

## Professional Training Programs as Tools for Effective Staff Development: A Case Study

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*This study focuses on the influence of professional training programs on trainees' development. A training program was evaluated through exploring trainees' perceptions of its influence on their skill development. The findings suggest that while professional training programs may be relevant to trainees' needs for career development and life-long learning, such programs fail to tackle problems specific to a trainee's organization. In particular, it is often hard to integrate generic training ideas into specific workplace settings.*

Keywords: Professional Training Programs, Trainees, Training Environment.

There is general recognition among human resource scholars that investments in training and development are associated with a range of individual and organizational benefits. The literature shows that this interest has been well documented. A substantial body of Human Resource Development (HRD) literature posits training as a vital and comprehensive component in individual and organizational development (Keep, 1989; Prais, 1995; Swanson, 1995). The goal usually is set by the organization to enhance the individual productivity and competitiveness (Swanson, 1995; Lang & Wittig-Berman, 2000). The literature also indicates that many factors were identified to have influence on training and training transfer (Holton & Baldwin, 2000). In contrast to the normative HRD training interventions, Prais (1995) suggests that work environment affects employees' decisions to apply what they learned at training interventions. Measuring the effectiveness of training is very complex. HRD literature had devoted little empirical attention to the effect of on-the-job training on employees' performance and development. In particular, there is a gap in the literature on studying the employees' perceptions of the impact of generic, formal training on individuals' skills and performance in their workplace. Such is the focus of the present study. This study is one component of an evaluation of a professional training program aimed at staff development and professional improvement.

### Research Questions

This study explores three issues:

- (a) Trainees' attitudes toward the training activities they were involved in
- (b) Trainees' perceptions of the impact of the training activities on their career development.
- (c) Challenges related to the training program environment brought about by trainees' goals, interests, and learning styles.

### Literature Review

The ability to learn and to convert learning into practice creates extraordinary value for individuals, teams and organizations (Ashton & Green, 1996). This interest in training and learning is associated with two different purposes. The first is the organizational development and growth through contribution to production, effectiveness, and innovation (Swanson & Arnold, 1996; Lang & Wittig-Berman, 2000); the second is the development of individuals through contribution to their knowledge, skills, and capacity to further their own learning both as employees and citizens (Barrie & Pace, 1998; Dirx, 1997). The scope of this paper is more directed towards individual learning and development. Kolb (1984) defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience" (p.38). Argyris and Schon (1978) explain that learning embraces cognition; thought, insight or detection, and action behavior or correction. Dirx (1997) argued that learning occurs when the learner creates or re-organizes concepts, frameworks, and capabilities as a result of linking new and existing knowledge. Knowles' andragogy (Knowles, 1970) suggests that adult learners are concerned with the learning process within the context of the learning purpose and situation (see also Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Learning, thus involves the acquisition of skills, knowledge, habits and attitudes in such a way that behavior is modified (Kolb, 1984).

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### *Training Systems*

In wanting workers to perform new tasks and become more effective and replace outdated work habits (Cogner, 1992; Ricks, 1997), organizational leaders often require their employees to participate in training. Professional training programs are primary training tools for achieving organizational goals. Following the principles systems theory (Rummler & Brache, 1995), a professional training program would act as independent system, with a primary role of supporting its own existence. However, the same program would be considered a subsystem with regard to the different organizations it is serving. This subsystem has a role of supporting the goals of the overall system (Kuchinke, 1998).

### *Simple Exposure versus Deliberate Practice*

While workplace activities may form part of the context within which individual learning takes place, the process of learning never formally starts or stops (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Some learning may make very little difference to the perspective of the individual whereas more significant learning may lead to a re-conceptualization of the individual's assumptions and values. These kinds of learning could be categorized as single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990). This sense-making process is strongly influenced by practice (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). What is more, the HRD literature makes an important distinction between exposure and deliberate practice (Ericsson & Smith, 1991). VanLehn (1989) argues that individuals need exposure to a large enough set of case experiences to begin developing a reliable repertoire of principles and a valid conceptual understanding of what they are experiencing. Similarly, some scholars advocate the notion that simple exposure to an area does not suffice. Rather individuals need to undergo extended periods of active learning to reach exceptional levels of performance (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). On the other hand, Pratt (1988) suggests that education in the form of training workshops can heighten individuals' appreciation for guidance, strengthen motivation to develop different capabilities and facilitate the development of skills needed to build these capabilities.

