

Applying Training and Transferring Learning in the Workplace: How to Turn Hope into Reality

An ESI International Study



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Studies and research around the transfer of learning date back to the early 20th century and since then, a plethora of viewpoints, theories and research fields have emerged to analyze how individuals, or trainees, apply the knowledge and skills gained in training to their real-world workplace environment. This aspiration to successfully transfer learning has intensified in recent years due to economic challenges, an evolving workforce, and increased organizational focus on measuring and justifying investments.

In fact, ESI International, through first-hand client experience and self-reported client data, finds that while organizations may take the time to prepare for a learning engagement, attend a learning engagement and even measure the impact of learning, many organizations continue to struggle to support the transfer of learning. Where are the breakdowns in the transfer of learning, and how can organizations address these gaps?

It's clear that organizations are still missing some fundamental steps to ensure the transfer of training; these steps include the development of an overall learning transfer plan, a strategy for reinforcing the application of learning post-training, a clear way to measure if and to what extent learning is applied on the job, and manager involvement during the pre- and post-learning phase.

Most of all, the following study suggests that organizations start out 'hopeful' that they are fully committed and engaged in the *transfer of learning*, but upon further questioning, one finds that hope and reality are two very different things when it comes to the transfer of learning in the workplace.



SURVEY GOALS AND DESIGN

To address this ongoing challenge, ESI International issued a Transfer of Learning Survey in March 2011 designed to assess an organization's success or difficulty in fostering a learning transfer climate in the workplace. The goal was to determine if organizations had a system or set of processes that ensures trainees can apply learning on the job in an immediate way to improve actual employee performance and generate positive business impact.

The survey was sent to training-related managers and leaders at both government agencies and commercial institutions spanning multiple industries around the globe. With more than 3,200 responses, ESI's Transfer of Learning Study helps us form a picture of how and why organizations are succeeding, or falling short, in the application and transfer of learning, and to learn and share transfer of training best practices.

The survey was developed from ESI International's client experience and learning transfer expertise, along with a variety of existing research, including basic elements outlined in the Holton, Bates and Ruona Learning Transfer System model.

SURVEY FOCUS

The full report will review overall survey findings, but specifically focus in on three key phases in the application and transfer of learning that shed light on successful and not so successful strategies:

- **Pre-training.** This is a time when the organization should be designing a systematic process to structure learning in order to maximize its application. Trainees should be meeting with their manager, discussing the learning objectives, relevance to business needs, and how to maximize results through successful transfer of learning.
- **Motivation.** The level of learning applied on the job has a direct relationship to employee motivation. The study inquires as to the reward or incentive system in place to motivate employees in learning transfer.
- **Post-learning.** Once training is over, the hard work begins. In theory, organizations have designed a set of post-learning strategies and tactics to reinforce change and spark dedication to apply learning.

To fill out the learning transfer picture, this report integrates the most valuable written comments submitted by survey respondents, along with commentary and real-world insight developed through first-hand client experience.

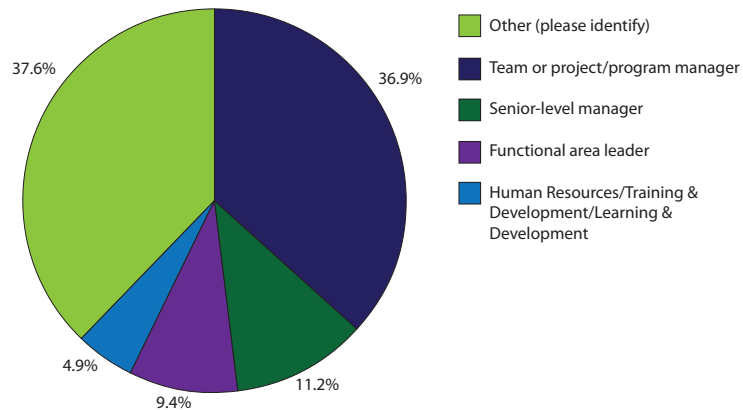


RESPONDENT PROFILE

More than 3,200 survey responses came in from government agencies and commercial institutions spanning multiple industries around the globe.

