

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

BTN interviewed Paul Matthews in 2018

The Business Transformation Network interviewed Paul Matthews in 2018 and created four videos. This is video #1 which focusses on how to stop wasting training budget.

TRANSCRIPT

Question: What is the biggest waste in the training industry?

The biggest waste, as I see it, is the fact that the training that we do is then not activated and implemented in the workplace. In other words, we put people in a classroom and then we seem happy to accept that only a very small proportion of what we teach them and a small proportion of delegates will actually go and do much with that information back in the workplace, and translate it, transfer it into different behaviours that will actually make a fundamental difference to the performance of what's going on.

The figures are crazy. 10 to maybe 20, 30% of stuff gets implemented, maybe one person in six. There's a whole lot of different research around about this. My background is engineering. Quite frankly, if I was building a bridge or building an automobile with a failure rate that training has, I'd be killing people on a regular basis, and I don't think that's appropriate, so I tend to come at this a bit more like an engineer saying, "what's really going on?" How can we design stuff differently in order to get the results that we must get in order to get the return on our investment?

Question: Why do people ignore it?

When I started researching the book I'm currently writing on learning transfer, I started terming it the elephant in the room, simply because people ignore it so regularly. And so why do they ignore it? I think some people are just completely unaware of it. Some people think they are doing it, but what they're doing is totally insufficient to make any impact that has any relevance at all. Some people think, "Well, it's not my job. My job was to deliver training." Some people, like the managers who are involved, say things like, "Well my job is operational excellence not on developing my team. I'm going to focus on being operations, and learning and development can take care of developing the team. Nothing to do with me." So you do get this aspect of people kind of saying, "Well it's not me. It's got to be somebody else."

But of course if nobody's really looking at the elephant and dealing with it then it ends up being nobody else and then everything falls apart because you don't get the results from the training because no one is doing anything about bringing that training into practice, into being people experimenting, people thinking about it, people reflecting on it. So all those things that will make it work just are not happening.

Another reason that it is often ignored or nothing is done about it is there's zero accountability. I was sitting talking to a learning development manager in a training centre once and a whole cohort of people came out of a couple of training rooms all flooding out to go and get their break, their tea and coffee, and I asked him, "If I was to ask those delegates, what are the consequences if they did nothing with what they've just learned in the training room, what would they tell me?" And rather sheepishly, he had to say, "Well actually there would be no consequences." And if there are no consequences for those delegates, if they do nothing, why would they do anything if it's easier to do nothing? Which it usually is when they go back to work because their manager is not supporting them that well because it's tough to do something different because they go back to a full in tray. There's so many reasons why they don't implement, and if there are no consequences for not implementing, why would they take the hard road?

Question: How do you activate learning transfer in the workplace to get ROI?

There's almost a precursor to learning transfer in that in order to do it well, you've got to make sure that what you're transferring actually needs transferring, or should be transferred. So the first step, arguably in learning transfer is figuring out whether the training is worth doing, which you do with performance consultancy or performance diagnostics. So that's your first step, is make sure the training is a reliable or useful solution to how you might proceed to get better performance. There's no point in transferring learning from a training room into the workflow if it's not going to make much difference when it does get into the workflow.

And then what you need to think about in terms of training is putting a wrapper around your training course. So let's just assume we're focusing on maybe just a one-day training event. You need to put a wrapper around that. Clearly, training can get a lot more complex than that, but at a simplistic level, there's going to be some things you should be doing before that training, like getting the manager involved and working out goals and outcomes and stuff like that. Then you do the training, and in the training you need to be focusing on the fact that this is part of a larger program, and then you need to be doing a number of things after that to help people experiment, to practice, to try out new things, and to support them while they are doing that, which again needs management involvement.

I mentioned there the concept of a program and this is very different to the concept of an event. So if you have a one-day event that you want to deliver, talk about it as say a four-day program. Never ever talk about it as a one-day event or a one-day program because all the people will do is put in their minds the idea that they need one day to go and do this, and when they've gone and done the face-to-face event, they'll think it's all sorted and that absolutely is not the case.

The only way that would ever be the case, by the way, is if learning and development had large sets of pixie dust they could sprinkle on people so that the results would magically happen and the learners would go back to the workplace, fully operational and able to put all that into practice immediately. Actually, let them know that L&D is fresh out of pixie dust. We just don't have any left. So it's really important you talk about the entire program and that people have this expectation that there's four days of stuff to do spread over maybe six months, not just a one-day event that's a one hit thing.

