



## **Praise for *Learning Transfer at Work***

“Paul’s excellent new book includes great practical tips and challenges long established processes to ensure that learning leads to improved performance. *Learning Transfer at Work* is a must read for all L&D professionals.”

**Daniel Rowlinson**

*Learning and Development Manager, Searcys*

“Paul has shone a light on an often ignored but critical aspect of learning. This isn’t just a dry academic analysis; he has gathered case studies and has again produced an extensive list of pragmatic actions.”

**Jim Potts PFHEA**

*Deputy Head Training and Education, Defence Academy of the UK*

“Paul addresses this particular elephant in the room head on. Learning transfer may not be the sexiest of topics in the learning and development sector but it is one of the most critical, and Paul skilfully combines research, theory and practitioner views. Any L&D professional’s practice will be enhanced by this book.”

**Mike Shaw**

*Senior Learning & Development Professional*

“This book calls out the elephant in many L&D rooms; if we don’t ensure a positive impact from development activities on organisational goals, we are wasting valuable time and resources. Paul highlights the importance of systemic thinking. Learning transfer is not solely dependent on whether an initiative in itself is good, but involves the vital questions around whether needs are accurately defined, who the learning is aimed at and how well the learners are prepared and supported once back in their workplace.”

**Andy Lancaster**

*Head of L&D, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)*

## LEARNING TRANSFER AT WORK

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“Learning transfer has been L&D’s dirty little secret for too long. Too much of what learning teams do is well intentioned but ultimately underwhelming. Paul Matthews’ excellent book is packed with actionable hints, tips and strategies which will enhance the work of anyone who is serious about ensuring that learning interventions make a positive difference to employee’s skills and an organisation’s capability.”

Robin Hoyle, Writer

*Head of Learning Innovation at Huthwaite International  
Chair of the World of Learning Conference*

Anyone who is looking to the future of learning must read this book. It asks questions which we assume L&D people already have the answers to, and frames the answers from other perspectives. Enlightening!

Nathan Baker

*Director of Engineering Knowledge, Institution of Civil Engineers*

“Learning transfer is actually the most critical piece of the learning puzzle, without it the entire exercise is wasted. Learning Transfer at Work finally offers some answers on how to pin this down and really make it happen, a great read!”

Joe Tidman

*Head of Learning and Development, Johnson Matthey*

“In this book, Paul takes one of the most difficult subjects for Learning and Development and deals with it in a no-nonsense style that will constantly challenge everyone who reads it. We have to know that we are truly making a difference for people AND the businesses they work for. The book is full of the latest insights, practical tips and ideas as well as traditional concepts with new twists. This will be a ‘must read’ and ‘need to put into practice’ for everyone in my team.”

Jeff Uden

*Head of Talent, Iceland Foods*



Learning Transfer at Work  
*How to ensure training >> Performance*

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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	xi
<b>Introduction</b> .....	xiii
<b>Part 1: Overview</b> .....	1
What is learning transfer?.....	1
Why do we avoid it?.....	9
But we already do learning transfer! .....	20
Where does it start? .....	25
Informal learning .....	30
The Learning Stack.....	34
Triggers that work .....	42
Mindset .....	48
Near and far transfer .....	53
Creating new habits.....	60
Support .....	67
Measurement.....	79
The brand of L&D.....	87
<b>Part 2: The Practical stuff</b> .....	91
Tips, ideas, tools and questions to get you thinking.....	92
<b>Companion Reading</b> .....	229
<b>About the Author</b> .....	231
<b>Index</b> .....	233

# Foreword

I meet many inspirational learning professionals in my role as Head of Learning and Development at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). And, as part of that global learning network, I count Paul Matthews as a key figure who understands what it takes to deliver effective learning in organisations.

His previous books “*Informal Learning at Work: How to Boost Performance in Tough Times*” and “*Capability at Work: How to Solve the Performance Puzzle*” establish the DNA of his thought-leadership; an astute diagnosis of the challenges faced by learning practitioners and highly pragmatic solutions that help organisations shift in performance and productivity. At CIPD we know that transformative L&D practice is principles-led, evidence-based and outcomes-driven, Paul ticks all those boxes!

I was therefore delighted to be asked by Paul to write the foreword for this latest book “*Learning Transfer at Work: How to Ensure Training >> Performance*” knowing full well that it would bring a necessary challenge.

The theme of learning transfer must be of the highest priority to all those involved with organisational learning. The investment in learning can be significant and there must be an expectation that the outlay will drive impact. In our increasingly competitive and fast-changing world results matter, and development must have a clear link to measurable outcomes.

This book calls out the elephant in many L&D rooms; if we don't ensure a positive impact from development activities on organisational goals, we are wasting valuable time and resources. Paul highlights the importance of systemic

thinking. Learning transfer is not solely dependent on whether an initiative in itself is good, but involves the vital questions around whether needs are accurately defined, who the learning is aimed at and how well the learners are prepared and supported once back in their workplace.