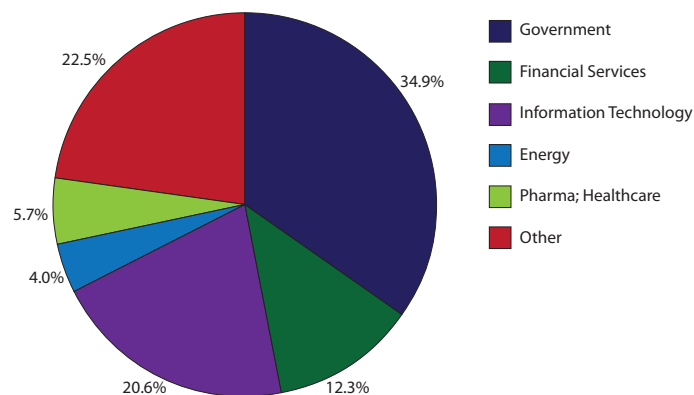
- **Title:** Almost 40 percent of survey respondents identified themselves as “team or project/program managers.” 37.6 percent described their job title as “other,” and this includes analysts, those in various contracting positions, IT, engineers and those in procurement.

What is your job title?



- **Industry:** A vast range of industries is represented by the survey, with the breakdown being about 50/50 between commercial institutions and government agencies. Industries noted under “other” include aerospace/defense, telecommunications, insurance and manufacturing.

What is your industry?



CONTRADICTIONS ABOUND

One is very hopeful at the beginning of the survey that concrete steps are being taken to methodize the application of learning.

The first hopeful sign: When asked if they have a formal process or system to ensure that training is applied successfully within their organization, one-third of respondents (32.8 percent) say they *do not* have a formal process or system. This means that 67.2 percent believe they *do* have a formal process.

Another hopeful sign: Two-thirds (67.6 percent) estimate that they apply more than 25 percent of training knowledge back on the job.

Yet when asked what they use to *prove* or *measure* their estimate of learning transfer, the two-thirds above who indicated that they *either* have a formal process for learning transfer or estimate that more than 25 percent of knowledge is applied back on the job can't justify their claim.

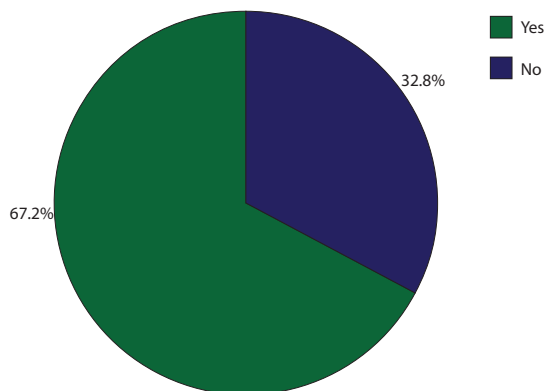
Case in point: Almost 60 percent of respondents say the primary method for proving or measuring this estimate of learning transfer is either informal/anecdotal feedback or 'simply a guess.'

These self-contradictory responses call into question their certitude about having a formal learning transfer system at all or their learning transfer success rate.

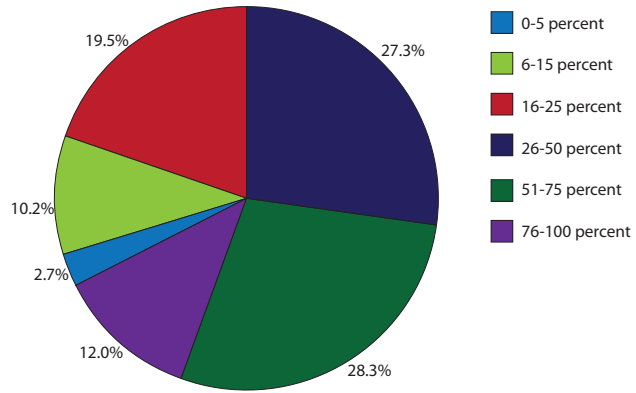


ESI Insight: Client experience shows us that organizations often fail to establish success criteria or identify expectations for learning engagements. This is a key pre-training strategy so that one can measure trainee performance against agreed-upon standards.

