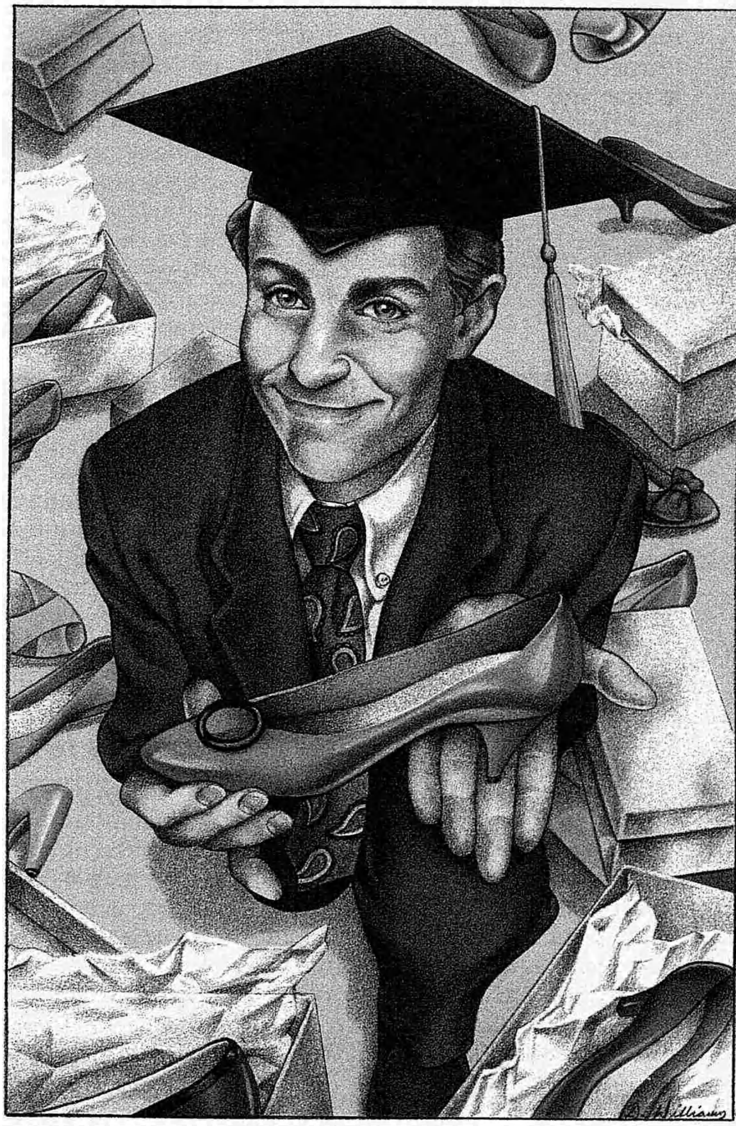
Bringing It Back to Work



Donna Williams

When all is said and done in a training course, what was said and done doesn't do any good if trainees don't use it when they get back to the job. The world's most informative seminar can use state-of-the-art technology to teach employees a new way to make widgets (or count 'em, or sell 'em, or tell people about 'em) but it's all for naught if trainees continue to use the old methods.

This month's "Training 101" looks at end-of-training issues. Scott Parry examines 3 factors that affect training transfer—and 20 ideas for improving it. Barry Friedman gives 6 suggestions for how trainees can do their part to apply learning on the job. John Jones presents 26 reasons why you should be wary of end-of-course questionnaires—and 7 ways to get them to tell you whether the training has changed (or will change) employee attitudes or behavior.

What it all adds up to is training that makes a difference.

But Will They Use It?

By Scott Parry, *chairman of Training House Inc., Box 3090, Princeton, NJ 08543-3090. Copyright the Training House. This article is adapted from his workshop materials with permission of the author.*

Training is an investment. If the learners apply back at work what they acquired during their learning, there will be a return on the investment. If they do not, then the training time was merely spent (and hence wasted) rather than invested.

Why would learners not apply at work what they were taught during the training?

