

Relationship Between Training Components, Work Environment and Participants' Characteristics on Transfer of Training Skills and Organizational Commitment

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Abstract: Over the years, organizations have been investing precious resources on training and development programmes. However, such investment does not being followed suit with examining how training interventions could effectively contribute in the achievement of organizational objectives. In order to yield desired level of performance and commitment from the employees, it is imperative for the organization to effectively plan, implement and evaluate their training activities. This study attempts to investigate the relationships between training components, research environment and participants' characteristics on transfer of training skills and organizational commitment. The results from this study suggested that there is a positive relationship between organizational commitment and training components, research environment and participants' characteristics. The findings of this study are significant as it elevates our understanding of Human Resource Development (HRD) theory and practice on transfer of training skills and organizational commitment.

Key words: Components, environment, transfer, skills, commitment

INTRODUCTION

Training is imperative in any organization as it helps in terms of career and knowledge enhancement among the employees. The impact of training on employees' skills and attitudes towards organizational commitment is significant in order for them to use their potential to the maximum. This study investigated on the probability whether training components, work environment characteristics and participants' characteristics play a role in transfer of training skills and building organizational commitment. The objectives of this study are:

- To examine whether training components (comprehensiveness), work environment and participants' characteristics play a role in influencing the transfer of training skills and organizational commitment
- To examine whether transfer of training skills is able to increase or influence employees' commitment (organizational commitment)

Training components and transfer of training skills: According to the literature of training, there are several training components features that influence the transfer of training skills. Some of the relevant factors as highlighted are instructional techniques and learning

principles (Alvarez *et al.*, 2004); self-management and relapse prevention strategies (Tziner *et al.*, 1991) and goal setting (Gist *et al.*, 1990). Therefore, it is essential for organizations to design their training programmes by incorporating such features that increase the probability of transfer of training skills. According to Holton *et al.* (2000), training components are basically referring to which training has been designed and delivered in such a way that provides trainees the ability to transfer learning back to the job. They further argued that a portion of training components is the degree to which training instructions match job requirements.

Trainees are more likely to transfer the training skills when they perceive that the training components were designed and delivered in such a way that maximizes their ability to transfer the training skills to their daily job (Holton, 1996; Holton *et al.*, 2000). In an experimental study conducted by Gist *et al.* (1991), they found MBA students taking negotiation skills development training with a post training maintenance component had a greater degree of transfer 2 weeks after the programme than students exposed to training only. Here, it can be concluded that training components do have positive impact on transfer of training skills. Over the years, according to Ahmad and Bakar (2003), greater emphasis of study was made on training needs identification, facilities for training and training activities.

Here, it can be deduced that both outlines of the programmes and quality of trainer created impact on transfer of training skills. Activities that attend to transfer such as action plans, coaching, a variety of instructional approaches and trainee participation with the planning, seem to make a difference in ensuring the transfer of training skills. Thus, from the various reviews stated above, the researcher proposed the following hypothesis:

- H_{1a}: the components of training are highly related to transfer of training skills

Work environment characteristics and transfer of training skills: Research has revealed that training efforts are unlikely to result in positive change in job performance unless the newly trained competencies are transferred to the work environment. This view was shared equally by Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Montesino (2002). As a consequence of this scenario, increased effort was mooted by interested parties in order to understand the credentials and after-effects of the transfer of training process.

According to Alvarez *et al.* (2004), Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Holton (1996), little attention was focused or less investigation was done on work environment variables as compared to training components and participants' characteristics. Nevertheless, such situation has prompted several researchers to evaluate the significant impact work environment characteristics has on the transfer of training skills. In relation to this, a number of studies have concluded that environmental factors are imperative in understanding the transfer of training skills (Lance *et al.*, 2002; Tracey *et al.*, 1995). They further stressed on the implication of both transfer of training atmosphere and continuous learning culture as work environment variables that have a major influence on the post training behaviors.

