

Missing link between skills development, increased performance



By [Deirdre Elphick-Moore](#)

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Skills development is still a major focus in South Africa. Businesses are incentivised to implement clearly defined skills development programmes. Although businesses can see almost immediate benefits through tax and skills levy rebates and better B-BBEE scores; are these programmes positively affecting the performance of employees and the organisations they work for?

Millions of rands are spent each year on learnerships and skills programmes, yet South Africa's skills shortages continue to be widely regarded as a key factor preventing the achievement of targeted growth rates. Why?

Research indicates that no matter the quality of the training, on average, no more than 15% of learning transfers to the job (Cromwell & Kolb, 2004). This article goes on to review the individual and organisational factors that impact on the degree of skills transferred from the learning environment to the workplace.

It is argued that for skills development to lead to increased work performance, these factors, which include, inter alia, employee motivation, in-depth analysis of organisational influences and ongoing training initiatives/involvement, need to be considered and managed concurrently.

Employee Motivation

The single most important element needed for skills transfer is employee motivation. It is both something that employees bring to the classroom/working environment and something that can be fostered by the culture of an organisation. If a person is motivated by extrinsic factors, for example money or recognition, his/her approach to the learning opportunity is likely to be very different to a person who is motivated by intrinsic factors such as the pleasure they derive from learning a new skills or because being engaged in a learning opportunity seems ethically the right thing to do. Consider the following scenarios:

1. An extrinsically motivated employee is placed on a learnership without any clear brief regarding why he has been chosen. Before learning commences, he is required to sign a document that includes the text "I understand that completion of this learnership in no way entitles me to changes in my employment status, including a higher salary or a promotion". It is unsurprising that this person fails to embrace the learning opportunity and the possibility of skills transfer is likely doomed from the beginning.
2. The same employee on the same learnership, but here his manager takes the time to explain to him why he has been chosen to attend the course, why the organisation is investing in this training and what potential impact this will have on his career prospects if he is able to demonstrate an application of the skills learnt in his workplace. In this scenario, the transfer of skills to the workplace is much more likely.

The implication of this should be clear: It is important that those involved in skills development understand what motivates individuals and that each training opportunity is appropriately contextualised in advance.

Organisational factors

Within the context of our economy's ability to expand and provide increased employment opportunities, the National Skills Development Strategy III (NSDS3) Document identifies "a need for much more substantial programmes that improve qualifications, support career-pathing, enable greater flexibility and mobility and increase productivity" (p.6).

The practice of skills development currently focuses largely on learnerships and accredited skills programmes, which aim to improve deficits in foundational skill and knowledge. In order to achieve the transfer of more than 15% of learning to the job, "today's high-impact learning teams [must] help their companies put in place programmes, content, systems and a culture which creates continuous, high-value learning".*

The good news

The good news for employers is that the NSDS3 makes provision for the development of such initiatives; "employers who provide workplace-based opportunities can supplement the cost of the programme with the grant from the SETAs. The SETAs, in turn, are expected to ensure that 10% of the mandatory grants is ring-fenced to fund workplace-based training opportunities".**

In her article, "An Inconvenient Truth - The Other Side of South Africa's Skills Crisis Debate in South African Companies", [Lindi Cawdry identifies the challenge](#) that organisations must face if they are to be effective in their skills development efforts: they have to "be introspective, to understand the organisational politics and dynamics that are difficult to quantify and are often seen to be 'politically sensitive'. It will require honest conversations, and proper assessment of the 'real needs'. [High impact learning teams] will require new and more dynamic strategies to confront and eliminate systemic barriers to skills [transfer] as well as continued skills development".

These are the missing links between skills development and increased performance.

* www.berzin.com

** *The National Skills Development Strategy III (NSDS3) Document, p.14*

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Deirdre Elphick-Moore, has an Honours Degree in Psychology and over 10 years of international experience in human capital management at Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley. Co-founding The Office Coach in 2009, she now focuses on personal and workplace effectiveness training and development. Her relaxed, engaging style encourages people to learn more, remember more and apply more in their workplaces, as well as inspiring to consistently better themselves in the work place. Contact her on deirdre@theofficecoach.co.za.

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