



Review

Transfer of training: Adding insight through social network analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews studies which apply a social network perspective to examine transfer of training. The theory behind social networks focuses on the interpersonal mechanisms and social structures that exist among interacting units such as people within an organization. A premise of this perspective is that individual's behaviors and outcomes are significantly affected by how that individual is tied into the larger web of social connections. With regard to transfer of training, the investigation of social networks as a perspective can build in-depth understanding of how social support aids in transfer of training.

Three groups of studies using a social network perspective are identified. A first group questions the role of the social network within the organisation for transfer of training. A second group of studies includes the network outside the organisation, hereby stretching the traditional idea of social support. A third group of studies sees the social network as an important outcome of itself. Through these studies, the potential value of the social network perspective for transfer of training research is identified and implications can be indicated.

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1. Introduction

As organisations try to improve their performance, investments are made to increase the performance of employees through professional development (Kozłowski & Salas, 2010). Training is among the means to support this professional development. However for training to be beneficiary, individuals participating in these trainings need to take the new knowledge, skills and attitudes back to the workplace and apply what they have learned (Hatala & Fleming, 2007; Wang & Wilcox, 2006). This is called transfer of training (Broad & Newstrom, 1992; Kirwan & Birchall, 2006). Yet, research indicates that this transfer to the workplace is confronted with many challenges (e.g., Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Curry, Caplan, & Knuppel, 1994; Kirwan & Birchall, 2006).

Within the different factors discerned as influencing the transfer process, the work environment has been argued to be a main predictor of transfer of training (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010; Holton, Cheng, & Naquin, 2003). Work environment implies the features of the workplace perceived by the employees to support or hinder their use of the knowledge skills and attitudes acquired during training on the job (Burke & Saks, 2009; Velada, Caetano, Michel, Lyons, & Kavanagh, 2007). In general, research on work environment factors (e.g. Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Richey, 1992) distinguishes between general environmental factors and factors related to training. With respect to the latter, social support of peers and supervisors are argued as being powerful determinants of successful transfer. However, in their review Cheng and Hampson (2008) refer to inconsistent findings with respect to the influence of supervisor and peer support on transfer of training. They conclude: "This implies that the construct validity of these tested variables may be questionable, jeopardizing their obtained results" (2008, p. 335). Or, as Clarke (2002) and Weisweiler, Nikitopoulos, Netzel, and Frey (2013) advocated, a better understanding of why and how social support in the work environment contributes to the transfer of training will provide great value for the research on training effectiveness in general.

Taking the perspective of social network analysis (SNA) can help to gain insight in this pattern of relationships with peers and supervisors and therefore to better understand how peer and supervisor support impact transfer of training (Hatala & Fleming, 2007). Social network analysis provides a collection of tools to explore patterns of relationships. At its best, social network analysis provides a kind of "X-ray" into the social life of an organisation, quantifies features of relationships, and connects them to constructs and outcomes of interest (Slaughter, Yu, & Koehly, 2009). In recent years, social network methods have increasingly been applied in organisational research. Of primary importance to the social network perspective is the premise that individuals' behaviors and outcomes are significantly affected by how that individual is tied into the larger web of social connections (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Taking a social network perspective within the field of Human Resource Development (HRD) and, more specifically, to the transfer of training can help to explain the impact the relationships within the work environment have on training transfer. Moreover, social networks can not only be regarded as a crucial mechanism in explaining transfer of training. It can be argued that establishing a community may be one of the most significant and lasting consequences of training programs. This would imply that creating supportive social structures are identified as important training outcomes.

The goal of this article is to overview the use of social network analysis for understanding transfer of training. Studies on transfer of training using social network analysis are described and categorized in lines of research which use SNA to disentangle specific aspects of the transfer of training question. Through this, the potential value of the social network perspective for transfer of training research is identified. Before turning to these studies, we first elaborate upon the role of social support in transfer of training and the possibilities of taking a social network perspective.

2. Transfer of training: the crucial role of social support

Understanding of the role of social support requires an understanding of what is meant by transfer as well as the identification of factors affecting transfer.

2.1. Transfer of training

Transfer of training is not only a function of original learning in a training program; to say that transfer occurred, learned behavior must be generalized to the job context and maintained over a period of time on the job (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Blanchard and Thacker (2010) pointed out that this generalization and maintenance also includes a learning process: the new behaviors are not part of the trainee's regular behavior and thus will need to be practiced on the job.

The idea that transfer includes further learning can be recognized in a seminal work on transfer by Brandsford and Schwartz (1999). They have emphasized the existence of two different views on transfer, hereby stressing the need to broaden our traditional idea on transfer. They claim that traditional approaches to transfer consist of a dominant methodology that asks whether people can apply something they have learned to a new situation (Brandsford & Schwartz); a view which is also dominant in the specific transfer of training literature. Brandsford and his colleague argue to broaden the conception of transfer by including an emphasis on people's 'preparation for future learning'. This implies that transfer is not only the application of what is learned, but it also involves if they are prepared to learn from their new experiences and are able to structure their environment in ways that lead to learning. No training can make people experts; it can only place them on a trajectory toward expertise (Brandsford & Schwartz).

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