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# Learning Transfer In Catalan Local Administrations: Variables Associated With The Workplace

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**Abstract**

Transfer of training to the workplace is often analysed by different models whose aim is to evaluate the impact of training on organizations (Kirkpatrick, 1959; Le Boterf, 1991; Pineda, 2003 & Phillips, 2006). In some cases, there are models which are only focused on the evaluation of training transfer as a tool which allows us to get to know the effectiveness of training (Noe & Smith, 1986; Olsen, 1998 & Holton, 2005) and which identifies variables that may act either as facilitators or barriers and can be grouped according to factors concerning learner, training activity design and delivery or workplace environment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Hutchins, 2007). Ultimately, there are some authors who are merely focused on the analysis of those variables closely related to workplace environment in which new learning is supposed to be applied (Clarke, 2002; Gumuseli & Ergin, 2002; Chiaburu, Van Dam & Hutchins, 2010 & Van den Bossche, Segers & Jansen, 2010).

This paper underlines the variables associated with the workplace, formerly appeared in a research which aimed to analyse the factors associated with training transfer in Catalan local Administrations. The development of the research includes a longitudinal analysis of nine studies carried out throughout the 2000-2009 period, as well as further contrasting of results with individual interviews and focus groups with the participation of experts, training managers, participants and managers.

The main results enable us to confirm that workplace-related variables exert a huge influence on training transfer, especially those concerning supervisors' role, availability of resources, learners' motivation in the workplace and work climate.

*Keywords: learning environments*, *transfer*, *training*, *workplace*, *learning transfer*, *public administration*

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**Introduction**

Transfer of training and its analysis is an aspect, which has concerned experts from all fields in the last few years: economy, personal management, education, psychology and adult training. The reason for that is that the absence of training transfer entails for organizations a relevant loss of resources, whereas getting employees to transfer what they have learned becomes an investment and, consequently, a competitive advantage that all of the organizations intend to achieve.

Transfer of training is the evidence that new knowledge and skills are being applied in the workplace (Baldwin & Ford, 1988) and they keep working through time (Cheng & Ho, 2001, Holton *et al.* 1997). In order to analyse it in the traditional way, it has been necessary to take into consideration those factors linked to participants' personal characteristics in training, those related to the design of the training action which has been carried out and those concerning work climate in the environment in which new knowledge is supposed to be applied (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Tannenbaum *et al.* 1991, Ford & Weissbein, 1997; Burke & Hutchins, 2007)

Within this contribution, we describe those variables related to workplace which affect training transfer in the field of Catalan local Administrations. Results stem from a research work conducted in the 2010-2011 period whose aim was to define and analyse both barriers and facilitators in training transfer in the context of local Public Administrations (Barrera-Corominas, 2011).

**2. Literature review: influence of workplace variables on training transfer**

Work-environment variables are important to ensure that new knowledge and skills acquired by employees in training actions may be applied in the workplace (Wang & Wilcox, 2006). Feedback and support by superiors and the possibility of introducing changes in the workplace are two key factors to ensure maintenance of new skills in the workplace (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). It may also be relevant to mention those variables linked to the employee's socialization (Reio & Sutton, 2006) and work climate (Yamnil & McLean, 2001; Rouana *et al.*, 2002).

Support stemming from supervisors is considered to be one of the most important factors to ensure that training is transferred to the workplace and kept through time (Axtel, Maitlis & Yearta, 1997; Ford, Quiñones, Sego, & Sorra, 1992; Martin, 2010). According to Lim (2000), support from supervisors should be understood as a constant activity of supervision by superiors of the activities that subordinates are carrying out. In this context, supervision must always allow giving suitable feedback to employees in order to let them know how and when they are in a position to apply what they have learned (Becker & Klimoski, 1989). According to Orpen (1999), the fact that supervisors know and understand what they may do and what they are supposed to do to ensure training effectiveness is an essential aspect, which is not to be eluded.

