DevelopIntelligence
A PLURALSIGHT COMPANY

Building The Business Case

8 PLANNING QUESTIONS TO GAIN BUY-IN FOR
SOFTWARE DEVELOPER AND IT TRAINING INVESTMENTS

Introduction

When you need to build a compelling business case for a proposed training investment, what information do you present to decision makers? What's your process for building buy-in?

To answer these questions, DevelopIntelligence interviewed technical learning leaders who agreed to provide detailed input on the condition of anonymity. This whitepaper synthesizes their thought leadership.

It begins with some observations from a Chief Information Security Officer, who candidly shared his thought process regarding training investments.

Following this opening narrative, you'll find eight planning questions to help you build your next business case. You can use these as a checklist. And if you're running into blockers, this information can help you chart a path forward.

If you have questions or would like to brainstorm on any of the topics here, **email: info@developintelligence.com**

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Executive:
"Training is nice, but how much does it cost?"

You:
"Training is more than nice. It's an essential investment for achieving this year's strategic goals. Here's what I mean by that."

Perspectives from a Chief Information Security Officer

During a recent budgeting cycle, the Chief Information Security Officer at a large SaaS company identified cybersecurity training for non-technical employees as a high priority for the organization. He felt all employees needed a basic foundation in how to keep company systems secure—including how to spot suspicious emails and where to report concerns. Building the business case for this training, however, required weighing it against other C-suite priorities. He describes this challenge below.

Before proposing training, start by defining the problem. What internal or external metrics can help you with this? For example, "We've had 10 phishing compromises in the past 60 days, due to employees clicking malicious links in emails. We need training to reduce the number of compromised assets (KPI)."

Making the case for cybersecurity training isn't the same as making the case for a new product. You can't say, "Give me $50,000 and I'll make you a million."

There's not a 1:1 correspondence. Nor can you say, "Give me $100,000 and I'll be able to mitigate your risk by $10 million." It's hard to build the business case. How do I estimate a risk management value?

Also, consider this: I might care deeply about a KPI related to phishing compromises, particularly if my performance is being measured by that KPI. And I might understand in depth how important that KPI is.

But it's not language that the CEO connects with. I have to express information in enterprise terms that the CEO cares about.

For example, let's say we have four to five assets compromised per month. The CEO cares about what that **means** for our enterprise:

"The data loss from the server breach incident resulted in $500,000 in legal fees, $25,000 in fines, $1 million in financial settlements with customers, and the loss of six accounts totaling $1.2M in annual revenue." By comparison, a proposed $50,000 investment in training sounds like a cheap insurance policy to prevent a repeat incident.

Things like reputation loss are hard to put a price tag on. But it's a direct enterprise risk. Focus on the enterprise risk—whether it's direct or indirect risk.

The CEO doesn't care about statements like, "It will help improve X or reduce Y."

They care about **dollars saved** or **dollars made**.

How will training save the company money?

How will training make money for the company?

And yes, they care about cost. How does the training compare against other priorities competing for those same financial resources?

You've got to justify the comparison between that training and something else.

Every business has many competing priorities. You have to arrange them based on overall business objectives, resources (people and financial), risk management considerations and so forth. A training program could be a great idea—and badly needed—but it may need to wait, because of other more important priorities.

What business problem are you trying to solve?

Though it can be hard to build a business case for training, the CISO and others who provided input for this whitepaper articulated several planning questions to make the process easier.

Organizations invest in training for software developers and IT professionals for many reasons. Here are a few examples:

- Equip developers in a new programming language they need for an upcoming project.
- Keep engineers abreast of key technology shifts, such as new developments in cloud and edge computing, to stay ahead of the competition.
- Reduce new hire attrition by making sure all new employees have a thorough understanding of the tech stack, tools and business processes they'll need to hit the ground running in their new role.
- Solve a tech talent shortage by creating a dependable pipeline of qualified candidates.
- Increase diversity in the tech workforce—more women and people of color, along with greater diversity in backgrounds.
- Compete effectively for top talent, who expect continuous opportunities to learn and grow.
- Meet ISO Standard 30414 in order to win new customers who require that certification.
- Prepare teams by a specific date for a mission-critical digital transformation involving new technologies and new business processes.

