

A Review of Theories that Support Transfer of Training

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Abstract: *Researchers have called for more integrative models of training effectiveness and transfer of training, in an effort to include most of the individual and organizational contextual factors as precursors of transfer of training (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Kozlowski & Salas, 1997; Mathieu & Martineau, 1997; Quinones, 1997; Colquitt et al., 2000). In recent years, the increased interest of organizations with optimizing the ROI (return on investment) in human capital development activities have led to an upsurge in research focusing on the evaluation of training effectiveness (Carlson et al., 2000; Switzer et al., 2005; Rowold, 2007). Successful learning in the training environment may not be enough to translate the acquired skills, attitude, and knowledge to the work environment.” Transfer of training, is more than a function of original learning in a training program (Atkinson, 1972; Fleishman, 1953). The purpose of this review is to understand the theories that support transfer of training in order to identify and study the factors which can predict transfer of training that is of pertinent importance to the success of organizational training and its application back in the job environment.*

Keywords: Transfer of training, Theories supporting transfer, Training

1. Transfer of Training

Positive transfer of training can be defined as the extent to which trainees successfully apply the new knowledge, superior skills, and positive attitudes gained in a training situation back to their work (Wexley & Latham, 1981; Newstrom, 1984). For learning transfer to occur, the learnt content or behaviour thereof must be generalized to the job context of an individual employee and should be maintained over a period of time on the job (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). For example in a hospitality service context, an employee may be taught about cross selling and if a food & beverage associate is able to sell the services of the spa located at the hotel, the employee can be said to be successful in terms of having generalized the new skills that were taught and if he or she is able to maintain these skills over a period of time transfer of training can be said to have occurred in the case of this employee.

The International Encyclopaedia of Adult Education and Training (1996:519) defined training, “as the provision that is aimed at creating intentional learning processes that contribute to improving the performance of workers in their present job”. The definitions on training available in the Human resource development context does not differ significantly from the one mentioned earlier. For example, in an HRD environment, training is frequently defined as a planned learning experience designed by the organization to bring about long lasting change in an individual’s knowledge, attitudes or skills (Campbell, 1970). Goldstein (1992) defined training as an orderly acquisition of attitudes, concepts, knowledge, behaviour or skills that results in enhanced performance at work.

2. Theories in support of Transfer of Training

In this section, theories that support transfer of training are presented. For transfer to occur, one can think of two conditions that are to be fulfilled. The first is that it must be maintained over some time, before it becomes obsolete either

to the organization or to the individual. It must also be generalized across contexts (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). The same authors also reviewed the transfer of training literature and identified three factors that might affect or influence transfer, which are the individual/ trainees’ characteristics, training design and work environment factors. Therefore, it will be of interest to researchers to understand, which theories in the domains of human resource development and organizational behaviour can be taken to support transfer of training. Yamnill & Mclean (2001) collated the theories and explained their impact under three broad areas.

- 1) Theories on motivation to transfer
- 2) Theories on training design
- 3) Theories supporting the transfer climate

These might explain what motivates or hinders the individuals to make an effort to transfer, what training design factors will aid or obstruct transfer and the work environment factors that are congenial to transfer the knowledge, skills and attitudes, learnt during off the job training, back to the job.

The following sections present a few of the theories in the aforementioned areas, which can help researchers and practitioners better understand the training transfer concept.

3. Theories on Motivation to Transfer

Motivation to transfer can be explained the desire of the trainees’ to use the knowledge and skills that were mastered in the training program on the job when the training is over (Noe & Schmitt, 1986). According to these theories, trainees may be expected to leave the training programs with different levels of motivation to use their learning in the real job environment (Yamnill & Mclean, 2001). According to Holton (1996), influences on transfer motivation fall into four categories; intervention fulfilment, learning outcomes, job attitudes, and expected utility. All of these categories can

be explained by expectancy theory, equity theory, and goal setting theory.

3.1 Expectancy Theory

Vroom (1964, p. 17) defined expectancy as, "a momentary belief concerning the likelihood that a particular act will precede a particular outcome". Expectancy theory therefore indicated that an individual, in this case a trainee will decide to behave or act in a certain way because they have certain expectations or outcomes associated with that selected behaviour. They will be motivated to select a specific behaviour over other behaviours, due to the fact that their expectations will be fulfilled as a result of that selected behaviour. An individual may expect that there will be monetary or other tangible rewards for performance, or that high performance might lead to job satisfaction or career advancement. These are the premises on which it can be concluded that trainees' can be expected to transfer the skills taught during training back to the job environment, with a belief that application of knowledge, skills and attitude learnt during training will lead to better outcomes in terms of rewards, job satisfaction, promotions and more.

3.2 Equity Theory

Equity theory is based on the simple premise that people want to be treated equally and fairly (Adams, 1963). It then follows that those individuals who want to be treated fairly and those who want to reduce inequity in their pay, rewards etc., may be expected to learn and use the training content to better perform on their jobs that will help them achieve equal treatment.

