KORN FERRY
BE MORE THAN

Elevating the impact of L&D

In a new report, the Korn Ferry Institute explores four ways organizations can increase the value of their learning and development programs.

Introduction

Companies spend billions of dollars each year on employee training programs, yet research shows there is often still a gap in how effectively the skills developed through such programs are applied on the job.

Referred to as transfer of training, the long-studied conundrum of how to ensure learning from training and development programs is applied back at work continues to puzzle practitioners and scientists alike. For more than a century, researchers would strive to better understand how learners effectively gain knowledge and skills through formal development programs and the practical ways they can best apply this new training to improve their job performance (Bell et. al., 2017). This is no mere mimicry of what's taught in the course; rather, it's the creative application of skills in response to various real-world settings, people, and challenges. Without this transfer, organizations will not realize the full value of training.

Companies often assume transfer will happen if employees simply participate in development programs. Unfortunately, this is not typically the case. Existing research identifies at least three broad areas with a strong impact on learning outcomes: instructional design and training, the learner's personal characteristics and motives, and organizational conditions and work environment. These factors all play a role in enabling employees to apply what they've learned to what they do.

But an often-overlooked area is the impact of the organizational context—in particular, support from the company, peers, and managers (Ford, Baldwin & Prasad, 2017). This, in turn, can hinder how well the new skills and knowledge learned during training are used on the job.

Recent studies have found that, cumulatively, the degree of a supportive work environment can account for nearly a third of the variance in the transfer of training, with peer and manager support playing the most impactful role overall (Hughes et. al., 2019). Indeed, Korn Ferry's own research emphasizes support from others as a key imperative of leadership development. If organizations want to maximize the return on investment in training, they need to view training not as a single event, but as a dynamic ecosystem of learning and development.

New Korn Ferry research

To this end, Korn Ferry recently conducted research on their learning and development programs to better understand how organizations can unleash the potential of these training opportunities. It involved a comprehensive review of Korn Ferry's program evaluation survey data, collected between 2016 and early 2023, from both participants and managers, representing 333 organizations.

The surveys were administered at three stages: prior to the start of the program (pre-program), immediately after the program (post-program), and 60 to 90 days after the program ended.

Data included 3,886 pre-program surveys, 29,019 post-program surveys, 1,458 follow-up surveys from participants, and 707 follow-up surveys from managers. The analysis confirmed previous research findings: that, to best support the transfer of training for employees, companies need to attend to the larger organizational environment—and especially to the role of the manager in this process. And what's more, the data surfaced specific findings that shed light on how organizations can create such an environment, presented here in the form of four specific recommendations.

How to better enable transfer of training

Based on an analysis of literature and new Korn Ferry research, four key recommendations have emerged that organizations can follow to better enable transfer of training for employees participating in educational programs.

1.Ensure employees understand the importance and relevance of the training.

Before a training program launches, it is important to start with employee motivation and engagement. It is critical that employees can see the relevant connection between what they're learning and the current gaps and challenges they face in their role. 66% of those who agreed program content was applicable to their job reported attempting to improve a considerable extent or more 60-90 days later, compared to 54% of those who did not agree program content was applicable to their job (r = .22, p < .001, N = 257).

Furthermore, employees should understand how the program can directly impact and improve the work they are doing today, as well as how it might help their career in the future. To ensure this high level of engagement, be sure employees have established clear expectations and goals for the program as well as how they will leverage the lessons learned in their work (Ford, Baldwin & Prasad 2017).

2. Set clear expectations both pre- and post-program.

While participants could set expectations on their own, the research shows that partnering with their managers is more powerful. Of the training participants who discussed the program aims with their manager and set up clear intentions, 55-63% believed they would gain valuable insight and new skills.