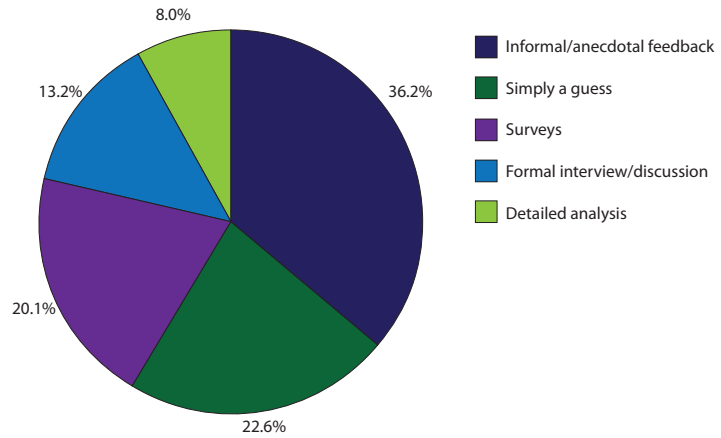
Do you have a formal process or system for ensuring that training is applied successfully at your organization?



At your organization, what percentage of training or learning do you think is applied back on the job, on average?



What is the primary method utilized to prove or measure this estimate of learning transfer?

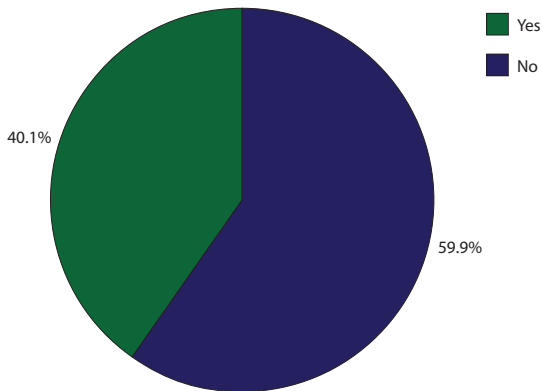


PREPARATION AND DESIGN (PRE-TRAINING)

Trainee Readiness

When we look directly at the trainee, 60 percent of those surveyed indicate that they *do not* have a systematic approach to preparing a trainee to transfer or apply learning on the job. This lack of pre-training planning casts further doubt on an application of learning methodology within organizations.

Is there a systematic approach at your organization that prepares a trainee to transfer or apply learning after training to their job and workplace environment?



Program Design

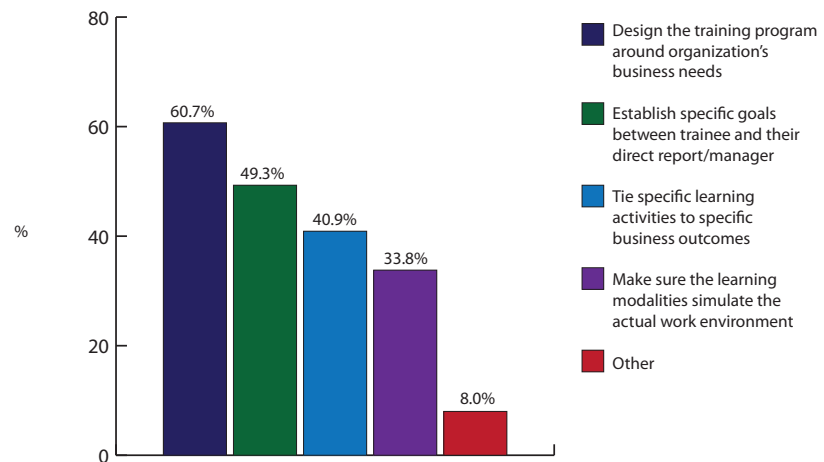
When asked if they employ at least one strategy in the design phase to ensure the transfer of learning, 60.7 percent of respondents say they design the training program around their organization's business needs, followed by almost half (49.3 percent) who say they establish specific goals between the trainee and their direct report/manager. Coming in a close third and fourth are tying specific learning activities to specific business outcomes and making sure the learning modalities simulate the actual work environment.

