

Knowledge Worker

A Transfer of Training Problem

(July 2019)

I'll wager most of us are familiar with the "transfer of training problem." It occurs when people are trained to do something, they are tested at the end of training, the testing proves they can perform as desired, yet, once they are back on the job, they don't do as they were trained to do. For whatever reason, the training doesn't "stick" or transfer to the work environment.

Here's a little story from my Navy days that illustrates one case of proven performance at the end of training but sub-par performance back on the job, a transfer of training problem if ever there was one.

Before becoming part of the Navy's Human Resource Management Project (HRMP) and being trained as an internal OD consultant (which we called "Command Development" instead of "Organization Development"), I was stationed at the Navy's Instructor Training School at the Service School Command in San Diego. One of my jobs there was to run the Navy's Programmed Instruction Writer's Course. It was a well-designed course, with relevant, criterion-referenced testing and, with rare exception, the graduates could develop first-rate programmed instructional materials.

After transferring to the HRMP and being at the Human Resources Management Center (HRMC) in San Diego for about a year, my Commanding Officer at the HRMC was reassigned as the Commanding Officer of the Service School Command. He knew of my prior experience at the Instructor Training School and, not long after assuming command of the Service School Command, he asked me to come over and see him.

When I arrived, he informed me he had a problem and he thought I could help with it. He said the quality of the programmed instruction materials being developed at the schools was demonstrably low. Because I used to run the Programmed Instruction Writer's course, he wanted to know what, if anything, I thought could be done to improve it.

Without hesitation, I replied, "Have 'em put their names on it, Skipper."

He looked puzzled and I went on to explain.

"When we taught them how to develop programmed instructional materials, we had them put their names on the materials. That served to identify them as the developer. But, when they got back to their schools, the schools wouldn't let them put their names on the materials. As a result, no one knew who developed the materials. The developers didn't get any credit and they weren't about to take any blame. But, if they have to put their names on the title page of the program, everyone will know who developed it, the developers will want to take the credit and they are much less likely to produce shoddy materials."

The Skipper nodded. Not long afterward, he directed the schools to have the developers put their names on the materials they developed. He went a step beyond the programmed instructional materials and included lesson plans, tests, handouts, manuals and just about anything else that had to be developed. The quality of the instructional materials shot up noticeably and quickly.

One of the things we Performance Improvement Professionals have to pay attention to are the factors that support and interfere with desired performance. We have to look at what encourages it and what discourages it. And, when possible, we have to do something about any such factors.

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I knew about the problem with the developers not being able to put their names on the materials they developed when I was still running the Programmed Instruction Writer's course, and I raised it with my superiors at the Instructor Training School. They shrugged and said it wasn't my problem. My job was to make sure my students *could* develop high-quality programmed instructional materials, not ensure that they did so back at their schools. That was the school's problem.

In one sense, my superiors were exactly right; there was no way we could impose what I then called "the pride of authorship" factor on all the schools in the Service School Command. But, fortuitously, a couple of years later, the new Commanding Officer of the Service School Command was in a position to do so. He sought my counsel and he did so, solving at last a long-standing transfer of training problem.

About the Author

Fred Nickols is an organizational generalist, knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the Managing Partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#), where he provides "Assistance at A Distance." His web site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceX-press*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns is available [here](#).