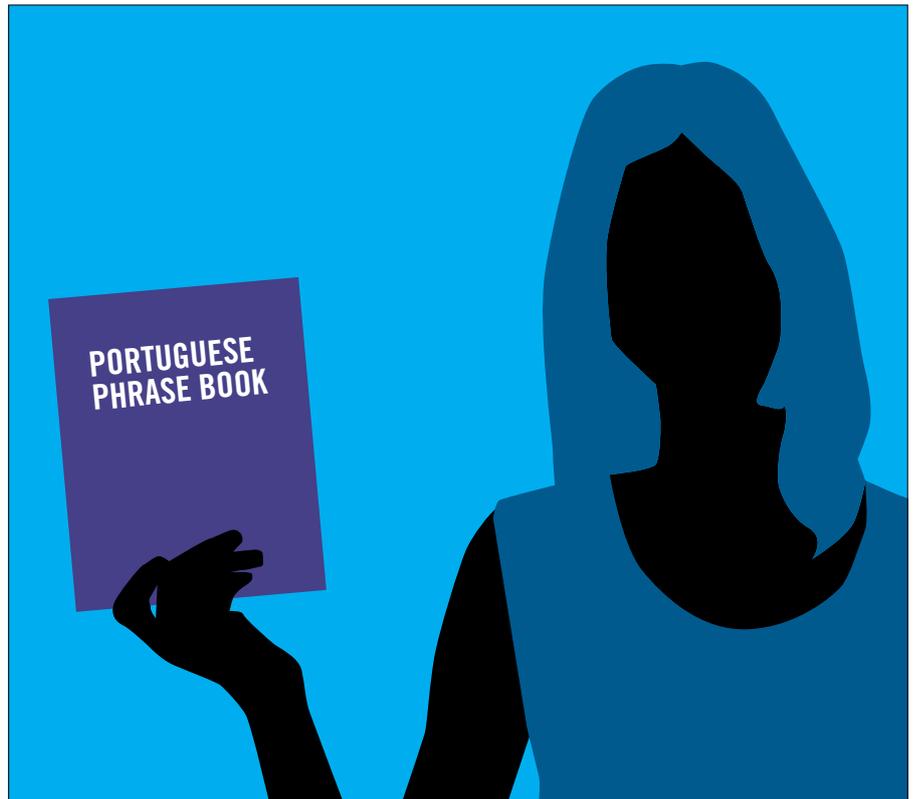


STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE LEARNING TRANSFER

BY CONNIE MALAMED



Given the size of the global training industry, you might imagine that learning transfer would be a top priority in the world of learning and development. After all, the primary goal of workplace training is to promote learning transfer—the degree to which an individual applies new skills and knowledge from training to the job. Yet, as you read through online magazines and blogs, you won't see much mention of this topic.

In this article, I hope to emphasise the importance of learning transfer and to show how it can be enhanced with proper support in the workplace.

Is the Transfer Near or Far?

Academics refer to different types of learning transfer, as there are important distinctions to consider. *Near transfer* occurs when a new situation resembles the situation in which the skill or knowledge was learned. An example of near transfer is when a technician is

trained to replace a motherboard in a desktop computer. This one skill should be easily transferable to the workplace where the trainee must also replace other circuit boards. In near transfer, the ability to apply training to the job is likely because the situations are similar. Near transfer knowledge is usually repetitive, such as tasks that follow a procedure.

The more difficult type is *far transfer* - when the learning situation and the new situation are dissimilar. Far transfer may involve applying principles, implementing strategies and using judgement to solve problems. For example, after a manager attends a course on dealing with difficult employees, he or she may still not have the skills to handle certain unpredictable situations, such as workplace violence.

Will the Transfer Be Positive or Negative?

Another important distinction is to consider whether training will enhance

or interfere with transfer. In *positive learning transfer*, what a person learns in one situation (whether through formal or informal learning) augments learning or performance later. If a person can read and comprehend Spanish, it will probably be easier to learn to read and comprehend Portuguese because the written languages have similarities.

On the other hand, *negative transfer interferes* with a person learning something new. For example, when a person has learned to drive on one side of the road, this skill may interfere with learning to drive on the other side of the road. Negative transfer can potentially cause someone to make more mistakes and errors than if the person had no previous knowledge or skill that could interfere.

Supporting Learning Transfer in the Workplace

Although there are barriers to learning transfer, research tells us that we can support learning transfer by making accommodations in the workplace. Here are six strategies that are known to work.

Promote a Positive Transfer Climate

Transfer climate refers to the conditions in the work environment that inhibit or enable newly learned skills, knowledge and attitudes back on the job. A positive environment that promotes learning transfer provides:

- a strong alignment between the training program and the organisation's goals,
- varied opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills,
- positive consequences when new skills are used, and
- social support from peers and supervisors.

Create Pre-Training Motivation

Studies show that a person's attitude prior to training determines his or her motivation to transfer new learning to the job. In fact, pre-training motivation to learn and to apply new knowledge and skills is a predictor of post-training

transfer. You can influence motivation by framing upcoming learning experiences in a favorable light. These strategies will help promote a readiness to learn:

- be clear as to whether training is mandatory or voluntary,
- provide realistic information prior to training,
- allow trainees to provide input, and
- communicate your organisation's expectations.

Even before an employee engages in a formal learning experience, your organisation can promote or hinder transfer motivation.

Make the Training Relevant

A person's motivation to transfer training back to the job is shaped during the learning experience. It comes as no surprise that when trainees perceive learning as relevant, useful, and valuable, they are more likely to apply their newly learned skills. Some factors that influence the perception of training as valuable include:

- acknowledgement that the trainee needs to improve his or her job performance,
- belief that the new skills will improve job performance, and
- the practicality and ease of transferring new skills to the job.

Create a Culture of Learning

Encourage your organisation to promote the value of learning at work. A culture of learning promotes both formal and informal learning. It acknowledges that employees need opportunities to try out newly learned skills and that mastery or competence takes time. It's possible that creating a culture of learning will reduce resistance to change and change is an inevitable part of learning and performance improvement.

Encourage Management's Support

An important dimension of learning at work is having managerial support. When managers and supervisors reinforce and promote the use of new skills on the job, it provides the

time, space and emotional support for learning transfer to occur. An important qualifier here is that when supervisors are coercive, it wipes away the effect. Some ways that managers and supervisors can promote transfer are to:

- participate in training events,
- allow trainees to contribute and provide input to training,
- discuss new skills and how to apply them,
- provide coaching, encouragement and feedback, and
- hold trainees accountable for using new skills.

Garner Peer Support

Support from peers and colleagues is a critical contributor to the social aspect of learning. Peer support may be even more important than supervisory support in promoting learner transfer. Organisations can promote peer support by encouraging:

- peer support networks,
- workgroup discussions to share ideas about newly learned knowledge and skills,
- participation in internal and external communities of practice, and
- opportunities for mentoring.

Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum. You can have an impact on changing the effectiveness of your learning experiences by providing a workplace brimming with support.

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Connie is delivering a keynote address at AITD2017. She is also presenting a one day workshop on Visual Design.