Three factors

Three sets of factors can help or hinder the transfer of learning from class to job: personal, instructional, and organizational. Let's look at some examples of each.

Personal factors involve issues in several categories:

- motivation (Does the learner want to be in class? Does the learner already know the subject matter. . .or believe that she or he does? Does the learner enjoy the work and the job?)
- ability (Does the learner have the ability to learn the material?)
- attention (Can the learner concentrate, or are weightier matters interfering—such as an illness or a divorce?)
- relevance (Does the learner see the course as relevant to the job and to his or her personal needs?)

Instructional factors include such things as the following:

- course design (Are the methods and media appropriate? What about facilities and equipment? Length and objectives?)
- emphasis (This includes issues such as theory versus practice, knowledge versus skills, and talking versus doing.)
- instructor (Is she or he credible and effective?)
- follow-up (Does the trainer get feedback on learners' performance after training? Does the trainer take appropriate actions accordingly, with the trainee or the course design?)

Organizational factors look at outside influences involving the

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company and the job:

- climate (Do the norms, culture, and expectations of fellow employees and managers support the new behaviors that were just learned?)
- time and timing (Does the trainee have time to do things the way they were taught? Is the trainee given the opportunity to apply new learning right away?)
- degree of fit (Do local procedures, forms, and equipment agree with those taught to the learner?)

A maintenance system

Personal factors are internal to the learner. Often, instructors can do little to influence them, besides attempting to "screen" course participants by assessing their behavior before the course and trying to get the right people into the right places at the right times.

The second and third factors are external to the learner. Instructors, course designers, and managers share responsibility for the instructional and organizational issues. They must establish a "maintenance system" to recognize and reinforce the desired behaviors as learners attempt to apply at work what they've learned in class. But how do you do that? Coming up are 20 ideas for addressing the instructional and organizational factors that affect transfer of training. But first, a brief discussion of learning.

Learning curves

Introductory psychology texts typically contain a chapter or so on learning and remembering. They explain that learning can be plotted as a curve to show how a learner's performance improves over time. After a training course, trainees transfer the newly acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes in one of three ways.

- Continued improvement (the curve is still climbing). When learners can immediately apply and improve the new skills, performance continues to grow. This is particularly apparent in areas such as typing or data-entry, foreign language study, performance-appraisal training for supervisors, and sales presentation skills.
- Stable performance (the curve levels off). Some types of behavior are binary. Learners can do something or they can't; it's not a matter of degree. Examples include remembering a concept or theory, spelling a name, stating a policy, citing a source, performing a mathematical operation, and recalling a formula.
- Declining performance (the curve shows a rapid decline). When new learning is not applied—or when attempts to apply it are met with negative consequences—trainees revert to old habits, wrong behavior, or withdrawal (non-response to situations they've been trained to respond to). Example: "I don't care what they told you in class; you're working for me now. Here's how I want it done."

Trainers have a major responsibility to do whatever they can to keep the curve as high as possible, ensuring maximum transfer from workshop to workplace.

20 ways to improve training transfer

Think about these ideas in terms of the different courses you teach. Not every item will apply to every course and every situation. If you implement three or four of these, the return on investment will be well worth your trouble.

1. Each participant completes an action plan that spells out what steps he or she will take back on the job to apply the newly learned concepts and skills. The trainee discusses the action plan with his or her supervisor, and both agree on when and how the plan will be implemented. The trainee files a copy with the instructor for follow-up.

2. Schedule an alumni day about five to eight weeks after the course. Participants come back together to report (10 to 15 minutes each) on the things they have accomplished by putting to use the concepts and skills they learned in the course. Make this day your "graduation." Invite their supervisors.

3. When you are teaching the entire job to a new hire, have each trainee develop a job description as an ongoing part of the course. The trainee summarizes in her or his own words every new procedure or responsibility that you teach, and adds it to the job description. After training, the trainee takes the document to her or his supervisor.

4. Create an association of those who have completed the course. Have the "graduates" meet once a month for their continued growth and development. They could designate a program committee to identify areas of interest for further training; you assist by getting speakers or instructors from within or outside the organization.

