

# Training Intervention and Strategies for Positive Learning Transfer

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## ABSTRACT

The performance of organisational members determines the success or failure of any organisation. Often, organisational members fail to perform at optimal level, leading to decline in productivity. In such situations, assessment is made, to find out the causes of such a decline, whether training or non-training related. Training is used as an intervention strategy when the phenomenon affecting productivity requires acquisition of knowledge skills and attitude, while non-training related factors are treated by some other appropriate methods. The study set out to identify variables responsible for low performance in organisations, the intervention measures employed in combating skills and knowledge-related problems, and strategies by which the outcome of training-intervention measure could be actualized.

Training Needs Analysis (TNA) was identified as an important pre-training exercise if the intervention must be focused, and after the training, determined effort for successful 'learning transfer'. Transfer may not always be obtainable, as a result of which strategies for effective learning transfer become imperative for organisations. It is therefore important for organisation to incorporate in their training interventions strategies that will allow for maximum transfer of learning.

**Key Words:** Training Intervention, Positive Transfer of Learning

## Introduction

The performance of organisational members determines the success or failure of any organisation. Every organisation is set up to succeed in one way or the other, and in order to achieve this goal, organisational members are expected to perform in a prescribed fashion. Sometimes organisational members strive hard to make the desired impact, but in spite of this, the desired level of attainment may not be achieved. In trying to correct what went wrong, the problem is diagnosed with a view to ascertaining whether the problem is that of training (knowledge and skills) or not. According to Boydell (1976:12) it cannot be stressed too heavily that it would be a great mistake to assume that training can cure all ills. Training intervention is employed only when the phenomenon diagnosed could be rectified or put right by training.

This study sets out to identify variables responsible for low performance in organisations; the intervention measures employed in righting the wrongs; and strategies by which the outcome of the intervention variables could be positively transferred to work situation.

## Low Performance In Organisations:

Every organisational member has a duty to perform, and each individual is expected to attain a high level of performance in order to achieve set organisational goals. Sometimes, the expected performance is at a group or occupational level, indicating that the individual contributions would add up to expected group performance/output. Certain negative level of performance may keep recurring, leading to perceived general low output and seen as danger signal to the survival of the organisation. Low performance could be perceived in the following instances:

- (i) unrealistic target setting;
- (ii) operator incompetence;
- (iii) lack of motivation;
- (iv) unsuitable equipment;
- (v) inappropriate methods;
- (vi) working environment;
- (vii) poor leadership; and
- (viii) group norms.

The list of sources of low performance in organisations is inexhaustible, but the above listed tend to be the more common and popular ones. A cursory look at the eight examples given indicate that the causes of low performance are based on the following areas where there may be deficiency: Technological system; human system; organisational system; and social system. Out of these areas of causes of low performance in organisations, the human aspect is the only one that could be attributed to the individual capacity. But in the examples given, it would be seen that while the case of “lack of operator competency” borders on lack of knowledge and skills; that of “lack of motivation” borders on complex human relations.

When the cause of low performance borders on lack of knowledge and skills, it is an indication of performance gap, between expected performance and actual performance. This implies that the individual could be taught ways and means by which he or she could perform at the required level. Hence, when there is perceived gap in the performance of the individual, training intervention is undertaken in order to bridge the performance gap.

### **Training Intervention:**

Having perceived that the individual has short-fall in his/her output, and that it is expedient that he/she performs at optimal level, training activity is undertaken by the individual in order to equip him or her with the wherewithal for performance at the required level. In other words, training is provided for the individual, to ‘salvage’ him or her from steady downward performance. This is referred to as ‘Training Intervention’.

### **Definitions of training:**

Seeing that training is used as an interventionist approach to solving performance problems, what is meant by training? In the view of Kenny, Donnelly and Reid (1979:2) training is helping an individual to learn how to carry out satisfactorily the work required of him in his present job. In line with Kenny et al’s (1979) view that training is geared towards job performance, Marsick (1987:3) stated that training usually refers to short-term activities that emphasize practical skills immediately applicable on the job. In other words, when an employee is involved in an activity involving acquisition of skills to be applied on the job, we refer to it as training. This definition indicates that if learning is not directed towards practical application of same, then it could not be referred to as training. It also implies that when organisational members are sent on training, then one expects or rather, they should apply knowledge and skills acquired from that training to the job, otherwise, they could not claim to be trained.

