

# How does the culture of the work environment support or hinder the transfer of learning to the workplace?

## Executive Summary

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## Executive Summary

### Abstract

This empirical research explored how the culture of the work environment supported or hindered the transfer of training from a skills related ‘moving and handling’ course, and a softer skills ‘attitudinal’ course in a health and social care organization. Schein’s (2004a) definition of culture was used for the purposes of this research alongside transfer of training models by both Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Holton (1996).

The study explored the assumption that the work environment and its culture would either support or hinder the transfer of training, and acknowledged the complexities of effective training transfer.

The analysis took a critical realist approach which treated participant perceptions as reflections of real events, values and feelings. Specifically, it focused on beliefs and values with regard to training; social cues and organizational support following the training; cultural rules of interaction; and work related task and goal cues that either supported or hindered the opportunity to use knowledge, skills and attributes acquired on the training.

*The findings contribute towards an understanding of how organizational culture has a significant impact on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and also organizational and professional supports which can affect the longer term transfer of training to the workplace. These should not be treated as individual constructs but as part of a complex process which exists within an organizational culture*

## Organizational culture and its impact on motivation

Much has been written with regard to training transfer and individual motivation (Noe 1986), and while intrinsic motivation may be a predictor of an employee's likelihood of transferring training, it should not detract from extrinsic motivation imparted through organizational and managerial actions. Significantly, this research has highlighted how managers' motivation may impact on individual workers' motivation to transfer. If managers provide no overt signal or expectation that staff will transfer training, and cultural norms suggest that transfer is reliant on individual worker's motivation, autonomy and self-efficacy (Axtell and Maitlis 1997) the cultural rites and rituals may not be in place to support the necessary performance management, and goal setting (Holton III and Baldwin. 2003c) as prerequisites of transfer.

If the organizational culture expects employees to discuss, specific learning outcomes from training with a line manager within a short time of returning to work from the training, there is a clear and stated expectation from within the workplace, that the knowledge, skills and attitudes from the training should be transferred. Furthermore such discussion signals the cultural belief that both training attendance and training transfer are valued.

The nature of the questions asked by managers may significantly impact on workers' motivation to transfer. Clearer goal setting and expectation of transfer may be indicated by using such questions as:

- Can you identify two specific skills or examples of knowledge that you have gained from this course?
- How do you think you will be able to put this into practice?
- How will we know when/if you have achieved this?

The expectation that these will be followed through is more likely to achieve the desired outcomes. Many of the discussions relayed by those interviewed happened informally ‘between the girls’ at break-time, with a high motivation to transfer demonstrated through examples of enthusiastic discussions. Such informal discussions may signal that staff believed the training was valuable, although the extrinsic signals displayed by managers suggested that they enquired whether staff ‘enjoyed’ the training, or asked ‘how did it go?’ This may not be enough to provide extrinsic motivation to transfer.

The significance of managerial verbal and social cues, and their impact on work culture, should not be dismissed. Overtly stating beliefs and values with regard to the transfer and training, and introducing artifacts such as learning logs and learning goals would be more likely to set the cultural expectations of achievement and clearly state the relationship between training and work performance.

### **Organizational and professional supports**

It is important that organizations understand the conditions for a ‘supportive’ learning environment. Beliefs, roles and rituals with regard to transferring learning and skills need to mirror any organizational rhetoric and artifacts. Any lack of consistency within teams when performing knowledge, skills, attitudes and work tasks learned on training, provide task and social cues which negate the value of the learning, and also signal a low ‘return on expectation’ (Anderson 2007). Organisational support for learning and development is not only demonstrated through stated objectives and organizational artifacts, but through the demonstrated actions and espoused beliefs observed by staff on a daily basis. In order to take account of ‘relapse prevention’ managers need to take responsibility for auditing and managing performance in the

workplace (Swanson 2003). An integrated systems approach to training, HRD, individual performance and organizational performance (Otley 1999) would provide a positive culture in which training transfer is expected throughout an organization. Organizational supports such as learning mentors and coaching (Ashton and Sung 2002) are likely to have a positive and significant impact on the transfer of training. The introduction of such roles within organizations may provide both a culture and organizational artifacts through which feedback directly related to transferring KSAs, goal setting and monitoring outcomes is increased.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research support and add depth to Holton and Baldwin's transfer of training model (Holton III 1996). It is clear that if a learning culture is not shared and implemented throughout an organization it will hinder the probability of consistent training transfer, and the return on investment/expectation in training, although in itself it may not impact on those individuals intrinsically motivated to transfer their learning.

The qualitative nature of the research has uncovered some of the ways in which organisational artifacts can be interpreted and used as supports with which to aid transfer, but more importantly how social and verbal cues need to be formalised in order to extrinsically motivate staff and make explicit organizational expectations with regard to the transfer of training. Future research should address the weaknesses in this exploration by extending it to more organizations and include an analysis of observed transfer in addition to participants stated beliefs regarding their own level of transfer from training.

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