

# THE SMART APPLICANT'S GUIDE

to the 2013  
ASTD BEST Award

Practical Advice and Surprising Insights from the Writer of  
#1-, #2- and #7-Ranked ASTD BEST Submissions

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## How to Use This Guide

Welcome to *The Smart Applicant's Guide to the 2013 ASTD BEST Award: Practical Advice and Surprising Insights from the Writer of #1-, #2- and #7-Ranked ASTD BEST Submissions*. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) describes this award as recognizing companies who show they are BEST at **B**uilding talent, **E**nterprise-wide, **S**upported by the organization's leaders and fostering a **T**horough learning culture.

Now you can benefit from my 20+ years of experience writing persuasively in a wide range of marketing communications contexts, my MBA in marketing and management and my success applying that experience and knowledge to help clients win more than 30 prestigious learning awards (and counting). In fact, clients of mine have moved up in the ASTD BEST ranking from #32 to #1 in one year, from #37 to #2 in two years and from #17 to #7 in one year.

In working with dozens of learning professionals to develop award-winning submissions, I've seen that what is obvious to me as an expert in persuasive communications isn't necessarily obvious to the learning expert. Everything in this Guide is based on my experience collaborating with these very talented learning leaders and their wonderful teams.

This Guide is a companion to the *Smart Applicant's Workbook for the 2013 ASTD BEST Award*, described below. The four key sections of the Guide are:

- **ASTD BEST: An Overview.** This section describes the general approach of the ASTD BEST award and will help you uncover for the judges and yourselves the measurable impact you are making on your organization.
- **What's New in 2013?** This year ASTD is asking for some new information. I'll help you understand what they're looking for.
- **The 8 Most Common Misconceptions Held by ASTD BEST Applicants.** By dispelling these myths now, my goal is to save you time and worry later. All eight of these misconceptions came up as client questions over the past four years. Now you can benefit from those queries.
- **Tackling ASTD BEST: The First 5 Things You Should Do.** The To Do list for ASTD BEST is long. You don't HAVE to do these five steps first, but you'll be in great shape if you do.

## ASTD BEST: An Overview

Through this award, the folks at ASTD basically want to know two things: does the learning function impact company success, and can you prove it? Yes, there's clearly more to it, but at the end of the day these are the key questions to answer. And if you think that's obvious, I will show you a multitude of draft responses from (otherwise very savvy) clients who don't answer either question. These drafts describe program innovation, attendance, participant evaluation ratings and many other topics not at all related to impacting company success and proof thereof.

### How can this be?

Learning professionals are so close to what they do that it's often difficult to take a step back and really evaluate overall impact. Smile sheets, test scores and certifications are important, but they don't indicate business impact on the enterprise: revenue, employee engagement, customer satisfaction, productivity and so forth.

Measuring impact can be a challenge. The companies that rank high on this award meet that challenge. It's my belief that applying for this award (and others) challenges you, the learning leader, to aim higher, raise your standards, adjust your metrics, capture new data and expand your reach. Your ranking on this list, if disappointing, may Guide you on where you need to adjust and focus.

### Why I wrote this Guide for you

To do well on this award, you can't just be great. You have to prove on your application that you're great. I developed this Guide because I have seen many training professionals who are outstanding at what they do, but who lack the time, resources and/or understanding of what's required to develop an outstanding submission. They do superlative work, but they are not getting credit for it because their award submissions don't reflect their true impact.

I hope that this Guide will help you show your learning organization in the best possible light. You deserve to be recognized for your hard work and accomplishments. And with everything else you have on your plate, you deserve some guidance that will save you time and stress.

### The bottom line

The ASTD BEST judges want to know that training matters at your company and that you are having a positive impact on your organization—not just that you have successful programs, but that the learning function is systematically improving performance, driving results and supporting corporate strategic goals. Always bear this in mind, both in this application and as you strive to make a difference.

## The 8 Most Common Misconceptions Held by ASTD BEST Applicants

These are actual misconceptions I have had to clear up with clients while working on ASTD BEST (and other awards). Okay, I may be paraphrasing rather than quoting them, but you'll get the idea. As I did for them, I want to save you time, worry and stress by debunking these myths.

### 1. Data must be precise or I will be struck down by lightning.

I have worked with a number of clients who have sweated over every last number because they are conscientious and/or data-oriented. It's really not necessary, especially on the ASTD BEST application, which sometimes asks you to measure things that are difficult or impossible to accurately measure (such as the percentage of employees who take advantage of stretch assignments). For this reason, the application states repeatedly, "Estimates are acceptable."

What's important is that your numbers reflect a relatively accurate picture of reality at your company. Just be as accurate as is reasonably possible, and don't drive yourself or your colleagues bananas about whether you provided 578 or 579 online courses. If the numbers basically feel right, they probably are.

### 2. Corollary: I can't estimate program metrics as I am a mere mortal.

Yes you can. Let me give you an example. One time I was working with a professional services client to compile metrics for a particular leadership program that had been transitioned from face-to-face to online. This client told me that they couldn't provide Level IV figures (business impact) for the program. I begged to differ. A very useful thing I picked up in business school is that as long as you use reasonable assumptions and do the math correctly, you can employ estimates to make a point, surely a principle to be applied with integrity.

Here's what we did:

- a. Calculated average travel time to and from the previous program, based on where regional trainings were held relative to learners. (We settled on a very conservative three hours per roundtrip.)
- b. Tracked the number of learners and their average billing rate.
- c. Tracked the number of internal instructors, usually senior executives, and their average billing rate.
- d. Calculated the opportunity cost: (# learners x average learner billing rate x 3 hours) +