### *Trainees Background*

Work settings nowadays demand flexibility, communication skills, and teamwork. However, helping trainees to achieve these goals is complicated by the fact that trainees come from many different background environments, and bring their individual experiences to bear, share, reflect and learn while simultaneously working together on a challenging yet unfamiliar task (Cogner, 1992). This suggests that the emphasis in knowledge-creating organizations should be on finding new ways to encourage people to think creatively and feed their thoughts back into the organization (Cohen, 1990; Montesino, 2002).

### *Learning Styles*

Adult learning theory suggests that individuals differ in their learning styles. There are numerous ways by which we learn (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Multiple instructional techniques increase the likelihood that at least one, if not several, methods will be compatible with an individual's style (Bryson, 1936; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Multiple learning methods are essential to a well-designed program (Cogner, 1992) because they can contribute to helping learners seek out developmental experiences after the workshop has ended (Holton, 1996; Russ-Eft, 2002). Nowadays, being able to benefit from formal training experiences is essential for the success of the professional development of employees more than ever. An ability to maximize learning in such contexts is not limited to accruing benefits for the development of short-term individual competencies but for the growth of such competencies over the long haul as well (Holton, 1996).

### *Effective Workshops*

Contrary to the practitioners myth of engaging learners with interesting activities, research shows that participants most satisfied with a program are not necessarily those who learned the most (Alliger & Janak, 1989; Dixon, 1999). Training outcomes are more likely to have a positive effect on employee attitudes where employers develop formal, structured approaches to training (Heyes & Stuart, 1996). In addition, because participants gain knowledge and expertise at training workshops does not mean that they will use it in the workplace (Gielen, 1995). Heyes (1998) suggests that the impact of training provision on performance outcomes is dependent on how and in whose interest skills are deployed at the workplace.

### *Transfer of learning*

Keep (1989) argues that training investment constitutes a powerful signaling device to reassure employees that they are valued by their employers, which in turn enhances employee motivation and commitment to the organization. In addition, Keep suggests that social and political processes at the level of the workplace shape the distinction between skill acquisition and skill development, a distinction conventionally referred to as the problem of transfer of training (see also Russ-Eft, 2002). A wide variety of trainee characteristics are likely to impact the effectiveness of training. Noe (1986) identifies personality and motivational factors and develops an expectancy model that hypothesizes the process by which trainees' attitudes concerning their jobs and careers and their perception of the work environment influence training outcomes. The effectiveness of a training program can also be

influenced by events prior to training (Baldwin & Magjuka, 1991), post-training activities (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Orpen, 1999), and transfer motivation (Holton, 1996). This latter transfer motivation could be explained on the basis of theories of human behavior including expectancy theory, equity theory, and goal-setting theory (Yamhill & McClean, 2001).

## **Methodology**

This research adopted a single case study design. It was conducted between September and December 2002 in the context of a training services program offered by an HRD department in a large Midwestern state university. The training is referred to as Foundations program. The foundations program provides a training and development opportunity for professionals aimed at improving productivity, increasing effectiveness, polishing performance and fulfilling personal goals. Some of the workshops offered in the program contribute toward the completion of a non-degree certificate in professional development. A key component of this program is its emphasis on training and development activities in the form of one-day off-the job workshops that aim to impact on-the-job performance. Thus, the program provides an ideal case for examining the issue of training effectiveness and transfer.

The research utilized a multi-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative procedures included attending and observing four different workshops. Observations were focused by the use of a set of guidelines to maintain focus on the issues at hand. To avoid imposing the researcher's interpretations of these observations on what participants could have attributed to their experiences, there was a need to validate the researcher's interpretations. Such validation was ensured by conducting five interviews with a randomly selected group of participants. Five lengthy semi structured interviews were conducted with the program director, one trainer, and three participants. The first interview was with the program director to investigate the formal structures, processes and general background of the program in general, and the Foundations training workshops in particular. The second interview was with a trainer and aimed to investigate the background, preparation and perception of the program, and attitudes towards the trainees and opinion about some factors that affect the training process. Finally, three participants, one male and two females, were interviewed to get their perceptions of the Foundations training workshops in terms of helping them develop new skills.

