



Discussion Paper

What steps can be taken to ensure learning is transferred to the workplace? And how should your learning management software support the process?

Simon Clayton, Learning Solutions Sales Director at CS Group, discusses how your learning management system should be supporting the transferral of learning to the workplace

1. Introduction

What do we mean by the transferral of learning?

In this context, we refer to the 'transfer of learning' as the application of learning to the workplace, with the intention being that the learner's work performance will improve as a result.

The management of the transfer process is important to learning and development professionals for two reasons:

First, because of the gap that exists between the outcomes resulting from undertaking a particular learning intervention and the outcomes resulting from *applying* what was learnt during that learning intervention to the workplace.

Second, because managing the transfer process presents an opportunity for Learning and Development Professionals to demonstrate the payoff to the business – in terms of performance and results – for all learning interventions.

Mind the gap

Recently, a CS Group client told me a story about one of his team: a mini-bus driver who was part of a team responsible providing a transport service for vulnerable people in the locality who otherwise would have difficulty leaving their houses. The service was a vital life-line for those people and, for example, enabled elderly people in the community to visit their local day centre, or local community groups to take a day trip out.

One day, as the driver was overseeing the lifting a wheelchair user in to the back of the bus, there was an incident. The wheelchair fell and its user was injured.

Luckily, there was no serious injury resulting from the incident, but once everyone had confirmed they were OK, the Management's first action was to check the driver's training records. If the driver had not taken the appropriate equipment and health and safety training, then the organisation would have been liable for the consequences of the incident.

In this instance, it turned out the driver had been trained and, therefore, the incident was deemed to be an accident. The organisation was not liable for the failing.

But is this good enough?

The learning had taken place. The organisation had the records to prove the learning had taken place. But the learning had not had the desired effect on performance. The learning had not been transferred to the workplace.

It is this gap between the outcomes resulting from undertaking a particular learning intervention and the outcomes resulting from *applying* what was learnt during that learning intervention to the workplace that this discussion paper seeks to illuminate. And this gap that the successful transfer of learning seeks to close.

The strategic importance of Learning & Development

We want our learning interventions to be successful in achieving learning. Line managers want to see that the learning interventions are well applied by transfer of learning to the job. They want to see improvements in behaviour and accomplishments in the workplace. Business Managers want to see that these individual performance improvements have the desired impact on organisational results.

Evaluation and measurement are essential in order to demonstrate the success of each step in this process. Learning & Development Managers need to build in to their learning programme the necessary evaluation and measurement tools that they, line managers, and other influencers and stakeholders can bring to bear to monitor the effects of learning.

By making learning and development accountable in this way, L&D Managers have an opportunity to demonstrate why learning and development should not be viewed as simply another cost centre to the business, but an essential part of effective business operations.

Six key areas to consider in order to ensure the transfer of learning

We suggest there are six key areas which need to be considered in order to ensure the effective transfer of learning. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but provides a useful starting point to the debate.

These six issues are:

- Understanding why we are delivering each learning intervention
- Understanding the environment in which the learning is taking place
- Measurement & Evaluation
- Learning isn't a single intervention
- Role of stakeholders in reinforcing learning & improving transfer rates/training 'effectiveness'
- Importance of a multi-disciplinary approach

In this discussion paper, I'll look at each of these issues and ask how your learning management system should help support you in addressing them. In no way am I suggesting that a learning management system can ensure the successful transfer of learning, or that software is, in itself, a magic solution.

What I am proposing is six issues that should be considered and identifying the ways in which software can support this process.

2. Issue 1: Understanding why we are delivering each learning intervention

The starting point to any learning programme is understanding **why** we are delivering it. The learning need may have arisen in response to a new performance need or because of a particular aspect of under-performance. Either way, the 'why' needs to be firmly rooted in the needs of the business and the needs of the individual.

Your software should help you ensure learning is firmly rooted in the needs of the business and the individual.

First, your defined learning skills frameworks can be managed and applied in the system to help ensure that learning is rooted in the needs of your business.

Second, you, your staff and their line managers and other influencers or mentors, can access staff personal development plans to illuminate the needs of the individual.

At this stage, we need to do some analysis of the present and desired levels of performance. This will help us in two ways:

1. in programme design
2. by establishing a base line of current performance against which we can compare future performance, after the learning intervention.

Learners can be encouraged to work through the skills, attributes and performance applicable to their job role and individual requirements with their line managers, mentor or other influencer - or their learning coordinator - to monitor performance on an ongoing basis through the strategic use of your learning management system's learner portals.

We also need to understand the causes of underperformance and/or the causes for the new performance needs. Again, this is going to help us when we come to develop the programme, select the appropriate intervention(s), and understand what support activities will be required.

