



Learning transfer—the missing link in learning

Emma Weber

In this concluding article, Sydney-based learning transfer expert Emma Weber interviews Roy Pollock from Fort Hill Company in the US, co-author of the bestseller, *The Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning*. Roy's insights about learning transfer, particularly in the context of the role of the manager, clearly show why this issue will become a significant priority for L&D professionals.

There is a lot of discussion about the role of the manager in learning transfer. What do you think the role of the manager is?

Numerous studies (summarised in *The Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning*, pp 232–244) have shown that managers have a vitally important role to play in learning transfer. There is a very strong correlation between the degree to which a manager supports application of learning and how much is actually transferred to the job. A

my manager has signalled to me that the training is important and that they expect me to apply it afterwards, I attend the training with a completely different attitude than if they are silent on the issue—or worse, expresses displeasure about my attendance.

The manager's role is to create a positive transfer climate by:

- having a brief discussion beforehand about the importance of the training and the expectation for its use

managers do not do a good job of coaching to facilitate learning transfer. It is partly a matter of priorities (their managers aren't holding them accountable) and partly a matter of lack of knowledge and skill. As Bill Amaxopoulos of Chubb Insurance puts it: "Just because someone is promoted to manager, doesn't mean they know how to coach effectively".

It isn't enough to exhort managers to coach more. You need to provide them with a short, practical, efficient process for doing so, and job aids to help them succeed. A number of our clients discovered that while no manager will ever ask L&D for a guide to coaching, when they provided one it was used to good effect. That was the idea behind our book *How to Get Your Money's Worth from Training and Development*—to provide an effective process and forms that managers and participants can use to maximise the value of the time and money invested in training.

The key is to make the process simple and efficient; for example, just getting managers to routinely ask three questions:

- What did you learn?
- How are you going to use it?
- And what help do you need to be successful?

These questions, if asked every time someone returns from a training program, would have a salutary effect on results. Why not set up the LMS or transfer support system to automatically email managers a reminder about the power of these

questions whenever one of their direct reports attends training?

The other key is to make coaching a priority. That means ensuring that the managers of managers notice. Simply measuring and publishing the level of post-program managerial support will call attention to it and earn it greater effort. For example, Steelcase started routinely asking participants three months after training the extent to which their managers supported their efforts to apply what they learned. When L&D shared the results with senior management, it became apparent how much potential value was going unrealised through suboptimal support. Coaching became a much a higher priority. Steelcase now posts the coaching support scorecard on their learning portal so everyone can see how much progress is being made.

There is a lot of talk right now about social learning. What special considerations do we need to give learning transfer in the context of social learning?

Co-workers are a key element of the learning transfer climate. They can encourage the application of new skills and knowledge and contribute to continued learning, or they can impede transfer.

We should harness the power of peer support and social learning to help facilitate learning transfer by making it easy for program participants to stay in touch, share experiences, and continue learning from one another following a training program. Many programs benefit by establishing learning buddies or trios to help hold each other accountable and to provide peer support. Effective learning transfer support systems include a sharing function to support ongoing social learning.

With technology playing an important part in all aspects of business improvement now, how are companies using technology to help with learning transfer?

One of the most exciting new developments in learning and development in recent years is the creation of learning transfer support technology. The first of these, and still the most widely used, is ResultsEngine®.

Web-based learning transfer support systems allow learning professionals to facilitate and

track the post-training application period for hundreds or thousands of participants. They include reminders to help keep the learning top of mind, a mechanism to report progress and achievements, a coaching loop that involves the manager and a social learning (collaboration) feature. A leader's dashboard summarises key information such as participation, goals, coaching and results for the learning organisation. A recent research report by Bersin and Associates concluded: "Based on our research, we anticipate that learning transfer support will be a major differentiator for high-impact learning organisations over the next 10 years."

Can you tell us a little more about the size/type of companies that are using learning transfer support technologies and what type of results are they getting?

A wide variety of organisations, large and small, across numerous industries have added learning transfer support to their programs to ensure that they achieve mission-critical results. Benefits have been reported in programs as diverse as basic sales training to general management, to executive leadership. Pfizer reported an almost 50 per cent increase in ROI after adding transfer support to one of its leadership programs, without any other change in the program. Hewlett-Packard deployed online transfer support in a worldwide program to reduce waste and found that "The post-workshop support system created a reinforcing cycle... to assure that participants were learning and manifesting the desired new behaviors and that the new behaviors were producing the desired business value". On a smaller scale, universities and executive education programs are finding learning transfer support especially valuable in soft-skills training because these skills require ongoing practice and reflection to master. ■

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study at American Express concluded, "An immediate leader has the potential to either make or break any training effort".

In other words, training programs must consider the impact of managers. To maximise success, they need to plan for and actively encourage managerial engagement by providing a practical process and job aids for getting the most from training.

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- facilitating undistracted attendance by arranging for others to 'cover' my work and minimising interruptions
- following-up with the learner afterwards about their goals for application
- recognising or rewarding application of new learning and expressing disappointment at non-use.

How well do you see managers stepping into this role? What can be done to support them?

Coaching is consistently one of the lowest-ranking competencies of managers on 360-feedback. So it is no surprise that most

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