WHAT MAKES TRAINING REALLY WORK

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(English version by Ann Terry Gilman and Jutta Scherer)

WHAT MAKES TRAINING REALLY WORK

12 LEVERS OF TRANSFER EFFECTIVENESS

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FOREWORD

by Robert O. Brinkerhoff and Paul Matthews

Robert O. Brinkerhoff

Training without transfer is like a car without an engine; it won't get you anywhere. When performance matters (as it almost always should), learning and development professionals must be able to drive transfer – being sure that training participants actually apply their learning in worthy ways. Ina Weinbauer-Heidel's clear and engaging prescriptions for managing the 12 transfer levers make this good book a must-read for anyone who wants to make sure training investments will pay off.

Robert O. Brinkerhoff, an internationally recognized expert in evaluation and learning effectiveness, is the creator of the Success Case Method; he consults widely on issues of program effectiveness and recently retired as professor, Western Michigan University, where he coordinated graduate programs in human resource development.

Paul Matthews

Apparently, elephants don't like the sound of buzzing bees, and you can stop elephants from trampling your precious crop by setting up speakers to play the chorus from a swarm of bees. A simple solution, yet powerful and effective. I have long described 'learning transfer' as one of the elephants in the room that Learning & Development people habitually ignore, in part because they don't know how to handle the elephant, and so the precious crop they sow with their training gets trampled. After reading this book, this is no longer an excuse. It is full of a buzzing chorus of simple and effective methods to manage the learning-transfer elephant.

Sustainable, competitive advantage is not so much based on what the organisation and its people know, but on what they do with what they know. Sure, training creates potential, but it does not drive performance until it is implemented. Josh Bersin, in a June 2018 article, states that globally, the corporate training market is worth over $200 billion, but how much of that actually 'lands' and makes a difference? If you are reading this book, you already know the answer: 'Not nearly enough'.

One of the things I welcome most about this book is that it is based on research. It gives you the findings from a meticulous review of the transfer-of-training literature and turns these findings into practical steps, supported by wise advice on the truths and traps of transfer. Building this bridge – between scholarly studies and the 'real' world – is no mean feat, and Dr. Weinbauer-Heidel demystifies the transfer complex deftly and well. In effect, she leaves no room for claims of 'not knowing what to do' and avoiding the issue of learning transfer. After reading this book, you WILL want to make changes to your training courses, and the explanations from the research will give you the credibility you need to enlist others for help along the way. You'll want to give them this book to read as well!

Thomas Edison said, 'The value of an idea lies in the using of it'. So, get people using the ideas they gain in your training courses by using the ideas you gain from this book.

Paul Matthews, People Alchemy's founder and managing director, is also a sought-after speaker and the author of Capability at Work and Informal Learning at Work.

THE ESSENCE OF TRANSFER RESEARCH – AN INTRODUCTION

“Seminars are useless – they’re a waste of money.” This is, in a rough translation from German, the title of a best-selling business book by Richard Gris. Quite a startling claim he made there. After all, companies in Austria and Germany invest around 30 billion euro each year in training their employees.[1] An enormous investment indeed. Can it really be true that these training efforts don’t accomplish anything? That they only waste time and money? Are trainings really pointless?

Take a rough guess – how much of what people learn in trainings is actually put into practice? Many HR developers and trainers – even participants themselves – think it’s only 10 to 30 percent. Which is exactly the figure given by transfer researchers, too. Let me run that by you once more: According to transfer research, only 10 to 30 percent of what people learn in training is put to profitable use in the workplace.[2] Not exactly an impressive return on investment, is it?

> Training transfer is the extent to which trainees effectively use the knowledge, skills and attitudes they have acquired in the training context in the work context.[3]

Professor Robert O. Brinkerhoff, one of the leading experts in the field of effectiveness and evaluation, has found that, on average, only two out of twelve trainees manage to transfer what they have learned into everyday life. Another eight try to apply their learnings but fail. And two don’t even try.[4] In view of the enormous investments involved, transfer success should definitely be much higher.