Written comments also show that respondents also place value on describing each competency; implementing a competency-based, annual learning process that is then tied to performance assessments, and simply describing what success would look like.



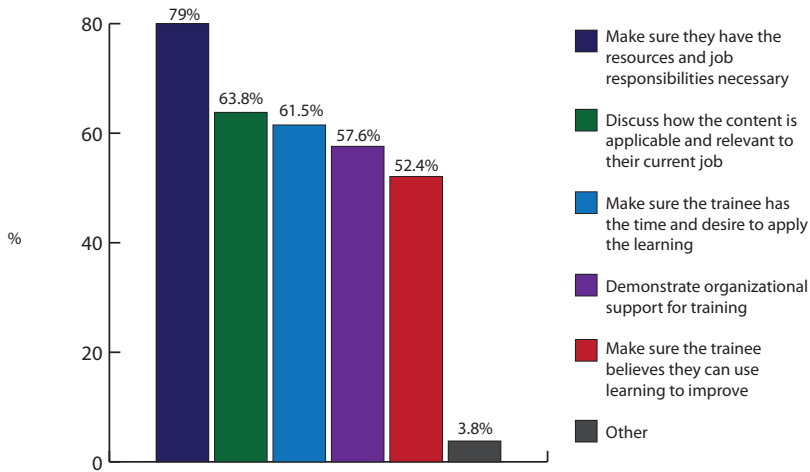
ESI Insight: Design a follow-up plan and set of post-training tools as part of the course design phase. Sounds like common sense, yet it is not common practice.

Do you employ any of the following program design strategies to ensure that the trainee is able to transfer the learning to the workplace?



For those who do have some level of formality in how they prepare the trainee, response count is equally weighted across all choices, with the number one answer being “make sure they have the resources and job responsibilities necessary” to apply the new skills in their current work situation.

If Yes, how do you prepare a trainee? Check all that apply.



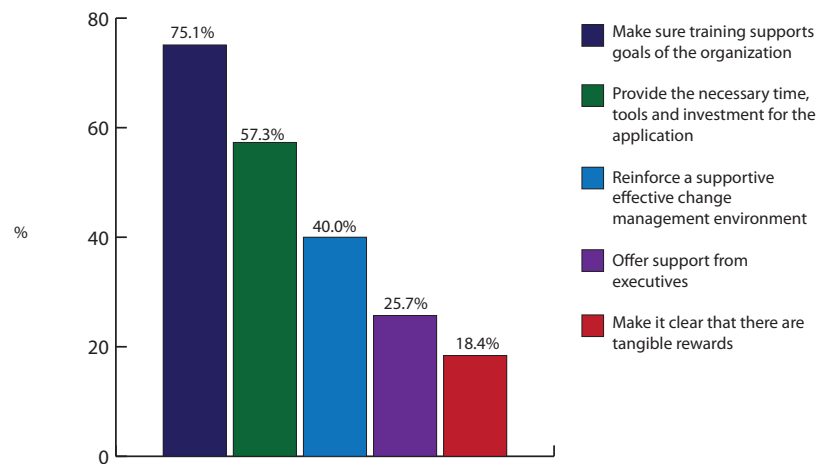
According to Olympian and former Congressman Jim Ryun, *“Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going.”*

MOTIVATION IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Motivating employees to prepare for, attend and then successfully apply learning is an inherent and critical part of the learning transfer process. Now, if only there was agreement on what ‘motivation’ means.