Research has suggested that when employees notice that the organizational climate is supportive, thus they are more likely to put into practice their new knowledge at the workplace (Baldwin and Ford, 1988; Tracey *et al.*, 1995). Holton *et al.* (2000) recommended that performance feedback comprises of an indication from management about how well one is carrying out his or her job is one of the contributing factors in relation to impact of work environment characteristics on transfer of training skills. According to Holton *et al.* (2000), supervisor encouragement is best described as the extent to which supervisors support and strengthen the use of newly learned knowledge and skills on the job. The dominant literature suggests that when workers see or perceive that their supervisors are supporting the application of newly

acquired knowledge and skills, these group of trainees are more likely to transfer these competencies back to the job (Tracey and Tews, 2005; Colquitt *et al.*, 2000; Brinkerhoff and Montesino, 1995; Noe, 1986).

Thus, based on the argument stated in the above literature reviews, the researcher hypothesized the following:

- H_{2a}: work environment characteristics are positively related to transfer of training skills

Participants' characteristics and transfer of training skills: Apart from the training components and work environment characteristics, there are some individual attributes that affect the transfer of training skills. Based on studies conducted by few reputable researchers (Colquitt *et al.*, 2000; Mathieu *et al.*, 1992; Noe, 1986), they discovered that some of these traits are cognitive ability, motivation to learn and transfer, anxiety and self-efficacy. On the other hand, in addition to these qualities, they also include job involvement, organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Interestingly, of all the listed characteristics, self-efficacy has been found to be dominant in terms of influencing the transfer of training skills (Mathieu *et al.*, 1992; Gist *et al.*, 1991). In other words, trainees with high expectations of their ability to perform, focus on learning as an outcome and are motivated to use their skills on the job are the one responsible to increase the transfer of training skills in the organization.

It is undoubtedly true that trainee motivation and attitudes play an imperative role in determining training effectiveness within their organization. It was found that trainees with high level of job involvement are more likely to be motivated to learn new skills. Noe (1986) described that such situation is due to trainee's perception that by being involved in training activities, it would increase the level of their skills, improve job performance and subsequently, uplift feelings of self-worth. Cheng and Ho (2001) further discovered that commitment is positively related to learning motivation and learning transfer. In other words, we cannot deny the fact that participants' characteristics in a way did influence the transfer of training skills and indirectly, these are the elements that make training programmes to be effective. Research suggests that motivation to transfer which is part of participants' characteristics is another critical factor in influencing the transfer of training skills. Noe (1986) prompted that motivation to transfer is the learners' anticipated efforts to apply skills and knowledge acquired in training setting to a real world work situation.

Thus, based on the argument stated in the literature review, the researcher hypothesized the following:

- H_{3a}; participants' characteristics are positively related to transfer of training skills

Training components and organizational commitment:

Cohen (2003) proposed that "commitment is a force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets". This general depiction of commitment communicates the definition of organizational commitment by Arnold *et al.* (1998) namely that, it is "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in an organization". Miller (2003) also suggested that organizational commitment is "a state in which an employee identifies with a particular organization and its goals and wishes to maintain membership in the organization". Organizational commitment is hence, the degree in which an employee is keen to preserve attachment due to interest and association with the organization's goals and values.

Of specific importance for this study, the correlation between the comprehensiveness of training offered by a firm and employees' organizational commitment has received inadequate attention in earlier research. According to Paul and Anantharaman (2004), there is a positive relationship between the two identified variables e.g., training comprehensiveness and organizational commitment. This was discovered when they conducted a study based on a sample of Indian software professionals. Interestingly, Whitener (2001) stated that there is a weak, insignificant relationship between training comprehensiveness and organizational commitment using a US based sample. Benson (2006) concluded indirect indication for a relationship between training comprehensiveness (components) and organizational commitment. In a way, these past studies will assist to justify the following proposed hypothesis:

- H_{1b}; the components of training are highly related to organizational commitment

Work environment characteristics and organizational commitment:

According to Cherrington (1995), a successful training programme would construct more-favourable employee attitudes and loyalty and subsequently help employees in their personal development and advancement. Additionally, Deming in 1986 emphasized on the significant of training and development for continual updating and improvement, identifying one source of human motivation at work as intrinsic motivation: the desire to grow; learn and to

develop oneself. Cherrington (1995) also indicated that majority of learning situations are fundamentally reinforcing because of the satisfaction and commitment associated with the acquiring new knowledge or skills. Thus, this leads to the following hypothesis:

- H_{2b}; work environment characteristics are positively related to organizational commitment

Participants' characteristics and organizational commitment:

It is a known fact that part of the factors that help in establishing employees' commitment is the relevancy of training. Upon entering into training programmes, they have their own specific expectations and needs. In the event that those were not met, it could result in lower commitment, negative attitude change and eventually an increase in turnover.

In addition, the employees that regarded training as the "most relevant" to their existing jobs were able to accomplish more positive commitment results and had less desire to quit (Burke, 1995). In order to use training as an instrument to build commitment, organizations must ensure that trainings are relevant, communicated efficiently and able to meet the expectations of the employees participating.

Well-motivated employees are more likely to have an optimistic perception of the training environment in their organizations. This has been shown to lead to bigger contribution in training activities (Mathieu *et al.*, 1992). The benefits resulting should generate positive feelings towards the organisation and so enhance affective commitment. In short, it can be summarized that by having such positive characteristics among the employees, the element of organizational commitment is being planted in them. Thus, the above literature reviews help the researcher to justify the following hypothesis:

- H_{3b}; participants' characteristics are positively related to organizational commitment

Transfer of training skills and organizational commitment:

In the context of correlation between transfer of training skills and organizational commitment, though quite a number of studies were done (Bishop, 1991; Black and Lynch, 1996; Boon and Eijken, 1998; Fey and Bjorkman, 2001; Faems *et al.*, 2005), it is unclear whether they are sufficient. Becker (1962) offers a systematic explanation of investment in human capital and associated productivity, wages and mobility of workers. Such investment not only generates competitive pluses for an organization (Salas and Cannon-Bowers, 2000) but also provides opportunities to acquire new technologies

and enhance employee skills, knowledge and organizational performance. In fact, there is an increasing awareness in organizations that the investment in training could improve organizational performance in terms of increased sales and productivity, enhanced quality and market share, reduced turnover, absence and conflict (Huselid, 1995; Martocchio and Baldwin, 1997; Salas and Cannon-Bowers, 2000). Past studies for instance by Bartlett and Kang (2004) only look at training comprehensiveness having a direct influence on organizational commitment. This is further supported by Benson (2006) who has identified that there is a direct correlation between training comprehensiveness and organizational commitment. Therefore, it is high time to expand the scope of previous studies by addressing the gap on the possibility of relationship on how transfer of training skills could actually lead to organizational commitment.

In contrast, training has been critiqued as too expensive by Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2000), Kraiger *et al.* (2004) and there is an increasing scepticism about the practice and theoretical underpinning of linking training with firm performance (Alliger *et al.*, 1997; Wright and Geroy, 2001). Thus, this study will attempt to strengthen the findings of past researchers that one's commitment towards an organization is indirectly related to the skills he or she has acquired upon attending training programmes. In other words, this study alone will examine the interrelationship between training components, work environment and participants' characteristics and how those elements blend with transfer of training skills and organizational commitment as proposed in the following hypothesis:

- H₄; there is a significant relationship in transfer of training skills towards inculcating organizational commitment

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design and sampling: A correlational study design was opted for this study. Sample size for this research would be based on 120 employees of a national training provider in Malaysia (there after referred to as the agency) which consists of executives and non-executives. These employees would be from the headquarter of the agency which is in Kuala Lumpur and the five branch offices respectively (Penang, Johor, Malacca, Sarawak and Sabah). As it is impossible for the researcher, especially within the constraints of time to collect information from all of the employees, the study use systematic random sampling technique of the study population.