Quantitative procedures were used to assess the immediate training outcomes in terms of the adoption of new and different attitudes and practices (i.e., transfer). To this end, a questionnaire was designed to gather data on three broad issues: Trainees' experiences of training and training instructors at the workshops, and trainees' perceptions regarding training outcomes and work environment factors that trainees think they affect training transfer. To get a better understanding of the participants' responses, the questionnaire included some background and contact information, a number of Likert type items and some free response items. The questionnaire was administered to all 120 participants attending workshops in the Foundations program. The questionnaire was distributed directly to all participants at the end of each workshop and it was made clear that participation was voluntarily and confidentiality guaranteed. A total number of 101 questionnaires were completed (82.5% response rate). Analysis of the quantitative questionnaire was through descriptive statistics.

Two major limitations should be noticed in this study. First, the findings of this study could be subject to other interpretations due to the environment surrounding the research as well as the observer's subjectivity. We cannot rid ourselves of this subjectivity, nor should we wish to; but we ought, perhaps, to pay it more attention (Cheater, 1987). Most significantly, though, analysis of the perceptions and experiences of employees towards training activities will help develop our understanding of the range of factors that mediate and impact on the effectiveness of training. Further research is clearly needed on the complex question of training transfer and effectiveness, particularly in terms of the influence of the wider HRD environment and the dynamics by which training programs help translate training into positive outcomes for productivity in the workplace. Such research would need to examine the financial and productivity benefits (Green, 1997), as well as the long-term benefits for the company and the workforce in terms of cultural and behavioral change. In terms of the second limitation, while the depth of investigation gives a thorough understanding of one single study, it is likely that it is only specific to the case at hand and thus limited to generalization.

## **Results**

This study yielded a broad perspective on issues related to training programs. The issues explored related to trainees' experiences with, and attitudes towards, the training activities they were exposed to and how such training interventions affected trainees' career development. The findings showed that the training workshops were well structured, convenient for the trainees and consistent with their needs for career development and life-long learning.

### *Background and Experience of Participants*

To have a better understanding of the trainees' purposes for attending the workshops, we asked them in the survey to provide information regarding their background and their experiences with the Foundations training program. The trainees reported a median of 10 years of work experience. To our question about "the number of workshops already completed," 101 respondents reported a median of four workshops. When asked whether they were seeking a certificate through attending the workshops, 78% of respondents answered in the positive and 23% in the negative.

### *Trainees' Attitudes toward the Training Program*

Qualitative data collected aimed at understanding trainees' purposes from training, effectiveness of the Foundations program, and applicability of information back at work. In-depth investigations showed that the premise and main motive of a trainee to getting a certificate was to get promoted. The majority of the trainees belonged to this category according to the program administrator: "Supervisors encourage employees to take certain classes because they think these classes would help the employees when they have their employee annual review and are also critical to get the employees promoted." In addition, the following comments from different trainees eloquently represented this category: "I am here because my boss wanted me to take these workshops, these [workshops] are critical for my promotion. I will be reporting on this when I go back" (W3, C3), and "Going to training is associated with both my (work) performance review and salary increase" (W2, P15).

The Training and Development component of HRD has had a long tradition of utilizing instructional and information technology in doing its work. The Foundations program was no exception. Foundations workshops made greater use of a wide array of media, and utilized new tailored, experience-based learning methods. Many media were used, including audiotapes, filmstrips, slides, opaque and transparency projections, and videotapes. Still some trainees had difficulty with taking notes while engaged with one of the media used: "I want a printout of the chalkboard in the video."

### *Trainees' Perceptions of the Impact of the Program*

Questions #3 through #6 of the survey were Likert scale questions. Respondents were asked to rate the degree of their satisfaction with regard to four topics. On a continuum from "Highly Dissatisfied" to "Highly Satisfied," we asked respondents to rate their degree of satisfaction with regard to the relevance of the workshops to their personal development and with regard to the applicability of these workshops back at the job. We also asked trainees to rate their degree of satisfaction with regard to the topics' appropriateness and with regard to quality of information provided by trainers. Table 1 presents trainees' responses to these questions. The table gives a basic picture of the trainees' satisfaction regarding information offered and regarding interaction with trainers.