3. Issue 2: Understanding the environment in which the learning is taking place

It is also essential that before we start developing the learning programme, we understand the environment in which the learning is taking place:

1. What factors exist that are going to assist in the transfer of learning?
2. What factors exist that may hinder the transfer of learning?
3. How do these factors affect the development of the learning intervention, delivery method(s), the support activities and the communication about it?

The working environment will affect our programme design and the choice of learning interventions that are appropriate. This isn't limited to practical or resource issues such as lack of access to PCs, or number of suitably qualified Trainers.

For instance, lack of support of learning goals from line managers may require us to undertake a formal training programme for management prior to the training of staff or, perhaps, some stealth training of line managers.

In addition, the work environment may differ from the learning environment in many ways that can inhibit the application of learning from the 'classroom' (whatever form that takes) to the workplace. Even if learning happens in the work environment, the social pressures, goals and performance expectations in the working role can be very different to what happens or is promoted during the learning intervention.

Because of this, our learning interventions usually need to be supported by non-instructional interventions to align the work process, work environment, attitudes of line managers and other influencers in the workplace and/or work goals and performance expectations more closely to those that exist in the learning environment.

By understanding the environment in to which our learning programme needs to be transferred, we can understand and build in to our learning programmes activities or approaches to overcome the barriers to transfer and make best use of the enhancers.

4. Issue 3: Measurement & Evaluation

As we've already mentioned, this approach will require a different way of undertaking training evaluation. First of all, we need to measure performance before the learning intervention in order to establish a baseline for comparison.

Measurement has an important role to play – not just in measuring the success of the learning intervention, and the subsequent transfer of learning – but also in emphasising the importance of learning and the application of learning to the workplace for both learners and their line managers and/or other important influencers/stakeholders in the work environment.

Because we are interested in the application of learning, rather than simply in learners' reaction to the learning itself, we need to 'go beyond the happy sheet' when it comes to training evaluation. Yes, we need to understand participant reaction and satisfaction, and the extent of learning at the end of each learning intervention. But we also need to assess the application of learning to job performance *and* the organisational results following the learning intervention.

These measures are not necessarily interlinked either: just because staff approved of a particular Trainer or learning intervention, it doesn't automatically follow that the learning will be applied to the workplace, or that performance will be improved. All four levels of Kirkpatrick's measures need to be applied.

Your learning management system needs to include tools to help you monitor learning in three key ways:

1. Participant reaction & satisfaction: providing training evaluation or questionnaires within the learner portal for learner and trainer.

2. Testing learning: Learning results must be recorded in the system, including e-learning and other test results.

3. Impact on job performance: Review within the Personal Development structure to monitor the application of learning to job performance.

At all three levels make the most of the LMS learner portals to engage the learner, line managers, trainer and other influencers.

5. Issue 4: Learning isn't a single intervention

When we argue that learning isn't a single intervention, this isn't simply a call for refresher training. Refresher training may well be important, particularly if there are statutory training requirements that need fulfilling regularly, but, in order to close the gap between the outcomes resulting from undertaking a particular learning intervention and the outcomes resulting from applying what was learnt during that learning intervention to the workplace, our multiple interventions will be more than refresher training.

Because we have already worked to understand the environmental barriers that exist that could hinder the transfer process, we have an opportunity to build in to our learning programmes activities to overcome these barriers and make the best use of the factors that can support the transfer of learning.

Our strategies may be as simple as peer buddying, cross-team mentoring, the use of learning journals, or ensuring that team leaders give their staff appropriate time when they are back in the working environment to apply what they have learnt. Whatever the methods, your learning management system, and the other programme support tools - and your measurement and analysis of learning - need to allow for this level of flexibility for all your programmes.

At a basic level, your LMS system should include essential training compliance management functions which enable you to set automatic reminders to give advance notice when a particular qualification or learning activity needs renewing. You should be able to specify workflow patterns appropriate to your own business and whether you want these reminders and activities to involve line managers, training coordinators and/or learners.

The system also needs to give you the flexibility to manage single instances of learning, ongoing qualifications and multi-disciplinary learning programmes.

6. Issue 5: Role of line managers and other influencers in reinforcing learning & improving transfer rates

There is a large body of research that emphasises the importance of the role of line managers, and other influencers in the transfer process. They have a hugely important role in ensuring that the importance of the learning and the importance of its application to the workplace is understood *and effected* by learners.

This role is important before, during and after the learning intervention.

LMS learner portals can be a useful communication tool to emphasise the importance of learning programmes or initiatives.

Details about courses, learning goals or other reference material can be stored in the system and highlighted to appropriate learners.

Our understanding of the processes, performance and results we are aiming to change/ improve and the organisational structures around them, help us to identify the key influencers in the transfer process. And these influencers are not just limited to line managers (although line managers, by definition, will have a greater role to play in any prior or subsequent performance measurement).

As well as ensuring that line managers and other influencers share our understanding about the importance of the learning activity, the importance of its transferal to the workplace, and the subsequent performance improvements that will result, we need to build in to the learning programme activities to ensure the communication and involvement of line managers and other influencers with staff.

