# Learning whilst working: perceptions on barriers and enablers to transfer of learning amongst part-time students on a professional MSc programme

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**Abstract**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine student-learner perceptions of benefits, barriers and enablers in learning whilst working, specifically focussing on learning transfer from a university MSc in Human Resource Management to students' professional roles as human resource practitioners.

**Design/methodology/approach**

The study used in-depth semi-structured interviews with alumni of the programme who had graduated two years previously.

**Findings**

The study found benefits (increased self-confidence, credibility and networking skills) as well as unanticipated challenges relating to individual learner characteristics, organisational culture and work-related support that hindered learning transfer.

**Research limitations/implications**

The study contributes to understanding the mechanisms required to support part-time learners on continuing vocational education programmes from a variety of stakeholders including students, their managers, their university and work colleagues and academic staff. It highlights the benefits of activities designed to help students relate theory to practice and facilitate transfer of knowledge between academic and practitioner environments

**Practical implications**

The study highlights learner perspectives that are focussed on how organisational culture and line managers might play a more central role in influencing how people learn at work and facilitate the transfer of learning from formal educational interventions.

**Originality/value**

The study is valuable to academics and practitioners interested in improving learning transfer from formal educational to professional settings.


**Keywords:** learning whilst working, learning transfer, student learners

**Introduction**

There is general agreement that undertaking part-time personal development whilst being employed on a full-time basis benefits both participants and their organisations (Li *et al.*, 2009; Griffin, 2011). Indeed, Morse (2006) and Skok (2010) identify benefits such as improved organisational competitive advantage, and Govaerts *et al.* (2011) suggest positive impacts on employee retention as a consequence of an organisation's employees continuing to develop knowledge and skills through part-time study. This is reinforced by Bennion *et al.* (2011: 149) who state that "the power house for new skills base is amongst people who are already in employment". A number of commentators (see, for example, Mallon and Walton, 2005; Skok 2010; Bennion *et al.*, 2011) have concluded that undertaking part-time study whilst in employment is valuable for refreshing, developing and updating one's knowledge and skills to meet the needs of both professional and personal development. Morse (2006: 744-745) refers to this value as "bringing fresh eyes and the latest thinking to bear in the workplace". Organisations appear to covet this activity, with a number of studies indicating that employees who undertake formal training and development whilst working have higher levels of job performance (Rowald *et al.*, 2008), increased organisational engagement and improved organisational and job commitment (O'Connor and Cardova, 2010; Rowald *et al.*, 2008).

Skok (2010) identifies the positive impact on career planning of employees participating in this form of activity, and a number of authors have indicated positive personal outcomes, not only through the provision of new skills and knowledge but also through an increase in self-confidence and self-belief (Morse, 2006; Chivers, 2007; Rowald *et al.*, 2008; Bennion *et al.*, 2011). Whilst these employee benefits are important, the most commonly cited value associated with learning concerns professional and vocational development (King *et al.*, 2015). Learning whilst working allows for, and encourages, the updating of knowledge and skills and, in turn, allows participants to more fully address issues in the changing landscape of work, in the wider economy and the fluid environment of government policy  (Bennion *et al.*, 2011).

Continuing vocational education and training aims to "equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competencies required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market" (Cedefop, 2014: 4). Its profile has never been higher due to a perfect storm of skills shortages and mismatches in many important growth industries striving for productivity gains (CIPD, 2015). Central to this in terms of quality and attractiveness is employer

engagement and integrated classroom and workplace-based processes, aligned with and supporting one another to equip individuals with the skills needed to succeed in today's labour markets (CIPD, 2017). With UK employers spending less on training than other major EU economies and less than the EU average, there are challenges in convincing employers to take a more strategic perspective of their future skills requirements and ways that vocational education can help develop the appropriate knowledge and skills for a resilient and productive workforce (Panteia, 2017). For Masters level vocational education to be appealing to stakeholders, it needs to offer assurances of high quality education for students alongside clear and measurable impact and business benefits for employers. Studying a vocational Masters programme part time at university (whilst working in an aligned professional area) would seem to offer the best potential for transfer of learning, with students gaining high level knowledge alongside current industry experience. This approach should bring with it a range of personal, professional and business/economic benefits.

