The purpose of this column is to examine evidence for myths that have been repeated so often that they have become an accepted part of the landscape (at least for some). The reason for revisiting these ideas is so that we can avoid using myths as the underpinnings for design- and performance-oriented decisions. Instead, we can make decisions based on more current evidence that may provide a firmer foundation for our choices.

This column is offered without judgment toward anyone who has held an idea as true that was a misconception in the first place or has been shown later to have little evidence to support it. Who has not been enamored with an idea that sounds so right, but that later turns out to be something quite different?

Training Transfer: Not the 10% Solution

You may have heard that most training programs result in a low level of training transfer, that is, the on-the-job application of what was learned during training. An often-quoted statistic, and one that has made it into the common wisdom, is that “only 10% of training transfers.” If this were true, it would mean that learners employ only 10% (on average) of what they have learned in training once they are back to their jobs.

If only 10% of what people learn in training transfers to the job, then should we assume that the other 90% does not? Do we therefore think that...
90% of training in general is a waste of time and money? If this is the case, should we quit offering training programs?

These are important questions, especially given the billions of dollars spent on training each year—more than $125 billion in the United States in 2009, a slight increase over 2008 expenditures (Patel, 2010). Those in organizations that make a significant investment in training should want to know whether their training dollars produce positive results.

Where This Came From

In 1982, David L. Georgenson wrote, “The Problem of Transfer Calls for Partnership.” He began the article with an interesting concern from hypothetical training directors. He asked, “How many times have you heard training directors say: ‘I would estimate that only 10% of content which is presented in the classroom is reflected in behavioral change on the job’?” (p. 75). He goes on to stress the importance of transfer and the key influences that managers can exert to ensure that learners apply what they have learned.

Georgenson’s article has been cited repeatedly (Fitzpatrick, 2001) as evidence of a “transfer problem” (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). And it has become a key source (Clark, 2010) for the idea that only 10% of training transfers. But is that what Georgenson was saying? No.

At no point in his article does Georgenson seriously assert that only 10% of training transfers. He asked that rhetorical introductory question about transfer to grab readers’ attention. He did not base his article on a study, and he cites no studies or other references. Instead, he offers advice as a practitioner who is sharing his own thoughts and observations.

What to Consider Instead

We should ignore the 10% figure that Georgenson used as an interest grabber back in 1982. Many researchers have since found evidence that transfer can and does occur (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996; Bassok & Holyoak, 1989; Singley & Anderson, 1989), but finding a single, generalizable value for training transfer in all organizations would be difficult at best (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010; Taylor, Russ-Eft, & Taylor, 2009). Considering the many factors involved in training transfer is a complex undertaking, and measuring transfer has been done, when done at all, with little consistency (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2009).

To illustrate some of the issues with measuring transfer, consider a meta-analysis of 107 management training evaluations that Taylor et al. (2009) conducted. They report effect sizes for transfer that vary widely depending on which group was asked to provide transfer data. Specifically the trainees were
most likely to give themselves high marks for applying what they had learned on the job, while their managers tended to give somewhat lower, but still high, marks. Overall, the marks from the trainees’ peers, and especially from their subordinates, were much lower than those from the trainees and their managers.

Self-report data are often flawed, and it remains an open question as to whether trainees’ managers, peers, and subordinates have adequate opportunities to observe trainees’ application of what they have learned. Respondents’ answers to transfer questions depend on a number of factors, including what they know or are told about the program itself, their knowledge of the skills in question, and their ability to rate the effectiveness of those skills as employed by the trainees they have been asked to observe.

In addition to considering who should report on whether transfer occurred, there is also the question of when and what we ask related to transfer (Blume et al., 2010). In considering when to measure transfer, it makes sense to note that the amount of lag time between completing the training and reporting on transfer affects trainees’ marks (a longer lag time generally results in lower marks). When deciding what to ask, questions related to criteria linked to training content produce higher marks than questions related to job performance in general (Taylor et al., 2009).

Other potentially confounding factors to consider are prior knowledge and practice. For example, needs assessments and pretests can establish whether employees possessed or employed the relevant knowledge and skills before the training was offered. Without screening for prior knowledge and skills, evaluators may not be able to establish the rate of transfer for a particular training program.

Given the many factors to consider in measuring transfer and the lack of a widely accepted and standard transfer evaluation methodology (Blume et al., 2010), it is not reasonable to generalize about how much training transfers overall. Still, organizations should want to determine whether their training efforts are making an appreciable difference in instilling new knowledge and skills. Given the lack of a consistent way to measure transfer, each organization faces choosing or adopting a methodology for determining whether transfer has occurred. Training managers and instructional designers should define appropriate protocols for measuring transfer of the training they manage and develop. To do this, they should consider the factors I have listed, and they may draw on a number of recommendations for how to conduct training transfer evaluations, for example, Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2007), Pearlstein (2010), and Philips and Stone (2002).

**Why We Care**

If we were to accept the prevalent notion that a mere 10% of training transfers, we might decide to abandon training altogether. However, logically, employees, managers, and leaders must occasionally or even
continuously learn new knowledge and skills to do their jobs well. Formal and informal training programs are one useful way to assist them.

Clearly many factors have an impact on transfer, such as the timing of training, job relevance, individual differences, content development, opportunities for practice and other instructional design considerations, training delivery and implementation, trainee motivation, management support, positive incentives or negative consequences for employing the new skills, and environmental barriers (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010; Farrington, 1999; Taylor et al., 2009). It is safe to say, without reviewing these factors in detail, that each can have a positive or negative impact on training transfer.

Although we should be cautious about accepting any general claim that a certain percentage of training transfers, we must remain mindful of the training investment that organizations make. Where those investments are significant, we should look for evidence that what people learn during training transfers to new and better performance on the job.

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