Questionnaires were distributed to a total of 120 employees which consists of 5 groups of position namely 'Manager', 'Assistant manager', 'Executive', 'Assistant executive' and 'Non executive'. Distribution of questionnaires were done via email as majority of the respondents are based at the agency's headquarter which is in Kuala Lumpur. At the same time, questionnaires were also emailed to respondents who are based at branch offices respectively (Penang, Johor, Malacca, Sarawak and Sabah). Such strategy was chosen due to constraint of time and locality of the respondents. In order to ease, the researcher's burden in following up individually with each of the respondent, a representative from each division was appointed. The role of each representative is to collect all the questionnaires from the respondents and courier to the researcher for her further action. Respondents were able to digest the purpose of the study as it was stated on the cover of the questionnaire. Brief instructions were included too and to protect the interest of the researcher and respondents, a note of confidentiality was also indicated on the cover of the questionnaire.

Data collection technique: Prior to distributing the questionnaires, written approval was sought from the deputy chief executive (management) of the agency. The researcher put forward a formal letter requesting for approval from the management to collect data from the employees of the agency. Questionnaires were distributed to all respondents via email in order to gauge their feedback. The researcher attempted to explain the relevancy of the study and at the same time, convinced the respondents that their feedback would remain private and confidential. Respondents were duly requested to return the questionnaire within 3 days from the date of receiving it. Distribution of questionnaire was via email due to logistic problem whereby majority of the respondents are based in the agency's headquarter at Kuala Lumpur. Thus, such method is seen feasible as it is less time consuming, e.g., posting out the questionnaire via normal post will take at least 1 week. The questionnaires were emailed to the 2 groups of employees from the agency which consists of executives (managers, assistant managers, executives and assistant executives) and non executives (supporting staff). In the case of a low response rate (<25%), a reminder will be sent to respondents. Thus, in order to encourage them to participate in this study, personal calls were made by the researcher. At the same time, follow up via email was done as well.

The following measurement scales were included in the survey instrument which was adapted from previously published validated scales.

Training components: This study dealt with respondents' perception on training components such as outlines of the programmes, quality of the trainer and other relevant information pertaining to training components. Questionnaire for this section was adapted from Snell and Dean (1992). A total of 4 questions were set up for outlines of the programmes with an example such as 'Training programme is a well-planned exercise and is of sufficient duration'. As for the quality of trainer, a total of 6 questions were outlined whereby it focused on assessing the attributes of trainers chosen in conducting training programmes for the employees of the agency. Examples of questions are: 'trainers are chosen by the management based on their positive track records and quality of training delivered before' and 'trainers had good knowledge and experience of the industry'. At the same time, 5 pertinent questions related to training components were set up too. Some of the examples are: 'training used up to date equipment, facilities and materials' and 'training of workers is given adequate importance in the organization.

Work environment characteristics: This study concentrated on respondents' opinion on continuous learning culture, supervisor and peer support and performance coaching. Consisting of two measures with 10 items whereby 5 items were emphasized on continuous learning culture such as 'In my division, my supervisor asks for ideas about how to solve work related problem' (Holton *et al.*, 2000). 'Senior managers provide the right kind of climate to implement new ideas and methods acquired by their juniors during training' is one of the items adapted from Holton *et al.* (2000) that focused on supervisor and peer support and performance coaching.

Participants' characteristics: This part of the questionnaire consisted of three measures with 9 items respectively and 3 items each were on motivation to learn, self-efficacy and motivation to transfer knowledge. 'I am confident in my ability to apply new skills at work' is an example of item measured under motivation to learn (Noe and Wilk, 1993). Items measured under self-efficacy and motivation to transfer knowledge were adapted from Holton *et al.* (2000). One of the items measured under self-efficacy is 'I can usually handle whatever comes my way' while sample of item measured under motivation to transfer knowledge is 'Training will increase my personal productivity'.

Transfer of training skills: This segment of the questionnaire probed into the respondents' views on transfer of training skills. A 5 items scale based on

McSherry and Taylor (1994) were used to measure the transfer of training skills. Examples are 'I allow sufficient time for planning after training', 'I listen to others' ideas more often after training' and 'training programmes and the skills that I learned have helped in my career development'.