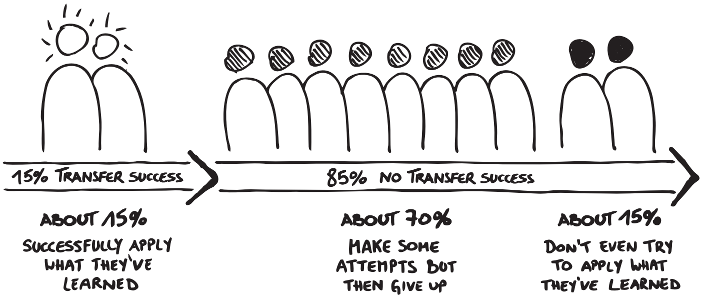
15% TRANSFER SUCCESS
85% NO TRANSFER SUCCESS
ABOUT 15%
SUCCESSFULLY APPLY WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED
ABOUT 70%
MAKE SOME ATTEMPTS BUT THEN GIVE UP
ABOUT 15%
DON'T EVEN TRY TO APPLY WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED

Fig. 1: On average, only two out of twelve trainees succeed in transferring what they have learned into practice

Are trainings simply ineffective?

Does it have to be like this? Could it be that the instrument “training” just doesn’t work anymore? Should we simply forget about it? Actually, in many cases this is an excellent idea. Like any other instrument, the instrument of training is not a cure-all for all organizational problems and challenges. When sales numbers go down, what is needed in some cases might just be a better product, not training. And when burnout rates skyrocket, the solution often lies in extra staffing, different organizational structures, or less bureaucracy – not stress management training.

And yet they still exist: the challenges for which trainings are an optimal solution (Note that we will come back to the question of when training is the right solution when we deal with the lever “application options,” see pages 191 ff.). They do exist: those trainings that are tremendously effective. You’ve probably experienced this before, as a trainee, an HR developer, or a trainer: an ingenious training program in which you have given or received the key idea that made all the difference. It is an unforgettable experience when, years after a training session, one of the participants comes to you and tells you, “Your training was such a great help! I still use your model XYZ.” Yes, these are the moments that make trainers glow with pride: the experiences that prove that training can definitely be efficient and effective. An observation, by the way, that is corroborated by science: The effect training can have on various criteria such as outcome, behavior, and knowledge varies enormously (from $d = 5$ to $d = 0$ or even $d = -1.5$) – where the numbers mean that training can have a tremendous effect, no effect at all, or even unwanted effects. Why is that so? What influences transfer effectiveness? And how can we make training more effective?

The essence of transfer research

Transfer researchers have been working on this question for more than a hundred years, conducting empirical studies in which they iteratively manipulate various factors, then measure the change in transfer results. There is a broad consensus that three elements are crucial for transfer effectiveness: training participants (trainees), training design, and training organization

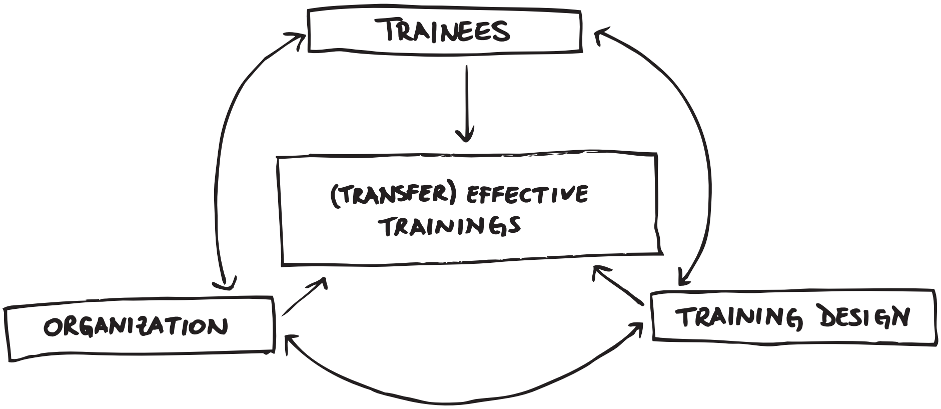

Fig. 2: Three elements need to work together to make training transfer-effective

Each of these three areas comprises a variety of factors. Lots of factors! Transfer researchers are truly hard-working people. As many as 100 factors have been identified that are believed to influence transfer effectiveness.[5] Are you now tempted to put this book down, thinking, "What am I supposed to do with 100 factors?!" You are absolutely right: 100 factors are hardly convenient to work with, let alone work effectively. And you don't have to. Many of these factors are nice to know but offer no practical help in controlling transfer effectiveness. Let me give you an example. Take one of the factors from the area of training participants. Numerous studies have revealed a significant correlation between intelligence and transfer success.[6] But what are we to do with this information? Are we supposed to make participants take an intelligence test before each training session, and admit only those whose IQ promises significant transfer success? Probably not. As you can see, some of the factors transfer researchers have looked into are interesting but no great help when it comes to making training transfer-effective NOW – simply because we can't influence those factors at all, or not enough, or not fast enough. For practical purposes, what we need are only those factors that we can influence, and only a handful of them: only the most important ones to keep things manageable. – Well, here they are: the 12 levers of transfer effectiveness:

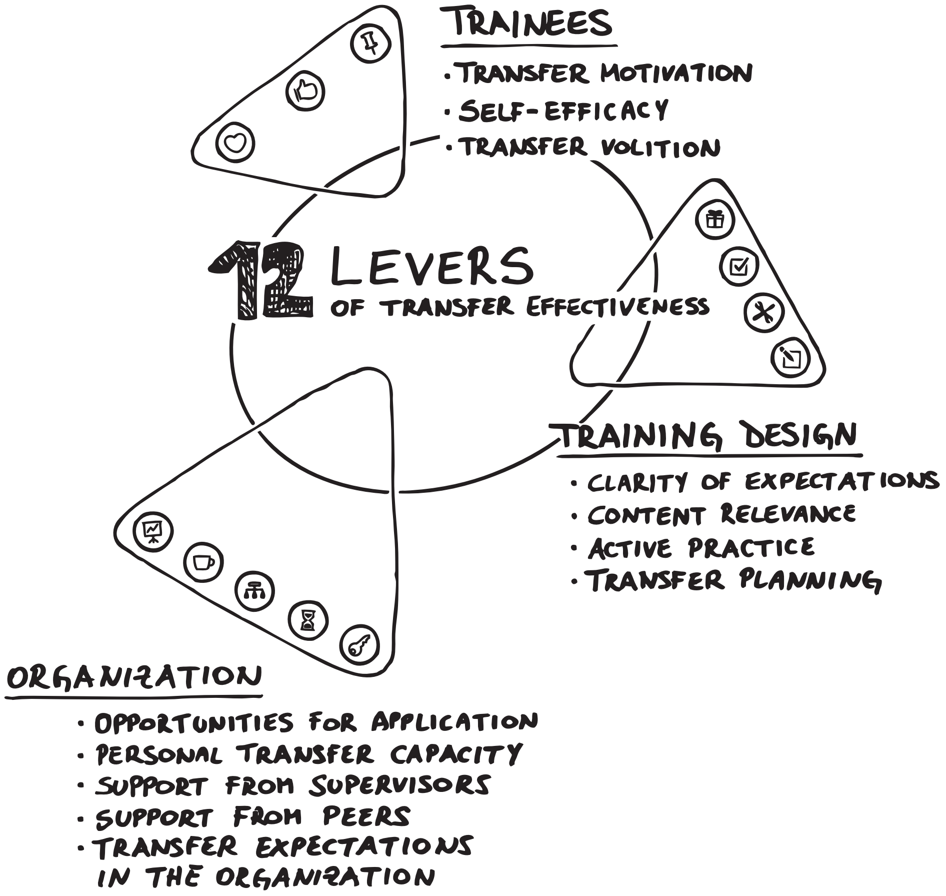
TRAINEES
• TRANSFER MOTIVATION
• SELF-EFFICACY
• TRANSFER VOLITION
12 LEVERS
OF TRANSFER EFFECTIVENESS
TRAINING DESIGN
• CLARITY OF EXPECTATIONS
• CONTENT RELEVANCE
• ACTIVE PRACTICE
• TRANSFER PLANNING
ORGANIZATION
• OPPORTUNITIES FOR APPLICATION
• PERSONAL TRANSFER CAPACITY
• SUPPORT FROM SUPERVISORS
• SUPPORT FROM PEERS
• TRANSFER EXPECTATIONS IN THE ORGANIZATION

Fig. 3: The 12 levers of transfer effectiveness

Who pulls the levers?

Whose job is it to set the levers to “transfer effectiveness”? As an HR developer, you may say, “What do I care about things like training design? That’s up to the trainers.” As a trainer, you may think, “I don’t have any leverage over organizational issues, so why bother?” So, could it be an option for you, depending on your role, not to get to know all the levers and focus on those within your area of responsibility? Let me tell you straight out: No, this is not an option.