Sadly, L&D practitioners often ignore these components and perpetuate a culture in which there is a lack of accountability for learning transfer. The book highlights that for impact to be a reality, learning professionals must be thoughtful and objective in their assessment of learning but also in providing support to all involved in the learning ecosystem. Every stakeholder in a development scenario must play their part and commit to ensuring effective transfer takes place.

This requires a shift in mindset, which in itself is no mean feat, and the willingness to embrace rigorous and creative approaches.

In addition, the chapter on L&D brand poses demanding questions of learning teams as to how they and the organisation view the learning and development offering. The answer is often, sadly, not encouraging and improving perceptions is inextricably linked to demonstrating impact.

As with all Paul's books, having painted a clear picture of the challenge, he provides strategies to drive improvements in learning transfer including the insightful research work of Dr Weinbauer-Heidel who has defined '12 Levers of Transfer Effectiveness'. Together these books and their practical ingredients create a recipe to increase learning transfer and impact.

So, I commend the book to you, it's a thought-provoking read! But more than that, I implore all of us that play a part in organisational learning to act on the principles. I am reminded of a quote by the great Leonardo da Vinci: "*I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough. We must apply. Being willing is not enough. We must do.*"

Now is the time to take the steps needed to make learning transfer the reality ... and the norm!

Andy Lancaster  
Head of L&D, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)  
Twitter: @AndyLancasterUK

# Introduction

Well, first it was going to be another of my Best Practice Guides, but it got too big for that.

Then it was going to be an eBook, but it kept growing. It is a big subject.

So I bowed to the inevitable and started the journey to writing another book. Yes, I know; I said that two L&D books were enough, but this new one on Learning Transfer is important!

Learning transfer is the elephant in many rooms I have been in where a training programme is under discussion. When I point at the elephant, there is usually an acknowledgement of its existence, followed by a slide back into the comforting rut of course delivery.

Yet to me, this elephant is BIG, and impossible to ignore. In reality, the case for proactively driving the learning transfer process is self-evident, but so many people choose to behave as if the elephant is not there. Why?

Ignoring this elephant is expensive. Besides, it really annoys the elephant!

This book is full of ideas; practical ideas you can use to do two things...

1. Convince those around you that the learning transfer elephant is real
2. Introduce processes and activities that deal with this elephant.

I have attempted to include...

- Why learning transfer is the elephant in the room

## LEARNING TRANSFER AT WORK

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- A convincing argument that you MUST practise proactive learning transfer
- Helpful information so you can convince others of its necessity
- The mindset required for learning transfer
- Where and when to start planning learning transfer
- Common pitfalls and barriers to getting it right
- Common myths and misunderstandings
- Lots of tools and practical ideas to help you be successful.

I hope you find it helpful :-)

Paul Matthews

August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018

PS This quote from George Orwell sums up why I didn't want to write another book.

“Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.”

# Part 1: Overview

## What is learning transfer?

*“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”*

*Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland*

Despite this sage advice from the King of Hearts, most training fails because it does not start at the beginning and does not keep going until the end. The Queen of Hearts would probably shout, “Off with their heads!” for such a transgression, so it is lucky that we are not L&D practitioners in Wonderland. Nevertheless, to avoid even the possibility of beheading, let’s begin at our beginning and define what we mean by ‘learning transfer’. Then we can proceed to explore the true beginning of training, and when it has reached the end.

Like many terms, the phrase ‘learning transfer’ seems to mean different things to different people. In organisational learning, it usually refers to the implementation of learning that has happened in a prior formal event, such as a training course or an e-learning course. Every definition I have seen talks about the application of learning, so the term learning transfer means much more than just transfer, or movement, of learning from one place to another.

It also means the translation and application of the learnt knowledge, skills and attitudes into effective action that improves job performance, is sustained over time and is beneficial for the output of the workflow.

The goal of training is to make the learning gained from the training experience portable, so that the learner takes it to new places where it can be used. If the training programme does not achieve significant transfer, and subsequent deployment of the learning, it's not worth much! Learning transfer underpins the whole notion of training, and yet too often we focus on the transmission of information from the trainer to the trainee, and then the retention of the information by the trainee. We tend to overlook the primary purpose of organisational training: an improved employee performance that can only happen when there is sufficient learning transfer. A huge amount of money is spent annually on employee training, yet past studies have shown that failure of transfer from the training setting to the real job is common.

Not surprisingly, employers are increasingly demanding that training yields a measurable and meaningful return on their investment. Hopefully, L&D trainers are finally waking up to the fact that organisations are going to start holding them more accountable and therefore they must influence beyond the training room. Keeping themselves inside the boundaries of training and other formal interventions does not generate results that are comfortable to report in those accountability conversations. Indeed, the reputation of L&D is not encouraging, as surveys show that most business leaders doubt the efficacy of L&D. A Deloitte<sup>1</sup> study stated that 84% of CEOs believe that L&D is an important component in the pursuit of talent and leadership, but only 39% agree that L&D is ready.

