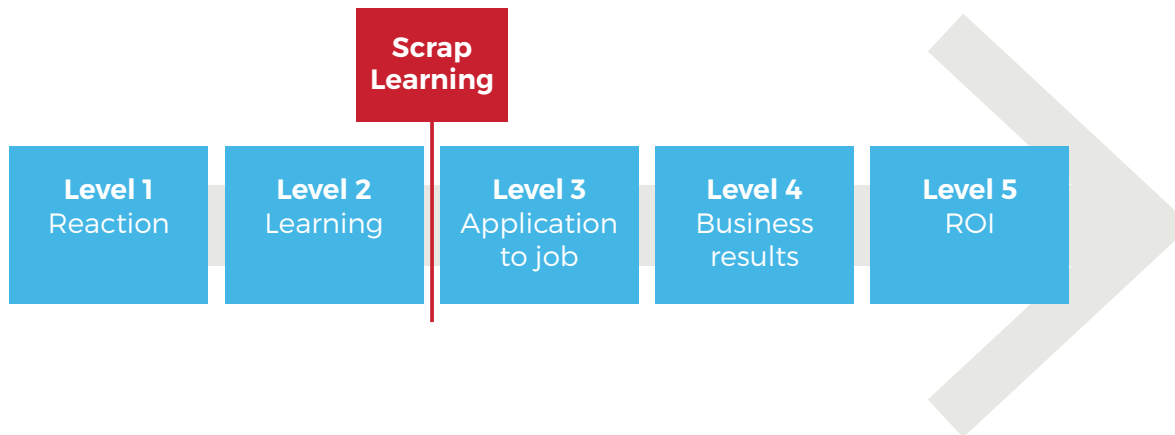
Insight, Skillsoft

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

L&D professionals can ensure that they are maximizing their return on investment. Taking the time to implement strategies to reduce scrap learning will have a powerful impact on both business performance and the bottom line.

Scrap learning—learning which is successfully developed but not applied on the job—comes with high costs. When your employees can't put what they've learned into practice, time and money is wasted. Skillsoft's VP, Global Customer Insight, Kieran King explains, "The failure of learning transfer costs companies millions of dollars a year in wasted expenditures and probably several times that in lost opportunities." When scrap learning rates are high, there can also be a cost to the L&D team's reputation. Despite the fact that reputational harm can be hard to quantify, there is no doubt that one of the challenges the learning industry faces is its proving its ability to raise performance and contribute to impact.

In the Kirkpatrick/Phillips five levels of learning evaluation, scrap learning is the casualty of achieving level two (the intended skills have been gained), but level three (application of the skills to the job) is not achieved.



What's a reasonable industry benchmark for scrap learning? Several studies have been conducted that can give us a range of what a typical scrap learning rate is. CEB Metrics that Matter, uses its benchmarking capabilities within its Metrics that Matter software to monitor scrap learning rates as well. Their Metrics that Matter software correlates any learning not applied to the job within a six week period as scrap learning. Their current average scrap learning benchmark is 45%.¹

SIZING SCRAP LEARNING'S EFFECT

To provide an example of the implications that this has for budgets, take a \$1M learning budget and a 45% scrap learning rate. That equates to \$450,000 in unrealized training potential. In a \$10M learning budget, that could mean as much as \$4.5M scrap learning.

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Kieran King, VP, Global Customer Insight, Skillsoft

¹ Scrap Learning—Your Programs Are Not As Good as You Think They Are, John R. Mattox, II, Ph.D. CEB Metrics that Matter, 2015

A modest reduction of ten percent in scrap learning would mean a \$100k impact for the \$1M budget and a \$1M impact to the \$10M budget. These are definitely numbers that command attention.

An organization cannot manage a reduction in scrap learning without first measuring its current scrap learning rate. While it may seem complex at first glance, measuring scrap learning is actually easier than you think. Following the CEB Metrics that Matter definition, scrap learning is the sum of learners who report that they applied the training within a six week period, subtracted from one hundred.

As you evaluate your key programs, ask learners how quickly they were able to apply what they learned to the job. The response options that are typically used include:

- 1 week
 - 2-4 weeks
 - 5-6 weeks
 - "I have not applied the learning yet."
 - "I don't intend to use what I learned."
-  **Scrap learning responses**

Then, the responses are compiled, sum the results of the first three response options together as a percentage of all responses, and then subtract that figure from 100%. As an example, if the sum of a program's first three responses represented 40%, then the scrap learning rate is 60%.