Much of what is known about the benefits of studying part time vocational programmes has centred on short-term learning and immediate reactions of participating students, and there are very few studies that examine how learning continues to be transferred once the period of study concludes. This paper aims to develop an understanding of the experiences of a group of graduates who undertook a part-time MSc in Human Resource Management whilst working full time. Focussing on learner perceptions of the learning experience and the transfer of learning to the workplace, the paper identifies the motivations to undertake a part-time programme, evaluates the benefits of undertaking such a programme and discovers the barriers to and enablers of effective learning transfer. Having graduated two years previously, it was felt that these graduates were able to reflect on their experiences and provide the researchers with a rich source of data that would contribute to the learning transfer discourse.

It is contended that the results of this study will benefit students who decide to study part-time programmes whilst in full-time employment, assist academics who plan, manage and teach on such programmes, and influence employers who often fund such employee development. The paper commences with a review of the learning transfer literature before examining barriers and enablers to the transfer of learning, with particular focus on transfer from educational programmes to professional workplace settings.

**Transfer of learning into the workplace**

Transfer of knowledge is a complex process that involves the application of (often abstract) knowledge to work settings, a process described by Latham (2007) as the efforts to "weld two worlds" together. It has been suggested that knowledge is useful only if it can be accessed by individuals and harnessed by organisations (Li *et al.*, 2009). The general consensus is that transfer of learning occurs when the employee is able to apply the knowledge and/or skills learned in a training or educational event in their work situation (Burke and Hutchins, 2007; Nielson, 2009; Weldy, 2009; Weisweiler *et al.*, 2012).

Leimbach (2010: 83) proposes a Learning Transfer Model which is essential for positive performance outcomes. This suggests that for effective transfer of learning to occur, the learner must be ready to learn and motivated to use new knowledge in the workplace; that the culture of the learner's organisation needs to be positive towards training and personally supportive; and, finally, the learning provider is required to not only deliver relevant and easily transferable learning, but also to assist in the setting of goals and measuring impact. Learning transfer, however, is not a common occurrence. Chow *et al.* (2010) report that estimates of training transfer are as low as 10% to 40% being transferred immediately, with only 15% of that transferred lasting more than a year after the training event. There is significant variability between studies on the impact of learning transfer activities, but it has been suggested that adoption of the learning transfer activities in the model above will improve performance by about 20% (Leimbach, 2010).

**Barriers to the transfer of learning**

Much research has been undertaken into the personal and professional barriers to becoming involved in learning whilst working (see, for example, Brown and McCracken, 2009; Skok, 2010). A key barrier is the ability of the worker to obtain and sustain time away from work to attend courses or training sessions (Rainbird and Munro, 2003). Santos and Stewart (2003) refer to a lack of time being available once learning has been achieved to practise the new behaviour and transfer acquired skills, often caused by the participant's workload (Russ-Eft, 2002). Holton *et al.* (1997) and Holton *et al.* (2000) refer to this as the personal capacity to transfer, which can be enhanced through a review of the learner's workload once the learning is complete. Inadequate quality and relevance of the education and/or training is also cited as a barrier to learning transfer (Rainbird and Munro, 2003). It is suggested that if the employee

cannot visualise that what they are learning aligns with what they do in the workplace, this serves as dissonance (O'Connor and Cardova, 2010) and can be a stumbling block to learning transfer (Burke and Hutchins, 2007; Berge, 2008).