A McKinsey study (May, 2016)<sup>2</sup> stated that “Only 57% of the respondents believe that their academies are ‘very or fully aligned’ with corporate priorities. Even fewer (52%) reported that these institutions enable their companies to meet strategic objectives.” These sentiments at senior management levels mean that there is an emerging trend where demonstrating business impact will become vital to securing L&D budget. Most organisations have already faced significant reductions in L&D budget during the recent tougher economic times, and now there is increasing scrutiny surrounding the budget that is still being spent.

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<sup>1</sup> Deloitte, *Reinventing HR*, 2015. <http://dupress.com/articles/reinventing-hr-human-resources-humancapital-trends-2015>

<sup>2</sup> McKinsey Quarterly, *Learning at the speed of business* (May, 2016)

Rather than being based on evidence, most investment in training and development appears to be based on faith that it will work or because it is regarded as a 'given good', but that faith seems to be misplaced. All too often the way we try to achieve learning is based on flawed models built around one big event. Information and skills from events that only cover concepts once have been shown to yield little long-term retention, even when quality and satisfaction ratings for the learning event are high. One researcher (Goldstein, 1986)<sup>3</sup> has suggested that 90% of all training is a waste of time and money – people either knew it already, forgot it quickly or simply didn't need it/couldn't use it in their jobs. That is an old study, but consider this statement from a Saratoga/PWC report (2005)<sup>4</sup>, "Organisations across Europe spent £1.03 billion on leadership training in 2003 with little evidence of a major return." More recently, in an ATD article (August 2017)<sup>5</sup> Tris Brown wrote, "LSA Global has measured more than 800 training projects; and we have found that training alone, even when it is highly customized and targeted, only changes the on-the-job behavior and performance of one in five participants on average." It seems like things have not changed much over the years.

My hope is that in sharing this information about learning transfer, the argument to include effective transfer strategies will prove so compelling and obvious that you will no longer be able to imagine delivering any training without them. In fact, it should become obvious that not using transfer strategies when you could would be tantamount to malpractice for any learning and development professional. (It's a crime, if not quite deserving the capital punishment the Queen of Hearts was so fond of dishing out.)

Of course, we are not just talking about wasted training budget here. Every day an employee isn't ready to work and ready to be independently productive carries a cost, not a profit. Shortening the 'speed to skill' time saves money as well as reducing frustration, improving morale and providing other side benefits, such as lower attrition rates. If shrinking the time to proficiency is one of the most significant contributions that L&D can make to an organisation, learning transfer is the key to achieving this.

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<sup>3</sup> I.L. Goldstein, *Training in Organisations: Needs Assessment, Development and Evaluation*, 1986

<sup>4</sup> Saratoga/PWC *Key Trends in Human Capital* report, 2005

<sup>5</sup> ATD article 'How Can You Ensure Transfer of Training to Get the Results Business Leaders Want' (August 2017) Tris Brown

We should be aware that the term ‘learning transfer’ can have other meanings. For example, in the education sector, it usually means the transfer of ‘learning’ from teacher to student, so perhaps a better term in education would be ‘knowledge acquisition’. This acquisition of knowledge lends itself to being examined later for its retention, and in education, exam results are a measure of success. This book, however, is about learning transfer where the focus is on specific improvements in employee performance and results, rather than solely on what has been learned and its retention. We are talking about a shift in focus from what it takes to complete a training event to what it takes to get employees proficient at their job using the material from the training event.

Learning transfer is about change resulting from a process that takes place to a lesser or greater degree following a formal learning intervention. The degree to which it occurs has a direct impact on the value the organisation will harvest from this investment. Successful learning transfer depends on a mindset that permeates the entire learning programme, from design through delivery to the end game. It depends on a focus on business benefits rather than learning outcomes.

In this practical book, I will focus on training as the formal learning intervention, so I have used the term ‘trainee’, though it could have been ‘delegate’ or ‘learner’. There is always debate about semantics, and which word we ‘should’ be using. Some would also argue that there is a difference between training transfer and learning transfer on the basis that training and learning are two different things. Given that learning is one of the goals of training, I find it rather difficult to separate the two. There are better things to spend our time on than arguing over which words to use, but I would suggest that it is a good idea to settle on the term that you use within your own organisation and keep it consistent.

Despite the book’s focus on training, the same learning transfer ideas and processes could be applied to anything else you might consider ‘formal learning’, or that would fall into the ‘10’ of the 70:20:10 learning model. For those not yet aware of this model and its recent popularity as a ‘compass’ for L&D strategy, the 70:20:10 model posits that

- around 70% of learning comes from experience, experiment and reflection
- around 20% derives from working with others
- around 10% comes from planned learning solutions

For more on this model and how to utilise the principles that arise from it, I recommend the work of Charles Jennings and his colleagues at the 70:20:10 Institute at <https://702010institute.com>.

