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Transfer in digital training: Quick-and-easy tools with great impact

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Dr. Ina Weinbauer-Heidel and Dirk Meißner give TJ subscribers practical tips and tools for effective learning transfer.

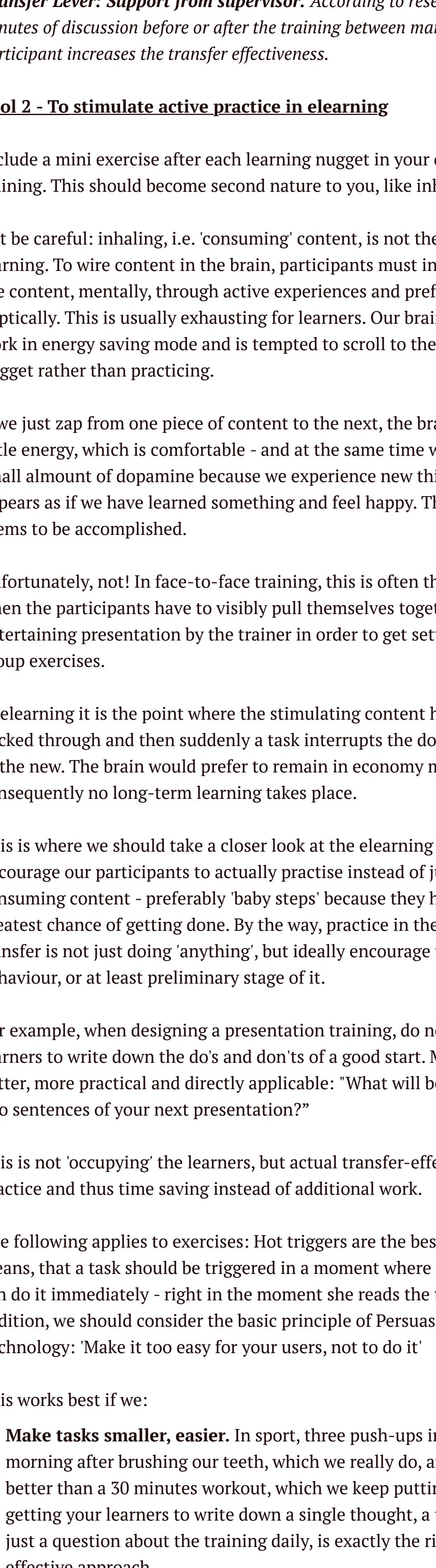


When it comes to the effectiveness of digital training, HR professionals, R&D consultants, trainers, and elearning designers would prefer to have all the levers in their own hands.

The challenges of the current crisis show us that in-company training must be effective - and preferably implemented yesterday. Corona is forcing entire industries into the home office, where training can only take place online. And cheap, fast, and of course verifiably effective please.

If learning experts really want to design sustainable training, then it is unfortunately not enough to upload a PDF here, insert some nice pictures there, everything as simple and fast as possible. If you want *sustained* behaviour change, you must invest more: not necessarily money - but ideas and a transfer vision. So, let's do it right!

And right does not mean to buy yet ANOTHER top software package, more technical features, or an additional content nugget. Because training design is only one of three areas that are crucial for transfer success. The other two are participants and organisations.



It is often the third area, the organisation, that represents the greatest transfer challenge and supposedly can be addressed the least by the elearning designer! However, there are several levers in each of the three areas that we can set to 'effective', even in elearning.

Because let's face it, don't we bury our heads in the sand too quickly and consider ourselves not responsible? True to the motto: 'I can't do anything about this! I have no influence on that!' But that is usually just an excuse for 'I have no idea how transfer works and what I can do about it.'

The key to more sustainability lies in transfer research. After some 110 years of scientific discourse, an approach was needed that brought both worlds together: research and the desire of learning experts to put the theory into practice. The result was the 12 Levers of Transfer Effectiveness®. Finally, something to tackle and get going.

