The transfer of knowledge in a training environment often focuses on the 'push' of that knowledge. For example, how can we design training in a way which is easy for participants to absorb, or is delivered in a method which they find suitable? As instructional designers, we can spend considerable time on training interactions, activities or content to hopefully boost participant engagement. Microlearning and mobile learning are just two of the latest examples in this push-based approach to training design.

There's nothing wrong with this approach either! However, every force has an equal and opposite reaction. Indeed, when the transfer of knowledge is focused on behavioural change – apply new skills, stop old habits, implement different processes – the push of knowledge alone may not be enough.

This is particularly true for adult participants. Changing behaviours as an adult may be associated with uncomfortable feelings – admitting deficiencies with existing performance, acknowledging that someone else may have a better solution, or experiencing discomfort from initial failures with new skills. As a result, as we try to push learning and knowledge onto participant, they may well be pushing back against us!

So, in addition to considering how to push learning, we should give equal thought to helping the participant 'pull' the learning. We need participants working with, not against, the transfer of knowledge at a fundamental level. As we push, the participant pulls.

In this series of articles, we examine three concepts to improve this participant-driven (pull) transfer of knowledge in any form of training.

- Relevance (this article).
- Context
- Accountability

Let's examine training relevance in the first of three articles in this series.

Training relevance speaks your language

When visiting a foreign country, anything written in your own language stands out. From advertising billboards to restaurant signs, your language cuts through the noise. Our instincts are trained to lock on to anything which feels like us, sounds like us, looks like us. American psychologist and author Adam Grant states 'The most promising ideas begin from novelty and then add familiarity'. From a learning point of view, this means relevance.

Participants are naturally attracted to learning they find inherently relevant. Relevancy trumps almost everything else in the mind of an adult. Yet the economics of many training solutions often do not allow for relevance because relevance requires customisation. Training developed externally from an organisation can suffer from assumptions, generic examples or 'lowest common denominator' construction. That's a simple economic reality of training built for mass distribution.

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Training relevance improves incorporation of knowledge

Consider that relevance means the participant can easily incorporate new knowledge into their role.

- Knowledge is presented in the context of specific, not abstract, roles and scenarios.
- Examples of application are realistic and relatable.
- Solutions have an awareness and use of internal acronyms, tools and limitations.

Training relevance case study

We recently reviewed over 1,950 online training modules, from across multiple organisations, completed in 2018. These modules were created by either (a) internal subject matter experts or (b) external instructional designers. All modules contained the same standardised polling, including two key questions.

- 'Did you discover what you expected in this module?'. For modules created by internal subject matter experts (unique content, high relevance), 86% of participants discovered the knowledge they were seeking as opposed to 67% for modules created externally to the participant's organisation (generic content, low relevance). This was even though the externally created modules often looked more impressive with animations, custom videos and fancy
- 'Were you successful in implementing on-the-job?'. For modules created by internal subject matter experts, 94% of participants reported total or partial success with targeted on-the-job skills, attitudes or behaviours. For externally generated modules, 56% of participants met with success.

When someone is speaking your language, you tend to turn up the volume.

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