It has been said that to avoid learning transfer problems, don't do any training. Instead do other things that bring learning and provide tasks that embed behaviour change directly into the workflow. However, training is unlikely to disappear any time soon. It is still the mainstay intervention of most learning and development departments. According to the Towards Maturity benchmark report *Unlocking Potential* (November, 2016), 56% of learning provision is delivered face-to-face and the use of technology in learning is focused on online course delivery rather than performance support. There is considerable pressure to reduce the amount of face-to-face training because it is seen as too costly in comparison to online training, but I maintain that it has its place. The importance of this physical separation from the daily grind should not be underestimated. If employees have no opportunity to step away from their working environments, the same old behaviour, for good and ill, is constantly reinforced, and the chance for more reflective, committed learning is lost. Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz calls this a 'balcony moment': the imperative for leaders to leave the dance floor periodically and reflect on the patterns and movement below.

It's interesting that people are seeking to reduce training, rather than fix the major issue with it: lack of learning transfer. Is this quest to reduce traditional training time a result of disillusionment with training as a tool? Is it because people feel there must be something better? Or is it simply a way to reduce costs? If we get learning transfer right, training and other formal interventions are viable tools to use in the quest to improve organisational performance. This in no way means that all training currently taking place should keep running and just have some learning transfer bolted onto it. There is more to it than simply moving towards a closer relationship between learning and work. As organisations attain higher levels of learning maturity, their mindset about employee development shifts away from viewing learning and development as stand-alone, separate, external activities. Instead they view learning and work as intimately connected, and development happening as part of their employees' day-to-day work. Mature learning organisations are increasingly discarding long-held or traditional beliefs about how learning should be created and facilitated, and are instead focusing on creating the right conditions, context and culture for learning to take place. Peter Senge,

who wrote the seminal book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of learning in Organisations*, said in an interview, “A learning organisation is a group of people working together collectively to enhance their capabilities to create results they really care about.”

This cultural shift is surely vital, because learning transfer following a formal event is a process that is in turn part of a much longer process that predates the event, and extends long after it, all of which plays out within the cultural environment. The whole longer process and its surroundings must be considered if you want the learning transfer component to be successful. As with a chain, the entire process is only as strong as its weakest link. We therefore need to look at all the links in this chain, including those parts of the process that predate the actual learning transfer, because these set up the initial conditions and inputs. And since the entire process takes place over time, you can think of it as a workflow.

It is advantageous to think of learning transfer taking place as the result of a workflow. The term ‘workflow’ presupposes a sequence of tasks, or even mini-workflows, that build on each other, step by step, over a period of time. It is an orchestrated and repeatable pattern of activities that takes specified inputs and, all going well, culminates in a specified set of outputs. The word ‘workflow’ reminds us of the fact that people must DO something rather than intellectually learn something. Albert Einstein said “Learning is an experience. Everything else is just information”. So think of the formal training event as simply one step in the experiential workflow that is required to get the results you want. A traditional training course, without an effective learning transfer workflow wrapped around it, is most unlikely to deliver employee behaviour change or any significant business benefits. Without further intervention, the traditional structured and linear nature of learning in the classroom does not prepare people well for the more complex and ambiguous world of work.

As with any workflow, if the inputs are inadequate, the learning transfer part of the workflow can never produce the desired results. This of course highlights the need to measure the inputs and outputs to ensure they are adequate. Measure the inputs in two categories: those required at the nominal beginning of the workflow, and those required to support each step of the workflow that feeds into the next. Measure the final outputs to ensure that you are getting the necessary returns for the process to be worth doing at all. These final measures should relate to existing business performance measures and can also

be based on tools and concepts introduced by Dr Donald Kirkpatrick, Dr Jack Phillips, Prof. Robert O Brinkerhoff and others that measure learning success.

So as with any other business workflow, learning transfer is part of a larger system, part of an even longer chain of interrelated workflows, and should always be considered within the context of the larger system. Unfortunately, learning transfer itself is a very weak link in most organisational systems. “For the most part, learning does not lead to better organisational performance, because people soon revert to their old ways of doing things”, according to ‘Why Leadership Training Fails – and What to Do About It’, an article in the *Harvard Business Review* (October, 2016). In their paper “*Training Transfer: An Integrative Literature Review*” (2007) Burke and Hitchens state “Estimates of the exact extent of the transfer problem vary, . . . . . to Saks’ (2002) survey data, which suggest about 40% of trainees fail to transfer immediately after training, 70% falter in transfer one year after the program, and ultimately only 50% of training investments result in organizational or individual improvements. Given these estimates, it is clear that learning investments continue to yield deficient results. . . .” What they are saying is that returning trainees had less power to change the system surrounding them than the power the system had to maintain its inertia and shape them. Trainees tend to revert/conform to the system after doing training. However, it is possible to empower the trainees and to shift the culture in the system so it becomes fertile ground for growth and development.