In order to motivate trainees to apply what they’ve learned, the majority of respondents (75.1 percent) say that they make sure training supports the goals of the organization, followed by 57.3 percent that make sure that the trainee has the necessary time, tools and investment for the application of learning. Only 20 percent indicate that there is any financial reward or incentive.

What strategies do you use to motivate trainees to apply what they’ve learned directly to the workplace? Check all that apply.



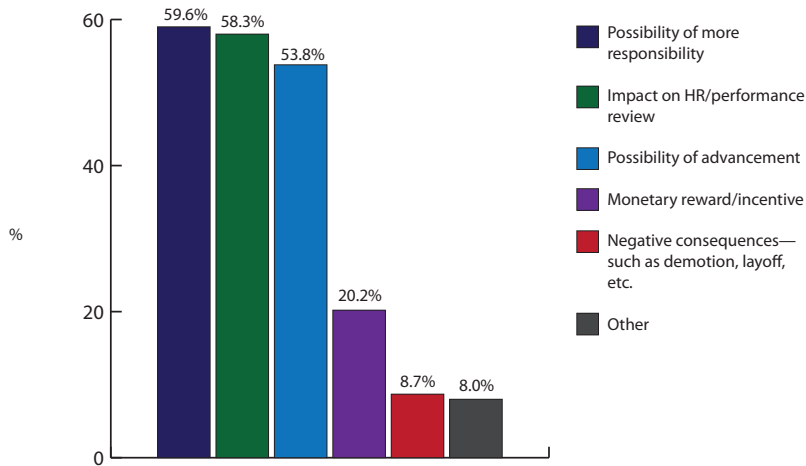
When asked what specific rewards are used to motivate trainees, almost 60 percent say the ‘possibility of more responsibility,’ followed closely by an impact on the HR/performance review. Some may question if these are bona fide motivational strategies.

Written comments show the following rewards are also seen as motivators: certification, career development, efficiency gains, overall organizational success and verbal recognition from executives. Many felt that their organizations don’t offer any reward at all, leaving them with nothing more tangible than ‘hope.’

Overall, survey responses downplay the role of financial rewards or incentives to motivate employees, noting that the greatest incentive is the ‘possibility of more responsibility.’ And, many indicate no rewards or negative consequences as the ‘motivation’ for the transfer of learning.

Might these incentives be out of line with today’s evolving workforce? Organizations may have to re-examine their strategies for motivating a new, changing workforce.

Which rewards are utilized to motivate trainees to apply what they’ve learned to the work environment? Check all that apply.



ESI Insight: If monetary rewards are out of the question for most organizations, then consider offering ‘moments’ that instill pride and serve as an incentive for an employee, like a lunch with the CEO. Also, the timing of recognition — perhaps during a company-wide meeting — is often more important than the “what” kind of recognition.



BACK ON THE JOB APPLICATION (POST-TRAINING)

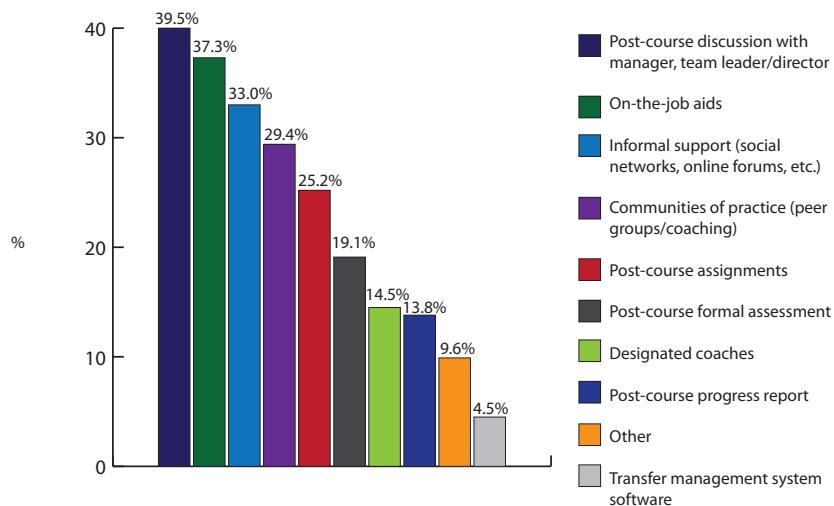
All the best preparation and training experience in the world can flounder if there is no follow-through at the workplace.