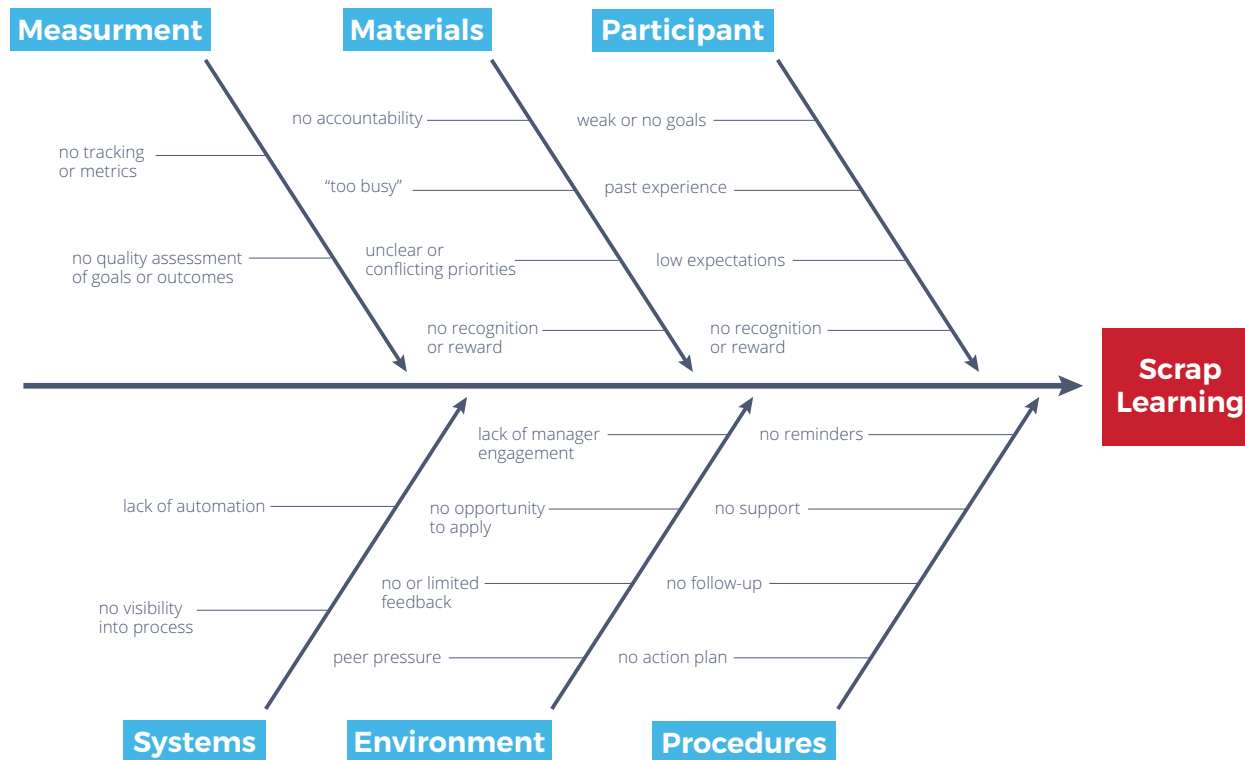
With Skillsoft, 86% of learners report that they will be able to apply what they have learned within six weeks. That means that the Skillsoft scrap rate is a remarkably low 14%.

If respondents reply that they have not applied the learning yet, or they do not intend to use what they learned, a follow-on question to understand why is essential. It is here where you will likely uncover the main barriers that prevent learning application. At Skillsoft, we ask the application question within our Impact Analysis studies and we have a conditional question that pipes into the survey if the learner selects one of the two scrap learning responses. Year after year, the same two reasons for scrap learning have surfaced:

- Learners are “too busy” and lack the time they feel they need to apply their new skill
- No immediate opportunity to apply the learning presented itself

An important tool in the process improvement discipline is the cause-and-effect diagram, which is also called a “fishbone diagram” because it resembles the skeleton of a fish. Plotting influential factors out this way helps an organization identify the causes of a problem. The figure below illustrates a poor learning transfer environment. The arrow forming the “backbone of the fish” points toward the effect-learning transfer failure or scrap learning. The “ribs” of the diagram are the possible contributing causes. All these factors do not necessarily contribute to learning transfer failure, nor are they the only possible categories, but they are the common ones that can help an L&D team diagnose the chief factors.

POOR LEARNING TRANSFER ENVIRONMENT



As we look at this diagram, two things are implied:

- First, multiple factors can contribute to a low rate of learning transfer. Therefore, the solution to the transfer problem will have to be multifaceted.
- Second, in most organizations there is no formal process for managing learning transfer. One of the first steps to remediate would be to define a procedure for managing transfer that can be subsequently improved.