Despite the common-sense argument that training that is not used is wasted money, the tools and activities to ensure successful learning transfer are often not used at all, or they are only used superficially and thus have little impact. This is not to say that all training is wasted. There are certainly training programmes that are successful in achieving the desired business results, but these are in the minority when compared to the vast amount of training that is delivered each year.

In many cases, if the system does not change, it is unlikely to support individual change, and may well be inimical to it. There are considerable bodies of research that show that the effect of training over the longer term is limited, and yet senior teams still see it as the solution. One reason for this is that they view their organisation as an aggregation of individuals. Therefore, people must be selected for and trained with the right knowledge and skills to execute their strategy and improve the organisation’s performance. Competency frameworks are developed to suit the organisational strategy, and training courses follow.

This makes very little, if any, allowance for the fact that organisations are systems of interacting elements, with structures and processes and leadership styles, as well as professional and cultural backgrounds.

If we see the organisation as a system with many interacting components, and the captain of the ship/system is the senior team, it can be difficult to confront that senior team with an uncomfortable truth: failure to execute on strategy and change organisational behaviour is not down to individual worker deficiencies but is due to the way that the captain is steering the ship. It is much easier for the captain to hear that members of the crew need training than it is for him to hear that his own performance is contributing to the problem.

Thankfully, although a major factor in learning transfer, the culture of the organisation is not the only determinant. There are many others, which in turn would be more powerful when wielded within a supportive culture. Michael Leimbach of Wilson Learning conducted a study to show the impact of learning transfer activities. He wrote an article for *TrainingZone* in July 2013 based on the results of his research, covering 32 research studies from recent years that compared the impact of training workshops alone with training workshops plus one or more learning transfer activities. He states, “This research allowed us to identify 11 specific actions that have a significant impact on whether training results in measurable performance improvement. Overall, we found that if an organisation implemented all these actions, they could improve the effectiveness of their learning by over 180%.” Learning transfer is a game we can win.

In general, the research clearly shows that the amount of learning that is transferred back to the job doesn't solely depend on how good the training course was. It also depends on

- The importance given to learning and development by the organisation and whether the right training need was identified for the right person in the right job
- How well the training course was designed to meet that need and how well the learners were prepared for the learning experience
- How well the trainers understood the learners' needs and how best to help them learn
- To what extent the learner was supported while trying to use the learning back at work.

# Why do we avoid it?

*Never ignore the elephant in the room. That's rude; play with it and introduce it.*

*Donna Lynn Hope*

As was pointed out in the introduction to this book, learning transfer seems to be the resident elephant in many rooms where a training programme is under discussion. When I point at the elephant, there is usually an acknowledgement of its existence, followed by a slide back into the comforting rut of course delivery. “Yeah, we need to do something about that, but right now we need to focus on the logistics for all the trainees from the EMEA region.” Perhaps the elephant has been there for so long that people in L&D now just assume that it's part of the furniture.

To me, this elephant is BIG, and impossible to ignore. In fact, the learning transfer elephant, because of the wasted money it represents, is even bigger than the other two elephants that lurk in the room as well. (We will meet these companion elephants later, because they are peripheral to learning transfer but also have an impact.)

To me, the case for proactively driving the learning transfer process is self-evident, and yet so many people choose to behave as if the elephant doesn't exist. Why? If we look at some of the reasons, we can start to understand how to change the conversation. By the way, some of what follows may annoy you as I am being a bit provocative, or you may find you are gritting your teeth and wishing you didn't agree.

1. I never really thought about it. “Elephant? Really? Where? No-one else is mentioning it.”

Actually, many people are talking about the elephant in books, on blogs, at conferences. This is nothing new, and not uncommon. They may not call it ‘learning transfer’. They may use terms like ‘making learning stick’, ‘making training effective’, ‘embedding learning’ and many others. Now that you are aware, start to notice how often you hear talk of the elephant. If your colleagues don’t talk about the elephant, you will need to look outside your own organisation to avoid the internal groupthink that is ignoring the elephant. Then come back and ask some pointed questions about training effectiveness within your own organisation and what might need to be done to make training more effective. Why do so many people in L&D do little or nothing about learning transfer when doing something is such simple common sense?

2. L&D say their job is to train people or deliver other formal learning. “You asked for training; you got it. Job done. Our responsibility finishes at the end of the course. Learning transfer is not our responsibility.” In effect, they are saying that their job is delivering information and not building skills that require practice based on that information. They see the necessary skill building and behaviour change as a job for those out in the field.

This attitude arises when L&D set themselves up as an order taker, as a shopkeeper. One of the common tools that contribute to this paradigm is the traditional Learning Management System (LMS), with its list of courses and events that people can book to attend. It’s like ordering something off an online shopping site where the seller is not involved in any way with how the product will be used. Some even have an algorithm that says, “Other learners who attended this course also attended these other courses.”

