How Can Soft Skills Training Enhance Organisational Performance?

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Introduction

Investing in workforce training has been recognised as a core strategy for competitive advantage (Adler & Kwon, 2002), but a major part of this investment has been wasted due to poor training transfer (Cheng & Hampson, 2008). Survey data suggests that only 50% of training investments result in enhanced organisational performance (Saks, 2002).

For the purposes of this discussion, enhanced operational performance will be defined as meeting requirements both in operational (productivity and quality of product or service) and financial (reaching economic goals) outcomes.

Despite the academic research so far, transfer of training remains the Achilles heel of the training process (Botke et al, (2018). Kupritz (2002) showed that soft skills training transfer is considerably more challenging than hard skills training. Considering that the recognition of the soft skills importance for employee mobility, employability and career progression is growing (Mitchell et al, 2010), there is an urgent need to find a solution to the "transfer problem" (Baldwin & Ford, 1988).

> *Training transfer is the application of learnt skills to a work environment in a way which enhances both job-related and non-job-related performance.*

The following article will look at the concept of training transfer, discuss the reasons why soft skills transfer is the most problematic as well as the factors affecting it, whilst advising a practitioner on the best practices for increased return on investment.

How do we conceptualise and measure soft skills training transfer?

Establishing what training transfer is and how it is measured is essential in order to have a clear understanding of what both academics and organisations are trying to achieve, and to ensure that the success of these efforts is measured appropriately (Blume et al, 2009).

Baldwin & Ford (1988) famously defined transfer of training as the application of knowledge and skills acquired in a training context to a work environment, also stating that for transfer to occur "learned behaviour must be generalised to the job context and maintained over a period of time on the job" (p.63). However, this definition focuses on learning, which is of little value to organisations unless translated into performance (Holton et al, 1997).

Cromwell & Kolb (2004) describe training transfer as the extent to which what is learned in training is applied on the job and enhances job-related performance. For the purposes of this article, this definition will be further extended to include non-job-related performance, such as demonstrating effort or supporting peers, to acknowledge that soft skills often indirectly contribute to overall job performance.

In terms of measuring transfer, Royer (1979) suggested looking at it as a continuum, making a distinction between near and far transfer, based on the degree of similarity between the

training environment and the work environment. The bigger the difference between the two, the less immediate training transfer will be.

Laker & Powell (2011) suggested that in the case of soft skills training, real-life scenarios are more complex than can be presented in a training space. It can be argued that measuring soft skills transfer immediately after training is misleading, as soft skills refer to far training transfer. Immediate assessment is likely to measure theoretical knowledge or the reaction of trainees, rather than performance enhancement after training, but before there has been enough time given to practise learnt skills in a different environment. As organisations are oriented towards performance rather than learning (Volet, 2013), this way of measurement has little value and creates a misleading perception of the success of the training.

Academics recommend allowing at least three months after the training to measure the impact it has made (Cheng & Ho, 2001), although in practice, this can be seen as not being time and cost-effective. On the other hand, poor training transfer wastes even more time, energy and money (Laker & Powell, 2011), therefore, it is worth following good practice in the first place.

Why are soft skills so difficult?

> *Soft skills require a longer time to transfer, therefore, measuring the impact made immediately after the session is likely to measure trainee theoretical knowledge and reaction rather than an individual or organisational performance enhancement.*

Soft skills are considered to influence the career success whereas hard skills, also known as technical, provide the foundation and a minimum skill required for performing a job well enough (Lange, Jackling & Gut, 2006). Kantrowitz (2005) classified soft skills in ten categories, as shown in Figure 1.

In order to address the transfer issue in a wider context covering all of the above, the soft skills term in this article will be used in its generic meaning, to include Laker & Powell's (2011) two types of skills:

*   **Intra**personal – self-management
*   **Inter**personal – managing interactions with others

Some academics have advised the organisations to hire employees who are already proficient in soft skills instead of assuming that they can effectively train such employees (O'Sullivan, 2000). Nevertheless, this article suggests that enhancing organisational performance through soft skills training is possible, although it needs a different approach compared to hard skills workshops due to its differing nature

Why does self-efficacy matter?

> *Self-efficacy positively affects behavioural change, which is often needed in the soft skills context, as trainees have to unlearn old behaviours before new ones can be learnt and applied.*

In terms of soft skills, desired results will be less immediate as trainees often already have their preferred ways of responding, which are built on beliefs, values and habits that may negatively interfere with learning and applying the new skills (Laker, 2008). Therefore, before new skills can be acquired, trainees need to unlearn old ways of responding, which requires a behavioural change.

Bandura (1997) suggests that all behavioural changes are the result of self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to behave in a desired way. Building self-efficacy, in cases when there is a lack of it, may go beyond the capacities of a single training session. However, the research shows that efforts to enhance the self-efficacy of trainees during the training can lead to improved performance (Gist, 1989). This can be achieved with relapse prevention techniques, for example, encouraging trainees to anticipate counter habits and counter motivations as well as coaching trainees on how to face them (Perkins & Salomon, 2012).

Soft skills training often involves behavioural change. This must be recognised in order to manage organisational and trainee expectations on how quickly the results can be expected. Organisations may underestimate the value of training and trainees get discouraged by lack of immediate results. This may impact their self-efficacy which is a driver for behavioural change in the first place. On the other hand, some argue that it is easier to train experienced individuals (Ibrahim et al, 2017), however, this is more likely to be true in the hard skills context.

Simone & Nale (2010) found that spacing out the training is one the most reliable methods to improve the quality of transfer when behavioural change is involved. There may be more benefit from shorter training sessions with gaps in between.

What does good look like?