Studies such as those conducted by Axtel, Maitlis & Yearta (1997) and Ford, Quiñones, Sego & Sorra (1992) set a direct correlation between autonomy and control on changes to be introduced in the workplace and the training transfer which is received. Along these lines, their studies conclude that those employees who enjoy greater autonomy to introduce changes in their workplace are likely to be those who will more frequently apply new knowledge learned through training and keep it through time.

Employees' socialization in the bosom of the organization is also a basic factor which allows them to successfully transfer what they have learned to their workplace (Reio & Sutton, 2006; Van den Bosche, Segers & Jansen, 2010). According to Van den Bossche and his colleagues, this is due to the fact that correct socialization of employees allows them to rely on greater support from their superiors, as well as from their workmates, when time to apply new knowledge comes.

Organizations should also foster an appropriate work climate for transfer (Yamnil & McLean, 2001), by providing employees with tools that enable them to set improvements in their workplaces and develop new behaviours in their daily lives (Ruona *et al.*, 2002). According to Rouiller & Goldstein (1993:383), work climate includes dimensions linked to: (1) *situational aspects*, which are used to remind participants of their training; (2) *goals*, consisting of getting trainees to consider the goals that they are supposed to achieve through it; (3) *social aspects*, which have to do with the workgroup where the participant belongs; (4) *task-related aspects*, related to the

design and management of work itself; (5) *self-control aspects*, linked to autonomy which enables to make decisions about introducing new knowledge or attitudes; (6) *consequences*, related to their feelings to the institution once they have applied what they have learned; and (7) *punishment or criticism*, which relates to feedback provided by superiors and workmates.

Holton (2005) identifies that transfer climate is influenced by organizational learning culture, as well as by the effects, both direct and indirect, which this may have on innovation. In this sense, he considers that organizations which relate goals to learning show better results in transfer than those who do not. Furthermore, these organizations are bound to have many more indirect influences upon those who participate in training to encourage them to apply new knowledge and change their attitudes in favour of an organizational improvement.

## 3. Purpose of the study and methodology

The aim of this research focuses on analysing both barriers and facilitators in training transfer in the context of local Administrations, with the goal to list which factors may determine or foster the fact that training has a greater impact on organizations. So then, the most specific aims which it puts forward are:

- Identifying and describing the factors that facilitate or determine transfer from training to the workplace.
- Specifying crucial elements in training transfer in the context of local public Administrations.

The fulfilment of this research takes two mayor stages into consideration. The first one consisted of a longitudinal analysis of transfer and impact assessment data collected by the Organizational Development Team during the 2000-2008 period in different Catalan local Administrations, by means of the factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA and MANORA) and Tukey's method to get to know whether differences in comparisons were significant. Altogether 4,335 questionnaires were analysed, from which 3,368 corresponded with participants in training actions, 460 with hierarchical superiors, 176 with training managers and 330 with union representatives.

The previous analysis were complemented with interviews with supervisors and training managers from ten different local Administrations: two in towns with over 100,000 inhabitants, three in towns with between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, two in towns with between 20,000 and 50,000 inhabitants, and three in towns with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. Interviews were analysed by means of content tables with the Atlas TI programme, and the results obtained were contrasted through discussion groups with both theoretical and training-related experts.

## 4. Main results of the research

The first stage of the research took into account the longitudinal analysis of data collected during nine years by EDO group, from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Workplace-related characteristics (table 1) show, in a scale from 1 to 4, how those participating in learning actions state that context has an impact on training transfer, with a maximum of 2.67 points in 2008 and a minimum of 2.49 in 2005, with no significant differences between the year-on-year averages shown below.

| Variables | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Context favours application | 2.50 | 2.53 | 2.52 | 2.52 | 2.52 | 2.49 | 2.55 | 2.65 | 2.67 | .275 |
| Boss favours application | 2.69 | 2.89 | 2.74 | 2.72 | 2.70 | 2.78 | 2.63 | 2.82 | 2.83 | .053* |
| Worker relies on different resources | 2.50 | 2.49 | 2.56 | 2.52 | 2.51 | 2.55 | 2.54 | 2.62 | 2.64 | .529 |