Defining training from another perspective, Laird (1978:9) stated that it is the acquisition of the technology which permits employees to perform to standard. This reference to the standard aspect of organisational life is supported by Robinson (1988:12), who said that training means to develop a person’s behavior pattern, in the areas of knowledge, skills or attitude, in order to achieve a desired standard or level of performance. By these definitions, one understands Laird (1978) and Robinson (1988) as saying that training is for the attainment of set standards. In other words, that every organisation operates on a set or desired standard of operation. Therefore, where one is not measuring up to the set standard, he/she is sent on training, to bring him/her up to the required standard. It is important to note that the expected result sets the standard of performance, compelling employees to brace up towards the achievement of desired results, based on set performance standards. This also implies that anybody who is not performing according to set standards is not giving the desired result, and needs to be put in line through a training programme.

The question is, if an employee is sent on training in order to enable him/her meet the performance standard, how is it that training recipients find it difficult to transfer learning to the job situation, it being the main reason for which they were sent on training? Secondly, seeing that personnel are not sent on training for the sake of it, how is it that training Directors/Managers find it difficult to enforce or bring about transfer of learning to the job? The inability of these situations to be made good are pointers related to problems of transfer of learning.

Reilly (1979:22) defined training as the development of a person’s knowledge, skills and attitudes for a vocational purpose. In the same vein, Maduabum (1996:4) defined it as the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitude required to perform a given job or group of jobs, duties or tasks. Both Reilly (1979) and Maduabum (1996) agree that training provides the individual with knowledge, skills and attitudes to help the person to be more effective in the performance of a specific job. In other words, that if knowledge, skills and attitude are required for effective performance on the job, then in a situation where one is deficient in any of them, he/she needs to go on a training programme in order to acquire it. This by implication means that nomination to training programme should be an indication that one has not got all that is required to perform on a job, and which must be obtained through training. If that be the case, then one expects that a training recipient should (on the face of it) have no problems in implementing them on return from training programme.

Our discussion so far depicts that training is an activity that aims at satisfactory job performance; adherence to set performance standards; and provision of requisite knowledge, skills and attitude for effective performance.

Summarising the three dimensions of training, thorne and Mackey (2007:xiii) stated that training is work-related; on-job training and off-job training, or that it is based on employment training scheme. This means that when we talk about training, we have job or employment enhancing performance in mind. But in the view of Hasseling (1971:93) training is a sequence of experiences or opportunities designed to modify behavior in order to attain a stated objective; while Oatey (1970:4) defined it as any activity which deliberately attempts to improve a person's skill at a task. Considering both Hasseling (1971) and Oatey (1970) definitions, we can regard them as being wide, because, they appear to give room for the inclusion of education and development as what we can actually call training. For our purpose, we can define training as "any activity which deliberately attempts to improve a person's skill in a job (as opposed to education which is mainly concerned with personal development as opposed to direct job-relevance). We do not want to join the controversy on the difference between education and training in this study, but suffice it to say that Marsick (1987:3) explained that education usually refers to longer-term courses that develop generic knowledge, skills and abilities rather than specific job-related competencies. Practitioners are agreed on the fact that training is job-related or targeted at specific performance. Hence, any activity geared towards these objectives or results could confidently be termed as training. How do we determine who should benefit from 'training intervention' or what is the criteria for selecting people for training? This would be the subject of our next section of this study.

#### **Training Intervention Beneficiary Criteria:**

We saw in the preceding section that training is used as an interventionist measure, to make individuals perform at the required level. This means that before the intervention, the individual had been performing below expectations, leading to low performance. Hence, on review of the entire situation by a training expert, he or she would determine what the individual organisational member needs in order to perform at optimum level. This is referred to as one's 'Training Needs'. Hence, in order to put an individual on the right performance level where a short-fall or gap exists in his or her performance, the individual's training needs must be determined. According to Walklin (1982:117) the essence of carrying out training needs analysis (TNA) is to determine first, the performance differential of the individual or group, in order to fix the difference between what the trainee is able to do before training, and what they will be expected to be able to do on completion of the learning session. The resulting lecture content should include core knowledge which the trainee must know, together with an element of that which they should or could know.

