Training Transfer: the Case for 'Implementation Intentions'

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As organizations adopt a more inclusive or pluralistic approach to talent management, there is an emphasis on the engagement of a broader segment of the workforce to deliver both strategic and operational objectives. Accompanying this is investment in learning, training and development activity which is intended to enhance the achievement of the objectives based on the assumption of the effective transfer of training to improve performance or behavioural outcomes. Ensuring that training investment is converted to measurable outcomes is therefore a priority for many organizations and Return on Investment in Training (ROIT) is increasingly sought in the same way as for any other corporate investment. This article synthesizes developments in goal setting theory and highlights a limitation with regards to the theory being applied to the contemporary workplace. It proposes that implementation intentions and the associated 'if/then' plans offer the chance to mediate this. Key to these plans being successful is for them to be embedded at the learning design stage creating a clear link between the need for the learning/training and agreed objectives. A large part of the success of implementation intentions is that control of behaviour is given to situational cues in the workplace and these can be reinforced by supportive line managers and peers. But it is essential that they are also aware of the implementation intention plan in order to offer informed support. A holistic learning environment is key to the success of any intervention but given the importance of situational cues when considering implementation intentions it is vital that both learners and those who support them in the workplace are aware of the specific roles they play and the impact they have.

Key Words: training transfer, implementation intentions, line managers, return on investment

Introduction

As organizations adopt a more inclusive or pluralistic approach to talent management, there is an emphasis on the engagement of a broader segment of the workforce to deliver both strategic and operational objectives. Accompanying this is investment in learning, training and development activity which is intended to enhance the achievement of the objectives based on the assumption of the effective transfer of training to improve performance or behavioural outcomes. However, this presents a challenge since only an estimated 10% of training has had the desired effect. Indeed professional bodies such as the American Association of Talent Development and the UK based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development acknowledge that discussions about how to demonstrate the business value of learning, training and development have raged for years. Ensuring that training investment is converted to measurable outcomes is therefore a priority for many organizations and Return on Investment in Training (ROIT) is increasingly sought in the same way as for any other corporate investment.

In this paper we argue that, for training to be effectively transferred back into the workplace, clear goals should be supplemented by clear implementation intentions to make the training work. Implementation intentions specify the actual behaviour to be performed in a specific context; as opposed to goal intentions which specify what a person wants to achieve. Converting goals into actions, supported by the will and a plan to deliver, can be the differentiator in securing ROIT. The paper will begin by focusing on the transfer of training and the results of studies to date. Following this it will consider what implementation intentions are and provide some evidence of their success in fields other than organization and management studies. Finally, we will turn our attention to the implications for HRD practitioners and offer some guidance on how to successfully embed implementation intentions into learning, training, and development interventions.

The Transfer of Training — Evidence to Date

There has been a good deal of research about how training can be transferred effectively to the workplace. The focus has been on both input and output factors in which the transfer of training is defined as "the extent to which, what is learned in training is applied on the job and enhances job related performance" (Laker & Powell, 2011). Input factors tend to focus on elements such as trainee characteristics, training design, and the working environment. Output characteristics focus more on goal setting.

Input factors as key elements of the transfer of training

Trainee characteristics are the first input factor on which much of the analysis has taken place, with the emphasis on individuals and their motivation to learn. Key trainee characteristics which affected the ability to transfer included intellectual ability, self-efficacy regarding the training task, motivation level, job/career variables, and personality traits. Self-efficacy and motivation have been identified as key trainee characteristics (Cheng & Ho, 2001; Burke & Hutchins 2007; Velada et al,, 2007; Martin, 2010 a and b; Grossman & Salas, 2011).

The second input factor to be considered is related to **training design** and is concentrated on incorporating key learning principles such teaching, stimulus variability, the timing of the training, whether the objectives are clearly communicated and understood, and whether the participants have been involved with designing the intervention (Martin, 2010 a and b).

Finally the **work environment**, consisting of social support offered by line managers and the opportunity to use new skills and behaviours, features strongly as an important aspect of the transfer of training. Line manager support is considered the most consistent factor explaining the relationship between the work environment and transfer and as one of the most powerful tools for enhancing transfer (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Nijman et al., 2006). The supportive behaviours displayed by managers have been identified as: discussing new learning, participating in training, and providing encouragement and coaching, recognition, encouragement, rewards, and modelling trained behaviours (Grossman & Salas, 2011). This support can be emotional and instrumental and can occur before, during, and after training (Nijman et al., 2006). Peer support is an important aspect of the work environment and enhances training transfer by improving employee's feelings of self-efficacy and providing them with coaching and feedback (Martin, 2010 a and b).

Output factors used in facilitating the transfer of training to the workplace

In addition to inputs as factors that will influence the transfer of training, research and practice have also focused on output factors which include the important elements of goal setting and commitment.