Barriers also arise when the employee attempts to transfer learning into the workplace. These barriers involve the employee's peer group, line manager and the general working environment, and concern the level of workplace support available and the poor or limited support for the employee to transfer learning (Bhatti *et al.*, 2013; Augustsson *et al.*, 2013). Described as a pothole by O'Connor and Cardova (2010), this lack of support may stem from a fear of change, which can subsequently create a barrier to work colleagues reacting positively to the application of what has been learned (Nijman *et al.*, 2006; Brown and McCracken, 2009). Some authors refer to this barrier as employees not being allowed to apply their learning in the workplace (Russ-Eft, 2002; Brown and McCracken, 2009; O'Connor and Cardova, 2010; Bennion *et al.*, 2011).

Line managers can act as barriers to rather than enablers of the transfer of learning (Rainbird and Munro, 2003). Poor managerial support can be a barrier if there is an implicit or overt absence of encouragement and facilitation to the transfer of new learning and skills (Russ-Eft, 2002; Santos and Stuart, 2003). Nijman *et al.* (2006) cite those who have undertaken learning being ridiculed by peers and/or line managers when attempting to transfer new learning into practice, for example through trying to introduce a new approach (Bhatti *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, negative feedback from management or peers can quickly demotivate and negatively affect the desire to transfer learning (Weisweiler *et al.*, 2012).

The working environment can have positive and negative effects on the transfer of learning. Brown and McCraken (2009) report the findings of a meta-analysis conducted by Colquitt *et al.* (2002) where the workplace climate was found to be a strong predictor of successful transfer of learning. Santos and Stuart (2003) summarise the barriers as follows:

> *Thus, the extent to which employees are able, and willing to transfer training into the workplace will be mediated by a wide range of situational factors such as line management commitment and involvement, organisational resources and opportunities and rewards.*
> (Santos and Stuart 2003: 42)

**Enablers of the transfer of learning into the workplace**

Drawing on the study by O'Connor and Cordova (2010), there are four themes that enable the transfer of learning.

*Individual characteristics*

The most recurring individual characteristic from the literature is the motivation of the learner to actively transfer what has been learned into the workplace (O'Connor and Cardova, 2010; Griffin, 2011; Weisweiler *et al*., 2012; Renta-Davids *et al.*, 2014; Krishnamani and Haider, 2016). Gegenfurtner *et al.* (2009: 404) define this motivation to transfer as "the trainee's desire to use the knowledge and skills learned in training on the job" and also stress that it is important to appreciate that motivation to transfer is dynamic since it is affected by numerous factors at any one time. Individual characteristics that influence transfer of learning have been found to be: the relevance of the learning (Burke and Hutchins, 2007); individual curiosity, self-efficacy and confidence (Chow *et al*., 2010); potential benefits to personal career goals (Renta-Davids, *et al*., 2014); and possessing a high internal locus of control (Burke and Hutchins, 2007). For maximum transfer, individuals must perceive that their new knowledge and skills "will improve a relevant aspect of their work performance" (Burke and Hutchins, 2007: 269). It is therefore essential that the individual is ready to learn, is receptive and wants to engage in the learning process, and is motivated and able to learn. (Gray, 2007; Krishnamani and Haider, 2016).

*Academic learning environment*

Chow *et al.* (2010) and Griffin (2011) argue that transfer of learning is more likely when individuals perceive that the learning event has been designed to promote and consistently signals how to apply the knowledge and skills to their job role. Attention should be given to the nature of the learning and teaching activities. Burke and Hutchins (2007) refer to the need to avoid cognitive overload through careful instructional design and pacing, and highlight that active learning is vital as it is key to adult learning.

*Organisational culture and working environment*

It appears that both the culture of the organisation and the physical working environment impact on the learner transferring knowledge from the classroom to the workplace. (Rowald *et al.*, 2008: 48-49) suggest that a positive organisational culture and work environment can

result in a learning climate that can be defined as "the cognitions of the organizational members concerning learning events, practices, and procedures as well as learning-related behaviours that are expected, and supported within the organizational setting". This positive learning climate results in the encouragement of sharing of knowledge (Li *et al*., 2009) that positively influences the transfer of learning in the workplace.