For some of the scenarios listed here, the business case is a "slam-dunk." Perhaps, a critical project can't move forward without the proposed training. If executives agree the project is vital, then the training is also essential. However, even though it's easier to get approval when you can tie your proposal to a broader organizational objective, you still need to articulate the business case to get the budget.

At times, it's hard to build buy-in because of the sheer number of projects competing for the same resources.

One way to get traction is to refine your goal. For example, if someone says, "Our goal is to launch a Cloud Academy in 2022," that's not really a goal. It's a tactic that could help you achieve any number of goals.

Instead, describe the pain and state the goal in measurable terms before discussing your proposed course of action: "We cannot find enough people to staff our mission-critical cloud migration (this is the pain). Traditional recruiting methods are not yielding enough candidates (this is also part of the pain). We need 50 people who are well-versed on XYZ technologies and tools by July 1, 2022 in order to migrate the 10 highest-priority applications to the cloud by your December 31, 2022 deadline (this is the goal). Here's how we propose getting there."

If the decision maker is ultra-focused on meeting that December 31 date, focus your business case around how you can make that happen.

Rule of thumb: Get crystal clear on the training goal before you do any other planning. You need a well-formed goal in order to build a compelling business case, design an effective curriculum and plan for measurement.

Is technical skill development really the solution?

If an individual or team isn't delivering the expected performance, you need to search for the root cause. A business leader might come to you and say, "I need help with a training issue." But you need to validate that it's really a training issue and not something else.

On a software development team, a number of factors other than skill deficits can lead to subpar results. An Advanced Java course isn't going to fix uncooperative team dynamics, broken business processes, ineffective people management, inadequate tools or other environmental shortcomings.

Rule of thumb: To achieve your goal, you need to choose the right tool for the job. Sometimes, a situation calls for soft skills training, one-on-one coaching or some other intervention—not technical skill development.

Common technical training “origin stories”

1. A technical leader approaches you and says, “I need to **get a team ready for a new project.** Can you help me think through the learning needs?”

2. A software engineering director says, “We need to **improve our software quality metrics.** What could we do with our software developer training to move the needle on that?”

3. The executive team wants to **pursue a strategic business goal** that will require corporate culture change and a radical technology shift. They ask you to help assess what will be required to prepare the workforce to implement this seismic shift.

4. A manager contacts you to say, “My team **needs Angular training**” (or another specific training topic).

5. A salesperson says, “My biggest prospect is working in Scala. In order to **win the contract**, we need to demonstrate that our team has expertise in this.”

6. You personally identify a situation where a learning program could **solve a vexing business problem**. Others haven’t spotted this opportunity yet.

In each scenario, you need to think through who owns the budget; how they define success; and who will drive the program forward, because it’s not always the requester.

Who owns the budget?

Organizations typically utilize one or more of these five models for funding technical learning programs. Which approach applies to your situation, and what are the benefits and considerations of this approach for your particular business case?

The reasons for saying yes to a program often differ by payer. Make sure you understand the decision-making criteria before building your business case. L&D may weigh your request against other training priorities. A CTO may evaluate your request against a wider variety of priorities, most of which are not related to training.

Employers use varied units of measure when discussing training investments—cost per day, cost per person, cost per person per day and so forth. Make sure to use your stakeholders' preferred vocabulary and units of measure in your business case.

Rule of thumb: You're competing for resources, so make every effort to understand the competition. Tailor your business case to acknowledge that you're aware of the other competing priorities. Then, answer the question, "What makes my funding request more urgent and important?"

