

The UK Survey of Learning

Robert Terry gives an overview of the results of the first *TJ* and ASK Europe survey into the transfer and application of learning

Given that we have known about the 'transfer problem' for at least 50 years, it may come as a surprise to discover that no one has ever attempted to find out what practitioners, people like you and me, actually do in the name of making our training *stick*.

You could be forgiven for believing that the questions raised about the effectiveness of training and the role of poor learning transfer in raising them would have galvanised the industry, or at least an academic or two into some serious survey action. Not so. Courtesy of burgeoning theoretical literature on the subject, we may think we know what might close the 'transfer gap' but we know precious little about what those who are responsible for buying, designing and delivering training actually do. Are we following the prescriptions offered by the legion of researchers who have committed themselves to understanding learning transfer or are we, for whatever reason, continuing to do what we have always done?

The very first national survey of transfer practice, sponsored by *Training Journal*, was conducted between September and December 2010. Practitioners from all sectors, from a wide range of roles and covering a broad spectrum of L&D responsibilities, were invited to complete an online questionnaire that explored the extent to which they made use of the strategies, methods and tools that are claimed to increase learning transfer.

A total of 549 respondents completed the survey, a comfortably significant sample and well in excess of our target, so this may be an appropriate point at which to thank all of you who took the time to participate. As promised, a synopsis of the survey results will be despatched

shortly to all respondents who provided their email address and indicated that they would like a copy.

Barriers to transfer

Judging by the tone and content of some of the comments left by respondents, the prevailing mood with regard to learning transfer could best be described as weary resignation. It would seem that, for the overwhelming majority of us, learning transfer is right up there with a healthy diet, more exercise and a better work-life balance – *Lord, make me virtuous but not yet*.

With varying degrees of frustration, practitioners cite lack of time, budget and tools



to explain why transfer is not at the top of their agenda. They also describe a prevailing attitude in their organisations in which senior managers don't so much delegate their responsibilities for training as abdicate them. In many organisations, it would seem that L&D is considered a drain on slender resources that promises little by way of immediate return and so receives only grudging endorsement.

Respondents reserve their most pointed comments, however, for line management. In their eyes, culpability for poor learning transfer lies squarely with line managers who, through a combination of misguided priorities, absence of motivation and lack of skills, cannot or will not actively participate in developing their people.

Training delivery and design

The results of the 2010 survey confirm that, when it comes to training delivery, practitioners know their stuff. In this their hinterland, respondents claimed to *frequently* or *usually* deploy all of the strategies that emphasised the utility, relevance and value of the training and used appropriate instructional strategies to maximise transfer as well as learning.

A similar story is revealed around training design, albeit this time with some notable gaps. Practitioners report very high rates of usage for design elements such as needs analysis, goal setting and opportunities for practise although, tellingly, opportunities for repeated practise are reported only *rarely* or *infrequently* – a reflection perhaps, of the increasing pressure to do more in less time?

Staying with training design, respondents report much lower levels of usage of strategies such as evaluation of business impact and the use of post-training event support from trainers, coaches or the emerging transfer support technologies such as Fort Hills' *ResultsEngine*®. More research is necessary before we can say with confidence that transfer support technology can make a strong contribution but there are indications that, as part of a well-balanced design, it can be much more than just nag ware.

Learner selection

A great deal of academic research has explored the role of learner selection in improving transfer. Given that for most of us, 'sheep-dip' is the only selection strategy in play, it could be considered redundant to dwell further on what might theoretically be possible. However, there may come a time when our budgets are so constrained that we are obliged to nominate for training only those whom we believe offer a realistic prospect



of performance improvement. In which case, we will be using more frequently strategies to identify those with proven learning agility than the *almost never* currently reported in the survey.

In fact, the whole area of learner selection either by personality, seniority or workplace performance appears not to be under consideration ... at the moment.

Workplace environment

If learner selection can be characterised as a 'slow burn', the workplace environment is definitely a 'quick win'. If there is one area that is currently



relatively neglected but that could, for very little money, produce huge transfer effects, it is the workplace and the so-called 'transfer climate' that prevails there. Respondents reported *infrequent* or *rare* usage of all but one of the strategies in this major area of influence.

Opportunities to practise and use newly-acquired capabilities, constructive participation in the transfer process by managers, peers and direct reports, monitoring, measurement and a culture of accountability are sitting there waiting to be leveraged in the name of learning transfer if we choose to do so.

Motivation

Another potentially huge improvement to learning transfer could come through greater focus on motivation.

Motivation to learn, to transfer and to improve performance, the role of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards in generating that motivation and the importance of motivating not just learners but learners' line managers are all, according to the academic research, potentially fruitful areas for investment. As anyone who has read VitalSmarts' latest blockbuster *Influencer* will tell you, *skill* without *will* does not create changed behaviour.

It's fair to say that, at the moment, motivation strategies are not high on practitioners' to-do list, reporting only *infrequent* usage.

Transfer and application

Notwithstanding this rather bleak picture, it's interesting to note that practitioners are relatively optimistic about the extent to which transfer is actually taking place in their organisations. Respondents estimated that, on average, 47 per cent of training content in their programmes is transferred and applied on the job. This compares very favourably with the rather more downbeat assertions of successive academic studies that estimate actual transfer at no better than 5-10 per cent.

It would appear that, although we are prepared to admit that for a variety of reasons, many of which we believe are beyond our influence, we do not deploy the strategies, methods and tools that might increase learning transfer, we are nonetheless convinced that our programmes still succeed while others fail.

Funny that.

Conclusion

In the coming months, I will explore in greater detail some of the fascinating insights that have emerged in this inaugural survey of learning transfer practice and attempt to identify more 'quick wins' that could transform the effectiveness of your training.

Buyers of training and development, who responded to this survey, reported that transfer and application is only a *slight* influence on their purchasing decisions. I hope that, in years to come, subsequent surveys will see learning transfer take its place at the top table of selection criteria so that we can know that we are working as hard to provide performance improvement as we are to provide first class learning. **TJ**

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