#### **Training Needs:**

In discussing the training needs of an individual, we had earlier stated that it refers to what the individual needs to acquire in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude. Even when there are no weaknesses observed in the performance of the individual, training can be embarked upon to introduce a new product line, new technology or a new process that will lead to enhanced performance. The sum total is that it will keep the organisation ahead of competitors. Osborne (1996:43) is of the view that a training need exists when the gap between 'actual' and 'required' performance (i.e. training gap), can be most economically matched by a training intervention. This view is supported by Robinson (1988:37) who defined training need as the gap which exists between the true requirements of a given job and the present capabilities of the incumbent. Both Osborne (1996) and Robinson (1988) could be regarded as using performance gap as an indication of training need. Maduabum (1992:184) joins both of them by saying that a training need is a gap between the kind of performance or competence which he (employee) is expected to have. Peterson (1992:14) simply defined training need as a need for human performance improvement that can best be met by training of some kind. This definition is very easy to be applied to so many situations because, for example, it did not specify the area of human performance, whether a job situation or social position. For example, one needs training in order to be a good worker but one also needs training in order to be a good wife; husband or member of a community. All that Peterson (1992) advocated was that if a human situation requires performance improvement, then training need has to be established. For our purpose, we want to restrict training need to work situation. Therefore, applied to the work situation, a training need stems from the premise that a change is necessary, a change from a situation or performance which is below that required to attain at least the minimum level, and that the intervention agent is training. Craig (1976:9) stated that:

a training need may be described as existing any time an actual condition differs from a desired condition in the human, or "people" aspect of organisation performance or more specifically, when a change in present human knowledge, skills or attitudes can bring about the desired performance.

Turrell (1980:14) concluded that a training need had been revealed if the results we get from the present organisation structure or present procedures are below an acceptable standard. Rae (1986:12), has the same view of training need with Turrell (1980), by defining training need as meaning that performance is not up to the level required, and this in turn means that both the existing level of achievement, and that required, have been measured and assessed. This implies that in order to confirm that there is training need, both the existing level of achievement, and that required, must have been measured and assessed.

### **Training Needs Analysis:**

It is widely acknowledged that there has to be an assessment of “what is” and “what ought to be before training need could be established. This assessment is done through what is termed ‘Training Needs Analysis’ (TNA). TNA is described as an examination of the organisation’s present operations, expected operations, present and manpower requirements, in order to identify the number of staff and manpower categories needed to be trained and retrained. The complete process of training needs analysis according to Peterson (1992:14), means specifying those gaps or discrepancies in performance that actually exist between what people are capable of doing now, and what you want them to do in the future.

Having identified training needs and exposed organisational members to the desired training process, how is this learning process made to impact on the work performance of individuals in the organisation? How do we ensure that learning acquired during the training session is positively transferred to work situation? Do we have situations in which training activity fails to intervene in performance enhancement as envisaged before the intervention? These are the issues to be tackled in the next section of our study.

### **Learning Transfer:**

The organisational ‘Training expert’ is required to stipulate the objectives which the training event is to achieve, and the method by which these would be achieved. The issues of formulation of training objectives and methods of training are outside the scope of our study, for brevity sake.

If training intervention must be effective and rewarding, then the knowledge and skills acquired from the learning event must be fully transferred to the work situation. Otherwise, it would seem as if intervention never took place.

### **Definitions of Learning Transfer:**

The word transfer is derived from ‘trans’, meaning across or over, and ‘ferre’, meaning to bear, thus to carry over. Virtually all learning involves carrying over previous learning. Even in one’s academic progress, attainments are carried over. Hence, for example, to do a post-graduate study, one must carry over an undergraduate record. Transfer thus refers to how previous learning influences current and future learning. When we talk about transfer of learning, we are talking about the extent to which learning is transferred from one context to another. In this study, it means the extent to which the trainee is able to transfer knowledge and skills from the training event to the work situation. According to Leberman, McDonald and Doyle (2006:1) ‘transfer of training’ is often used synonymously with ‘transfer of learning’. They consider ‘transfer of training’ as a subset of transfer of learning. Likewise, in this study, we shall use ‘transfer of training’ and ‘transfer of learning’ interchangeably. But what do we mean by transfer of learning? In the view of Haskell (2001:xiii) transfer of learning is our use of past learning when learning something new, and the application of that learning to both similar and new situations. Leberman et al (2006:2) refer to transfer of learning as a process, where the learner plays a key role, and that the transfer process may involve a number of participants, primarily the learner. The definitions of Cormier and Hagman (1987); and Marini and Genereux (1995), state that “transfer is the process of applying skills, knowledge and attitudes acquired during a training programme to the work place”. The two joint authors see learning transfer mainly from work situation and they say that the successful application of transfer leads to an improvement in job performance and has a lasting effect.