A common lament I hear among L&D people is their lack of access to the top table and exclusion from top-level decision making. I often find that the people with this lament are the very same people who have the ‘shopkeeper attitude’. Think about it for a minute. Would you, as a senior decision maker in an organisation, want to have the head shopkeeper from a small peripheral department at your board table? Not likely.

So, start getting interested in how people are using your training courses, and why they order them in the first place. Assume that at least part of the process of learning transfer is your responsibility and notice how that shifts your thinking about your role as a trainer and as a course/programme designer. People want a training course to solve a problem they have. What is that problem? Become someone who solves problems for people rather than someone who just sells stuff that might be a solution if the buyer has chosen wisely. If we are buying anything other than a commodity, we really appreciate the expertise of a salesperson who takes the time and effort to find out what problem we are trying to solve and then guides us to a viable solution.

3. L&D has outsourced the training, and the external training provider is primarily interested in selling training.

If the subject of learning transfer is even discussed, it becomes a finger pointing exercise. The training company says that it is up to the client to handle learning transfer activities, and the client points at the training company saying that their training course has not worked.

To me, responsibility lies in both camps. The procurement process within the client company should be making sure that it is buying all the components needed to ensure the success of the training course. Otherwise, it is a bit like buying a car without the wheels. Equally, the selling process within the training provider should ensure that their client understands the need for effective learning transfer and should provide help and support to put that in place.

Unfortunately, it seems to be acceptable to buy training, and to sell training, without wheels.

4. Management says it's not their responsibility. They say that their job is operational excellence, not staff development. "L&D should be doing staff development."

There are two aspects to this. One is that most management role job descriptions include a section that states their responsibility for developing the members of their team. If the job description does not include this responsibility, it should. The second aspect, which they

also cannot run away from, is that most of the learning that happens at work, happens on their watch in the general day-to-day workflow. The 70:20:10 learning model tells us this, and even a moment's reflection also tells us this from our own experience of where we learned to do what we do at work.

What most managers don't understand is that, unbeknownst to them, they have superpowers. These powers manifest themselves every time the manager answers a question, delegates a task, or has a conversation or other form of interaction with a team member. They also manifest when a team member observes how their manager interacts with anybody else – either directly or in any other way. By their actions, the manager sets the mini-culture within the team to be accountable or not, to learn or not, to blame or not, to help or not, to experiment or not, to seek excellence or not, to serve customers or not, to go the extra mile or not. Employees look to their manager for a lead to understand what is rewarded and what is frowned upon.

Every manager has an immense effect on how their team functions and performs, and most don't begin to comprehend the magnitude of their power. They are 'developing' their team members to behave a certain way by being the manager they are, and they have far more power over developing/moulding team behaviour than L&D ever will. A manager cannot abdicate their input into staff development because it is already baked into their role. They have no choice in the matter. The question is whether they will become aware of their power and use it consciously, or whether they remain unaware and use it haphazardly.

5. Some would say that if we mandate that learning transfer is a management responsibility, managers couldn't do it effectively anyway because they don't have the time/skill/inclination/support. "Our managers are not trained coaches."

This excuse is really scary because of the aforementioned superpowers. If people are unaware of their superpowers, the best we can hope for is that the use of those powers for better or for worse cancels out into some overall neutral effect. But think how much is to be gained by harnessing them for the greater good.

We need to take a leaf from the superhero comic books where the nascent hero becomes aware of their powers and then ideally learns from a teacher to use them wisely. In comic land, a superhero who uses their powers for the greater good is one of the good guys, and one who gets seduced into using their powers for their own gains, or just doesn't care about the consequences of their actions, is one of the bad guys.

Good managers should already have an amount of time in their schedules for regular, maybe weekly, one-on-ones, and discussions about learning transfer from a recent training course can take place in that time. But many managers don't do this, and therefore have no protected time available for learning transfer support. To me, a manager who admits to not doing one-on-ones is admitting to being a poor manager of their team, a poor manager of their time, and a poor manager of their boss who has given them their workload, which they have accepted.

Programmes followed by one-on-one coaching show a better transfer of learning. Olivero, Bane and Kopelman<sup>6</sup> conducted a study involving 31 managers from a public agency who took part in a conventional managerial training programme. This was followed by eight weeks of one-on-one executive coaching. Analysis revealed that the training alone increased manager productivity by 22.4%, while coaching, which involved goal setting, problem solving, practice, feedback, supervisory involvement, evaluation, and public presentation, increased manager productivity by 88%. Professional coaching for learning transfer works. This is to be expected, given that coaching is a tool used to help people attain their goals.