And then, it's fairly obvious that in order for people to start doing things after a training event, they're going to have to practice. They're going to have to try things out, they're going to have to run simulations, so you got to find out how can we help them test this in a risk-free environment or where there are minimal consequences if they get it wrong? Just think of stuff that you've learned. Until you actually go and do it, very seldom do we think that we know it, or that we can use it with ease, or that we're practiced with it. And this is more important when you need to practice things so they come reflexively when the situation demands. And then in other cases, it might not be a reflexive thing like, I don't know, how to handle a power tool correctly. It might be something that requires judgment. And so that's the difference.

And then you can start looking at some of the learning transfer theories like high road and low road transfer or near and far transfer to help with the design process of understanding, given this learning outcome, given these performance goals that we have, given the behaviour change we want, given where people are and where we want them to be, then how can we apply these different theories of learning transfer to build a design that's actually going to make sense and help them to where we want them to be.

It is not necessarily a simple process other than the fact that you need lots of little things for people to do. Now, the reason I say that, is too often people go into a learning event and they will have maybe two or three major outcomes or goals that they ask people to set, "What are you going to do differently after this course?" The problem with those is that they are too big. Just think about it. When you get asked to do something, your first reaction internally is to say, "Well, how difficult is that? How awkward is it? What's this going to cost me and am I motivated enough right now to go and do that thing right now that actually seems potentially quite big and quite awkward?" And the answer is normally no.

And if I get asked again tomorrow to do it, the answer is probably going to be no again.

So largely what happens when people have these things to do or are given to do after a training program, their motivation levels are not high enough that the trigger that asks them; it fails. So there's some lovely work done by a chap called BJ Fogg at Stanford University where he talks about the behaviour will happen when there's a trigger, when there's the right level of motivation, and that coincides correctly with the amount of ability that someone sees they have to do what's being asked to be done. And if the motivation is not enough for the activity they're being asked, in effect, the trigger will fail.

So often what I see with people who are currently doing things that are related to learning transfer is they're operating on the side of the line on the graph where the triggers always fail, which is why even though they're doing stuff, what they're doing doesn't work. Okay, so what that shows us is that what we need is lots of small activities spread over a period of time where they can look at the activities and say, "Oh yeah, I can do that. That'll take five minutes. Yeah, I can do that right now. Let's just go and do it." So cumulatively over a period of time, you need lots and lots of small activities which will build-up to the same results as those three big outcomes you had earlier.

Now, while they're doing all of that, you clearly need to support them doing it. And this is where typically the line manager has a very large role to play. Now, line managers are often not that well-skilled as coaches, we'd love them to be. That's not necessarily what they're there for. Although in advanced learning cultures, they do do a lot more coaching. But what they will say is, "My role is operational excellence and I'm not a coach or a mentor."

So what you have to do is if you set up these little activities, then you can say to the line manager, "Well, all you've got to do is just debrief the activities and encourage people to do them. Surely you can do that. That's part of your job as a line manager is to debrief people on delegated activities." The other thing that line manager has to manage is the culture around that individual. So as well as supporting the individual, they have to manage the environment they're operating within, so the environment is friendly to the experimentation these people need to do in order to practice and try out these new ways of doing things. So the line manager just says, "I'm so glad you're back from the training. Here's a full in tray. Get on with it. We missed you. We need you back on deck and doing everything right away. Forget about the stuff you did at the training. We haven't got time for that right now." That happens all too frequently and it's just not good.

Question: What tools do you need to make learning transfer effective?

Now some of the things that you're actually going to need during learning transfer, A, is a design process to get the design right and to look at the theories that help you with that design. The second one is getting all the different people on board and holding them accountable for what they need to do to aid and assist the whole process. And typically wrapped around all of that, you need some kind of digital solution that will enable you to manage what's often a very large number of small activities. The new name for that, by the way, is a Learning Transfer Platform or an LTP, and that's something we have a lot of experience with.

GET IN TOUCH

Paul Matthews is a renowned authority in the Learning and Development space. Whether you want to call on his knowledge and expertise as a skilled keynote speaker, as a consultant or to run a workshop, he'd love to hear from you.

To book Paul for your forthcoming event, enquire about his availability or arrange an informal chat about any of his services, get in touch today.

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