When asked about post-learning tools and programs to help trainees recall and apply what they've learned, survey responses indicate a solid, varied mixture of tactics being used including post-course discussions with the manager/team leader (39.5 percent), on-the-job aids (37.3 percent), informal support such as social networks or online forums (33 percent) and communities of practice such as peer groups/coaching (29.4 percent).

Additional written responses point out that organizations are using peer reviews and informal working teams, along with ensuring that there are concrete opportunities to apply what is learned.

Organizations and their employees are clearly leveraging an ever-expanding array of tactics to recall information learned during training and increasing their use of 'just-in-time' tools to apply knowledge and skills directly to the job. At the same time as one sees a steady, continued reliance on traditional post-course reports, assignments, discussions and on-the-job aids, there is more flexible, community-based support coming to the fore, such as communities of practice, peer coaching and social networks.

Which of the following post-training tactics are utilized to help trainees apply what they've learned or recall the learning? Check all that apply.



ESI Insight: Trainees should understand that the organization or sponsor expects them to apply what is learned and that there will be an assessment of training impact by collecting data from them and other stakeholders, such as clients.

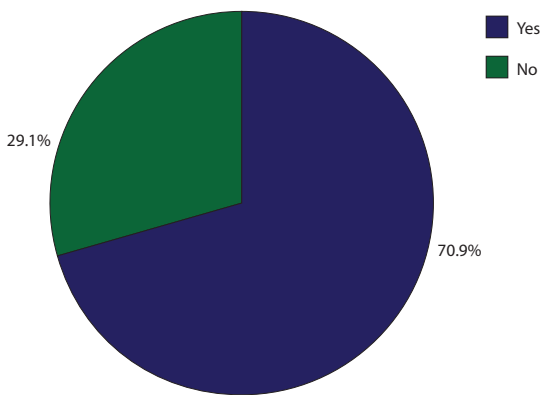
MANAGERS KEY TO TRANSFER PROCESS

The survey was also designed to gauge manager involvement and commitment post training.

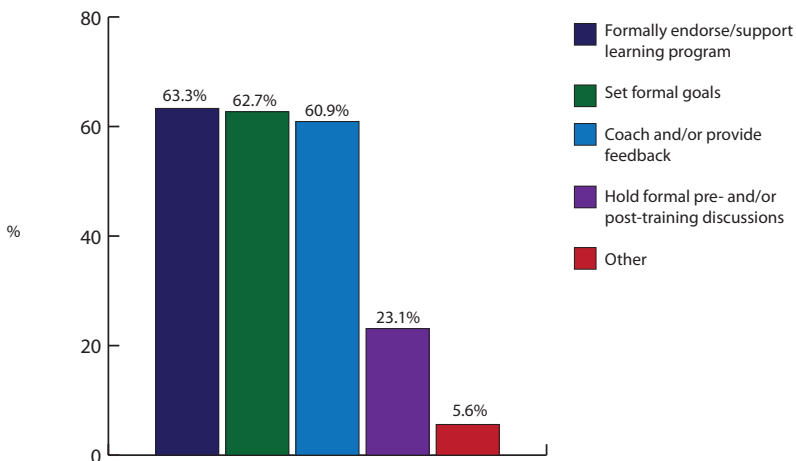
Of those surveyed, 70.9 percent say the organization *expects* managerial support as part of the learning process. Yet, when asked what managers are expected to do for the learning transfer, 63.3 percent say managers formally endorse the program, while only 23.1 percent hold more formal pre- and post-training discussions.