In short, transfer shows how intensively the attendee of a training course really applies their acquired knowledge, skills or attitudes on the job long term. Apart from the participants, training design and the organisation with its framework conditions and funding opportunities are also important for the transfer success.

All in all, there are 12 Levers of Transfer Effectiveness® that you should set to 'effective' with resourceful tools and interventions. With these applied, your project is on the best and scientifically sound path to business impact.

The mantra of transfer promotion is 'baby steps', as Stanford professor BJ Fogg likes to put it. It is all about mini measures that are aimed at achieving more transfer success, without overburdening either the participants or the company. Transfer supporting measures that are so small and simple that they can be implemented easily and without resistance or fuss.

So how does it work in practice? Are there ways of using levers in elearning, such as support from managers? And only with mini interventions? With little effort? Without resistance?

Here come the five quick-and-easy tools that do exactly that.

Tool 1 - To bring managers on board

Initiate a conversation with the training participant's manager. Draft the relevant email inviting the manager to such a conversation so that the learner only needs to complete and send it. This is the basic task for the participants: Get your supervisor on board and ensure right now that this training is worthwhile for you, your team and your company.

The email text could be something like this:

'Dear supervisor, in order to (benefit for the company) ... I am completing the digital training (title) ... Basically, it's all about (core message) ... I am interested in your feedback so that I can get the best out of the training for myself and our team. What do you think is especially important for us? What do you expect? Which project/task/framework should I have in mind? When do we want to exchange ideas? I look forward to your feedback.'

You should also encourage such conversations during the training - also with tasks à la 'share ideas with my manager'.

Transfer Lever: Support from supervisor. According to research, even 15 minutes of discussion before or after the training between manager and participant increases the transfer effectiveness.

Tool 2 - To stimulate active practice in elearning

Include a mini exercise after each learning nugget in your digital training. This should become second nature to you, like inhale - exhale.

But be careful: inhaling, i.e. 'consuming' content, is not the same as learning. To wire content in the brain, participants must interact with the content, mentally, through active experiences and preferably even haptically. This is usually exhausting for learners. Our brain prefers to work in energy saving mode and is tempted to scroll to the next content nugget rather than practicing.

If we just zap from one piece of content to the next, the brain needs little energy, which is comfortable - and at the same time we also get a small amount of dopamine because we experience new things. It appears as if we have learned something and feel happy. The mission seems to be accomplished.

Unfortunately, not! In face-to-face training, this is often the moment when the participants have to visibly pull themselves together after an entertaining presentation by the trainer in order to get settled into group exercises.

In elearning it is the point where the stimulating content has been clicked through and then suddenly a task interrupts the dopamine flow of the new. The brain would prefer to remain in economy mode, but consequently no long-term learning takes place.

This is where we should take a closer look at the elearning module and encourage our participants to actually practise instead of just consuming content - preferably 'baby steps' because they have the greatest chance of getting done. By the way, practice in the sense of transfer is not just doing 'anything', but ideally encourage the new behaviour, or at least preliminary stage of it.

For example, when designing a presentation training, do not ask your learners to write down the do's and don'ts of a good start. Make it better, more practical and directly applicable: 'What will be the first two sentences of your next presentation?'

This is not 'occupying' the learners, but actual transfer-effective practice and thus time saving instead of additional work.

The following applies to exercises: Hot triggers are the best way! This means, that a task should be triggered in a moment where the learner can do it immediately - right in the moment she reads the task. In addition, we should consider the basic principle of Persuasive Technology: 'Make it too easy for your users, not to do it'

This works best if we:

1. Make tasks smaller, easier. In sport, three push-ups in the morning after brushing our teeth, which we really do, are much better than a 30 minutes workout, which we keep putting off. E.g. getting your learners to write down a single thought, a term or even just a question about the training daily, is exactly the right and more effective approach.
2. Begin with a starter step. Instead of letting the learners perform the whole desired action, it is better to trigger only the first step. For example, in an elearning context, a good starter step is to 'print out the following summary and put it on your desk'. Instead of work through the downloaded 10-page PDF. And as a supplement maybe: 'If you can't wait, you may of course read on as an exception ;)'.
3. Offer tools for the action, i.e. checklists, samples, templates, a guide, etc in a hot-trigger format, in such a way that it will be at hand at the exact moment of need. In your online training, offer two variants of a task after each learning nugget. A 30 second to-do for experts and a longer version for geeks who really want to know.