It is true that a manager cannot be expected to have the same level of coaching and mentoring skills as a trained coach and therefore may not be able to support their team member in the same way as a professional. However, the manager is usually present from day to day, where an external coach is not. The manager has an enormous impact because of their own attitude towards learning and experimenting with new ideas, and because of the way they manage the environment around the trainee as they embed their new learning. The manager can also be supported

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<sup>6</sup> Published in *Public Personnel Management* (Vol 26, 1997), 'Executive coaching as a transfer of training tool'.

with tips and guides on how to provide support for team members who are doing a training course. They could even be supported by coaches if the programme warrants it.

In my opinion, letting managers off the hook for supporting learning transfer, which is something that is largely within their sphere of influence and responsibility, is just perpetuating an unacceptable situation from generation to generation of managers. Stop the cycle and get the managers involved as coaches – no matter what it costs. Later in the book there are practical ideas to help you do this.

Plus, the rewards for moving towards a coaching culture are significant. According to a Bersin by Deloitte<sup>7</sup> research study, organizations that are highly effective at coaching were approximately 30% more likely to have strong business results and 33% more effective at engaging employees. They also enjoyed 42% higher employee productivity and were rated 75% higher in hiring the best people, developing employees and retaining their top people.

6. Doing things to facilitate the learning transfer process takes time, money and resources that we do not have. “Basically, we can’t afford to do it.”

If you can’t afford to do effective learning transfer, it seems rather silly to waste money on training that will, as a result, be largely ineffective. Think of it this way. You have a budget for L&D. Consider how you can get the most business benefit from that budget rather than how you can deliver the most trainings. And note that focusing on business benefits, performance, productivity and results may win you larger budgets.

7. “Our people are not ready for that kind of change.” Whenever I hear this excuse, in my mind I am thinking, ‘This L&D person is not ready to fight for that kind of change.’

The next thing that goes through my mind is ‘What are they scared will be uncovered by asking people to do something with what they

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<sup>7</sup> *High-Impact Performance Management: Maximizing Performance Coaching*, Stacia Sherman Garr, Bersin by Deloitte. ([www.bersin.com/News/Details.aspx?id=15040](http://www.bersin.com/News/Details.aspx?id=15040))

have learned on a training course, and asking other people, such as their managers, to help them?’ Sure, people, especially managers, will need support, but to say baldly that managers are not ready, therefore introducing learning transfer is not possible?

8. “We know we should be doing something about learning transfer, but we don’t know how to modify our training programmes to include it.”

Keep reading, you are in the right place. Look for other resources on the web and other books, such as those in a short list of companion reading in the Appendix.

9. “We do some stuff on learning transfer and it doesn’t seem to make any real difference.”

Most training courses do indeed have things tagged on that are designed to encourage learning transfer. This might be something as simple as asking trainees to set some goals related to the course or asking the line manager to have a conversation with the trainee about the course. The problem is that not enough is done, and often what is done, like the two examples mentioned, are largely ineffective for reasons we will explore later. To deliver effective learning transfer, you need to commit to the process and develop a full workflow that has all the elements needed to get the results you want. Keep reading.

10. “We have never done it before, and no one is asking for it, so why change things?”

People may not be asking for learning transfer by name because they don’t know what they don’t know, but they are probably asking for better training because they want better results from training. Or they are asking for cheaper and quicker training so the results they are accustomed to getting don’t seem so expensive. Is there pressure on your L&D budget because it is seen as an organisational spend that does not produce the results that could be gained by spending that money elsewhere in the organisation? Have you ever mentioned the fact that you could wrap a workflow/programme around a training course to improve the results it gets?

Those who ask for training do so often on this assumption...

Training = exposure to content

Content exposure = learning

Learning = behaviour change

Behaviour change = better performance and results.

In other words, they erroneously believe that L&D has sacks full of pixie dust in the back room to sprinkle on trainees, which means that trainees return from a training course with their new knowledge and skills fully operational. Of course, if you do have any pixie dust left, you don't need to do anything about learning transfer and you can give this book to someone who doesn't know where to buy pixie dust.

11. "Our history shows that training doesn't have much impact anyway, so why add more cost to the process".

This excuse obviously begs the question as to why they are doing the training in the first place. It's analogous to a man standing in front of a fireplace with an armful of wood insisting that the fire gives him more heat before he gives it more wood.

12. This training is only for compliance purposes because we need to tick some regulatory boxes. "Getting the trainees through the test is all that matters."

I can understand this at the surface level, but to me, this seems a short-term approach. If there are regulations in place to drive/control how people behave in certain regulated circumstances, one would hope that organisations try and achieve those behaviours. We are therefore back to the same need for effective learning transfer that achieves behaviour change.

Years ago, I visited a large care home and caught the tail end of a training course on infectious disease control. I was there to speak with the person delivering the training, so I waited at the back. On our way to his office, the trainer and I followed a group of the trainees and watched as they returned to their ward. Only about a third of them used the antiseptic hand dispenser as they walked in the door, despite the training course they had attended a few minutes ago. I asked him how many people used to use the hand sanitiser dispensers, and he shrugged. From the trainer's point of view, he had fulfilled his obligation to train people and

tick a box, but he seemed impervious to the obvious lack of behavioural change as a result of the training. This seemed to me rather bizarre.

