



Learning Evaluation Theory: Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method

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Introduction

According to a 2015 study from Bersin by Deloitte, Learning and Development (L&D) departments still have many challenges in evaluating learning well. In order to improve future learning programs, it's important to identify what works and what doesn't. There are many different models to choose from when it comes to evaluating learning.

The third whitepaper in our series on learning evaluation explores the Brinkerhoff Success Case Method—one of many evaluation models—and its usefulness to L&D departments. In earlier whitepapers, we discussed the Kirkpatrick and Kaufman Models. You can access those papers [here](#).

Kirkpatrick's evaluation model is normally implemented following quantitative research methods. Survey and assessment data are captured, aggregated numerically, and evaluated. By contrast, Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method focuses on qualitative analysis—crafting stories from discussions with a small number (i.e., about two to six) of affected parties.

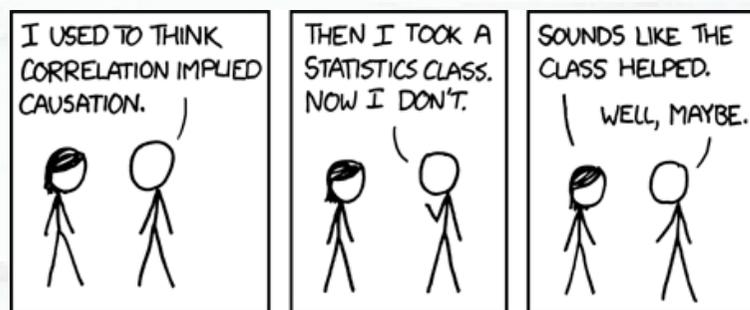
Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method

Brinkerhoff's model isn't restricted to learning. It can be used to analyze any major business change, such as the purchase of new equipment or implementation of a new process. It's based on the assumption that any initiative, no matter how successful or unsuccessful, will always include some success and some failure. It seeks to uncover the most impactful successes and failures of an initiative and then tell the stories behind them, backed by evidence. Your organization can use these stories to learn how to be more successful in the future.

Part 1: Identify cases

The first stage of the Success Case Method identifies an initiative's success and failure. The beginning of this step is gathering the kind of quantitative data and surveys that might be collected as part of a Kirkpatrick-style model of evaluation. Data is collected to illustrate how successfully an initiative's business goal has been met across an organization. This data is used to find the outliers—cases where the initiative has been particularly successful or unsuccessful—in order to study them in more detail.

For this reason, the Success Case Method can be used alongside, rather than in place of, a Kirkpatrick-style evaluation model. We're advocates of both quantitative and qualitative research to support decision making. Ongoing quantitative analysis of big data provides up-to-the-minute indicators of your initiative's success as well as learning- and performance-related trends within your organization. Qualitative analysis enables you to dig into these results and explore their potential causes. You may have heard the saying "Correlation does not imply causation, but it does waggle its eyebrows suggestively and gesture furtively while mouthing 'look over there.'" The kind of qualitative analysis suggested by the Success Case Method helps you to "look over there."



Part 2: Investigate further

The second stage of the Success Case Method involves interviewing people involved in these cases (i.e., the most and least successful stories). These interviews first seek to establish if there's sufficient evidence to verify each story. Once verified, the interviewer will gather further details and facts to produce a small number of comprehensive, evidence-based stories. In most instances, there will be many more interviews than actual success cases.

The stories told should cover all four of Kirkpatrick's levels of evaluation with evidence at each level to show the progression from the learning experience to learning and job application to business impact. These stories are then shared with the organization to applaud success and apply lessons learned to help improve and ensure the success of future initiatives.

Limitations

The Success Case Method focuses on the most and least successful cases resulting from a particular initiative. It's not designed to help judge the overall success of an initiative, but rather to learn from the most and least successful cases. We're not sure if Brinkerhoff would agree, but we recommend using his method alongside other evaluation methods to paint a full picture. Furthermore, the Success Case Method is:

- a manual activity that must be repeated every time evaluation data needs to be updated,
- effective within pilot programs to learn lessons from experimentation, and
- less useful for ongoing analytics where automated data collection and analysis becomes significantly faster and cheaper.

That said, the Success Case Method, or other qualitative methods, can be used to dig into unexpected changes in ongoing analytics data.

Brinkerhoff Summarized

This method focuses on qualitative data.

The goal is to create evidence-backed stories about the most and least successful cases from an initiative.

The method shouldn't be used on its own. Rather, use it to dig deeper into the results of quantitative analysis.

Because the Success Case Method is designed for the one-time study of an initiative's most and least successful cases, it's not useful in identifying overall success or for ongoing analytics.

Upcoming Publications

This is the third in a series of whitepapers covering learning evaluation theory. Other installments in this series will explore other models of learning evaluation, emerging technologies that can support evaluation of learning, and a seven-step evaluation process that you can implement in your organization today.

About the Author



Andrew Downes
Learning & Interoperability,
Watershed

With a background in instructional design and development, Andrew Downes has been creating learning content, experiences, and platforms in both corporate and academic worlds since 2010.

Now a consultant with Watershed, Andrew is a leading thinker in Evidence Driven Learning Strategy and Learning Systems Interoperability. Andrew helps organizations to develop learning strategies based on evidence and evaluation, working with vendors to get at data from the products those organizations use.

One of the authors of the Tin Can/Experience API (xAPI) specification and much of the content on tincanapi.com, Andrew has delivered numerous presentations, webinars and training sessions internationally. Andrew is well recognized as a reliable expert in the xAPI world.

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