Written comments indicate that managers are also expected to identify training needs as part of the review process and formalize the learning transfer process.

Does your organization expect managerial support/involvement as part of the learning transfer process?



Are managers expected to do any of the following? Check all that apply.





ESI Insight: ESI's own post-learning surveys show that trainees give low marks when asked if they discussed with their manager how they will use what they learned on the job (on a scale from 1 to 7, with 7 being high, 65 percent indicated 4 and below).

Managers clearly play an important role. In fact, securing manager support is selected as the number two most important strategy for the transfer of learning (seen later in the report). However, for a successful learning transfer climate, managers must do more than simply endorse a training program. Managers must be expected to have clear responsibilities and provide tactical support every step of the way, including developing a plan for learning transfer, holding formal pre- and post-training discussions and ensuring post-instruction reinforcement.

PEER INFLUENCE

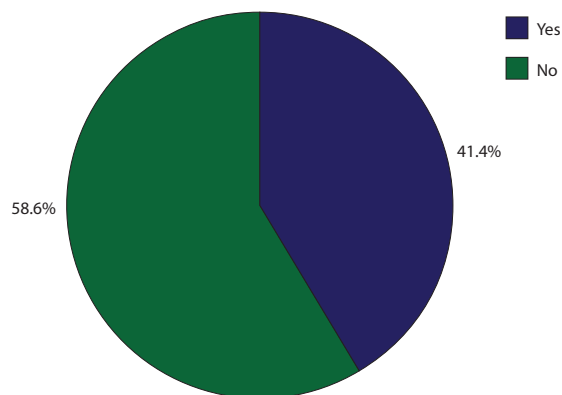
Clearly, managers have a great influence over how well trainees transfer learning to the workplace, but what about their peers?

When asked if their peer group positively or negatively influences their ability to apply what they've learned, 58.6 percent of respondents say 'No.' A lack of positive peer influence, or support, can play a major role in squelching the potential transfer of training for maximum business impact.



ESI Insight: Managers can play an important role in facilitating a positive, supportive peer work environment. By simply appointing a group leader who can organize post-training discussions or informal sessions, managers can foster a healthy climate for learning transfer.

Does a trainee's peer group, or co-workers, positively or negatively influence the ability to apply what they've learned at your organization?



LEARNING TRANSFER BEST PRACTICES

Strategies and Bright Ideas

In addition to specific yes/no and multiple choice questions, the survey is meant to provide a forum for sharing specific learning transfer tactics and identifying some best practices.

Survey respondents were asked to identify the main strategies for the transfer of learning from a given list and then encouraged to identify their own, unique strategies via written comments.

The top three strategies indicated as the most important for the transfer of learning are:

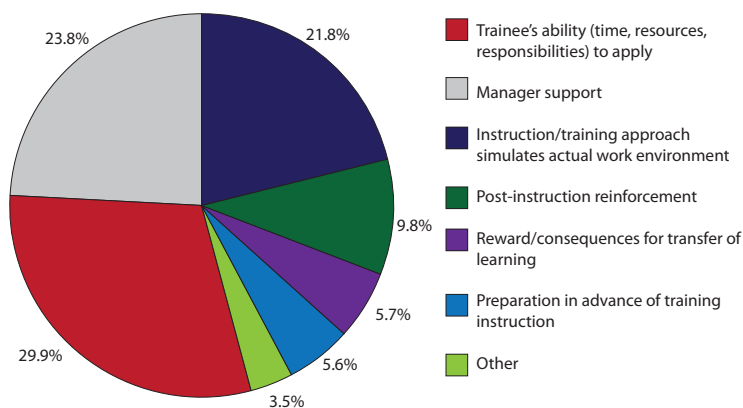
- Trainees have the time, resources and responsibility to apply learning (30 percent),
- Manager support (23.8 percent) and
- The instruction approach simulates the actual work environment (21.8 percent).

It is interesting to note that pre-training preparation and post-instruction reinforcement receive much lower marks.