Table 1: Evaluation of criteria related to applicability facilitators according to participants

The matter that refers to the boss as a facilitator of learning application displays a minimum score of 2.69 in 2000 and a maximum score of 2.83 in 2008. This is actually the only variable showing statistically significant data among its annual averages (p=0.05). The previous matter referred to the resources which the employee has within

reach in order to apply learning. In this particular case, the highest score was obtained in 2008, with 2.64 points, and the lowest one in 2001, with 2.48 points. Nevertheless, no significant differences are noticed in this variable.

A detailed analysis of the qualitative results from previous reports allows us to notice that both hierarchical superiors, in charge of training, and workers' representatives highlight the lack of support and tracking from supervisors as an aspect that hinders the introduction of changes in the workplace as a result of training. Superiors and training managers also point out the lack of an organizational culture that might favour the introduction of these changes.

The second stage of the research, in which both training managers and supervisors are involved, reasserts the idea that supervisors may hinder the application of learning. This is frequently entailed by a lack of interest regarding subordinates' training, or else by an either unspoken or explicit ban on applying innovations to those workplaces stemming from training. To a large extent, this comes as a result of hierarchical organization and bureaucratization of the local public Administrations.

> "*Trainees hold the belief –and sometimes they are just right– that bosses care more about daily duties rather than about whether a particular dossier is ready or their people are trained enough.*" (**P18: SJ+50_2 (22:22)**)

> "*(...) sometimes, indeed, I have heard of employees who have learned something, but, as in their section the boss is too strict about how to do things, they don't then have the chance to apply this.*" (**P13: SJ+100_2 (59:59)**)

Also, organizational culture and history –typically ultra-conservative in Administrations– comes forward as a factor that may have an influence on a non-application of training. Lack of resources, which stems from scarce investment, also becomes a factor highlighted by interviewees as a difficulty additional to the transfer of training.

In terms of facilitators to transfer training, this stage stresses employees' leeway to introduce improvements in their workplaces ("*leeway –always under some supervision– to apply what they have learned in a logical and consistent way according to the department's possibilities.*" **P11: SJ-20_2 (51:51)**), managers' training in skills which may allow them to develop a supportive and supervising role with collaborators in their training, as well as the application of new knowledge: "*Now, there are fewer obstacles because section bosses have been trained in a way that they can motivate or help encourage people to take up training*." (**P 1: RF-20_1 (91:91)**)

## 5. Conclusions

Research results allow us to support the following authors when they state that supervisors play an essential role in the transfer of training to the workplace (Axtel, Maitlis & Yearta, 1997; Ford, Quiñones, Sego & Sorra, 1992; Martin, 2010). That is why we must consider superiors' awareness and training as factors that allow them to be able to continuously support their employees, from the moment prior to training until they return to their daily duties. With that purpose, it is also essential to underline the role that supervisors play in their collaborators' motivation in the workplace. Higher motivation results in higher chances to transfer training into the workplace (Noe, 1986; Noe & Schmitt, 1986).

Also, the chance to apply new knowledge in the workplace becomes a relevant aspect for training to be transferred, which allows us to prove what is stated in Ruona *et al*., 2002. In this sense, it is important that local Administrations provide their employees with enough autonomy that enables them to introduce improvements and changes in their workplaces. However, in the context analysed, this may be difficult due to plentiful rules regulating activities in the workplace, along with the existence of directives external to the local administration itself that may have an impact on the employees' work.

Organizational culture and history appears in the second stage of this study as an aspect that may hinder the introduction of changes in the workplace. This is chiefly because it has an impact on the organization's climate, which hinders the introduction of changes in a traditionally ultra-conservative institution.

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