5. Develop a newsletter to maintain and reward good performance through recognition. Include interviews with graduates, success stories, instructive articles, contests, quizzes, and case studies for analysis ("What would you have done?").

6. Have each learner send in a Critical Incident Report. The report summarizes a problem encountered back on the job and describes how the learner solved the problem by using tools and techniques acquired during the course. Make successes public in a staff newsletter.

7. In customer-contact jobs, conduct a "shopping survey" by phone or in person. See how the graduate is able to handle various problems and questions that a shopper poses. Then give immediate feedback, and reward the employee if the performance merits it.

8. Instead of running courses "intensively" over a short time span, stretch them out and run them "extensively," interspersing classroom time with time back on the job. This gives participants time to apply and act on each new set of skills, meet with their supervisors, and address differences between class and job.

9. Bring the managers of your participants together before the course starts (and maybe after it is over) to brief them on the objectives, content, and format of the training. Most important, discuss their role as partners with you in the training of their people. Spell out their responsibilities; give them a letter of agreement.

10. If people work together in

pairs, schedule them to attend training in pairs (for example, data processing clerks, a secretary and his or her boss, customer service reps). Develop your training exercises in a way that strengthens their responsibility to support one another.

11. Use needs analysis techniques and instruments that can be repeated at some interval after the course. That way, you can generate data to be given back to graduates and their bosses. Get them together to interpret the changes.

12. Use planning sheets, flow charts, checklists, and other job aids in the training program. Trainees can take such tools back to the workplace and use them on the job. Conduct an audit of the workplace to see how well the job aids are being used; reward and reinforce that behavior.

13. Set up an assessment lab or a series of modular (independent) self-assessment exercises. Schedule each graduate to come in for "a free, no-obligation check up." Give the graduate feedback on strengths and weaknesses; discuss areas in which she or he has been able and unable to apply the learning.

14. Work with department heads, division managers, and other managers to select a training coordinator for each major unit of the organization. Work with coordinators in scheduling follow-up activities to help participants as they leave training and go back to their jobs. Equip the coordinators with checklists and other job aids.

15. Form a training advisory committee. It should consist of key managers from the major divisions of your organization. Use the committee for input (guidance) in developing your courses, and for output (follow-up) in monitoring and reinforcing good performance by graduates.

16. Give participants surveys and assessments that they can go through and have their managers and subordinates, customers, and users go through. That will affect the immediate environment of your participants.

17. Provide participants and their managers with lists of behaviors to be observed and evaluated back at work. Request that they return copies of the checklist to the instructor within 30 days of the end of a course.

18. Create a performance contract in which the participant agrees to meet the criteria spelled out in the contract in exchange for receiving the training. Participants evaluate themselves against the criteria and notify the training department when they have met them.

19. Run training programs for natural work groups (by department, branch, or location) rather than for a mixture that runs across organizational lines. Address the specific needs of each group rather than conducting "one size fits all" courses for diverse audiences.

20. In jobs in which productivity can be measured (for example, the number of sales made, transactions processed, or trucks loaded), schedule a contest for just after the training. Set up the reward schedule so as to have many winners among your graduates.

Six Ways To Make It Work at Work

By Barry A. Friedman, *a management education consultant at Mobil Corporation in Rochester, New York.*

Transfer of training is an idea that cuts to the core for trainers and managers. Why conduct training unless it changes behavior on the job or causes productivity to increase? That is the fundamental question of training transfer.

Many articles have outlined the responsibilities of trainers and line managers to ensure that those who attend programs apply new skills on the job. They speak of aligning training with business needs, designing programs that are job-related, modifying the culture to support new skills, preparing participants' managers to reinforce new behavior, and designing follow-up programs and measures. Such practices are crucial for training to have impact, but somewhere along the way they leave out a key player: the employee being trained.

Concrete guidance for trainees

What advice do we give trainees to promote behavior change on the job? "Work hard, think of job applications, actively discuss and practice the new skills during and after the program, and write action plans."