According to Fogarty, Perkins and Barrell (1992) real transfer happens when people carry over something they learned in one context to a significantly different context. This definition implies that when we have a situation that is similar to the one providing the experience, it does not amount to ‘real’ transfer. Hence, the situations being considered must be significantly different, before one can say that real transfer has taken place. Gagne, Yekovich and Yekovich (1993:235), provided a more simple definition, by referring to ‘transfer of learning’ as the application of knowledge, learned in one setting or for one purpose, to another setting and/or purpose. This definition did not consider the similarity or differences of the two situations under application, but requires that if one was able to apply knowledge from one situation to another, then we can say that transfer of learning has taken place. We have another view by Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), who defined transfer of learning as the ability to apply previous learning to a new situation, problem, or to future learning. They also defined transfer of learning as carrying over knowledge, skills, understandings, attitudes, and habits of thinking, from one learning situation to another.

The foregoing definitions indicate that experience must be gained from a previous event and applied successfully to another work situation, before one can say that learning has been transferred. In other words, one must be able to understand or absorb a process and apply it to another situation, before transfer of learning can be confirmed. A fresh dimension to the definition of transfer of learning was provided by Subedi (2004) and Broad and Newstrom (1992), stating that it is the effective and continuing application, by trainees to their jobs, of the knowledge and skills gained in training (both on and off the job). It could be seen that the previous authors' definitions made no mention of "on and off job" situation, but its inclusion in the latest definition is an indication that transfer of learning takes place at "on the job training" also. We saw in our earlier discussions that transfer is applicable when the venue of learning is "off the job" environment, to warrant the learner to understand and absorb the skill being learned, before taking them to the job situation, where transfer would take place. But by the latest definition, we are given the view that there is transfer of learning 'on the job' also.

In the views of Newstrom (1984), Wexley and Lathan (1991) and Subedi (2004), the ability or inability to transfer learning from the training to work situation is a complex process and depends on the following six conditions:

- (i) the intent or motivation of the learner (trainee characteristics);
- (ii) the workplace environment including supervision support (organisational environment and culture);
- (iii) the instructional design as well as delivery features (job relevance) of the training programme;
- (iv) trainee's commitment to use the training;
- (v) perceived ability to apply; and
- (vi) opportunity to use the new knowledge and skills back at the workplace.

Subedi (2004:597-8) grouped 'transfer of training' into three categories as follows:

- (i) Organisational or Workplace Related Factors:  
Which includes post-training transfer environment, supervisory behaviours, opportunity to practice, perceived level of supervisory support, elements of organisational climate and culture such as workplace environment – including incentives, feedback and reinforcement of desired behavior.
- (ii) Training Design and Delivery Related Factors:  
Which includes theories and practices of human resource development (HRD) such as training needs analysis, organisational analysis, job/task relevance design of training, technology and instructional techniques.
- (iii) Trainee Related Factors: which includes factors such as trainee's self-efficacy, ability and skills, goal-orientation, motivation, job attitudes, personality, interests, expectations, commitments and readiness to learn and apply.

### **Strategies for Positive and Effective Learning Transfer:**

Three factors support the transfer of learning and these involve all the participants in the transfer process. Firstly, the training recipients have acquired new skills that are transferable. Secondly, the training recipients have confidence in themselves that they can implement the newly acquired skills. Thirdly, that supervisors and management will recognise the contributions of the re-entrant and give encouragement in different ways. The level of management support is very critical.

After a successful training exposure, it is expected that effective learning transfer would take place, but there could be relapse indicators, showing that learning transfer is not taking place. They include:

- (i) A backlog of work or a lack of work resulting in boredom.
- (ii) Unsupportive co-workers, urging the re-entrant to revert to old behaviours.
- (iii) Re-entrant doubts about using the new skills effectively.
- (iv) Little or no management support on learning transfer.
- (v) Restructuring and re-deployment of training recipient; and peers antagonism.

The presence of any of the above situations is an indication that learning transfer is not effective or taking place at all.