Why? Because this is one of the main reasons for poor transfer success: a lack of clear responsibilities. Effective transfer is always the outcome of a joint effort. Several people need to work together, each making his or her specific contribution – an effort that needs to be organized and managed. Yet there's also a risk when several stakeholders are responsible for overall transfer success: Whenever many people are jointly responsible for something, often none of them really feels responsible. Everyone assumes that someone else will make sure that everything is done properly – especially when tasks are not clearly defined and/or clearly assigned to individual people or roles. Which is exactly what happens with transfer improvement. Who is responsible for defining and selecting the right training content? Who develops and implements measures to ensure that participants' supervisors will support the transfer? Who can – and should – make sure participants are motivated to implement what they've learned, and to keep pursuing their plans in everyday work? If you ask different people, you'll get a range of answers. As a result, these questions remain unsolved and responsibilities unclear, and often they are not addressed or even considered at all. The transfer process remains unmanaged – and transfer success fails to materialize.

After having read this book, this won't happen to you. You'll be familiar with the levers of transfer effectiveness and raise the questions that are essential. You'll have an overview of what is important, and a toolbox full of ideas on how to drive and promote transfer.

If you are an HR developer, you will benefit from knowing the levers of transfer effectiveness in that you'll be able to look very specifically for trainers that meet your transfer requirements. In addition, with this model in mind you will find it easier to make executives in your organization aware of their importance for transfer success and to request their participation. Last but not least, the levers of transfer effectiveness will enable you to get the necessary commitment in your organization and convince decision makers to budget the necessary funds for training and, in particular, for transfer activities and interventions.

If you are a trainer, you'll find that knowing the levers of transfer effectiveness will help you become a strong sparring partner and conceptual adviser to your clients. You'll be able to point out to them what needs to be done and who needs to be involved in order to achieve transfer success. By doing that, you will make them aware that successful transfer is not your sole responsibility but that the organization must do its share. Not only will this gradually strengthen your reputation as a trainer with very special transfer abilities and results – it will also help you secure additional business as, in your role as a consultant and partner for creating transfer-effective development programs, of course you can also provide your clients with the appropriate tools, activities, and interventions.

Ultimately, the question of which levers are relevant for you depends on your perspective on your own role and positioning: As an HR developer, do you see yourself as an organizer of seminars – or as a business partner that contributes to a company's success? The latter implies, of course, that you are also responsible for transfer management, the coordination of transfer success, and, consequently, all of the levers. And in your role as a trainer or training provider, do you want to be someone who conveys content in a methodically-didactically appealing way – or do you see yourself as someone guiding and facilitating development, someone determined to help training participants and organizations make progress in their respective fields? In that case you'll need all levers, not just some of them.

In a nutshell, whenever you ask yourself this question: "Is this lever really relevant for me as a trainer, as a training provider, or as an HR developer?" it may be a signal to revisit your own (possibly narrow) perspective on your role.

The first step towards transfer-effective training

So, let's get down to business. What's the first step to increase transfer effectiveness? The answer is: setting goals. If you are now tempted to skip the next pages, stop right here. Of course, we start with goals. In fact, it's something so obvious we often don't devote enough care and attention to this step.

How do we define goals so they will be transfer-effective? Let's take a brief look at the definition of transfer. Training transfer means putting acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes into practice. So, acquiring new knowledge as such is not considered "transfer" and is therefore not the goal of training. As Goethe once put it succinctly: "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do." A transfer-effectiveness goal (or transfer goal, for short) describes exactly this "doing." A transfer goal describes an action that leads to the desired business success – a critical behavior, as Kirkpatrick, the grandmaster of evaluation, calls it.

When we describe transfer goals in this way – as actions, that is –, they automatically become clearer. Here's an example. In descriptions of sales trainings, we often find goals such as: "Improve your sales skills" or "Gain confidence in dealing with customers." Are these goals clearly defined? Are they phrased clearly enough to allow everyone involved in the transfer (training participants, trainers, executives, etc.) to understand them the same way? Are they measurable? Not really. So, let's give this another try. Let's find wording for a tangible critical behavior; a transfer goal. In the case of our sales training, it could be this: "Participants will increase their closure rates by 20 % by using closing techniques in their sales talks." This wording makes it very clear what the outcome – the benefit for the organization and participants themselves will be (+20 % – awesome!) and what concrete behavior will achieve it (applying closing techniques). Transfer goals ensure that everyone involved knows where they are headed and what's in it for them. And that is the starting point of transfer-effective training.