Do we really expect that such advice will motivate trainees to seriously consider new concepts and diligently practice them on the job? What is needed is more concrete guidance.

Talking with employees following training is a bittersweet experience. The warning signs start immediately, as they tell the trainer, "I enjoyed your program" and "I wish my boss had this." Such statements do not instill confidence that behavior change will occur.

Some employees go back and strategically implement what they've learned—and make a difference. What can trainers share with employees to help them to do that? What differentiates trainees who successfully transfer training from those who don't?

Six specific suggestions trainers can offer to trainees can help them increase transfer of training:

- Be strategic.
- Involve the boss.
- Communicate with others who are affected by action plans.
- Take moderate risks.
- Package behavior change intelligently.
- Be realistic.

Six suggestions

Trainees who heed those six suggestions increase their chances for successfully transferring training to the job. Let's look at the suggestions in greater detail.

Be strategic. Trainers must design programs that meet business needs. Similarly, trainees should write specific action plans that are directly aligned with their departments' objectives; they should analyze business objectives to determine where shortfalls exist. Action plans that are "add-ons" or that don't link into important priorities are doomed from the start. Trainees must focus on projects that count.

Involve the boss. Trainees must keep their bosses informed before, during, and after training.

Trainees should contract with their managers to ensure support. The "contract" is an agreement regarding roles and responsibilities toward the training. Every trainee should be prepared to upwardly manage and negotiate support from the boss. That will help trainees avoid the "so you are finally back from training—now get back to work" syndrome.

Negotiations should include such areas as identifying action plans, setting priorities, removing barriers, taking risks, acting as a buffer, and being tolerant of initial setbacks or outright failures as the trainee uses new skills.

Communicate new projects to those affected. Of course, the boss must be kept informed, but many projects tackled by recent training participants involve several other people. Encourage trainees to write communication plans as part of their action plans. A communication plan is intended to inform other employees who are affected. The plan should include what is expected of everyone and what everyone can expect if support is provided. Employees need to know how the trainee's actions will affect their jobs. There should be no surprises, or support may turn into resistance.

Take moderate risks. Actions that incorporate moderate risks result in greater trainee growth and motivation than wild or conservative actions. More times than not, high risks are viewed as reckless; conservative risks seldom bring about significant results. Trainees must identify projects that test their new skills, that have organizational benefits, and that have reasonable chances of success.

Package changes. One way for trainees to reduce risks is to package new behavior, projects, and action plans in ways that are acceptable to the organization. A conservative organization will not seriously consider state-of-the-art management techniques unless they are properly packaged to make people comfortable with the changes.

For example, trainers in a nuts-and-bolts culture should not conduct "trust walks" and "touchy-feely" exercises.

Trainees must translate new skills into forms that are digestible to the system. One way to do that is to associate a new project with something the organization already recognizes as legitimate. For example, new meeting techniques could be practiced during regular monthly staff meetings.

Be realistic about change. Employees typically go through stages as they try to apply on the job what they've learned in training. Immediately after training, many are optimistic that they can quickly turn things around. Then, reality strikes as they bump up against resistance and other organizational barriers. Unfortunately, the final stage may involve pessimism about ever being able to make the new skills work in the present culture. Trainees should have realistic expectations about what can be applied on the job.

A shared responsibility

Transfer of training is a shared responsibility. Managers must provide leadership and shape the culture. Trainees' supervisors must model effective supervisory practices and reinforce specific application. The training department must properly design programs. But a good part of the responsibility lies with the employees being trained. Trainers can help trainees to accept a greater share of that responsibility by following those six basic suggestions.

Don't Smile About Smile Sheets

By John E. Jones, *president of Organizational Universe Systems, 5412 Barkla Street, San Diego, CA 92122. He is the author, with W.L. Bearley, of* Surveying Employees: A Practical Guidebook *(Valley Center, California: Organizational Universe Systems, 1988).*

Most training courses include end-of-course questionnaires that ask participants to rate various aspects of the experience. In the training industry, we refer to these instruments as "smile sheets" and often deride them in professional discussions.