Effective Learning Transfer could be obtained by tackling the matter from the three categories suggested by Subedi (2004:597-8) as highlighted above; and itemized below:

- (i) organisational or workplace level;
- (ii) training design and delivery level; and
- (iii) trainee or re-entrant level.

#### **Organisational or Workplace Level:**

Learning transfer will be more successful if the whole organisation is supportive of the training. This means that training and learning transfer has to be made an integral component of the organisation's service management strategy. Nadler cited in Broad and Newstrom (1992) suggested that the trainee needs to be supported, in order for transfer to take place. The workplace plays an important part in the transfer process, and it is here that the learner is expected to demonstrate his/her new knowledge and skills. Direct supervisor often determines whether new learning can be implemented at the workplace or not. Often, supervisors leave the training recipient to his or her fate. Yet, it is the job of the supervisor, to see that high performance is maintained and that positive change must follow any training programme undertaken by organisational members. Sometimes, it appears that supervisors 'refuse' to assist training recipients who are experiencing re-entry problems, perhaps, to prevent the subordinate from proving or behaving as more competent than the supervisor.

In many cases, training recipients are not given opportunity to use the new knowledge and skills back at the workplace. The training recipient, 'bubbling' with ideas and enthusiasm, returns, and before settling down to work, gets posted out of the section or job for which training was received. Often, peers and other organisational members concentrate on the 'benefits' that the re-entrant would derive from a successful learning transfer, and work to stifle his or her efforts. Organisational members must be reminded at all times, that the success of the organisation or corporate success supersedes individual success. This is because, if the organisation succeeds, everybody will benefit, but if the organisation falls, everybody would 'sink'.

#### **Training Design and Delivery Level:**

A key factor facilitating the transfer of learning from the classroom to the workplace for adult learners, is the use of a course design that employs experiential/action learning, which incorporates both personal and professional development modules, as well as a work based curriculum. The trainer (consultant) and supervisor are to ensure effective learning, in order to eliminate failed transfer. According to Joseph (2010), failed transfer usually happens when students are unable to make connections between what was learnt previously and the tasks at hand. Joseph (2010) noted that:

The practice of drawing students' attention to connections, practical applications, and abstract relationships, should be a deliberate and conscious strategy on the teachers' part. It should become second nature to a teacher, to ask students questions like "why is this topic important?" "In what other situations can this principle be applied?" This culture of transfer should be encouraged, both in the structured classroom and out of class settings.

Most importantly, Training Needs Analysis (TNA) ought to precede nomination for training. Hence, every training programme must have job/task relevance to be meaningful to the trainee, and engender learning transfer. Programme delivery technique must be monitored, to ensure effective skills acquisition. Professional training consultants should be engaged for programme design and delivery, as against the use of quack trainers.

#### **Trainee or Re-entrant Level:**

Implementation of training intervention rests squarely on the shoulders of the training recipient, who is responsible for ensuring that transfer took place, assuming that the training event was relevant and successful. There must be readiness to learn and apply on the part of the trainee. Often, trainees are ready to learn for their personal benefit, but not for the benefit of the organisation which sponsored their training. Secondly, trainees' self-efficacy, ability and skills in the area, is very paramount because these are attributes that bring success to any profession. The motivation of the trainee is very important because this has effect on the trainee's goal-orientation, job attitudes, interests and commitments. Motivation may not have to be economic rewards all the time. Letter of commendation could be very motivating especially at senior levels of performance. A very senior manager in the Nigerian Public Service is reputed for motivating his subordinates merely by telling them "this is fantastic!" any time they put up good performance. And when the subordinate fails to perform in any occasion, he tells that person "this is unlike you". This second comment serves in telling the individual that he or she has been a high performer, but that he or she is retrogressing, a situation which nobody likes.

Finally, the trainee must be given the opportunity, to perform. Often, enthusiasm is ‘smouldered’ through lack of opportunity to perform. This takes many forms; ranging from re-deployment, to restriction to narrow aspect of the job or inadequate resources for performance. It must be noted that without the individual (learner), transfer of learning is an illusion, so improvement cannot be achieved.

#### **Conclusion:**

Intervention is made in order to remedy a deteriorating situation. Training intervention entails learning transfer, without which successful intervention could not be said to have taken place. Intervention is for the progress of the organisation, hence, it must assist the re-entrant in ensuring effective learning transfer. There must be strong will on the part of Management to make learning transfer a culture of the organisation.

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