	Model	Considerations
1.	Training is part of the benefits budget. Each year, the company allocates a specific dollar amount per engineer.	This budget owner wants to know how your proposed learning program adds excitement for current employees and job applicants. How will you enhance recruiting and retention efforts? Opportunities to work on mission-critical projects with cutting-edge technology can be a big draw for candidates.
2.	The technical leader who requests the training pays for it out of a departmental budget.	In this scenario, the requester needs a tech skill development strategy to push an initiative forward or help meet a departmental objective. Show how your proposed solution will deliver the needed results, and you'll likely get budget approval.
3.	The technology organization (CIO and/or CTO) has a pool of money for training. A software development manager then requests funds from whoever manages that budget.	You're competing with more teams when requesting funds from the overall technology organization. Highlight the benefits of the learning program and what it will do for both the technical future of the company and this year's bottom line. Compelling data will help your request stand out from the rest.
4.	L&D has an annual budget for technical workforce development. They prioritize training requests, using agreed criteria, when deciding how to allocate these funds.	Before building your business case, find out the criteria that your L&D team uses to evaluate training proposals. A brief discussion with a L&D manager will give you insight into how they analyze requests for funds.
5.	Stakeholders from different areas of the organization pool money to fund a training endeavor. For example, if a company wants to launch a Learn To Code program to increase diversity in its technical workforce, funding might come from a technology sponsor, L&D, Diversity & Inclusion and the CEO's budget for special projects.	This group may be looking for more impact and purpose, rather than specific outcomes and technical achievements. Perhaps, your company wants to increase diversity and inclusion. Or maybe, you want to stand out as an employer-of-choice by providing clear paths for career growth.

What are the decision makers' OKRs or KPIs, and how do they define success?

The decision makers have quarterly goals, and those are likely different from yours. Find out what they are and, to the degree possible, show how you can help them meet THEIR numbers.

Here are some common examples:

Organizational metrics

- Revenue
- Profitability
- Productivity
- Quality
- Risk management (including cybersecurity and brand reputation)
- Customer acquisition
- Customer retention
- Customer satisfaction
- Employee satisfaction
- Diversity
- Inclusion

Competitive metrics

- Product/Service
- Performance/Speed
- Recruiting
- Marketshare
- Market penetration
- Pricing
- Net Promoter Score
- Product placement

Also, learn how the decision makers define and measure success. Identifying the metrics that are important to your stakeholders will help you understand what success looks like. This allows you to position the training in a way that appeals to them. In a situation with multiple stakeholders, they each may have different views. Part of building buy-in for a project requires coming to agreement on success criteria.

Consider this example: A financial services company is contemplating a Learn To Code program to reskill non-technical employees to move into entry-level software development positions. If the project goes forward, three departments will help pay for the program: Technology, Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) and HR (L&D).

D&I will care how the program moves the needle on diversity measures. The technical sponsor may focus more on engineering metrics, such as time to full productivity. L&D wants satisfied participants, high instructor ratings and most importantly, confirmation that learners are able to apply their new skills on the job.

Ask questions to elicit each stakeholder's success criteria. What will they see/hear/experience if the program is wildly successful?

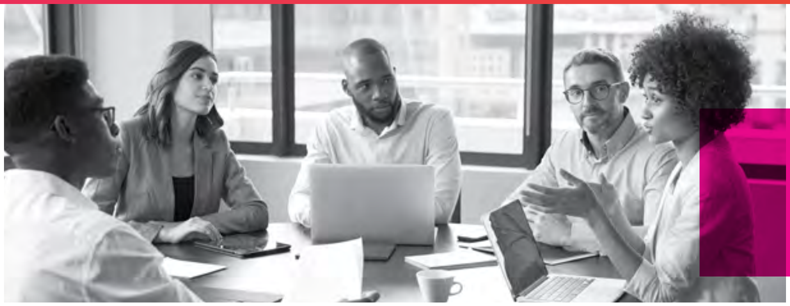
Rule of thumb: The decision makers' success criteria will determine the metrics you'll need to track if the program moves forward. Once you've defined those metrics, you need to ask, "When I report out on the program results, will these numbers give you the information you need?" If not, it's better to find out up front what else is required, so you can plan for it.