So why do we use smile sheets? The three most common reasons:

- Training sponsors want them.
- The training staff wants to know "how'd we do?"
- The ratings look valid.

People who pay the bills to have their employees developed want instant results; they often want participants to like the experience. (Sometimes they use training as a cosmetic intervention to improve morale). End-of-course questionnaires provide quick answers. They fit in with the short-term mentality of some executives—"profits this quarter."

The professionals who staff courses also want immediate feedback, even if it is flawed. One of the severe limitations of end-of-course feedback is that it violates what we all know to be effective criteria of information exchange. In spite of that, trainers often have an almost morbid preoccupation with wanting to know how participants reacted to courses.

End-of-course questionnaires generate statistics with a a pristine, truthful look, especially when the numbers come out of computers. This is the GITO phenomenon—

Garbage In, Truth Out. People want end-of-course rating summaries because they look valid. Unfortunately, their usefulness (the chief criterion of validity in this context) is severely limited.

The 26 faults

Believe it or not, this list of 26 limitations of end-of-course ratings is not exhaustive. That there are at least this many faults should cause evaluators to think skeptically about using such data.

1. Ratings don't correlate with transfer of training. No available research shows a clear relationship between end-of-course ratings and the extent to which participants apply training on the job.

2. Many raters are unqualified. Training participants do not have the background to supply valid judgments about the effectiveness of a training course. They know what they like, but they are usually uneducated about educational theory and methods.

3. Trainees have uneven comparative histories. Trainees usually have highly varied training experiences with which to compare a given course. What one person considers to be outstanding may appear ordinary to another; both may have valid reasons for their opinions.

4. Data are retrospective. End-of-course ratings suffer from all the faults of retrospective data. What we remember may be highly inaccurate; our judgments about it may vary across time. Asking participants to rate the opening session on the last day is usually useless.

5. Responses are judgmental or subjective. Most end-of-course questionnaires ask respondents to make evaluations. Such ratings are, of course, judgmental and subjective. What one person sees as useful another may see quite differently.

6. Ratings are sensitive to mood. The activities that immediately precede the end-of-course ratings can affect the data. For example, a celebratory atmosphere in the room may improve ratings.

7. Trainees fear reprisal, even when surveys are "anonymous." Some participants almost always leave blank the demographic items on end-of-course questionnaires. In general, the more demographic items that are included, the more the fear of reprisal on the part of respondents.

8. Trainees do not complete surveys. Participants don't want to complete long questionnaires from which they will not personally benefit. End-of-course evaluations, then, usually compromise in favor of brevity.

9. Ratings are sensitive to wording nuances. If you change a key word, the ratings change. Using loaded language or controversial terms can have serious and unknown effects on patterns of response.

10. Free-form comments are almost always predominantly negative. They receive too much weight, though they often cannot be confirmed. It is better to ask for comments only in the pilot study that precedes a system-wide survey. Here such remarks can be useful in making the final instrument more comprehensible and clear.

11. Surveys set expectations for change. The act of asking for people's input raises expectations that something will be done with the results. Training participants often ask later to hear how the staff used their ratings and suggestions. Be wary of asking about things that are not going to change.

12. Surveys are quick, taken at a time when people want to leave. Many training participants approach the task of evaluating a course in a cursory manner. After all, it is not their course. Their motivation is often to "get outta here" rather than to improve the course.

13. Statistical trends depend as much on group composition as on design and delivery. Comparing average ratings across sessions is not an "apple to apples" practice. The particular mix of participants—or even the presence of a difficult participant—can skew ratings.

14. Statistical trends are not comparable when design and delivery change. When a course takes place over a long period, there should be continuous improvements to its design and delivery. That makes end-of-course ratings apply to noncomparable experiences; the statistical trends can be misleading.

15. Not all instrument items are equally important, and often some of them do not even match the rating scale. How a respondent interprets an item is a function of her or his experience base; no two training experiences are exactly alike.

