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## Lesson Learned

### Rethinking the Post-Event Evaluation

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Meeting planners often employ post-event surveys to measure attendees' reactions to, and satisfaction with, the experience, ambiance, content, and value of the meeting or event they just attended.

Surveys that collect this *reaction* data are usually administered onsite following a meeting or distributed via email within a few days after the event's conclusion. While this level of evaluation is important, it does not measure the level of learning that occurred during the meeting. Measuring what participants learned during a conference, sales meeting, or leadership training session indicates the information, knowledge, or skills that attendees gained. It also provides a benchmark to assess whether the meeting's objectives were met.

### Why Is Measuring Learning Important?

In the early stages of planning an important meeting or conference, the planner should work with management in the appropriate departments to develop clearly stated and measurable learning objectives for attendees. This is essential because the defined objectives set an expectation for the level of information, knowledge, or skills attendees should gain during the meeting. Setting clear learning objectives should also align the meeting with the organization's

business goals and provide a focus for the people who are planning the meeting's content.

The level of learning should be measured at the end of the meeting to ensure that the objectives have been met by the attendees. If the required learning has not occurred, then it cannot be used in the workplace, and the meeting cannot be considered successful.

### **Examples of Clear and Measurable Learning Objectives**

After the annual sales meeting, the sales team will be able to:

- Identify three new cross-selling opportunities.
- Score 75 or better on the new product quiz.
- Identify five new technology trends explained during breakout sessions.
- Explain the advantages of three new product features.
- Effectively communicate the new product positioning and differentiation.

### **Evaluating Application and Implementation**

Attendees' behavior should change after they return to the workplace and begin to use what they learned during the meeting—for example, new management skills, enhanced product knowledge, or sales techniques. These behavioral changes, made because of the meeting content, can affect important business measures—such as sales revenue, employee turnover, and new product development.

Meeting planners can assess the value of meetings at a more strategic level if they collect learning data from attendees and then take the next step and measure application and implementation—the use of the information, knowledge, or contacts that takes place once an attendee returns to the workplace. This level of evaluation also requires the development of clearly stated and measurable objectives.

### **Examples of Clear and Measurable Application and Implementation Objectives**

When the meeting content is implemented:

- Within six months, all sales representatives will increase their use of the new web-based CRM/sales lead tracking system by 50%.
- Within one year, each product development team will introduce at least two new products into the development pipeline.
- Senior management will meet with all regional department managers to discuss the new sexual harassment policy.
- Employee satisfaction scores will improve from an average of 3.1 to 4.0 on a five-point scale.
- All operations managers will complete an ergonomic implementation plan that will help reduce employee injuries.

### **Timing Is Everything**

Collecting reaction data on the final day of a meeting or conference is a common practice. Assessing what attendees learned during a meeting can usually take place at the same time. However, application and implementation data must be collected after the attendees have returned to the workplace and begun to act on their newly acquired knowledge. Therefore, meeting planners often wait three to six months after a meeting or conference to collect meaningful data that indicate how attendees have used or implemented the skills or knowledge acquired during the event.

### **What Types of Questions Should I Use to Collect information?**

#### **Surveys vs. Questionnaires**

Surveys are used when the goal is to capture attitudes, beliefs, and opinions. Surveys usually gather post-event reaction data. On the other hand, questionnaires are used to capture a wider range of data that often includes specific improvement measures and statistics.

A questionnaire may contain any or all of these five types of questions:

1. ***Open-ended questions*** have an unlimited answer. The participant fills in a blank space enables him/her to express opinions or reactions freely
2. ***Checklists*** ask a participant to choose an answer from selections on a list. Checklists may ask participants to “select all that apply”.
3. ***Two-way questions*** present alternate responses, such as “yes/no” or other possibilities.

4. **Multiple choice** questions present several choices. The participant must choose the most applicable.
5. **Ranking scales** ask the participant to rank a list of items.

When asking if a participant agrees or disagrees, a five-point *Likert Scale* (example to follow) is often used.

**Real World Examples:**

Attendees at a 2007 conference were asked to complete a questionnaire intended to assess the level of learning during the conference. This excerpt was part of this questionnaire, which was distributed onsite on the final day of the conference.

Assessment of Learning from the 2007 Annual Conference	Please circle a number that best reflects your response. 5= Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree				
I feel confident that upon returning to my college I will be able to implement at least one of the programs, tools, or processes that I learned about at this year's annual conference:	5	4	3	2	1

This open-ended question was also part of the questionnaire distributed onsite during the final day of the 2007 conference:

**Please list any/all of the specific programs, tools, or processes you learned about that you feel confident you can take back to your job and implement within six months.**

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The excerpt below was from an application and implementation questionnaire that was presented to conference attendees six months following the conference.

Assessment of Application and Implementation from the 2007 Annual Conference	Please circle your response	
I have made a formal proposal to my department head regarding the implementation of a program, tool, or process that I learned about during this year's EWD annual conference:	Yes	No

Approaching post-event questionnaires more strategically gives a meeting planner an opportunity to demonstrate more clearly the value of important meetings and events. Developing specific, defined learning objectives and application and implementation objectives enables meeting planners to collect data that show a strong link between meetings, events, and conferences and their organization's business goals. Remember, if you do not take proactive steps to show the value of the meetings you manage and produce, someone else will — and the outcome may not be what you expected.

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