Learners can be asked to complete or update registration questionnaires about the relationships that matter to them. Store details about their line managers, mentors, learning coordinators or other influencers. These influencers can then be given access to learners' histories and plans, to monitor, guide or update.

Having identified who the key influencers are for each learner, we need to make these relationships work to aid the transfer of learning. Leveraging the influence of line manager, or other influencer, should not be limited to what happens after the learning intervention – they also have a key role to play in ensuring the learning is applied to the workplace before and during the learning intervention.

Before the learning intervention

Line Managers, or other influencers, can be a key source of information about possible barriers to learning transfer that exist in the workplace. Use their knowledge to develop your learning programmes which take account of these identified possible barriers.

By asking line managers to identify possible barriers in the workplace, you are also giving them an opportunity to think about the barriers and enhancers to learning transfer that exist as a result of their own behaviour, and give them an opportunity to change their behaviour.

This kind of consultative approach gives line managers an opportunity to support the learning before the intervention in other direct ways; whether that be emphasising the importance and practicality of the new learning to staff; producing plans with staff about how they will apply new skills to the job; or simply providing time for staff to complete pre-work.

Your learning management system should help you capture information about possible barriers to learning from all staff and influencers. This information can then be stored in their individual profiles for future reference.

In addition, the learner portals can provide an environment in which to record how learning will be applied and record what pre-work has taken place, in conjunction with their line manager or other influencer. This provides a valuable record to assess transfer rates and performance against plan after the learning intervention.

During the learning intervention

The degree to which line managers or influencers can impact on the transfer of learning will depend on the type of learning intervention and whether they are participating in it themselves. At the very least, line managers need to support the learning & development team in monitoring attendance and providing distraction-free time for learning.

If the course is instructor led, then line managers have a role to play in supporting the instructor, emphasising the importance and practicality of the learning, encouraging learners to participate actively, and leading the debate about how the learning can be applied to individual's job roles.

After the learning intervention

As well as monitoring the learner's application of new skills, line managers and other influencers have an important role to play in providing prompt feedback about application of skills to reinforce the benefits of transfer to the learner. Success should be rewarded and poor transfer needs to be addressed by the line manager in conjunction with the learning team.

Other support activities might include coaching, arranging peer-buddying, or asking learners to brief what they have learnt and how they are applying it to other team members or other staff.

Your LMS should be flexible enough to record this variety of learning activities, whilst also providing the management and work flow tools to ensure that the administration of pre- and post- learning activities is kept as

Line managers and other key influencers will also have an important role to play in measurement of learning and transfer rates after the learning intervention – particularly with regards to assessment of the application of learning to job performance (for example, how has the learner delivered on the pre-agreed plans to transfer learning to the job?) *and* the performance results following the learning intervention.

7. Issue 6: Importance of a multi-disciplinary approach

Again, this hardly needs reiterating: we are all familiar with the argument that what works for one person, won't necessarily work for another person. Therefore, a degree of flexibility in delivery method is important.

This has greater ramifications when it comes to the transfer of learning, because of the additional support activities before and after the learning intervention.

Your LMS must provide users with a single, holistic view of learning, skills, development and performance throughout your organisation.

Organisations which have a multi-disciplined learning programme require a system that can, at the very least, support the management of:

- traditional instructor-led training
- qualifications and ongoing learning programmes such as NVQs and SVQs
- e-learning and reference-ware
- professional development and CPD programmes
- mentoring or buddying programmes
- personal development plans
- evaluation and measurement
- other support activities

As well as streamlining back office processes and engaging and involving all staff through the use of interactive learner portals.

8. Conclusion

Values

Every organisation will have its own challenges and preferred methods of approaching learning. We recognise that software has only a small part to play in helping organisations ensure the transferral of learning. It is, nonetheless, an important role: your learning management software needs to support all the learning initiatives you undertake – to take the headaches out of managing them, to engage staff, line managers and other key influencers, and to ensure performance goals are achieved.

Good management has a vital role to play in closing the gap between the outcomes resulting from undertaking a particular learning intervention and the outcomes resulting from *applying* what was learnt during that learning intervention to the workplace. And this is where your LMS should deliver.

You need a flexible, coherent system that is designed to manage the multi-disciplinary approach suited to your own business and performance issues. And if it can support your communication and internal marketing then even better.

A holistic view of learning

We've already outlined the key steps for ensuring that learning is transferred to the workplace:

- Understanding why we are delivering each learning intervention
- Understanding the environment in which the learning is taking place
- Measurement & Evaluation
- Learning isn't a single intervention
- Role of stakeholders in reinforcing learning & improving transfer rates/ training 'effectiveness'
- Importance of a multi-disciplinary approach

We would argue that the final ingredient is a single, holistic view of learning – such as that offered by our learning management software, Consensus LMS.