Organizational commitment: A 6-items scale based on Gregersen and Black (1992) were selected to evaluate the organizational commitment. Examples are 'I am proud to be associated with this organization', 'this organization deserves my loyalty' and 'I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own'.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the correlation between dependent and independent variables. The dependent variables as portrayed in the framework model of this study are transfer of training skills and organizational commitment. On the other hand, training components, work environment characteristics and participants' characteristics are identified as the independent variables. As illustrated in Table 1, it is clearly indicated that the relationship between training components and transfer of training skills is positive (0.431) and significant ($p < 0.05$, 2 tailed). Thus, this supports the proposed H_{1a} that the components of training are highly related to transfer of training skills.

Based on the findings shown in Table 1, it can be concluded that there is another positive and significant bond between work environment characteristics and transfer of training skills. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between the two variables, $r = 0.521$, $p < 0.05$. Again, this finding supports hypothesis 2b whereby work environment characteristics are positively related to transfer of training skills. This goes to show that in order for a worker to learn better in acquiring the required skills, it is imperative for the organization to provide conducive learning ambience. Otherwise, it would defeat the purpose of sending them to training programmes.

One must not forget that attitude and motivation of the trainees may differ from one another and this does affect the transfer of training skills. Therefore, Table 1 further illustrates the possibility of participants' characteristics in terms of influencing the transfer of training skills. As demonstrated, it is obvious that there is a solid connection between the two variables, $r = 0.722$, $p < 0.05$. Indirectly, this shows that hypothesis 3a is valid as it clearly reflected that participants' characteristics are positively related to transfer of training skills.

Table 1: Pearsons correlation between transfer of training skills and organizational commitment and training components, work environment characteristics and participants characteristics

Variables	Training components	Work environment characteristics	Participants characteristics
Transfer of training skills	0.431**	0.521**	0.722**
Organizational commitment	0.480**	0.491**	0.563**

**p<0.05 (2 tailed)

Another identified dependent variable in this study is organizational commitment. It is known fact that such variable is imperative in determining the level of one’s loyalty towards the organization. Investigated through Pearson correlation coefficient tool, the result as shown in Table 1 clearly proved that components of training are highly related to organizational commitment as proposed in hypothesis 1b, $r = 0.480, p < 0.05$. It can be summarized that by putting an emphasis on employees’ development program, it does in a way makes the workers feel attached to the organization.

The result in Table 1 suggests that there is an optimistic link between work environment characteristics and organizational commitment. The R is equal to 0.491 which indicates positive relationship between the two variables. Supervisor and peer support is strongly needed in ensuring one’s commitment towards the organization. On top of that, the result also indicate that continuous learning culture being part of the sub topics for work environment characteristics also plays a significant role in determining the level of employees’ loyalty. Thus, it can be concluded that such result supports the proposed H_{2b} which is work environment characteristics are positively related to organizational commitment.

The relationship between participants’ characteristics and organizational commitment was examined using Pearson correlation coefficient instrument. There was a strong, positive relationship between the two variables, $r = 0.563, p < 0.05$. This implies that the three sub topics of participants’ characteristics such as motivation to learn, self-efficacy and motivation to transfer knowledge are significant in gauging the employees’ level of commitment or sense of belonging towards the company. Of course, this supports the researcher’s proposed H_{3b} that undoubtedly there is a connection between participants’ characteristics and organizational commitment.

Interestingly, this study also looks into the possibility of organizational commitment being influenced by transfer of training skills. The question is does listening to others’ ideas after attending training provides the room for being loyal to the organization. Another question to ponder is does training programmes and the skills that one has learnt helped in his/her career development. Based on the findings as stipulated in Table 2, there is a strong, positive correlation between the

Table 2: Pearsons correlation between transfer of training skills and organizational commitment

Variables	Organizational commitment
Transfer of training skills	0.532**

**p<0.05 (2 tailed)

two variables, $r = 0.532, p < 0.05$. Therefore, it is acceptable to comprehend that employees’ loyalty in the agency can be measured through the transfer of training skills.

