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Work factors influencing the transfer stages of soft skills training: A literature review



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ABSTRACT

The transfer of training can be considered the Achilles heel of the training process. When trainees fail to use their new knowledge and skills on the job, training resources are wasted, and business results go unrealised. Research shows that the most problematic type of training transfer relates to soft skills training. To better understand the factors that influence the success of the transfer of soft skills training, we review studies published in top academic journals between 1988 and 2017. Our review reveals that three groups of work factors influence the post-training transfer of soft skills: job-related factors, social support factors, and factors related to the organisational facilitation of learning. The effects of specific factors vary by transfer stage. Our review also suggests that future research should devote more attention to the stages of transfer and consider both the behaviours of supervisors at each stage and the use of transfer-enhancing interventions.

1. Introduction

Although organisations invest billions of dollars in training every year, many trained competences reportedly fail to transfer to the workplace (Grossman & Salas, 2011). It is clear that the impact of training cannot be realised unless employees are both willing and able to use their new skills on the job (Jiang, Lepak, Han, et al., 2012). This ‘transfer of training’ is considered the Achilles heel of the training process. When trainees fail to use their new skills to improve performance, training resources are wasted and business results go unrealised (Chiaburu, Van Dam, & Hutchins, 2010), which leads to a waste of valuable time, energy and money for both organisations and their employees (Laker & Powell, 2011; Van der Locht, Van Dam, & Chiaburu, 2013; Volet, 2013). Despite the large investments in and potential benefits of training, organisational decision makers are often unsure of the extent to which employees perform differently once they have returned to work (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010; Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992), and they also fail to understand how to optimise this transfer (Baldwin, Ford, & Blume, 2017).

Even more problematic is the transfer process of soft skills training. Soft skills refer both to intrapersonal skills, such as the ability to manage oneself, and to interpersonal skills, such as managing interactions with others (Laker & Powell, 2011). Although most training transfer research and theory assumes that training content is irrelevant to the success of the training transfer (e.g., Burke & Hutchins, 2007), some studies mention how the transfer of soft skills differs from the transfer of hard skills. For example, Laker and Powell (2011) link the transfer of soft skills to far transfer (whereas the transfer of technical skills, for example, is more related to near transfer because a trainee can ‘mirror’ the skills from the training in the work environment). ‘The imprecision involved in the application of soft-skill training is due to the uncertainty involved in exactly what the trainee needs to know and in what contexts he or she needs to apply that learning’ (Laker & Powell, 2011, p. 116). Massenber, Schulte, and Kauffeld (2017) found that the mediating effect of motivation to transfer between supervisor support and training transfer appeared only after soft skills training and

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not after hard skills training. Additionally, soft skills, and therefore the transfer of the results of soft skills training, are often more difficult to measure relative to functional skills in business areas such as finance, accounting, and marketing (Brown & Warren, 2009; Nijman, 2004). At the same time, across professional fields, employers agree that soft skills are increasingly important to employee mobility and success in the workforce (Carvalho & Roque, 2015; Deming, 2017; Griffith & Hoppner, 2013; Ibrahim, Boerhannoeddin, & Kazeem Kayode, 2017).

Research has addressed various factors that explain the success of the transfer. 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). Although many factors influence transfer, the period after training seems to be most important in facilitating transfer (Hawley & Barnard, 2005). Only those employees who successfully apply their gained skills in the workplace (i.e., those who transfer their training) provide benefits to organisations through enhanced performance (Laker & Powell, 2011). Features of the work environment have been thought to be particularly important to post-training transfer (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992) because, while employees may be highly motivated individuals who have attended excellent training courses and are keen to use their new skills, constraints in the post-training work environment may prevent them from applying what they have learned in their jobs (Blume et al., 2010; Chiaburu, Sawyer, & Thoroughgood, 2010; Govaerts & Dochy, 2014; Salas, Tannenbaum, Kraiger, & Smith-Jentsch, 2012; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992; Van der Locht et al., 2013). Kastenmüller et al. (2012) mention that a facilitating work environment is especially necessary for the transfer of soft skills training because these types of training and their transfer require the participation of colleagues and supervisors. Qualitative reviews have provided some evidence of the factors and interventions that can affect post-training transfer. However, these reviews have not examined how (e.g., which conditions, situations, or support behaviours) and when (in which transfer stage) these factors influence the transfer. Additionally, so-called transfer-enhancing interventions have been used to optimise the post-training transfer, but there is significant variability in the findings across the relevant studies and a lack of consistent support for particular transfer interventions (Blume et al., 2010). If we want to improve the training transfer of soft skills training, we need to understand both the post-training transfer process and the work factors that influence the process and results of post-training transfer.