Kontoghiorghes (2002) highlights that when trainees are expected to use their new knowledge they are more motivated to transfer that knowledge into the workplace. Line managers are thus vital in encouraging transfer, which can be formally required through, for example, teaching others what has been learned, preparaing reports and presentations, and discussing the impact of the learning at performance reviews (Longnecker, 2004).

### *Organisational and work-related support*

Many commentators identify individual support as integral to facilitating the transfer of learning (see, for example, O'Connor and Cardova, 2010; Bennion *et al*., 2011). Bhatti *et al.* (2013) suggest that those undertaking training and development view their supervisor's involvement in the training, ongoing feedback and praise as integral to the transfer of their learning into the workplace (Burke and Hutchins, 2007; Hutchins, 2009). This involvement can take the form of the provision of clear information about expectations of performance post training (Berge, 2008) and timely feedback (Nijman *et al*., 2006).

It is evident that a range of internal and external issues appear to have an effect on a student's ability to transfer learning. However, many of the identified barriers are easily converted into enablers. Recognition of a participant's individual characteristics and motivations, positive learning and workplace environments, and clear organisational support can encourage participants to readily transfer learning to the workplace. Therefore, this paper aims to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of a group of graduates who had previously undertaken a part-time MSc in Human Resource Management. Participants had benefitted from two years' work experience after graduation and were thus able to reflect on their part-time study experiences. This paper contributes to the learning transfer discourse by giving voice to a group of learners and highlights a number of issues that educators might wish to consider when designing and managing part-time programmes aimed at middle-management participants.

**Methods and data collection**

This study assesses participant views on effective transfer of learning between a part-time MSc in Human Resource Management and the workplace. It also examines the extent to which the educational process of part-time learning adds value to participants' professional and personal development. The sample and setting for this research were graduates who had completed the part-time MSc in Human Resource Management offered by a Scottish university in 2014 and 2015. As well as receiving their MSc, successful graduates were awarded professional recognition and became CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) Associate members. All of the 60 participants who graduated from this programme in 2014 and 2015 were contacted and invited to take part. Sixteen volunteered to be individually interviewed.

A series of interview questions were developed, based on the literature review. The questions focussed on developing an understanding of the benefits of undertaking the programme and, crucially, on identifying the participants' perceptions of the enablers and barriers in the transfer of learning process whilst studying and after graduation. Individual in-depth interviews took place in October 2016 at the participants' workplace and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The data collected were transcribed and, based on O'Connor and Cordova's (2010) enablers to learning transfer, a thematic analysis was undertaken. These themes are presented and explored in the following results section.

**Results and discussion**

**Benefits of undertaking the programme**

*Networking*

A key finding from the study is the importance of networking. The opportunity to learn from and make connections with fellow professionals, who were often at a similar career stage, was overwhelmingly identified as a key benefit of undertaking the programme. Respondents stated that such networking opportunities impacted on their engagement with the programme, provided them with a range of organisational perspectives and examples, and acted as a means of personal and professional support. This last point was seen to be the most important amongst this group of respondents; participants created and drew heavily upon this social network and bonded to form a mutual support group to share their professional and personal experiences. An added practical benefit was being able to draw on the knowledge and

expertise of their peer group as they sought to understand new approaches and the ways organisations operated.

### *Increase in learners' confidence and credibility*

Respondents also stated that their confidence had increased as a consequence of the programme (Bennion *et al*., 2011), mainly by having a clearer understanding of the various theories underpinning HR practices. Indeed, one interviewee commented that he felt that his participation on the programme had given him "enhanced credibility within his field and amongst his workplace colleagues". Indeed, it was found that learning new approaches, considering different points of view and being more critical of previously taken-for-granted assumptions were skills many participants felt had developed their confidence within and outside of their workplace. One interviewee remarked that the programme gave him the confidence to become involved in professional activities external to his organisation and stated:

> *"I would not have had the confidence to engage at this level with a specialist network unless I had done the programme and developed a greater understanding of Labour Relations."*