Table 1. Responses to Items #3 Through #6

Item	Omit	HU <sup>1</sup>	U	N	S	HS
3. Importance of this workshop for you personally	0%	0%	6%	19%	28%	47%
4. Importance of this workshop for you professionally	0%	0%	3%	6%	28%	64%
5. Quality of information provided by the instructor	0%	0%	3%	8%	18%	72%
6. Understanding content and applying it to your own work	3%	2%	1%	7%	37%	51%

<sup>1</sup>HU = Highly Unsatisfied; U = Unsatisfied; N = Neutral; S = Satisfied; HS = High Satisfied

The trainees surveyed in all four workshops reported high satisfaction with the relationship of the training workshops and their personal learning experience. In response to question #3 "degree of personal satisfaction (relevance or applicability) of the workshop to the trainee," 75% of respondents indicated that they were "highly satisfied" or "satisfied" with the content and relevance of the workshops to their personal development. Twenty percent of the respondents were "Neutral" and only six percent were not satisfied with such relevance. With regard to professional development, the literature suggested that the contents of generic workshops would not count towards the professional development of the trainees. The data collected in this research showed something different. The trainees indicated high satisfaction with respect to the applicability of the subjects discussed (such as flexibility, communication skills, and teamwork) professionally.

In response to question #4 “degree of relevance or applicability of the workshop to the trainee’s professions,” 85% of the respondents indicated they were “highly satisfied” or “satisfied” with the relevance of the workshops to their professional development. Ten percent of the respondents were “Neutral” and only five percent were not satisfied with the content of the workshops as being relevant to their personal development. These views are evident in quotes, such as “It was very informative and I now see things in a different perspective” (W4, C17) and “Very nice and thorough, pleasant and effective. Content was excellent, I would not drop anything” (W3, V12).

Question #5 asked about the “quality of the information provided by the instructor.” While the majority of respondents showed satisfaction or high satisfaction with the quality of information provided by the trainers (92%), some respondents were neutral (8%). Only three respondents demonstrated dissatisfaction with quality of information and problems addressed by instructors. Respondents included such comments as, “We were applying diversity while learning about it. The instructor was able to make us think creatively and helped us to relate the activities we did to our work” (W1, D2), and “This was an excellent workshop. The trainer really knows his stuff” (W2, P5).

Question #6 inquired about “The extent you attempted to involve yourself in seeking in-depth understanding of this material and to consider its application to your own needs and objectives.” Again participants responded positively to this subject. We noticed that the main marked answers were “Satisfaction” or “High Satisfaction” (88%). Few trainees marked “Neutral” (7%) and not many (6%) were dissatisfied.

#### *Challenges in Addressing Participants’ Needs in Professional Training Environment*

The study also tried to understand how the different environments surrounding the learning experience of the trainees shaped the effectiveness of the Foundations program by analyzing data from interviews, surveys, and observations of workshops. Results from the interviews showed that the more a learning environment is responsive to the needs of trainees, the higher is the probability of the trainees’ success in implementing their new acquired knowledge. The following quotes from different workshops provide good evidence in this regard: “It would be great for all departments and businesses to present and share this (knowledge) with their employees” (W4, C13) and “I learned a lot; Management in all departments should be required to attend this workshop” (W3, V3).

Some trainees went on to link what they learned, not only to their organization, but also to society in general. The following comments illustrate this category: The information shared in this workshop can be used outside the workplace as well” (W4, C2) and “Very good information, very good presenter, among the top presenters so far. I think the topic is important to our society.” (W3, V11).

The results also revealed two meandering conclusions. First, and in accordance with Keep (1989) investments in Foundations training workshops constituted a powerful signaling device to reassure employees that they were valued by their employers. This in turn enhanced employee motivation and commitment to the organization. Second, it was understandable that the Foundations program was recognized as a system by itself. At the same time the program served as a training division or subsystem for diverse organizations. Different organizations made use of the Foundations program resources to develop their employees, personally and professionally. There are numerous reasons in any system why things happen and do not happen. Figuring these out requires more than superficial analysis or metaphoric analogy (Swanson & Holton, 1998)

Not all trainees had a positive experience with the training workshops. First, some trainees were not satisfied with the topics discussed, “I felt the information only scratched the surface of the topic. Course should have been designed to force more participation” (W2, V2). Second, contrary to the established view that training interventions should begin with a pre-training assessment; only one of four trainers observed administered a pre-training informal assessment. She e-mailed the trainees attending her workshop one week prior to the scheduled training intervention and asked them to give her some feedback regarding their expectations about the workshop. She added, “Think about what you want to learn from this workshop. What is most important to you In general”? In general, trainers were more interested in delivering their workshops more than in assessing the specific needs of the participants and their organizations. This might be due to the fact that trainees come from different organizations and had different backgrounds.