Time for transfer! How to increase your personal transfer success

What holds true for participants in training is also true for your own personal transfer success with this book. Knowing is not enough; you need to apply what you learn. Reading is not enough; you need to act. You will achieve maximum transfer effectiveness if you immediately put what you have learned to the test and into practice. Not in an abstract way, but by applying it to exemplary cases from your own practice. This way, you'll get the most out of your precious time (using it for both reading and conceptualization) and can immediately check whether what you've read really works for you.

Specifically, I recommend you take a real-life training session or program that you're planning or developing at the moment and write a transfer concept for it, lever by lever. Which training session or training program are you going to choose?

As I read this book, I will develop a transfer concept for this training or development program:

____

Let's start with the first key step: setting transfer goals. What should this training accomplish in practice? What will participants do differently or better, based on the training? What behavior will be key to success and what should be the result? Write down whatever ideas and cue words come to mind.

Transfer goal(s) of my training:

If you've just realized that your transfer goals are not as clear and unambiguous as they should be, this is an important insight, too. In the course of the book you will learn about various tools and interventions to sharpen your goals (for example, the Transfer Goals Workshop or the Needs Assessment, see pages 196 ff.). If your goals are clear-cut and tangible already, so much the better.

So, let's get started. Let's look at what levers affect transfer effectiveness, and what tools and interventions will help you increase the transfer success of your training.

[1] In Germany, around €27 billion is invested annually in in-company training, according to Gris and Gutbrod, who use a biting title in German: "Keep on training, keep on lying? Why, despite all the findings, a large share of consulting and training work is still a waste of time." Gris, R., & Gutbrod, A., "Weiter bilden, weiter lügen? Warum entgegen aller Erkenntnisse ein Großteil der Beratungs- und Trainingsarbeit immer noch Verschwendung ist" in: Organisationsentwicklung, 2009, 28(3), pp. 52 – 57. Note: Richard Gris also writes in German as Axel Koch on his "transfer-strength method": In Austria, investments amount to around €1.4 billion. For details and comparisons of EU Member States, see the regular Eurostat survey (Vocational Education and Training Statistics – CVTS) and also the national reports from the Federal Statistical Office in Germany and Statistics Austria.

[2] For estimates of transfer success, see, for example, Baldwin, T. T., & Ford, J. K., "Transfer of Training – A Review and Directions for Future Research" in Personnel psychology, 41(1), 1988, pp.63 – 105 or Kauffeld: S., Nachhaltige Weiterbildung. Betriebliche Seminare und Trainings entwickeln, Erfolge messen, Transfer sichern, Springer, 2010, p.4.

[3] This, the most common definition employed in the transfer research debate, comes from Baldwin, T. T., & Ford, J. K., "Transfer of Training: A Review and Directions for Future Research" in: Personnel psychology, 41(1), 1988, pp.63 – 105.

[4] Brinkerhoff, R. O., What If Training Really Had to Work? 2006, http://www.iap-association.org/getattachment/Conferences/Annual-Conferences/Annual-Conference-2014/Conference-Documentation/19AC_P3_Discussion_Note_Pauline_Popp_Madsen.pdf.aspx (1.12.2016). The values are based on Prof. Robert Brinkerhoff's many years of personal evaluation experience. More information on his work can be found at www.brinkerhoffevaluationinstitute.com

[5] For a fully comprehensive description of the transfer determinants, see, for example, Meißner, A., Lerntransfer in der betrieblichen Weiterbildung: Theoretische und empirische Exploration der Lerntransferdeterminanten im Rahmen des Training off-the-job, Josef Eul Verlag GmbH, 2012, pp. 96 ff.

[6] For intelligence (cognitive abilities) as a determinant of transfer, see, for example, the meta-analyses of Colquitt, J. A., LePine, J. A., & Noe, R. A., "Towards an integrative theory of training motivation: A meta-analytic path analysis of 20 years of research" in Journal of Applied Psychology, 85(5), 2000, pp. 678 – 707, and also the meta-analysis of Blume, B. D., Ford, J. K., Baldwin, T. T., & Huang, J. L., "Transfer of Training: A Meta-Analytic Review" in Journal of Management, 36(4), 2020, pp. 1065 – 1105.