

CERTIFICATES SEND THE WRONG SIGNALS

Training courses traditionally conclude with a certificate. A good ending? Unfortunately not, says **Dr Ina Weinbauer-Heidel**. Here, she explains why and reveals what works better



Transfer – the successful application of what has been learned – is the ultimate goal of every training programme and at the same time the Achilles' heel of our industry. In its more than 110-year history, transfer research has identified a large number of factors upon which transfer success depends. One of these factors is the so-called "transfer expectation in the organisation". The question is: does the company notice whether the participants (do not) apply what they have learned?

The research results confirm what common sense already tells us: if the organisation recognises and positively rewards participants for whether and to what extent they put into practice what they have learned during the training, the transfer success increases.

Unfortunately, however, in some organisations the opposite is true. Attempts to apply the new knowledge attracts negative comments such as



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"we can't do it like this, we've always done it that way" or even "he'll calm down again, he's just attended a seminar". Soon enough, not much of the learning is remembered.

But at least there is the common practice of receiving a certificate or confirmation of attendance at the end of the seminar as an official reward that each participant can display in their office. So, everything is great? Unfortunately, not quite ...

Wrong signals instead of clear expectations

What, then, do we actually confirm and certify? In many cases, if we are honest, it is just the attendance at the training event. The certificate is awarded to those who have successfully participated; not a word about the application of what has been learned.

And that sends a fatal signal because it says: in our company it is

important you were physically present at the seminar for the scheduled time. What you do afterwards with what you have learned is irrelevant. By handing over the certificate, the programme is finished and what was expected of you is done.

And this also applies to longer development programmes, for which it takes a little more to get the certificate; for example, an essay on the scientific examination of a topic. The signal here is: you will get the reward if you have shown that you can write a theoretical paper.

If you follow this thinking, you will find a lot of similar signals. For example:

- ▶ Participation in training is mandatory, participation in follow-up is not. *Signal: It is critical for me to attend the training. Implementation or reflection on implementation isn't that important.*
- ▶ The training description roughly outlines the goals (eg: the participants increase their sales competence). *Signal: The company itself has no clear idea of where the training should lead.*
- ▶ An evaluation is made of whether the participants were satisfied with the training. *Signal: It is not important what is ultimately put into practice.*
- ▶ Key performance indicators of the personnel departments are, for example, the number of training days. *Signal: Transfer effectiveness is not a relevant parameter.*

All these practices are widespread and with them the sentiment that transfer is nice to have but neither expected nor demanded. And that is a crucial transfer barrier.

No one feels responsible

Whose task and whose responsibility is it to communicate the transfer expectations in the organisation? Should trainers and L&D consultants really deal with this? Do they have any influence at all?

These questions lead us to one of the main reasons for the lack of transfer success – there are no clear responsibilities, because the success of transfer is always a joint success. It needs several stakeholders who pull together and make their contribution.

Each contribution, however, →

needs to be defined and managed, and first stimulated by critical questions. But none of the stakeholders feels accountable, each assumes that the other already ensures that what needs to be done is done.

And this is where trainers and L&D consultants can come in, especially when it comes to the level of transfer expectations in the company. They should not rely on their clients. Because they are not only stakeholders of the transfer success, but also important challenging and development partners for their associates in the companies.

The L&D professionals often have catastrophic blind spots. Therefore, they usually do not recognise the signals they send regarding transfer expectations. It is worth taking the time to address these blind spots, reflect critically on the client and together search for alternatives to promote transfer; and ultimately to prove themselves as a committed and professional service partner.

A question of self-image

The question of whether this is also the responsibility of trainers and L&D is ultimately a question of your own role and understanding of your own position.

Do you see yourself as someone who conveys certain content in a methodically-didactically appealing way? Or as a development companion and facilitator who consistently advances participants and companies?

All those who see themselves as the latter are also responsible for creating frameworks conducive to transfer. And this includes the expectation of transfer within the company.

This commitment is worthwhile not only in terms of the validity and effectiveness of one's own work, but also in the economic sense. By bringing the transfer question and the necessary framework conditions and levers to the table, trainers and L&D consultants strengthen their own reputation as development professionals with specific transfer demands and results.

In this way they also secure additional sales in the medium term. As partners and consultants for transfer-efficient development architectures, they also have the appropriate tools, measures, interventions and sparring questions.

KEY QUESTIONS ON TRANSFER EXPECTATION IN THE ORGANISATION

Try asking the following:

- ▶ How can we support the fact that the organisation notices and rewards the participants applying what they have learned, and that it has negative consequences if they do not?
- ▶ Does the application of what has been learned result in desirable positive consequences for the participants? What outcomes could we introduce?
- ▶ Is the application of what has been learned expected and checked in the company? By whom and how? And what could we do to support this?
- ▶ Is the transfer success of the participants the primary purpose and clearly declared goal of training in the company? Or is training primarily a sham solution for strategic, cultural or other organisational problems?
- ▶ Are there clearly defined transfer goals – observable behaviours critical to success that have demonstrable business impact?
- ▶ Is it obvious that transfer success is the declared goal of training events in the organisation? How do the top management, executives, trainers and HR department communicate and live this?
- ▶ How do we design the end of the training programme? What do we award certificates for?

Tools and interventions

How can these measures be designed? What are some transfer-promoting alternatives to attendance-based certificates? Here are some inspirations and ideas:

- ▶ **Transfer report** Each trainee writes a transfer report that describes their implementation successes. A certificate is issued only after this report has been signed by the supervisor and/or sent to the HR department or trainer.
- ▶ **Transfer presentation** Each participant presents their implementation successes and learnings



to a suitable committee (such as executives, management, L&D, the trainer or colleagues). The certificate is awarded to anyone who has been able to convince the participants of the success of their transfer.

- ▶ **Completion of a practical project** Before the training programme, the company commissions practical projects which are developed and carried out with the help of the training content. So, in the case of training on the subject of product marketing, the project brief could read: develop an online marketing strategy for product X and implement it in the company. The participants receive their final certificate when their practical project has been successfully completed or implemented. This is determined by the project stakeholder and/or by a presentation in front of another appropriate body.
- ▶ **What are you awarding your certificate for?** The trainer or the L&D department asks each training participant for the implementation successes they achieved. These are then noted and clearly visible on the certificate. This is particularly effective when the management gets involved. Then the signs are clear: transfer is not a nice-to-have in the organisation; it is what is expected, and the outcome is recorded.

But what if the customers are used to receiving a “reward paper” at the end of the training and do not want to let it go? Then trainers can proceed step-by-step: keep distributing participation confirmations as before but – and here’s the crucial difference – announce that

a practitioner certificate or confirmation of success will be issued only after the successful implementation.

This should achieve the twin goals of placating the participants fixated on paper-based endorsement, and improving learning transfer. **TJ**

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Next month: Ina explores what we can learn from scientific research to improve learning transfer.