3.3 Goal Setting Theory

Goal-setting theory suggests two cognitive predictors or determinants of behaviour: intentions and values. Intentions are viewed as the immediate precursors or predictors of human action. The second cognitive process manifests itself in the choice or acceptance of intentions and subsequent commitment to those goals associated with the intentions (Locke, 1968). A goal is that level of performance that an individual is trying to accomplish; it is the object or aim of exhibiting or indulging in a particular behaviour or a set of behaviours. A study by Wexley & Nemeroff (1975), suggests that trainees' who were given performance goals transferred the training content better than the control group to whom no goal was set. Therefore, in order to engage in a behaviour as a result of training, setting of goals either by the trainee or by the constituents of the organization seems to be important.

4. Theories on Training Design

The following section discusses theories on training design.

4.1 Identical elements theory:

The theory of identical elements was proposed by Thorndike and Woodworth (1901). According to the theory, "transfer can be improved by increasing the degree of correspondence

among the training setting stimuli, responses, conditions and those related factors operative in the performance setting" (Yamhill & Mclean, 2001). This suggests that if in the training environment the skills that are taught is more or less identical to the skills that would be required in the real job environment then transfer can be enhanced.

4.2 Principles Theory

The principles theory if applied to a training context can be taken to suggest that, training should focus on the general principles necessary to learn a task so that the learner can apply them, to solve problems in the transfer environment (Goldstein, 1986). This theory suggests that it is possible to design training environments, without too much concern about their similarity to the transfer situation that a trainee will confront when applying to a task, as long as it is possible to utilize the underlying principles and generalize the training content. For example, general principles about problem solving might be applied in a conflict management solution in organizations.

4.3 Near and Far Transfer

According to Laker (1990), transfer of training can be near or far. Near transfer is the application of learning to situations which are similar to those in which the initial learning had taken place; far transfer is the application of learning to situations dissimilar to those of the original learning during training. Whether a trainee achieves near or far transfer appears to be dependent on which theory of transfer guides the development, design and presentation of the training program. It can therefore be taken that, identical elements theory influences near transfer and principles theory influences far transfer. According to Spitzer (1984), near transfer would be the objective of short-term skill development that can be applied immediately to improve performance in one's present position, such as using automated systems for streamlining processes involving customers in an organization. Near transfer would seem to be most desired when pursuing technical training (Laker, 1990), because technical training usually teaches specific behaviours and procedures applicable to the individual's current job. Principles theory is critical to far transfer because knowledge can be seen as an abstract concept and it can be used to solve new problems. If trainees can understand the principles, concepts and if they have a chance to practice the exercises and apply the situations that they were exposed to in training programs back to their workplace, they can be expected to apply those newly acquired skills and behaviours, when faced with new challenges and unfamiliar problems. This then confirms the principles theory.

5. Theories Supporting Transfer Climate

Transfer climate was described by Schneider and Rentsch as a "sense of imperative" (cited in Holton *et al.*, 1997) that arises from a person's perception of the factors that are present in his or her work environment. It influences the extent to which that person can use learnt skills on the job.

For example peer support can aid in the active application of a new skill learnt during training.

5.1 Transfer Climate framework

Rouiller & Goldstein (1993) offered a conceptual framework for operationalizing transfer climate; they suggested that transfer climate consists of two types of workplace cues, namely situation cues and consequence cues that include eight distinct dimensions in all. The first set of workplace cues- situation cues reminds trainees of the opportunities to use what they have learnt, when they return to work. There are four types of situation cues are goal cues, social cues, task cues, and self-control cues. The second set of workplace cues- consequence cues is the feedback trainees receive after they apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained in the training back to their jobs. There are four types of consequences namely positive feedback, negative feedback, punishment, and no feedback. This study and the conceptualization of the transfer climate factors by Rouiller & Goldstein (1993) was a milestone in the identification of the factors and improving the understanding of such factors, so that manipulations can be made in the transfer climate to enhance transfer.

5.2 Organization Theory

Organization theory describes the organizational climate that supports (cited in Yamnill & Mclean, 2001), "the need for change, the implementation of interventions, and the transfer of trained skills are embedded within the context of work team, subunit, and organization levels". Hence, it is implied that the organization as a whole needs to be supportive for trainees' to apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes learnt during training, back to the job.

6. Conclusion

Through this paper important theories that support transfer of training have been identified and reviewed which may aid our understanding of "transfer of training". This in turn will help identifying and studying factors that may determine/predict transfer of training.

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Author Profile

Uma Pricilda J is currently serving as Associate Professor at the reputed VIT University and has more than 15 yrs of industry, academic administration and research experience. She has to her credit papers published in International and National Journals. She has also attended many International and National Conferences on Business & Management. For the past two years she has been successfully organizing an International Conference on Emerging Markets at VIT Business School, VIT University.