> *"What good looks like" should be defined by the organisational culture and its strategic objectives, following which, trainees should be receiving instant and regular feedback from their colleagues.*

Gruber (2013) states that it is essential to have a clear understanding of what performance is expected before there can be any discussion about training transfer. This is particularly challenging in the context of soft skills as they are difficult to observe and measure (Yen et al, 2001). Trainees may not be able to understand what should be done for the desired outcome to be achieved, as the first step of action does not have to be correct for subsequent steps to be initiated (Laker & Powell, 2011). This is different from receiving an error message when a technical mistake is made.

Furthermore, what is a successful outcome is subjective, so feedback concerning success is often delayed or salient (Laker & Powell, 2011). It is still of great importance considering there is often little similarity between the training and working environment. In order to reduce subjectivity surrounding the use of soft skills, the desired performance should be defined by organisational culture and its strategic objectives, reinforcing this image by the means of regular and timely feedback from peers and supervisors. This will help trainees to establish their training goals, which is essential for maximising transfer (Burke & Hutchins, 2007).
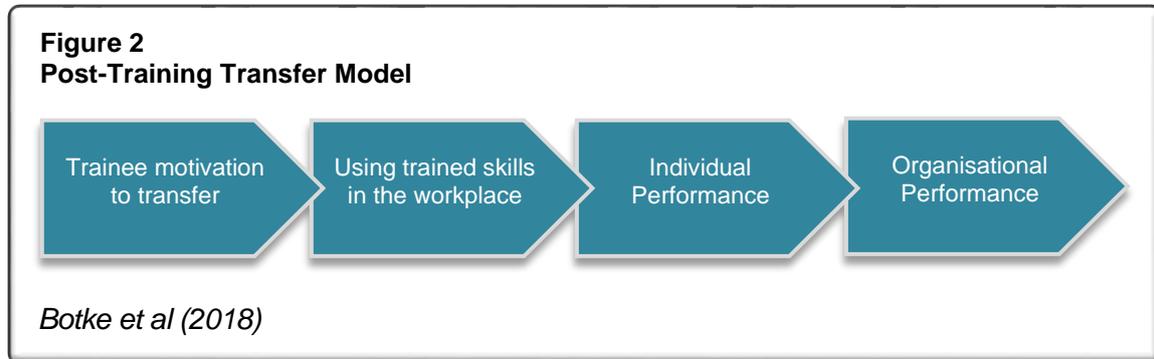
Overall, it is not soft skills that make the transfer so difficult, it is the incorrect approach taken when designing and facilitating soft skills training sessions, as they cannot be viewed through the same lenses as hard skills. Acknowledging the nature of soft skills and taking the factors discussed above into consideration will maximise training transfer in the context of soft skills.

Key factors: why motivation requires organisational support?

Understanding soft skills nature is an initial step towards maximising training transfer. However, there is a wide range of influences that can affect it. Baldwin & Ford (1988) divided these factors into three broad categories:

- trainee characteristics
- training design
- work environment

Blume et al. (2010) emphasised the importance of a good training design as this is likely to promote keenness to use the new skills. Hawley & Barnard (2005) suggested that the post-training period is the most important in facilitating training transfer, especially in the context of soft skills. Botke et al. (2018) introduced a post-training transfer model, consisting of four stages:

Figure 2
Post-Training Transfer Model

Trainee motivation to transfer → Using trained skills in the workplace → Individual Performance → Organisational Performance

Botke et al (2018)

According to this model, provided that trainees have motivation to transfer and opportunities to apply learnt skills, soft skills training will lead to performance improvements at individual and organisational level. However, it can be argued that motivation to transfer is a pre-training rather than post-training influencing factor.

Perkins & Salomon (2012) introduce their detect-elect-connect motivational view of transfer. The notion of 'elect' "takes on special status as a pivotal point where the learner either moves forward or turns aside." This means that an individual's pre-training positive intentions may change depending on the post-training environment.

Botke et al. (2018) stated that course relevance impacts the trainee motivation to transfer. As soft skills influence performance indirectly, it may be more challenging to identify its relevance, unless development areas have been specified as part of the performance plan. However, this in itself could have an impact on motivation if trainees disagree with the feedback given. More ambiguity may come from the fact that due to the difference between training and work environments, some trainers tend to not specify what needs to be learnt and where it should be applied (Laker & Powell, 2011). This lack of clarity can make it difficult for trainees to be motivated and understand training goals. Informal training solutions, such as coaching and mentoring, as post-training guidance, may provide the needed clarity. This also gives trainees practice in a safe environment.

> *The notion of 'elect' "takes on special status as a pivotal point where the learner either moves forward or turns aside."*
> *Perkins & Salomon (2012)*

Third-party providers would also benefit from communicating the expectation for organisational support at post-training stage (Yaw, 2008) by including post-training support plan in the training design. This could be seen as too costly and time-consuming to implement in practice as well as requiring high levels of collaboration between organisations and training providers. But unsuccessful training transfer is likely to be much more costly.

Overall, organisations should be less reliant on what happens during the training (Caudron, 2000), and take more responsibility for translating learnt skills into behaviours at the post-training stage, which over time will lead to improved individual and organisational performance.

Trainee motivation and practice of skills are essential for soft skills training transfer. Organisations will benefit from mentoring or coaching solutions at the post-training stage in order to achieve both.

Soft skills can enhance organisational performance

The growing importance of soft skills in the contemporary workplace, as well as the problems associated with soft skills training transfer, encourages a focus on the key influencing factors within the power of the organisation. This focus helps to ensure that training investment is not wasted due to poor training transfer. Understanding the nature of soft skills and tackling it differently from hard skills training is important. There should be less reliance on what happens during training and more attention paid to the post-training stage. This will enable organisations to give individuals guidance and support, as well as increasing and protecting their inner motivation. This will eventually lead to enhanced organisational performance.

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