When reviewing the written comments, ways are found in which organizations are trying to increase the application of learning:

- Assess current state of knowledge, skills and competencies of the target job role
- Conduct practice sessions led by manager or senior project manager
- Secure more manager involvement and hold middle management accountable to change how things are done and how to apply learning
- Invest in knowledge-sharing solutions
- Communicate a strategy on how to accomplish the transfer of learning
- Consider both internal and external certification

Of all the main strategies, which do you feel is the MOST important for the transfer of learning at your organization?
Please explain how your organization supports this strategy.



Examining Gaps

More than 2,600 respondents wrote specific ideas for ways their organizations can improve the application of learning. The following is a compilation of those written comments, organized into seven main ideas or suggestions for an improved learning transfer climate.

- **Training should incorporate real projects and practice that applies to actual, on-the-job work**

Ideas:

- Involve employees and trainees in the design and follow on application
- Provide refresher courses, just-in-time follow ups and go-to mentors
- Align training with solving failure points or current state challenges

- **Need more overall training and development**

Ideas:

- Execute better marketing and communication about training availability
- Make training mandatory and tie it to certification
- Give employees the proper time to take training

- **Need a way to measure learning transfer**

Ideas:

- Share with the rest of the organization how training was applied
- Implement feedback mechanisms to measure impact, e.g., quarterly reviews
- Formalize and communicate the measurement approach



ESI Insight: It's important to set expectations up front on how to measure. Then, organizations should implement a scalable, repeatable and non-intrusive way to collect predicted outcomes and then validate the impact.

- **Make training more relevant**

Ideas:

- Provide better context by customizing training to the organization
- Get sign-off from the business on the relevancy before training
- Align training objectives, mission objectives and actual job responsibilities
- Tie training to career path
- Better define individuals' annual training plans



ESI Insight: Identify support and job aids before rolling out training. Make sure to align training with company strategy and overall company core competencies.

- **Create a change within the organizational structure**

Ideas:

- Invest in someone to track application in the organization. Consider onboarding a "Chief Application Officer"
- Allow time for training
- Give mentors the time to mentor
- Put the right person in the right course
- Increase positive reinforcement through monetary and non-monetary means



ESI Insight: Post-training reports and performance data should be transparent and shared within the organization. Metrics can be broken down by geography or division, as long as employees see that their application of learning and progress is being tracked and valued.

- **Need more manager support and involvement**

Ideas:

- Formalize and track the manager involvement in assessing impact, challenges and catalysts for implementing what was learned
- Make it a priority for management
- Train the managers
- Follow up with consequences
- Set realistic expectations



- **Implement change management**

Ideas:

- Put strategic focus on employee development
- Identify what it means to become a learning organization
- Add change management processes and associated culture change phases
- Add more communication and updates in order to motivate



ESI Insight: Communicate the vision and reasons why a change in knowledge/skills/competencies is needed to support the company's growth/future strategy.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

ESI International conducted an email survey consisting of 16 open- and close-ended questions to decision makers and influencers of learning engagements for government and commercial organizations. The survey was distributed across five continents (North America, South America, Asia, Africa, Europe) in March 2011. A total of 3,209 people replied to the survey; however, not all respondents answered every question. The survey was anonymous unless respondents elected to receive results, in which case specific contact information was required.



THE ESI SOLUTION

ESI International, the leading provider of project management, program management, business analysis, business skills and contract learning programs, has helped some of the world's most successful organizations turn learning into business results. ESI can help identify pre- and post-program design strategies and processes that can drive successful learning transfer and identify training techniques to support on-the-job application of learning. These insights can help domestic and international corporations and public agencies actively manage and refine their learning programs so that learning objectives become concrete business objectives. With the support of our educational partner, The George Washington University in Washington, DC, ESI has helped more than one million professionals and 1,000 clients worldwide achieve individual and organizational objectives.



For more information about how ESI can help your organization, call us at +1 (877) 766-3337 or visit www.esi-intl.com.