### **Enablers of and barriers to the transfer of learning**
### *Individual characteristics*

The results of this study reinforce the general understanding that an individual's intrinsic desire to transfer what has been learned in the classroom to the workplace is essential for successful learning transfer (Renta-Davids, *et al*., 2014; Krishnamani and Haider, 2016). Indeed, all participants stated their desire to share what had been learned and actively introduce elements of the programme into their workplace. Supporting the recent findings of Renta-Davids *et al*. (2014), participants highlighted active transfer of learning as a means to develop careers, expressed a desire to improve personal performance (Burke and Hutchins, 2007) and, as identified by Krishnamani and Haider (2016), were receptive to learning new ideas and willing to engage in the learning transfer process. One interviewee stated this had prompted a "change in culture" within his company as he began to rethink the function of the HR service and how it contributed to the strategic aims of the business (Burke and Hutchins, 2007), challenging pre-existing HR orthodoxies. However, in line with conclusions drawn by

Gegenfurtner *et al.* (2009), the study also found that this motivation changed as participants progressed through the programme and was affected by a range of external influences which will be further discussed below.

The opportunity to introduce the new learning to the workplace was not limited to programme content. Interestingly, the ability to practise and improve writing skills was reported as valuable to the participants' professional roles. This reached beyond basic report writing to more analytical accounts of HR practice. Aligning with the findings of Chow *et al.* (2010), it was found that this increased participants' confidence and credibility. One interviewee stated:

> *"My writing skills improved. I am much more confident when writing reports and analysing documents. This was a surprise to me as I didn't realise I could improve that area so much. Not only the writing but the confidence in delivery of the recommendations which demonstrates how the programme has helped with my ability to draw upon the research and change current practice."*

The improvement and/or refinement of participants' generic academic skills was seen to have good transferability to the workplace, and many commented on this learning as being extremely valuable to professional practice. Academic writing skills were found to provide confidence to conduct research, analyse internal documents and summarise complex data.

The study identified some barriers to the transfer of learning that were common to all participants. The demands of work, study and domestic/familial responsibilities impacted on the level of commitment that participants were able to apply to the transfer of learning. Frequently, interviewees noted how they felt their "time and energy was stretched" because of lengthy commutes or family obligations.

### Organisational culture and work-related support

The study identified that the culture of the workplace had a significant impact on whether participants were able to successfully share their knowledge and transfer it from the classroom to the organisation. Supporting the findings of Rowald, *et al.* (2008), respondents reported divergent experiences, ranging from active encouragement (and sometimes an

organisational requirement) to share knowledge, to being made to feel a little foolish by managers or colleagues when attempting new initiatives. A lack of support was particularly prevalent in organisational cultures where career development was not seen as a priority. However, many participants considered that this organisational culture perspective was perhaps the personal view of the line manager rather than the general organisational culture, which may or may not have been supportive of development and learning. This personal view appeared to be common and, whilst a minority of participants reported positive manager interactions and support for their studies and the transfer of learning, the majority did not feel that they received line manager support. There was general agreement amongst respondents that this presented a lost opportunity for the organisation to benefit from the learning process. This was a source of disappointment and frustration for respondents with one interviewee stating:

*"Although my organisation seems happy for me to do this programme and they are even giving me time off for assessments, I can tell that my line manager is not interested in what I am doing. She just views this as another burden on her already full job and I can tell that she doesn't really think that I should be doing this.*

*"I was not held accountable for the learning on the programme, or transferring it. My manager didn't even read my dissertation despite me emailing her the recommendations."*

The source of funding also appeared to have a significant impact on the level of support the participants received from their organisation and/or line manager. Employers who had paid for their employees' participation in the programme were generally very supportive and actively encouraged the transfer of learning, perhaps through a requirement to brief colleagues on what had been learned during the previous programme session. In these instances, the participants were viewed as a useful resource that the organisation could draw upon. One participant stated:

*"I'm required to brief the HR team about what I have learned at Uni at our weekly meeting. I have to come up with a summary of new things I have learned*

*and identify at least one initiative that we might consider introducing. My line*

