Motivation:
The Key to Learning Transfer

BY KAREN SIECZKA

There are many reasons training fails to transfer learning. Often, one of the key reasons is the lack of motivation, not on the part of the learner, but because the design of the training itself is demotivating. When training fails to motivate, offering no knowledge transfer or skills gain, a learning opportunity is lost, and, even worse, it can influence learners against future training programs. This begs the questions: what tactics can instructional designers use to make people really want to learn? What are some ways to make motivation a key point when building training?

Connie Malamed, the "e-Learning Coach," blogs often about motivation as a part of creating good design; she maintains there are several factors that cause a learning transfer, including the perceived

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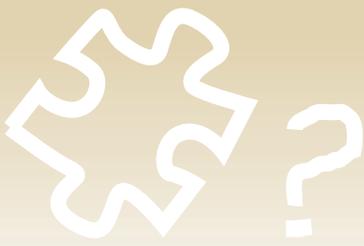
value of the training to the learner and what opportunities are available to apply the skill or knowledge.

Workplace Climate

Today's workplace demands instruc-

tional designers to consider how training will cut through the noise, provide relevant, timely information, catch and focus the learner's attention, all while producing a behavioral change, skill gain, or other outcomes desired by both the organization and the learner. It's a tall order. Michael W. Allen, in his book, *Michael Allen's Guide to E-Learning,* stresses that to successfully create a desired change, a learner's motivational level has to be at the point where he or she is interested or, even more desirable, sees the value of the training and wants to commit to improvement of a particular skill. It seems motivation is everything when it comes to learning. "If motivation is high, learning will occur even if instructional materials are poor," Allen writes.

Building on Allen's reasoning, if a

learner is interested and ready to learn, then good content AND effective content presentation should unlock learning transfer. But, how does a designer make this happen?

An Inside Job

It is important to understand adult motivation before attempting learning design that makes the experience stick for the learner. Motivation is chiefly intrinsic, meaning it has to come from within

Resources for Further Exploration:

• Motivation and Learning presentation by Rich James

• Get Your Audience Pumped: 30 Ways to Motivate Adult Learners, the eLearning Coach blog by Connie Malamed

• Michael W. Allen's Guide to E-Learning

• Sandra Graham and Bernard Weiner's Theories and Principals of Motivation

• Mind Tool's Herzberg's Motivators and Hygiene Factors, Learn How to Motivate Your Team

• Alan M. Saks and Monica Belcourt, An Investigation of Training Activities and Transfer of Training in Organizations

• American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), ASTD's 2012 State of the Industry Report

each learner. Applying the logic of Herzberg's Theory of Motivation to the workplace, learners are only truly motivated by training that will enable them to reach for and satisfy the factors Herzberg identified as the real motivators, factors such as achievement, advancement, and the possibility of growth and development. With all the choices out there today, why would learners spend time on training activities that don't have any of those factors?

Even great training programs can't force the learners to feel motivation but poor instructional design can surely drive them away from it. Since motivation is a drive to fulfill a need, designers have to find ways to enhance a learner's motivation. How? By assuring learners are rewarded through the learning activity itself or are moving toward an internal goal, a benefit they perceive is for them, it is useful, interesting, challenging. With this in mind, an instructional designer should always be evaluating to see if the training is managing to hit any of those intrinsic hot buttons such as making learners feel capable, enhancing self-esteem in some manner, helping them realize hidden potential, or reinforcing mastery of a task or subject.

Challenges

Beginning a course, designers face several challenges, many which can crush the learner's motivation. First, the content of the training has to be worthwhile and relevant to the learner. Designers may find themselves overloaded with information from subject matter experts who expect more information rather than less to be the best route for learning. However, it is up to the instructional designer to wade through, to search for nuggets of information, and synthesize them into something useful — an end product the learners ac-

tually need and more importantly, can apply to real-world, workplace situations. If information supplied by an expert is not necessary to reach the business goal of the training, perhaps it might be useful as a resource document but don't force the learner to endure excess materials as a mandatory part of the course.

Another challenge is the overload and availability of information. Learners can access most everything they could possibly need anywhere, any time. Today, workplace learning often occurs outside the realm of a formal process so it can be hard to convince learners to sit down and take time to engage in planned training activities when the activities often seem to have nothing to do with actual, practical workplace application.

Maybe the training seems to be a "one size fits all" solution, forcing learners to wade through all the stuff they already know to reach new, valuable information. This type of design is guaranteed to frustrate and annoy learners instead of motivating them. Training that is customized and speaks specifically to learners, how they can benefit on the job, in their career, or personally, if they take the time and effort to care, will gain more positive attention and acceptance.

Engagement Strategies

Training that both motivates and educates uses simple, straightforward thinking embracing learner-centric ideas. In short, the training design revolves around learners: What do they need? When do they need it? Why do they need it? What's the simplest way to give it to them? Some ways to make training more engaging, interesting and more motivating to learners are:

• **Make it relevant.** Focus the design around skills and knowledge that are

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practical, useful and based on actual workplace situations. Uncover issues or difficulties the learners are experiencing to create engaging scenarios and practice activities. This makes learning meaningful. Who wants to sit through information that will never be used on the job?

- **Give learners choices.** Learners like choices and flexibility. Give them the opportunity to apply their current knowledge to situational challenges. Allow them to breeze past what they already know to the points they want to learn. Let the learners choose the sequence of learning that works for them, allowing them to choose the starting point and to skip around, forward or back if need be.

- **Break it down.** Give the learners small, digestible chunks of training. The human brain is only capable of absorbing so much at one time before learners shut down in frustration. Also consider that most learners don't have large blocks of time available to devote to learning. Create learning experiences that can be mastered in small, manageable pieces.

- **Show the benefits.** Draw learners in by creating a story that directly affects what they would do with the information. Be specific about what the course will do for them in terms of time saved, makes the job easier, etc. Sell the benefits! Build in positive feedback to remind them of what's in it for them.

- **Make it social.** Incorporate social media as part of the design of the learning experience. Today's learner is connected — allow opportunities for learners to share expertise and gain knowledge via social media channels. Also, offer just-in-time resources such as job aids, training libraries, discussion boards, and other online support systems.

- **Know your audience.** Above all, designers should put themselves in the learn-

er's shoes, relate to them. What are their skills levels? What do they need to know for the job? What will challenge them but not threaten them? What do they need to know now? What can be left for another time?

Summary

In their 2006 study, Alan Saks and Monica Belcourt estimated only 62 percent of trainees immediately transferred skills to the job after learning. Even more discouraging, they discovered after one year only 34 percent maintained the transfer of learning. The American Society for Training and Development's 2012 State of the Industry report estimates in the United State alone, organizations spent over $150 billion on employee learning and development during 2011. Taking these two studies in tandem potentially means billions of training dollars are not having much impact.

Michael Allen warns instructional designers when he writes, "No motivation = no learning outcomes." Using thoughtful design to challenge learners to solve real organizational problems makes learning relevant to both the employee and to the organization while keeping the motivation high for the learner and teaching, reinforcing, and applying the desired skills. By flipping Allen's equation, making it "motivation = learning outcomes," the learner becomes more of an asset to the organization. And an engaged, motivated learner is always a positive factor for his or her own growth and development as well as for the organization.

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Quick Keys to Designing Motivational Training:

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- **Know your audience.** Above all, designers should put themselves in the learner's shoes, relate to them. What do they need to know to get their job done?