Goal setting is the first of the output considerations, the essence of which is that people who set and commit to specific goals outperform those who set vague goals (Brown et al., 2013). Specific goals give focus and direct attention to activities relevant to attaining the goal (Seijts & Latham, 2012). Goals may include learning goals, behavioural outcome goals, distal outcome goals, and proximal plus distal goals (Brown & McCracken, 2010). **Learning goals** are used by individuals striving to understand something new or increase their level of competence in a given activity (Button et al., 1996). A **behavioural outcome goal** is characterized by an avoidance of challenges and performance deteriorates in the face of obstacles (Button et al., 1996). Behavioural goals are generally more associated with transfer of training (Chiaburu & Tekleab, 2005). **Proximal and distal goals** allow people to evaluate their ongoing goal directed behaviour and refocus their efforts if needed (Brown, 2005; Seijts & Latham, 2001; Weldon & Yun, 2000). Creating a sense of immediacy, providing a clear mark of progress leading to a sense of mastery, and allowing the distal goal to be recalibrated if needed are all reasons offered for the increased effectiveness provided by proximal goals (Weldon & Yun, 2000).

The second aspect of transfer of training outputs relates to goal commitment which is characterized by determination to expend effort towards a goal over time. Without commitment, individuals are more likely to abandon the goal especially when faced with difficulties or obstacles. Several situational factors have been identified which could have an impact on commitment such as publicness (the extent to which significant others are aware of the goal), volition (the extent to which an individual is free to engage in behaviour), and explicitness (as opposed to vague goals being set) (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987). The most researched phenomena in terms of goal commitment is participation in setting the goal (Li & Butler, 2004) as this increases commitment to the goal. Given that goals enhance performance to a greater degree in easy, compared to complex, tasks and goal performance becomes weaker when hampered by context factors (Bipp & Kleingeld, 2010) the reliance on goal setting alone in contemporary workplaces could be a major factor why training does not transfer as contemporary workplaces are generally accepted to be Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA).

These two factors have influenced both research and practice into the area of the transfer of training. However there is a further element, less well articulated, that is a critical factor in whether the transfer of training is effective. This is in respect of implementation intentions.

Implementation Intentions — Evidence to Date

Even though a goal may be clearly outlined, it will not energize people to pursue it if they have no idea how to go after it (Seijts & Latham, 2012). This notion of 'how to go after it' introduces the concept of goal intentions, defined as "end states an individual wants to attain; they turn desires into binding goals" (Achtziger et al., 2008, p. 381). A key difference exists however between goal intentions and implementation intentions. Goal intentions specify what a person wants to achieve, (I intend to achieve X) but implementation intentions specify the behaviour to be performed and the situational context it is to be performed in (if situation Y occurs, then I

will initiate behaviour Z) (Sheeran et al., 2005). Vagueness of the goal, lack of self-concordance and failure to develop a specific action plan are considered reasons for non-achievement of goals (Koestner et al., 2002). An implementation plan should take into account how to ensure persistence in the face of distractions and obstacles. Implementation intentions are formed to support the accomplishment of goals by specifying when, where, and how goal directed responses should be initiated. Identifying how to ensure persistence in the face of obstacles is one way of mitigating the already identified limitation of goal setting theory which is that performance becomes weaker when hampered by contextual factors.

This is important because Brandstatter et al. (2001) found that difficult goals without an implementation intention were completed in only 22% of the cases whereas difficult goals with an implementation intention were completed in 62% of cases. Further studies on implementation intentions have focused on a variety of behaviours such as completing an assignment, continuing education, and regaining employment and all have provided evidence for the increased completion of goals based on these implementation plans. Whilst these studies indicate that implementation intentions have positive effects on goal achievement in areas unrelated to a work environment, Friedman and Ronen (2015) found that implementation intentions can also have a positive effect on transfer of training in a work environment. Results of this study indicated that those who formed implementation intentions provided the trained response to mystery shopper questions, on average seven times out of ten whereas those who did not form implementation intentions only provided the trained response on average four times out of ten, indicating that implementation intentions had led to greater transfer of training.

Considering implementation intentions as an alternative post training transfer intervention may therefore mediate some of the limitations identified in goal setting theory and could lead to more of the training transferring into the work role and affecting behaviour and performance. Having reviewed current literature, the paper will now consider the implications for practice of using implementation intentions to generate greater transfer of training.

Transfer of Training — Implications for Practice

The growing awareness of the need to secure a return on investment for training activity has led to an interest in how such an objective can be secured. Articulating implementation intentions, as a complementary activity to those of goal setting and commitment can help in this process and can be a successful post training transfer intervention. The foundation for this is that although setting a goal is beneficial, the process ends once the goal has been set. Using evidence from other disciplines where implementation intentions have led to successful completion of goals, the paper suggests that implementation intentions should now be considered with regards to successfully completing work based goals in relation to transfer of training.