*manager seems interested and is very supportive of my studies."*

In contrast, two of the respondents who were self-funded often encountered blocking behaviour from managers and colleagues. They identified that barriers to the transfer of learning were created by a pervasive attitude that the programme was "too academic with ideas that were not in the real world". Indeed, some participants had been made to feel foolish by their work colleagues. This often occurred when the participant had attempted to introduce a new method into the workplace and work colleagues had made disparaging or sarcastic remarks in response. In these instances, the participants still attempted to transfer learning but became wary of involving colleagues who had previously been critical. One respondent felt:

*"I am a little embarrassed to even talk about the programme. When I started the*

*MSc I was keen to share knowledge and think about practical ways of using what*

*I had been learning at work. However, a couple of colleagues and my boss made*

*some remarks about 'empire building' and becoming 'a bit too big for my boots'.*

*I tend to keep things to myself now and don't even discuss the programme at all."*

It was thus found that the level of interest the employer took in the participants' learning experience was a key factor in the success of learning transfer and that some organisations even incentivised participants to apply learning. Indeed, one interviewee stated that her next salary upgrade was contingent upon successfully completing the programme and demonstrating that transfer of learning into the workplace had taken place.

Respondents' perspectives on the level of manager, employer and colleague support revealed a range of interesting concerns around lack of time and support for study and opportunities for transfer of learning to the workplace:

*"My organisation are wasting this opportunity to transfer the learning back –*

*they have paid for my course but they have not structured the learning to enable*

*the best pay-back. If I was a manager I would ask the students to write a short*

*report on what learning has occurred and how it has been useful."*

And:

> *"There is not enough sharing of knowledge in the team. We need a forum for that."*

Certain respondents agreed that they avoided having conversations about transfer of learning with their managers as this had the potential to add to their already significant workloads.

### *Academic learning environment*

Respondents were asked to comment on their experiences of the programme and reflect on how its design had encouraged or discouraged the transfer of learning. Respondents, in general, felt that the programme promoted the link between theory and practice, and they all provided examples of where learning had been transferred to the workplace during the programme and in subsequent careers. Academic staff appeared to have influenced the accessibility of information and the practical methods of translating often abstract theories into the workplace. One respondent stated:

> *"I still remember* (lecturer's name) *and the session on employee engagement. This has had a significant impact on my career as it not only provided me with the knowledge and confidence to introduce policies that might affect engagement, but also has created a genuine personal interest in the topic that has caused me to continue to find out more about the topic."*

However, in line with Chow *et al.* (2010), respondents did consider that the university could do more to encourage the transfer of learning. Several respondents suggested that learning transfer could form part of the formal assessment for certain subjects and that the employer might become involved in jointly assessing the extent of learning transfer. In addition, the process of effective communication between the university and employer was seen as a potential enabler through the university developing a greater understanding of the organisational requirements and constraints, and the organisation more fully understanding the programme content and recognising the potential impact of transferring learning.

The continuing professional development (CPD) process that dovetailed with the academic modules was felt to be valuable in facilitating the transfer of learning, and respondents widely

agreed that it helped them *"forge"* and *"forced"* the connections between theory and practice:

> *"The CPD process is valuable. How about a sign off from my manager on that so that they are involved and can see the benefit of how the module content synchs with my role and how it impacts my development?"*

And:

> *"CPD allows me to think about what I have learned that is relevant to module content which is interesting. I find it difficult as I am not a reflector, but it forces us to make the connections."*

There was agreement that a receptive audience, whether colleagues or a manager, motivated and gave students the confidence to apply their learning. One student described how her manager had completed the course previously and was keen on developing her ideas further. The student was tasked with setting up an online training module as one of her CPD objectives; she found her workplace supportive and that it encouraged her to use her skills. This helped strengthen the student's ability to set goals for achievement and make connections between the learning and her job requirements, thereby strengthening the learning transfer process. For many students, the recommendations made through their dissertation and the activities associated with CPD became a vehicle to drive change within the organisation. Students found this valuable and gained great personal and professional satisfaction from knowing that the academic work had resulted in practice-based process improvements. This demonstrates that practitioner-learners need to be action-oriented (Longenecker, 2004) and that using processes such as CPD and work-based assessments alongside manager and colleague support help bridge the theory–practice gap.