This research investigated the relationship between variables related to training and organizational commitment. Generally, the level of transfer of training among the employees in the agency is high. They were able to practice what they have acquired from the training programme to the workplace. Based on findings as discussed earlier, positive transfer of training has taken place as expected by the organization. According to Baldwin and Ford (1988), the positive transfer of training occurred when the trainees effectively apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained in a training context to the job. Thus, such finding has proven the research objective of this study whereby transfer of training skills were influenced by training components, work environment and participants’ characteristics.

As hypothesized, the results from this study suggested that there is a positive relationship between organizational commitment and training components, work environment and participants’ characteristics. In order to support it, it was revealed that the results are consistent with Whitner’s in 2001 study whereby according to her, employees tend to be committed when they perceive that the organization is supporting them. Again, this goes to show that such attributes did in a way influence the organizational commitment as highlighted in the research objective of this study.

Another important objective raised in this study is the probability of whether the transfer of training skills is able to increase or influence employees’ commitment (organizational commitment) in the agency. As tested in H_{4a}, it was discovered that there is a strong, positive relationship between the two variables. The results suggesting that employees who anticipate benefits from their participation in training are likely to be more committed. The finding for the relationship between perceived support for training from colleagues and senior staff and organizational commitment suggests that social

support for training is an imperative component in the establishment and maintenance of commitment. This infers that employees take cues from both their colleagues and their superiors pertaining to the significance of training and these perceptions may influence their attitude and participation. For that reason, it is critical for HRD department personnel to at least strive in order to create an environment in which training participation is keenly supported by all employees, especially senior staff (Brief, 1998).

Demographically speaking, the survey revealed that older employees have a considerably higher affective or emotional commitment than younger employees. This indicates that older employees are more devoted to the organization they are working for. On the other hand, younger workers are still new to the working world and believe that there is immense opportunity out there for them. Therefore, they do not feel that they have to be faithful to their current organization. In the case of tenure, a similar conclusion can be assumed. People who have spent longer time in the career world have significantly higher sentimental commitment than those who are new.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are significant as it further elevates our understanding of Human Resource Development (HRD) theory and practice on transfer of training skills and organizational commitment. At the same time, it helps HRD practitioners or enthusiasts to see the impact of transfer of training skills towards one's commitment in an organization. Of most importance, the results from this study will assist the management of the agency to review its training and development programmes as to ensure that those programmes are relevant and subsequently help in developing the employees' skills in terms of providing efficient service to the customers.

LIMITATIONS

It is proposed that further studies should attempt to use qualitative method to gauge the expected result from the respondents. Instead of distributing questionnaires only, it would be interesting if interview could be done among the top management of the organization. In a way, element of biasness in the study could be avoided as the current one only involved the participation of certain group of the employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the other hand, future researcher could adopt the focus group methodology which is useful in exploring and examining what people think, how they think and why they think they way they do about the issues of importance to them without pressuring them into making decisions or reaching a consensus. The method is especially valuable for permitting the participants to develop their own questions and frameworks as well as to seek their own needs and concerns in their own words and on their own terms. Group work allows the researchers to access different communication forms which people use in their day-to-day interaction and these include joking, arguing, teasing and recapturing past events. Being able to gain access to diverse forms of communication is valuable since it may not be possible, or can be difficult, to capture the knowledge and attitudes of individuals by asking them to respond to more direct questions as in positivist science such as surveys and questionnaires. As such, focus groups permit researchers to enter the world of the participants which other research methods may not be able to do.

Future researcher could also attempt to explore whether the independent variables such as training components, work environment characteristics and participants' characteristics are influencing one another in terms of the effectiveness of training and development programmes. For instance, does training components have a direct impact on work environment characteristics? A more complete understanding of these relationships through future research would provide an important extension of this study by allowing increased insight into inter-dependency of those variables.

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