When building your business case, consider other calculations that might be important to the enterprise, such as:

- The cost/risk of not acting...not doing anything
- Lost opportunity cost from waiting
- The weekly cost of a project delay if a team is not upskilled on time
- Potential gain from green-lighting and embarking on a new project
- The financial benefit of speeding up a project

Rule of thumb: You might not have enough information to calculate these numbers yourself. So, find out where the data lives and ask your allies for help in getting the information you need for building your business case. A stakeholder will likely be able to help you develop defensible estimates.

Who will drive the program forward?



Ideally, the person who requests the training will remove road blocks and do whatever else is needed to drive forward momentum. But this is not always the case with technical training.

"Many learning programs never see the light of day, because there is no torch bearer," noted a L&D leader. "Someone has to step up to the plate and own the program...to take it to completion. The person who requests the program often is not the champion. They hope someone else will take it and run with it."

You need to nail down an answer to "who owns this" before you start building the business case. Here's why: If you will own it, how much of your time and resources will it require? Do you have the capacity to take it on?

Also, what agreements do you need to create with the requester? For example, suppose a technical leader is funding the program but wants L&D to manage it. What if L&D gets into the design process, but the internal subject matter expert is swamped with a project and can't review the design? Does L&D wait? Does L&D find an external subject matter expert?

Also, what prototyping is acceptable? The L&D leader above said, "Here's my perspective:

The requester gave the ball to us when asking for the program. If we say yes to it, then we have to run with it to get it launched.

"Years ago, I got an important piece of advice: 'It's better to deliver 60 percent than nothing at all.' Here's what that means in a training context: Sometimes, executives are too busy to review things, and all my subject matter experts are busy on projects. So, I run with the program design and get a first version out there.

"That way, I start collecting data and testimonials and get employees talking about the program. My role is to get people into the classroom. If I sit and wait for everything to be perfect, I've missed a window of opportunity. Once people start seeing and experiencing the program, they'll all have opinions on how to make it better, and I can refine the curriculum accordingly."

Do you have the trust of the requester to make a judgment call like this—to proceed with a proof of concept to get some feedback?

You need to have this discussion as you're building your business case.

Rule of thumb: If decision makers are hesitant or have objections, include a proof-of-concept phase in your business case. This lets decision makers sign off on a smaller investment and gives you the opportunity to collect data. You can then use this data to strengthen the program and demonstrate the wisdom of a broader rollout.

What stakeholders will you approach for input?

Make three lists:

1. **Whose buy-in do you need in order to get a green light for the proposed learning program?**
2. **What additional stakeholders would have valuable input?**
3. **Is there anyone who might push back or attempt to block your proposal?**

All three lists are important. Here's an example. The CTO approaches you and says, "Look. We can't find enough engineers with experience in our tech stack. So, I'd like to work with you to create a program to train experienced engineers in our particular stack. This will open up a larger pool of possible candidates for our jobs."

In this case, the CTO is the decision maker and will fund the proposed program (list #1). But a key stakeholder on list #2 is the Recruiting team. They have important insights on the recruitment challenges, as well as the skill sets of the candidates who will take part in the upskilling endeavor. List #2 often provides vital input for program design and can be a valuable source of metrics for measuring program effectiveness. Enlist their help as you build your business case.

Suppose, a decision maker on the Recruiting team is also on list #3. That person believes the best answer to the talent shortage is a new recruitment advertising campaign, not an upskilling program. What information can you bring to the table to demonstrate that the upskilling proposal has better ROI potential than the advertising campaign? And how can you present your business case in a way that turns that person's resistance into allyship?