Keep in mind that while this advice takes a process-driven approach toward improving learning transfer, it does not assume that developing people will ever be as predictable as manufacturing a product. That being said, striving toward process excellence must be a focus of any organizational improvement effort—including learning. There is ample evidence that taking a process approach to learning transfer can improve outcomes, reduce scrap, and increase the benefit of learning for the organization. No organization can afford to do nothing about a learning transfer problem.

HOW CAN AN ORGANIZATION IMPROVE ITS LEARNING APPLICATION RATE?

Skillssoft has observed five best practices for enhancing the application of learning while decreasing the risk of scrap learning.

The practices are:

1. Embed learning into the workflow
2. Ensure quality content
3. Reinforce learning
4. Align learning
5. Enlist greater manager support

GUIDE TO REDUCE SCRAP LEARNING

1. EMBED LEARNING INTO THE WORKFLOW

Since 70-80% of learning occurs on the job, it stands to reason that learning should integrate seamlessly into one's daily work. "Don't solely rely on learners consciously making a decision to learn and find what they need," King cautions. In addition to making learning available via a corporate learning management system (LMS), she advocates blending relevant learning into the workflow through business applications, SharePoint, intranets, and email. Learning must fit an employee's schedule—breaking information into manageable chunks makes it more accessible and efficient.

2. ENSURE QUALITY CONTENT

Look for current content from credible sources. Content should be performance-oriented and accommodate a variety of different learning styles and preferences. Sound instructional design includes observation, modeling, interactivity, assessment and practice. John R. Mattox, PhD, from the Corporate Executive Board Metrics that Matter, stresses the importance of appropriate technology. "Learners are more savvy with higher expectations of quality. Learners will not suffer through pages and pages of text when interactive options are available," he said.² "Videos, summaries, simulations, audio books, and eLearning courses can be as effective—or more effective—than instructor-led training."

3. REINFORCE LEARNING

Psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus discovered that reinforcing training improves retention. He also observed that as the gap between training and practice or recall increases, so does the amount people forget. Learning professionals still struggle to help workers retain what they have learned. A continuous learning approach is essential to modern learning strategies.

Work with employees to develop a learning plan so they can identify resources that complement and reinforce what they've learned. Spread refreshers across the days and weeks immediately following the training. Skillsoft applies a guideline of six reinforcements within 30 days, blending different learning modalities.

² "Advice on Avoiding Scrap to Make e-Learning Effective" by John R. Mattox, II, Ph.D., Skillsoft blog: Learning Reimagined

4. ALIGN LEARNING TO BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

Business-aligned learning requires an understanding of the organization's objectives. "Learning solutions arise when a business driver calls for a certain type of performance. By partnering with business stakeholders to define performance expectations, learning professionals can translate performance criteria to a set of competencies or skills," King says. She tells L&D professionals when they meet with stakeholders to plan training, the key question should be: "What are the business needs that you are seeking to impact?" not "What training needs to take place?"

Once you've determined the business need, you can define the necessary performance requirements, align a learning solution and set goals to measure the impact. Consider what kinds of skills employees need to develop in order to achieve the desired performance, as well as the learning modalities and delivery methods that best suit the target audience.

5. ENLIST GREATER MANAGER SUPPORT

Managers should set expectations for training before it happens, detailing why the employee is getting training, the changes that should take place, and how training will be applied on the job.

Managers should also evaluate each employee's readiness for training to ensure the person has the appropriate knowledge and skills to draw value from the planned training.

Post-training, managers should follow up with employees to ask what knowledge and skills they gained. Assigning projects that allow employees to reinforce those skills and recognizing performance changes have a powerful impact on reducing scrap learning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kieran began her career in the talent field more than 20 years ago. In 1999, Kieran joined CBT Systems (which was acquired by Skillsoft in 2002) and participated in the evolution of the learning industry by consulting with organizations across a wide variety of sectors and geographies. She has consulted with companies to design enterprise learning programs, implement learning and talent platforms, lead strategy engagements, and advise on measuring learning's impact on business outcomes. Kieran has authored several methodologies and white papers, she blogs regularly and she's been featured in magazines such as *Chief Learning Officer*, *Elearning!*, *Talent Management* and *Forbes*. Kieran was also featured on Sirius Radio's *In the Workplace* hosted by Wharton Business School. Today, Kieran studies the composition of successful learning and talent partnerships throughout the world.



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