**Conclusion**

Focussing on transfer of learning, this paper aimed to develop an understanding of the experiences of a group of graduates who undertook a part-time MSc in Human Resource Management whilst working full time. The research illustrates how the learning of individuals is situated within both academic and organisational contexts where people learn and work. It demonstrates the importance of networking and a social approach to learning, and how this motivates students to exchange experiences and transfer learning with student peers and, in some cases, into their professional development space.

The respondents had a range of individual and organisational reasons for undertaking the programme and were extremely self-motivated in that pursuit. However, the evidence here confirms that the context of the organisation is a key influence in enabling smooth transfer of learning (Marsick *et al.*, 2008). For example, whilst initial learner readiness (Leimback, 2010) was extremely strong, respondents reported highs and lows in learning motivation and the ability and motivation to transfer learning – a good example of the dynamic nature of learning transfer (Gegenfurtner *et al.*, 2009). Factors such as relevance of learning and support for learning transfer, illustrated for example by the absence of a nurturing organisational environment, managers' support, encouragement and interest in the employees' studies, left some students disappointed about lost opportunities and unfulfilled expectations. Interestingly, in some cases, respondents actively avoided the involvement of their managers due to fear of additional workplace pressure and lack of time to balance work and study commitments and act on any feedback. This gap between initial transfer intentions and reality resulted in some disillusionment and missed opportunities for learning transfer (Kontoghiorghes, 2002; Hutchins, 2009). The study also illustrates how the culture of the organisation and, in particular, workplace managers can play a pivotal role in influencing how their people learn at work and facilitate the transfer of learning from formal educational interventions (Marsick *et al.*, 2008; Marsick 2009).

Participants felt they needed to be better motivated to transfer the principles they had learned into their workplace, and made useful suggestions as to how this might be facilitated. Networking was seen to be an important driver in ongoing learner motivation and in facilitating the transfer of learning. Students shared their experiences, supported each other and were generally curious to explore each other's work situations and how they were using the learning from the programme to improve their professional development. This extended long past the end of the taught programme.

One interesting finding was the positive impact of the transfer of generic academic skills and abilities on respondents' professional development. After graduating, learners reported high levels of increased confidence, a heightened belief in what they could accomplish, and increased credibility and impact through enhanced written and oral communication skills. The perceived benefits they gained from these improvements in most cases outweighed their perceptions of the benefits of the HR professional knowledge base that they had benefitted

from throughout the programme. This appeared to be an unexpected positive outcome of the transfer of learning. Taken together, the employability skills and knowledge had a strong and compelling impact on their professional development, with many of the learners reporting promotions and positive job changes in the two years after graduation, along with heightened personal growth, confidence and credibility.

There was a perceived lack of support and interest in learners' studies at workplace level. While students clearly expected this to be more readily available, some avoided it for fear of extra pressure. Respondents felt that the transfer of learning could have been much stronger if workplace managers were more focussed on the potential benefits and if learners themselves were held accountable for using and sharing the new knowledge in a more structured manner.

From a university perspective, the need to provide better "connecting" learning events as part of the programme by involving industry representatives in the learning process in some way would appear to be important to the students. This could be in the form of assessment requiring direct input from the student's manager or mentor, as part of a module, or through a manager or mentor assessment of the student's ongoing development as part of the CPD process.

This echoes research by Latham (2007) and others (Rousseau, 2006; Rynes et al, 2007) to identify ways that academics can work closely with practitioners to explore how this transfer might work and the challenges and the benefits of doing so. This may necessitate adaptations to current models of education and the joint support of academics and practitioners to support and enable this. Participants' views on the missed opportunity of learning transfer and ways this could be facilitated suggest the value of a partnership model, with all parties (learners, peers, academics and organisations) working together towards facilitating learning whilst working.

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