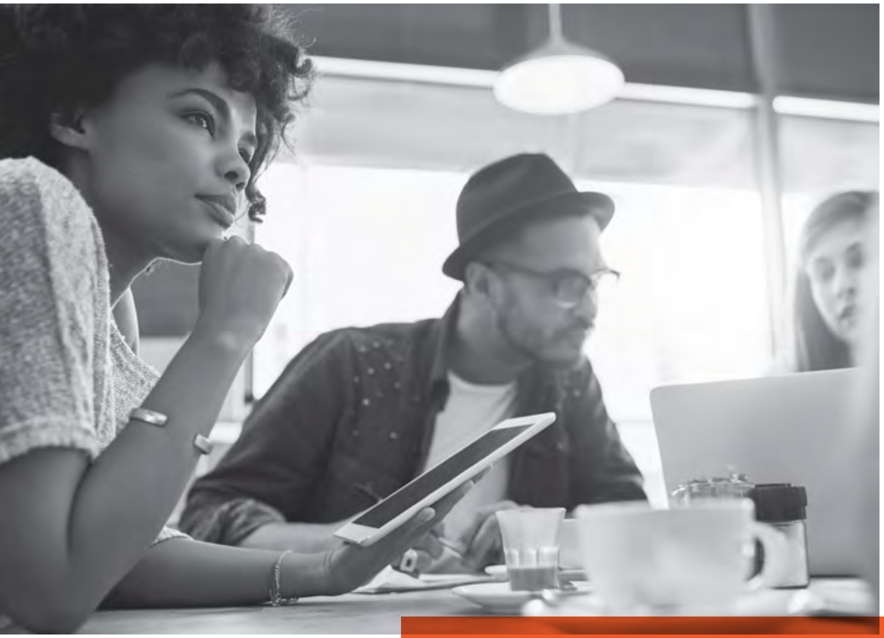
Another detractor (list #3) is an engineering manager who says he can't afford to have his team take time out for training—any learning has to be done outside of work hours. Explore what's driving that concern, so you can brainstorm ways to use training to solve the concern. For example, if the concern relates to velocity, maybe your proposed program design breaks training into shorter segments, with a period of on-the-job application between each segment. This way, the manager can see how tech skill development improves team velocity.

Rule of thumb: Be thorough in identifying the stakeholders that need to buy into your proposed program. Overlooking one can have consequences downstream: "Why didn't you seek my input? I have strong opinions about this." It's better to hear those opinions up front.

Are there any external drivers?

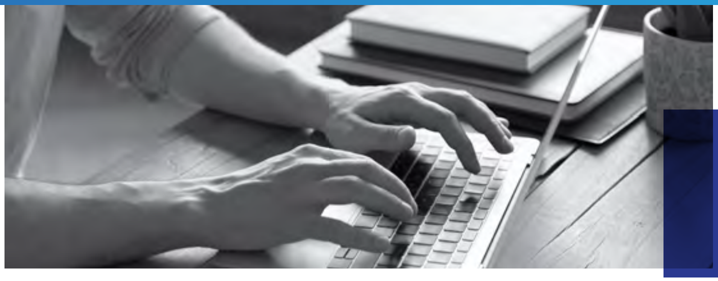
Do you need to meet certain training standards to comply with regulatory, insurance or risk management protocols? For example, some organizations must do training for PCI compliance (Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard).

One CISO described training as a “default security measure”—particularly phishing awareness. Of the 18 CIS Controls, training plays a role in all 18. Number 14 reads, “Security Awareness and Skills Training.” (See: https://www.cisecurity.org/controls/cis-controls-list/)



Rule of thumb: Check to see if an outside requirement makes the business case for you.

What existing infrastructure can you leverage?



Reinventing the wheel costs money. If the wheel already exists, use it. You can improve training ROI by streamlining key functions:

How will you manage enrollments?

Most LMS platforms support training registrations and automate notifications.

Who will deliver the training?

Your HR Team may already have relationships with instructor-led training partners that have been vetted and approved by the organization.

How will you incorporate different training modalities?

If your organization has a relationship with an online tech skill development provider, explore how you can leverage the available self-paced content, sandboxes and labs in your proposed learning program.

How will you evaluate student satisfaction with training?

If your company uses a survey tool, you can utilize that platform to deliver and analyze training evaluations.

Rule of thumb: Look for ways to create efficiencies across your technical learning programs. Highlight these in your business case to demonstrate your concern for cost management.

