

# Who's in charge of transfer success?

Feature

Dr **Ina Weinbauer-Heidel** on what holds back effective learning transfer – and how we should all strive to overcome it

Something fundamental, powerful and satisfying motivates more and more development professionals and trainers to commit themselves to strive for transfer effectiveness: their own aspiration and desire for meaning and impact



“What is the biggest barrier for transfer success?” is a question I’m asked over and over. To answer this, it’s worth considering:

- What does the success of the transfer depend on?
- What is the biggest barrier to effective training and how do we overcome it?

## **What does the success of learning transfer depend on? 12 levers for training with impact**

Which factors are decisive for successful transfer? What makes training sessions effective and what are the barriers to transfer success? Research shows that transfer success

is dependent on three areas: the participants, the training design and the organisation. And within these areas, there are various factors that we as L&D managers, HR professionals and trainers can influence and manage; these are the 12 levers of transfer effectiveness that help us make the most out of our training programmes.

## **Which lever am I responsible for? The crucial question of transfer success**

Whose job is it to set the levers for “transfer effectiveness”? As an HR professional you may ask: “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

organisational issues, so why bother?”

Most managers are convinced that transfer is “an issue of HR departments”. And if the transfer is not successful, you often hear from the participants: “I would liked to have [incorporated the training], but the trainer wasn’t any good!” So, who is right?

The answer is: *everyone and no-one is right!* And that brings us to the biggest barrier of transfer success: the responsibility for transfer. Transfer is always a collective success. It needs several people who pull together and make their respective contribution – but one that must be organised and managed. And that is the crux. It is often the case that when many stakeholders are jointly responsible, the outcome is

that no one feels personally responsible. Each assumes that the other already ensures that what needs to be done is done, especially if there are no clearly defined tasks or tasks cannot be clearly assigned to any one person or job role. And that is precisely the case with transfer support.

Whose task is it, then, to define and select the right content for the training? Who develops and implements measures to ensure that superiors support the transfer? Who can and should promote that the participants are motivated to implement what they have learnt and to stick to their plans in their daily work? If you ask different questions from different stakeholders, you will get very different answers. These questions and responsibilities remain unanswered, are often not addressed or even considered. The transfer process remains uncontrolled and unmanaged – and transfer success

resources, and achieve only a meagre 20 per cent transfer success without seriously hurting anyone.

It's hard to predict how long it will take for every CEO to ask his HR department for tangible proof of the effectiveness of the training. Or how long it will take until (virtual) seminar rooms stay empty because of seminar fatigue and demotivation among your participants. Perhaps individual trainers are still booked up for some time to come – even if it's by selling off-the-shelf training. Or because they offer new training based on current trends that only peripherally meet the immediate needs of the organization. Or they accept orders that they know in advance will only be moderately effective since the necessary conditions for successful transfer are not in place..

Plus, there will again be crises in which training budgets will be cut. But perhaps we will

does not happen. And that is the largest transfer barrier of all.

So, we know that the biggest transfer barrier is shared responsibility. Because many stakeholders are accountable for transfer success, often no one feels responsible for it and in this way, transfer remains unmanaged.

**Hope or act? Transfer does not 'just happen'**

We can continue to hope for transfer, or we can act and make sure that the topic of transfer is firmly on our meeting agendas. It is quite possible that we will continue to have seminars for several years, invest time, money and

recover, even without major changes in the effectiveness of our training. Or perhaps we can postpone it, by using fancy new technologies that detract from the transfer problem – at least for a while.

So it is not fear or external pressure that should motivate us to act in terms of transfer effectiveness. It is something much more fundamental, powerful and satisfying that motivates more and more development professionals and trainers to commit themselves to strive for transfer effectiveness: their own aspiration and desire for meaning and impact.

**Overcoming the biggest transfer barrier – why it's worth it for HR managers and trainers**

The biggest transfer barrier is that nobody feels responsible for it – because no single role or person exists across the board that can solely and consistently be made responsible for it. If training providers (and the HR departments that engage them) are tasked with giving training more effectiveness, and thus their work more impact, it is exactly this barrier which must be dismantled first.

How can this be done, though? Put the topic on your agenda and give it the priority it deserves. Find out about the levers that can be used to control transfer success and talk about them! Not only as catchwords or

meta-discussions about learning philosophies and digitisation but also in the form of actions, interventions and measures with responsibilities and a to-do checklist. Let's stop only hoping for transfer, let's start managing it!

**How to go about managing learning to generate more effective transfer**

**For HR managers,** it is worth knowing the levers of transfer effectiveness, because you can specifically focus on the trainers who meet your transfer requirements. With transfer know-how and a corresponding toolset of transfer-promoting measures, it will be even easier to make the managers in your organisation aware of their role in transfer success and to demand their cooperation. With



levers of transfer effectiveness, it's easier to get commitment for the transfer issue in your organisation and convince decision makers to provide budgets for training and, in particular, transfer measures and interventions.

**For trainers** it is worth knowing the levers of transfer effectiveness, because they will become a strong sparring and development partner for their clients. They can point at what matters and who needs to be involved in order to achieve transfer success. In doing so, trainers make it clear that transfer responsibility does not lie with trainers alone, but that the organisation must also make its contribution. As a consultant and partner for efficient transfer

architectures, trainers naturally also have the appropriate tools, measures and interventions in their toolkit. This can give trainers and training providers a strong USP and a considerable competitive advantage.

**Seminar supplier or business partner? A question of ambition and understanding of roles**

Ultimately, the question of whether it is you who is responsible for transfer and its levers is a question of how you understand of your own role, aspirations and purpose: Do you, as an HR professional, see yourself as an organiser of seminars? Or as a business partner who contributes to the company's success and advances people in their development? The second implies that you are responsible for transfer management and achieving transfer success. And as a trainer or training provider, do you see yourself as someone who communicates certain contents in a methodically

and didactically appealing way? Or as a development companion and facilitator who has the ambition to bring participants and companies forward? They too cannot limit themselves to training design, but should also address other levers of transfer effectiveness.

If you don't bring the topic of transfer effectiveness to the table and tackle it, then perhaps nobody will. It is up to you to increase the value and reputation of your training programmes and thus the reputation of our entire industry! What step will you take today?

**Dr Ina Weinbauer-Heidel** is founder and CEO of The Institute for Transfer Effectiveness where the goal is to improve the interface between transfer research and transfer practice. Her talk "What makes training really work? The levers to more effective training" takes place on at the World of Learning Conference on **Tuesday 15 October**