With this literature review, we aim to bring clarity to this issue by reviewing and integrating findings regarding the effects of work factors on the post-training transfer of soft skills training. Specifically, we focus on answering the following question: *What is the influence of work factors on the transfer of soft skills training at different post-training transfer stages?* To do so, we first provide a stage model of the post-training transfer process by integrating previous reviews (Blume et al., 2010; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Cheng & Hampson, 2008; Cheng & Ho, 2001; Grossman & Salas, 2011; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). We subsequently use this stage model to review the literature. To better understand the factors that influence the successful transfer of soft skills training, we review empirical studies published in academic journals between 1988 (which marks the publication of Baldwin and Ford's well-regarded review of the 'transfer problem' in training research) and 2017.

Our review reveals that three groups of work factors influence the transfer of soft skills: job-related factors, social support factors, and the organisational facilitation of learning. The effects of specific factors are found to vary by transfer stage, and some factors are mediated by transfer-enhancing interventions. We conclude this paper with suggestions for further research on the transfer of soft skills training. Such research will not only contribute to a better understanding of the transfer process but will also optimise transfer results in organisations.

2. Modelling the transfer process

To study the transfer of soft skills training, it is important to examine the total post-training transfer process and to clarify the transfer results at each stage. Blume et al. (2010) recommend training transfer researchers to increase the precision of their selection and reporting of transfer outcomes. How transfer is conceptualised and how and when it is measured are important (Blume et al., 2010). Furthermore, Gruber (2013) states that 'you have to be explicit about what kind of performance you have in mind when you seriously want to talk about transfer and about training' (Gruber, 2013, p. 97). This criterion problem has also been mentioned in other studies (Cheng & Ho, 2001; Knyphausen-Aufsess, Smukalla, & Abt, 2009). In line with Blume et al. (2010), De Rijdt, Stes, Van der Vleuten, and Dochy (2013) and Yelon, Ford, and Bhatia (2014), we conceptualise training-to-work transfer as transfer not only to the employee's job but also to the consequences of doing the job well, that is, of (changed) work behaviour leading to improved individual and organisational performances.

In our transfer model presented in Fig. 1, t_0 represents the situation before the training (referring to the knowledge/skills, behaviours and/or performance of the trainee), and t_1 represents the situation directly after the training. At t_1 , the trainee is supposed to have gained knowledge and skills but has used the new knowledge and skills only in the context of the training and not on the job; thus, there is not yet a change in work behaviour or work performance. It is clear that the influence of training cannot be realised unless employees are both willing and able to use their new skills on the job (Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012). If the transfer is successful, measures at t_2 indicate changes in work behaviour and work performance at the individual or organisational level. Whereas the main evaluation question during the training is 'Have you learned the new skills?' (learning perspective), the main question during the transfer is 'Did the training improve your performance?' (work perspective).

If we examine post-training transfer, four transfer stages can be identified as occurring in periods t_1 - t_2 . Stage 1, i.e., the motivation to transfer, is defined as the trainee's desire to apply the skills and knowledge gained during training to the workplace (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Cheng & Hampson, 2008; Tracey, Tannenbaum, & Kavanagh, 1995). Motivation to transfer is expected to influence transfer behaviour (Cheng & Hampson, 2008). Stage 2 is the actual use of the trained skills in the workplace (Arthur, Bennett, Edens, & Bell, 2003; Blume et al., 2010; Cheng & Hampson, 2008; Grossman & Salas, 2011; Van den Bossche & Segers, 2013). The trainees

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