This compared to only 42-51% who had not discussed the program aims (the percentage range covers six items, rs= .15 to .21; ps < .001, Ns = 498 to 519). Discussing expectations with the manager creates increased awareness and clarity for employees on how they can further develop in their role, bolstering motivation for participating and engaging with the training materials. Heading into the program with clear learning outcomes in mind creates greater focus and insight in employees for how they can improve areas that will benefit their work. This ultimately improves transfer of training as employees understand the relevance of the learning and are better able to apply new knowledge and skills on the job.

The manager's impact is also carried over post-program: 58% of participants who discussed learning goals with their manager said the training was highly valuable to their development and growth. Of those who did not discuss goals, only 46% said the same (r = .14, p < .001, N = 22,404). The analysis found that participants who took the time to clarify expectations with their manager attributed 64% of their post-program change to the program, compared to only 53% for those who did not discuss their goals ahead of time (r = .22; p < .001, N = 537). Likewise, 49% of those who strongly agreed that their manager does a good job of supporting them in their work made significant progress, or greater, toward all goals set (compared to 37% who did not strongly agree; r = .14, p = .023, N = 393).

3. Actively support employees' development efforts.

The research reveals that managers who actively encourage employees in their development are more likely to perceive the participant as being an effective leader. In fact, 51% of participants who strongly agreed that their manager supports their growth were rated 'Excellent' or higher on leadership effectiveness (compared to 28% of those who did not strongly agree; r = .33, p < .001, N = 65).

This means it's critical for managers to not only support employees while they're going through a particular training program, but to engage with their learning and development efforts actively throughout the year.

This dynamic also holds true when it comes to job performance. The managers of those who said they felt supported by their manager rated those employees higher on overall performance (65% vs. 29% rated as Excellent or higher; $r = .41$, $p < .001$, $N = 125$). Likewise, these employees were evaluated as being more effective in getting their job done (61% vs. 38%; $r = .45$, $p < .001$, $N = 63$). Having strong employee-manager relationships that support ongoing learning and development increases the power and impact of any single training program, boosting the overall value gained from formal training opportunities.

4. Foster strong manager-employee relationships for maximum commitment.

Employees who feel supported by their manager are more likely to make greater progress on their learning goals and continually develop in their role. This speaks further to the importance of the reciprocal relationship between managers and employees in creating the optimal conditions for ongoing learning and development.

Ultimately, the nature of this supportive relationship impacts how employees feel about the organization. 67% of participants whose manager does a good job supporting them in their learning and growth strongly agreed that they would recommend their organization as a good place to work after the program. Only 47% said the same if their manager did not support them ($r = .26$, $p < .001$, $N = 200$). This relationship plays a key role in shaping the cultural climate of their organization. Those who have a positive relationship with their manager are more engaged and committed to their work, with 79% of those who felt supported by their manager expressing the intention to stay five years or longer in their organization. Only 63% said the same if they did not feel supported ($r = .27$, $p < .001$, $N = 170$). The critical role managers play in actively supporting employees transcends any specific training program, as this relationship helps build a positive work culture that increases transfer of training, as well as employee engagement and retention.

Conclusion

Organizations aiming to unleash the potential of their employee learning and development programs should look outside any single training event or learning journey. They should consider the broader organizational support needed to maximize their investments and extract the most value from those events—given that the transfer of training doesn't happen automatically.

The odds of success are increased when the manager of the participant is invested at each stage of the process—building stronger relationships and providing the support the employee will need on their development journey.

Get this right and it will result in employees having a clearer understanding of how they are likely to benefit from the training and how it applies to their job, with better chances of achieving their goals post-program. And ultimately, it will result in high-performing, more effective employees, and an organizational culture that engages and retains valuable talent.

Authors

Zack Van Rossum
Director, IP Development, Korn Ferry Institute

Mariah Moore
Data Scientist, Korn Ferry Institute

Stephen Lams
Senior Vice President, Data and Analytics, Korn Ferry Institute

Sarah Hezlett
Vice President, Assessment Science, Korn Ferry Institute

About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.

Korn Ferry. Business Advisors. Career Makers.