A framework for building a business case

Find out what decision framework your audience prefers and consider using it to lay out your business case. For example, when technical stakeholders—CTO, CIO, engineering managers, etc. —are the key decision makers, they may use some variation of the “engineering process” to evaluate the best course of action.

Here are the questions you need to answer to build a compelling case:

(The spots marked in magenta below will help you determine metrics to use when making the case for training.)

Step	Questions
Define the problem you are trying to solve.	
If someone else brought the problem to you ➤	A. What business problem are you trying to solve? B. What are the **business implications of the problem today?** C. What **consequences** do you foresee if the problem persists? D. How important is solving the problem compared to other priorities? E. Is technical training really the solution?
If you spotted the problem ➤	A. Do others see the problem? B. If not, gain agreement that there’s a problem. Define it in measurable terms, and establish its importance compared to other priorities (before spending time and effort on brainstorming solutions).

Step	Questions
Gather data and information about the problem.	A. Which stakeholders does the problem affect? B. Which stakeholders will you approach for input? C. How does each stakeholder define the problem? D. **What evidence does each stakeholder need to see/hear/experience to know the problem is resolved?** E. **What benefit(s) will each stakeholder experience once the problem is solved? What is the value of those benefits in dollars or other measures (such as increased retention)?** F. **For each affected stakeholder, what are the current pain points? The costs? How much does it hurt, and what are they able to invest for pain relief?** G. What have they tried so far, if anything, to solve the problem? What worked and didn't work? What did they learn from the things they tried? H. Who is the champion for this training? I. Who owns the budget? J. **What are the decision makers' OKRs?** K. Are there any external drivers of this training, and how important are they to the business?
Brainstorm potential solutions and evaluate them.	A. Which pain points can a learning program assuage, either on its own or in combination with other initiatives? B. What learning program structure(s) are most likely to solve the problem? C. What are the considerations of each possible structure? 1. What can be developed internally versus what needs an external partner? 2. Even if we can deliver internally, what is the cost/benefit of utilizing internal SMEs? 3. How much time away from day-to-day work would each structure require, and what are the cost/benefit implications of that? 4. Which structure is best, given the urgency of the problem or the timetable of the project? Which approach has the greatest likelihood of creating employee readiness within the prescribed time frame? 5. What additional resources are needed for each structure (licenses, equipment, travel costs, etc.)? D. Is there an existing infrastructure (i.e. LMS platform; licenses for learning resources; etc.) that makes one solution more attractive than another?

Step	Questions
Narrow the options and define one or two more fully.	Which option(s) show the most promise, with the best potential for good ROI?
Get feedback from others.	A. What resonates? What do you like best about this possible solution? B. What questions do you have? C. Do you agree this is a workable approach for solving the problem? D. Do you have suggestions for improvement? E. If other stakeholders agree this is a workable solution, is there anything that would prevent you from signing off on this? F. Is there anything else you would need from me in order to say yes to this project?
Use their feedback to improve the solution.	If a key stakeholder has identified a problem with your proposed solution, repeat the engineering process (or whatever framework the decision maker uses) to fine tune the solution. For a major learning program involving multiple stakeholders, you may need to go through the engineering process several times in order to secure buy-in.

Conclusion

The technical learning leaders who provided input for this project highlighted a key point: Building an effective business case is an iterative process.

The journey often starts with brief conversations to gather facts and take the temperature of a situation.

From there, it may evolve into five or ten slides that describe the problem state and briefly outline a potential solution. You get input from stakeholders on these slides to learn what resonates and what questions they have, and you iterate from there. Every discussion yields more insights on each decision maker's goals, needs and concerns to inform your next steps.

Once stakeholders understand the business problem you're trying to solve and its associated costs, it's much easier to ask, "How much do we want to invest to solve this problem?" Technical training for software developers and IT professionals can be a high-ROI activity. If you can get your products to market more quickly and deliver higher quality and better functionality than your competitors, what's that worth to your business?

If you're building a business case for a technical learning program and want a sounding board for your ideas and questions, **email: info@ developintelligence.com**

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