Figure 1 pulls together the various elements of goal setting and implementation intentions. There are several implications for practice which need to be considered, however, if the full benefit to both individuals and the organization are to be realized. These implications can be grouped into **process based** or **people based** concerns.
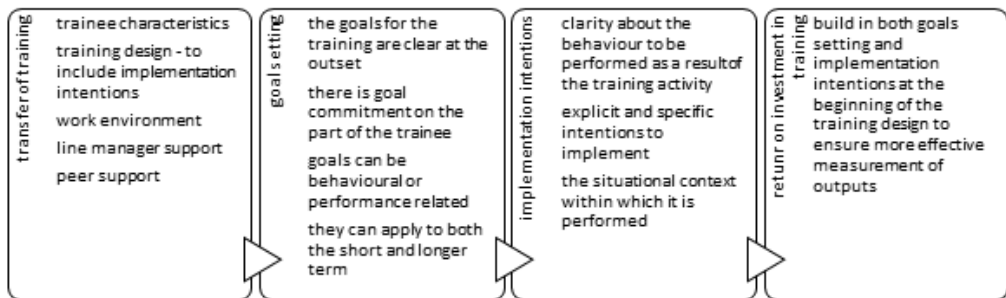
transfer of training	goal setting	implementation intentions	return on investment in training
trainee characteristics training design - to include implementation intentions work environment line manager support peer support	the goals for the training are clear at the outset there is goal commitment on the part of the trainee goals can be behavioural or performance related they can apply to both the short and longer term	clarity about the behaviour to be performed as a result of the training activity explicit and specific intentions to implement the situational context within which it is performed	build in both goals setting and implementation intentions at the beginning of the training design to ensure more effective measurement of outputs

Figure 1: The characteristics of, goal setting, implementation intentions, and the transfer of training

Process based implications consider the design phase of training interventions and should be considered, once the learning need analysis has been completed. Key considerations will be to:

- Ensure that the goals for the training activity are clear at the outset on the part of the organization and the individual. These can be both behavioural or performance goals and can apply to the short and longer term.

- Build in both goals and implementation intentions at the beginning of the training design to ensure more effective measurement of outputs.

- Allow time at the end of the training to fully brief participants on what the implementation intention is and how it relates to the behaviour change being sought by the training.

- Ensure that participants have clear plans specifying when, where, and how the goals are to be achieved, by whom and from where additional resources are needed to ensure their effective implementation.

- Take account of the specific context within which the training outputs are to be implemented and build this into the implementation intention.

People based implications will consider various stakeholders who play a part in the initial identification of the need for the training to take place followed by the design, delivery and support of the training. Key considerations here will be:

- Support from senior people within the business to give backing to the need for the change in behaviour which the training will bring about.

- To ensure line manager involvement in both training design and outputs because "determining before-and-after performance metrics usually requires the active co-operation of line managers and this is not always forthcoming. Even where involvement in learning transfer is formally expected of managers, today's 'more from less' pressures can mean that support is lukewarm" (CIPD, 2014).

- To ensure there is goal commitment on the part of the trainee in relation to behaviour or performance change; short or longer term. This will in part be down to a proper identification of need so the 'right' people attend the course but will also be easier if senior people and line managers are supportive in words and actions.

- The knowledge and ability of the training designers and deliverers to understand what implementation intentions are and how they can enhance the transfer of training. It might be that using implementation intentions is itself a need analysis of a new skill set required by HRD professionals.

These process and people based implications consider a functional and practical point of view but the greatest implication for practice could be in the benefits obtained by the individual and the organization. Hamlin and Stewart (2011), identified four core purposes of HRD, identified in Table 1.

	Core Purpose
1	Improving individual or group effectiveness and performance
2	Improving organizational effectiveness and performance
3	Developing knowledge, skills and competencies
4	Enhancing human potential and personal growth

Table 1: Four core purposes of HRD

The use of implementation intentions works to support each of these levels. As a post training intervention the more concerted focus on behaviour change will develop the individual's knowledge, skills, and competencies but also, as they begin to see results will enhance their own personal growth and job satisfaction. As a consequence of this, organizational and group effectiveness will also improve.

Conclusion

In focusing on transfer of training, this paper has synthesized developments in goal setting theory and highlighted a limitation with regards to the theory being applied to the contemporary workplace, which is the notion that goal performance becomes weaker when hampered by contextual factors. Implementation intentions and the associated 'if/then' plans offer the chance to mediate this however as they should ensure persistence in the face of distractions and obstacles. With a tangible and visual representation of the goal, the implementation intention can ensure the goal is kept in focus due to its publicness and its explicit nature (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987). Key to these plans being successful is for them to be embedded at the learning design stage creating a clear link between the need for the learning/training and agreed objectives. By growing out of the learning rather than being a bolt on at the end, learners will have a clear understanding of the situation/behaviour change (if/then) dynamic which the learning addresses. A large part of the success of implementation intentions is that control of behaviour is given to situational cues in the workplace and these can be reinforced by supportive line managers and peers but it is essential that they are also aware of the implementation intention plan in order to offer informed support. A holistic learning environment is key to the success of any intervention but given the importance of situational cues it is especially so with implementation intentions being used as a post training transfer intervention.

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