Important: it is the learner's choice. Ideally there is also an immediate reward, e.g. a digital high five ('Great! That's it! You're on the team!'), additional content, a special tool tip, a funny link or, from the world of gaming 'You have just reached level 3 of 5'. All this is much more than just nice packaging: The emotion during or after the action decides whether we will do it again or not.

Transfer Lever: Active practice. Practical tasks must be doable. You should immediately get your learners active with mini exercises, motivation, and rewards. Because what feels good, we like to carry on.

Tool 3 - To set the first transfer step

There is a classic phenomenon: During the training the learners have good ideas and thoughts ('That sounds great! I should definitely put that into practice!') and then move on to the next info nugget and the idea, the resolution, is already gone or postponed and thus unfortunately mostly forgotten ('I'll have another look later and think about it.').

What is critical in face-to-face training is all the more important in online training. Without specifically defined next steps (Action Steps), no transfer! It is important to translate information into 'What does that mean for me?' and above all 'What will I do next?'

In this context, scientists swear by 'implementation intentions'. These can double or triple the frequency of implementation. You need to transfer the message from the classroom to the digital formats: 'Nobody leaves the seminar room/learning platform without concrete next steps!'

Careful! Again, it is tempting to say, 'I can't get my learners to do that, so I'll leave it out'. Don't. You can make this easy too.

Implementation intentions are particularly effective in the 'If... – then...' or in the 'After I ..., I will ...' format. You don't have to explain the concept, you can just use it in your elearning.

Tool 4 - To get colleagues who are not on the same training support me

Colleagues are also critical for the transfer success with their feedback on implementation attempts: 'Great idea!' or 'Where did you get this nonsense?' What colleagues think of the new ideas is often crucial for sustained implementation. But how do you get your learners' colleagues on board, especially if they have not (yet) done the same elearning?

'Teach-backs' with ready-made slides/documents and a task for the learners are a great tool for this. The task: tell your colleagues about your key insights. Send this pre-written email to possible interested parties.

Dear colleagues, I am currently doing exciting training on (add topic) ... I already have some concrete ideas how we (add value to the training, e.g. how we can shorten our meetings) ... I would be interested in your opinion. If you can, please come to a (virtual) lunch/coffee on ... at ... I look forward to meeting with you all".

For further support you can provide your learners with the most important insights from the training as a PDF/PPT.

Transfer lever: Support from peers. Encourage the learner's colleagues to welcome and support the transfer.

Tool 5 - To make successful application the finish line rather than the last click

From a transfer point of view, the training is far from over at the end of the training! But unfortunately, a different attitude has become established in many companies: With the certificate in hand, everything required is done.

Start now so that your elearning gets the status it deserves, not as a feeble click exercise, but as a crucial contribution to the success of your company!

Transfer lever: Transfer planning. Encourage participants to plan the detailed implementation of what they have learned during the training. According to studies, this can triple the practical success.

Conclusion

We often do not have all the levers in our hands. We cannot provide 100% support from managers; or stand next to the learners and encourage them to do a transfer task.

But with the above tools, we are clearly headed in that direction. And as you have seen, it's not difficult at all, not for the learners nor the elearning designers. They are small but effective and critical steps for more transfer effectiveness.

The excuse 'I can't...' no longer applies. And the principle of hope à la 'transfer happens automatically' should also be a thing of the past. The transfer problem can be solved - with the 12 Levers of Transfer Effectiveness® and simple, joined up tools. No more and no less.

Start now so that your elearning gets the status it deserves, not as a feeble click exercise, but as a crucial contribution to the success of your company! What is your next step to make more transfer happen?

About the author

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