



Review

Disentangling the role of the supervisor in transfer of training



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ABSTRACT

Literature has indicated that support of the supervisor is critical for an employee to apply the competences developed during a training programme in the job. Typically in training transfer studies this is referred to as 'supervisor support'. A close examination of supervisor support in training transfer studies shows that, although many studies consider it a similar construct, the content does differ from one study to another. The purpose of this systematic literature study is to elucidate this notion of supervisor support by conceptualising and operationalising the role of the supervisor in training transfer at a deeper level of specificity: in terms of particular behaviours and attitudes adopted by supervisors. Ninety-nine articles were retrieved and examined. As a result, a more holistic definition of the construct is proposed and 24 specific behaviours and attitudes that a supervisor can adopt to support training transfer, were discerned.

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1. Introduction

Organisations make enormous investments in increasing the performance of employees, often through professional development (Van den Bossche & Segers, 2013). Training is one of the potential strategies for organisations to support this professional development by helping employees gain the proper competences (Chuang, Liao, & Tai, 2005; Van den Bossche & Segers, 2013). For training to be beneficiary it needs however to be transferred back to the workplace. Training transfer thus refers to the extent to which trainees effectively apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes learned in training in their jobs (Newstrom, 1986). However, despite its importance and given the large investments, training transfer is not always guaranteed, nor easy. The reason for this lies within the fact that training transfer is a complex process in which many variables have been found to affect transfer. In this respect complex systemic transfer models have been constructed (e.g. Cheng & Hampson, 2008; Holton, 1996; Kirwan & Birchall, 2006; Kontoghiorghes, 2004). The influencing variables are traditionally divided into three broad categories: trainee characteristics, the design and content of the training programme, and the work environment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). With regard to the impact of these categories on transfer of training, Blume, Ford, Baldwin, and Huang (2010) asserted in the most recent meta-analysis on predictors of transfer of training that there is no evidence for a clear superiority of individual variables over situational variables, or vice versa. However, to further the understanding of the transfer process, some researchers (e.g. Grossman & Salas, 2011) have urged future research to focus on a deeper investigation of factors that have already yielded solid evidence, rather than expand the list of factors that can influence transfer. One of such factors is support of the supervisor, which has been established as one of the most critical work environment factors that affect transfer of training (e.g. Brinkerhoff & Montesino, 1995; Chiaburu, Van Dam, & Hutchins, 2010; Clarke, 2002; Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000; Cromwell & Kolb, 2004; Hawley & Barnard, 2005; Lim & Johnson, 2002). Yet, there remain gaps in the literature regarding the specific supervisor behaviours that influence transfer (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Hawley & Barnard, 2005; Van Der Klink, Gielen, & Nauta, 2001). A further examination of the content of the supervisor's role in transfer of training is therefore highly warranted (Van Der Klink et al., 2001). The aim of this study is thus to expand the theoretical underpinning of the role of the supervisor in transfer of training. More specifically, the focus will be on investigating the role of the supervisor in training transfer at a deeper level of specificity: in terms of specific behaviours and attitudes adopted by supervisors to support transfer of training.

1.1. The state of the art of research on the role of the supervisor in transfer of training

Although numerous factors can affect transfer of training, research increasingly emphasised the important role that supervisors play in the transfer process (Hawley & Barnard, 2005). Within the work environment, support of the supervisor has been shown to be a powerful determinant of successful transfer of training (Van den Bossche & Segers, 2013). In their meta-analysis on the impact of predictive factors on transfer of training Blume et al. (2010) found that within the work environment transfer climate has the strongest relationship with transfer (effect size of .27), though it is closely followed by social support (effect size of .21). Further analysis even revealed that support of the supervisor (effect size of .31) has a stronger relationship with transfer than peer support (.14). Likewise, Grossman & Salas (2011) argue in their literature review that of all of the work environment variables, support has garnered the strongest evidence for its role in the transfer of training.

The role supervisors have in influencing and supporting trainees to transfer the newly acquired competences to the job has been widely supported in quantitative and qualitative studies (Hutchins & Burke, 2007). Al-Eisa, Furayyan, and Alhemoud (2009) for example, found that trainees who perceive high levels of support from their immediate supervisors to participate in training and to apply the newly learned competences on their jobs are more inclined to initiate transfer. A similar finding was reported by Kirwan and Birchall (2006). They found an important relationship between manager support and employees' personal capacity for transfer. Cromwell and Kolb (2004) further described that trainees who reported receiving higher levels of organisational, direct supervisor, and peer support, also reported applying to a higher extent the competences acquired in training. The studies of Meyer, Lees, Humphris, and Connell (2007) and Hawley and Barnard (2005) reinforce the conduciveness of supervisor support to successful transfer of training and show that the lack of the required level of supervision or guidance is potentially detrimental to the application of training. Scaduto, Lindsay, and Chiaburu (2008) furthermore suggested that trainees who know where they stand with their supervisor, who have the certainty that the supervisor will use his power to help the employee solve work issues, and more generally, who have an effective work relationship with one's supervisor stand a much better chance of benefitting from the training, which will lead to training transfer.

These findings, as well as similar positive effects described by other researchers (e.g. Austin, Weisner, Schrandt, Glezos-Bell, & Murtaza, 2006; Burke & Hutchins, 2008; Chen, Sok, & Sok, 2007; Gregoire, 1994; Kontoghiorghes, 2001; Liu & Smith, 2011; Lysø, Mjøen, & Levin, 2011; Martin, 2010; Warr, Allan, & Birdi, 1999; Xiao, 1996) have led to a widespread agreement on the importance of supervisor support. However, not all research does confirm this positive relationship between supervisor support and training transfer. Some studies indicate that supervisor support is not always welcome and thus not always beneficial to transfer. For example Enos, Kehrhahn, and Bell (2003) suggest that perceptions of supervisor support are minimally related to transfer of learning, since they found low non-significant relations between supervisor support and the extent to which the trainees in their study applied each of the twenty core managerial skills on the job. Likewise, supervisor support was found unrelated to skill transfer in the study of Chiaburu and Marinova (2005). Rather, peer support

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