On a more optimistic note I remember a meeting with the head of compliance of a sizeable pharmaceutical company. She was new in her post and was in the process of rethinking how they delivered on their compliance obligations. Her thinking was very different to that of the care home trainer. She came to the realisation that she might well need to run separate tracks of activity in terms of compliance training. One track would be focused on getting the various boxes ticked by delivering the type of training that conformed to the requirements of the regulatory authorities. The other track would be focused on behavioural changes so employees would be far less likely to break the regulations.

This is by no means a complete list. What are the other ‘excuses’ for not calling out the elephant?

Take a moment and list the barriers in your organisation to discussing and implementing effective learning transfer tools and activities. What supports those barriers and keeps them in place? How can you change the conversation? What do your colleagues say about it?

And now it’s time to get tough!

How much sustainable behaviour change are you managing to achieve from the training courses you deliver? If you are like most people delivering training, the honest answer is ‘not that much’ or perhaps more honestly, ‘I don’t know’. Maybe you, as an L&D professional, can take home your salary knowing that most of the training you do is a waste of time. Maybe the people who ask for the training are happy with that low level of impact. Maybe, like some L&D people I speak with, you can bury your head in the sand or look the other way and make nonsense noises while you plug your ears with your fingers. Maybe you say some nice words about learning transfer and do a few things that might help, but really you are just doing what you have always done. Or maybe you are waking up to the reality that we should, as professionals, be doing much better than we are at producing business impact from our training courses. Given you are reading this book, I trust you are in the ‘let’s do better’ camp and this entails providing support to the trainees to help them succeed.

There are many in L&D who would cough and splutter in indignation at the previous paragraph. How did you react? Maybe you are one of the very small minority of L&D professionals who are doing a good job of learning transfer and that paragraph genuinely does not apply to you. If so, I salute you. Or maybe you just feel very uncomfortable when someone calls out what should be obvious to all: the emperor has no clothes. In the parable of the emperor's clothes, the embarrassed ruler came to his senses and realised that he had been deceived. He had been living within an illusion where everybody was pretending something was real when even a child could see that it was not. Somehow, so many people are living within the illusion that training is working well, when even a cursory examination shows that it is in most cases not delivering on its promise.

If learning transfer is important and therefore should be done, and if it is possible to do this, and if people are avoiding it, we end up in the murky waters of responsibility and accountability. Who is responsible for making it happen, and who should be held accountable if it doesn't happen? In other words, "when and where does the buck stop?"

Stop and think for a moment about the last training course you were involved with. Who was accountable for making sure learning transfer happened? When asked that question, very few people have an answer. In other important organisational activities someone is accountable, so what's different about learning transfer?

One reason is that the activities required for successful learning transfer come from many people across different departments, and it is most unlikely that each person will do their bit and all the parts will magically coalesce into a successful programme. Somebody needs to be the conductor of the orchestra. The conductor in turn requires each member of the orchestra to play their part in the symphony. And then somebody else, perhaps whoever booked and paid for the orchestra to perform, holds the conductor accountable for the quality of the performance. So who holds the event organiser accountable? Perhaps the people who paid for tickets to attend the concert. There is inevitably a chain of accountability.

Now, think back again to the last training course you were involved with. What was, or should have been, the chain of accountability, perhaps even starting with the company shareholders or owner? Where did the chain break? If you

fix that link in the chain, are there more weak links further down the chain that will then break? Take a step back and consider how accountability plays out in your organisation. Accountability is a facet of organisational culture, often driven from the top. Does the senior team take ownership? Do they accept accountability or are they full of excuses?

It is easy to say that a person should be accountable, but for delegated accountability to be effective, it must also be accepted. No-one wants to be held accountable for something that is likely to fail; that is a poisoned chalice. Alongside delegating accountability, you must also ask people if they have everything they need to be successful. If they say 'yes', then they are well on their way to accepting ownership and accountability. If they say 'no', then they will not take ownership and if/when things go wrong they will drop into spectator mode and watch as things fail. You might even get 'I told you so' comments. On the other hand, if they feel a sense of ownership because they have accepted accountability, they will step in to solve the problem when things go wrong.

Accountability is not a set-and-forget state of affairs. Each person in the accountability chain must do some 'counting'. That's the origin of the word! They should be holding regular reviews and checking the results being achieved by the person that they are holding accountable for those results. And of course, to do any of this, there must be measures in place. If you are going to hold somebody accountable for producing a specific set of results, you need to be able to measure those results to understand the level of success. In addition to defining the accountability chain, there must also be an understanding of the specifics of what each person in the chain is accountable for.