TRANSFER FOR SKILLS TRAINING

A guide to creating learning transfer for the application of skills-based learning

Use this template as a basis to inform your training and transfer design

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How to use this template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Design Overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Program Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Deliberate practice and structured feedback is the key to preparing people to use new skills in the workplace.

When people are required to use a core set of skills in the workplace there can be times when the skill set needs bringing up to a desired level through practice before the user goes live with the skills.

Of course people rely on training to acquire those skills which quite often are based on theory or knowledge.

One of the challenges for training designers is how to balance the amount of knowledge learned with sufficient practice of skills before the participants go back to their respective workplaces.

This can lead to what’s known as an information dump followed up with short bursts of practice. Very unsatisfying for the learner and not very helpful.

It’s also necessary to make sure that people directly involved with the users of the skills have some input on how the skills are applied and how they can be improved.

So, programs that require a set of skills to be practiced before application should compartmentalise the learning process in a way that gives the learners everything they need without overburdening the peers and managers who are supporting them.

One way to do this is to give all the knowledge based information ahead of time, with opportunity to question the information. Then provide a learning event for interpretation of the knowledge into skills with practice. Finally, learners should set up times to practice the skills with a trusted advisor who is there to give feedback and advice.
How to use this template

The diagram on the following page illustrates a fictional training program. It is mocked up to demonstrate how learning transfer can facilitate the use of knowledge in the workplace.

Use this diagram as a reference when looking at the more detailed program elements page to see where in time each of the elements sit.

Each of the program elements pages describes what the element is and how it should be used.

There are also images of what a sample of each element could look like. These samples are for illustrative use, and can be your launchpad to creating your own elements.

Take time to understand the program overview and each of the elements in order to adapt what is in this template to suit your own knowledge-heavy program design.
This diagram represents a mocked-up skills-focused learning program. The elements play out from left to right over time. There are a number of types of training that would fall into this category, for example presentations skills, customer services processes, or sales activities. Although, that is by no means an exhaustive list it could be said that skills are defined as actions taken – customer service reps need to be good at handling complaints – to be proficient at a job.

Also, the quantity and depth of elements will likely differ according to the complexity of a skill that needs to be learned, how much understanding is needed prior to learning, and how many practice cycles are needed to adequately elevate the skills before they are taken live into the workplace by the user.

Remember to use this design overview as a time frame for designing your solutions. The descriptions on the follow pages give more detail about each element.
For skills training the participants need to be able to use the skills in actual work once they have practiced them to a level where their proficiency is acceptable.

For that reason the pre-training work for this type of learning transfer design focuses on two things. The first is preparation and the second is meaningful connection to real work.

You should define what the outcomes of the learning will be and how people are expected to use those outcomes. Then you should ask your participants to create a typical piece of work that relies on using the critical outcomes of the learning.

The participants need to submit the work item and an explanation about what it is and how it will be used. They should also specify what they personally need to achieve. In that way they can use their own work sample in the actual training and you can accurately determine how to adjust your content to suit the broad needs.
Where possible for skills training only skills should be practiced in the learning environment, and knowledge should be input before any group activities start. That is not always possible, but if you are able to send all knowledge materials ahead of time, you can focus on skills in the learning space.

Skills are best practiced in groups. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, having a cohort with similar needs enables peers to comment on each other’s progress and to share ideas for application. Secondly, you can spread the responsibility for monitoring and advice throughout the group – freeing yourself up for facilitation.

Additionally, all participants should commit to making a practice schedule before they go back to their workplace. They need to align suitable preparation and practice slots with themselves and their managers. So having access to both calendars and being able to set up those slots is essential.
The purpose of deliberate practice is to take all the skills learned from the course and elevate them to a level that is considered proficient to use in real work.

The practice should be adequately spaced – decide this according to the complexity of the skills – and supported through preparation and feedback.

Participants need two things to make sure that they can use the practice time to best effect. The first would be advice and tools for preparing to do the practice. In this case you can see opposite a preparation template for a practice session. The templates shouldn’t be too ‘heavy’ because participants will have their course materials, but should be enough to enable preparation.

The second is job aids that remind the participant about the main points of the training – helpful for when you need to plan and just need a few reference points.
A crucial person in the practice session will be the person who has to provide the feedback to the participant.

One often missed part of the process is how to support the feedback giver. We suggest that the manager is best placed to give feedback because he or she is responsible for the person’s development and reviews.

However, the manager rarely attends training, so giving performance support tools such as course content brochures, video explanations, feedback tools, etc. before the learner attends training helps the manager prepare.

It should be clear to the manager or anyone else attending the sessions exactly what to look for, how to note down the comments, what to say to the participant, and how to give advice about what needs to improve – crucially from the perspective of the job role the participant does.
Coordination and manager support is key to getting complex skills applied in the workplace.

If you need to get skills from training being applied you should step back and take a look at the bigger picture of work relevance, practice and feedback before you design your learning. It’s advisable to follow these steps to achieve that.

Firstly, make sure that all knowledge is given to participants where possible before training begins. You have use a combination of media and channels to make that interesting.

At the same time have participants submit a real work sample that will be improved and used through training. If the work samples aren’t physical objects the participants can still submit scenarios, reports and stories about previous work and how that should be changed.

Secondly, plan how to make the learning session as skill-focused and interactive as possible. Have the participants work closely with each other and offer advice you might not have thought of.

Additionally, make sure that all practice session with their managers been set up and confirmed before the session ends.

Thirdly, provide additional tools and templates, and instructions about how to prepare for and do deliberate practice to the participants.

Finally, support the manager as best you can. You might not even meet this person, so give him or her a course summary with objectives and outcomes, perhaps a video demonstrating key points from the training, tools for preparing for practice and for giving feedback.

Remember the manager can make or break this solution so support them as best you can without overwhelming them.