16. Ratings of different parts of training (such as the opening, lectures, and hands-on activities) are always uneven and non-synergistic. For example, adults tend to rate lectures lower than they rate experimental training exercises. In addition, rating a presentation is a contaminated act. Reactions to different aspects of the training—the style of the trainer, interest in the content, use of audiovisual aids, and so forth—may co-mingle in the act of rating.

17. The emphasis is often on excitement. People like to have fun in training courses. Many resent it when the trainer asks them to work hard, even for compelling business reasons. Training that resembles "rest and recreation" often gets high marks. End-of-course ratings may reflect the extent to which people simply "had a good time."

18. Surveys may confuse "like" and "worth." Instruments that use rating scales that include words such as "like" and "satisfying" promote this confusion. What we need is a clear index of the usefulness of the session, not whether it made people smile.

19. Surveys tend to focus on what is wrong. On the basis of end-of-course ratings, training-design specialists may inadvertently change what is really working in the course. If a questionnaire only solicits data for improvement, "critiques" may become negative criticism.

20. The change-back effect. The most dramatic effect of training is no effect. Most training does not work. Most intended results are not demonstrably evident. There must be supportive changes in systems that reward and reinforce personal development. End-of-course ratings do not reflect the probable washout of effects.

21. Some effects of training are delayed. Some people continue to

learn from a course long after it is "completed." Many former trainees remark that "lights went on" for six months after a course. End-of-course ratings do not tap that process.

22. When a course "raises the ante" regarding taking responsibility for being an organizational leader, a trainee may arrive at the closing session with doubts about the future ("Do I want to stay?" "Do I have what it takes?"). Such concerns can depress end-of-course ratings.

23. Self-confrontational experiences can have temporary effects. In courses that include self disclosure, feedback, risk taking, and confrontation, people may experience a lack validation of their self-concepts. The experience can be temporarily upsetting, and may result in low ratings.

24. Survey "report cards" put pressure on staff. There is a strong tendency to "play the ratings." If training managers use survey results in evaluating staff, trainers may choose not to confront participants and may even slip into entertainment postures. Many trainers see end-of-course ratings as a threat.

25. When the numbers come out of the computer, many trainers pay the most attention to the negative results. They remember the one or two "cheap shots" that participants wrote on the questionnaires and discount the positive feedback.

26. Surveys are about judging others' work rather than taking personal responsibility. Perhaps the most serious fault of end-of-course ratings is that they are upside down. Participants earn their salaries while learning and planning how to apply the learning to their work. Most end-of-course questionnaires encourage them to make the trainer responsible for their learning.

What to do instead

With all of these limitations, what is to be done? Here are seven suggestions:

1. If you must include end-of-course ratings, clean up your thinking about them. Reflect often and honestly about their faults.

2. If your manager evaluates you on the basis of end-of-course ratings, do something dramatically positive just before people fill out the questionnaire. Have participants' supervisors come to the final session, and have each person declare in front of all the worth of the experience and his or her intended changes. Then gather the data. When they leave, quietly consider the degree of personal integrity in such a strategy.

3. Stick with business goals. Make each end-of-course survey item clearly relate to organizational needs.

4. Focus on self-responsibility (What did you do here?). Have participants rate the extent to which they took personal responsibility for learning practical things that they clearly commit to use on the job.

5. Limit questionnaires. Since you are getting shaky information, why ask for a lot of it? Keep end-of-course instruments brief.

6. Set up control charts on key metrics. Specify what you are trying to influence in the organization, set up measurement systems, and track changes. Establish acceptable limits of variation; plan to intervene in other ways than with training (a "low-wattage" intervention at best) when measurements fall outside of control limits.

7. Conduct follow-up studies. Study training effects on the job. Focus on observable behavior whenever possible, and include multiple sources of information.

I don't mean to argue that trainers should never use end-of-course evaluations. Rather, I have provided a set of caveats about their limitations. We need more than one method and more than one data source for gathering complete information on the results of training. The effort is worth it, and the payoff can be significant.

"Training 101" *is edited by* **Catherine M. Petrini**. *Send your short articles for consideration to Training 101*, Training & Development Journal, *1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.*