A third challenge common to the training workshops was the fact that they were nonspecific in nature. When asked about this “one-size-fits-all” issue, the program administrator commented: “We do not target our content to a certain area but to a broad base. Anyone could get a lot from what we give” (I1, Oct. 03). Thus, these workshops were tailored to the needs of the individual, and not to specific management needs, and most notably, not to the specific demands of the different organizations. The Foundations training program failed to tackle specific problems that concern individuals back at their office and the activities discussed in these workshops did not lend themselves to be easily integrated to the workplace setting. This idea was illustrated in the following comment: “I needed more time to digest/practice applying these concepts. Much of the information was geared to workplaces that can more easily measure productivity (products produced, no. of contacts made, etc.). I guess the service that my unit provides

can best be measured in terms of customer satisfaction (survey results) or errors made. I do not feel that I have the time to collect this information and still do my job though” (W2, P15).

A fourth challenge that emerged was the different learning styles of the trainees. Conventional wisdom says that you can keep some trainees satisfied all the time but you can't keep all trainees satisfied all the time. The following comments illustrate this category: More strategies and conversation about actually solving some problems” (W4, C10), “Instructor needed to keep the workshop interesting; it became very boring in the afternoon” (W4, C21), and “Part of material presented was repetitive” (W4, C25).

Finally, the trainees learning experiences in this program were based on a one-time experience, a single workshop. To truly develop a skill or behavior, learners require repeated or multiple exposures. The Foundations program workshops attempted to cover a range of skills within just a few days. In the course of four workshops, as many as six to eight categories, such as empowerment, diversity and communication skills were covered. As a result, participants received only a single opportunity to practice a particular skill and receive feedback. With so little exposure, the different experiences simply build awareness rather than true understanding and skill development.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The research evidence discussed in this study suggested that determining training purposes and training effectiveness on performance outcomes are complex processes. This raises questions about what factors are likely to influence the effectiveness of training. Finding answers to such questions will be important if we are to understand how, and whether, performance improvements will result from training interventions.

Results also showed that trainees' satisfaction at a training workshop did not mean that the workshops were necessarily perceived to be effective. Nor this meant that participants perceived that they had learned and would change when they go back to their jobs. Moreover, managers might have different opinions than employees regarding training workshops. For example, managers might want training workshops to be more strategic in focus and better integrated with the ongoing objectives of the firm, and not focus on the personal and career development of the employees. For that reason, investigating the interests of employees and managers regarding the purpose of training is further needed. Researchers as well need to investigate work environment factors influencing the transfer and effectiveness of training, such as management and peer support (Russ-Eft, 2002).

### **Implications for HRD**

HRD professionals need the expertise and credibility to play the leading role in building and sustaining knowledge producing environments where the creation, sharing and application of knowledge are a dominant concern throughout the organization. To arrive at such objectives, HRD professionals should find ways to improve employee expertise based upon a continual search for better insights, strategies and procedures related to the mission of the organization. They should be more involved in guiding and directing the trainees towards the workshops that best serve their needs. Thus, short-term training interventions would gain a part to play in building future organizational capacity, but only a part. The greater need is for HRD strategies that are well integrated with current business and HR strategies and are focused on developing and embedding a fast responsive culture. These strategies should include pre-training discussions with the trainees and proper feedback and follow-up after training.

Additionally, comments from the trainees emphasized the importance of management support for the professional training interventions. Without visible involvement by managers, learners do not perceive the behavioral change as strategically important to their organization. In that HRD professionals should act as constructive and positive agents (Cohen, 1990). They must be prepared to work with both the supervisors and trainees to transfer the new acquired experiences at training into shared knowledge and performance at work. They should no longer operate in a silo (Sloman, 2002).

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