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## **Original Research**

# **Relationship Between Trainee Reactions and Training Transfer: Findings From a Qualitative Study in Nepal**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the relationship between trainees' reactions and the transfer of training in Nepal. Using a qualitative research design, six participants of a soft-skills training program were interviewed immediately after completing the training and after six months of the training program. The findings show that initial reactions may not be directly related to transfer: positive reactions will not always translate into transfers in the workplace. Conversely, an adverse reaction does not mean the trainee will not transfer, a unique finding from this study. It is argued that since the initial reactions may not predict transfer, organizations need to be careful in interpreting reaction statements as the trainees' willingness/ability to transfer. The study found that various forms of post-training organizational support, trainee proactiveness, and trainee's locus of control can influence the transfer of training. The study reinforces how post-training supervisory and peer-support support can create an environment that entices trainees to transfer and that post-training trainer support, a factor usually not discussed in the literature, can also impact transfer.

*Keywords:* reaction, behavior, transfer of training

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## **Introduction**

Large sections of scholarship from the Western world consistently theorize training as a potentially powerful method of enhancing individual productivity and organizational effectiveness (Ford et al., 2018; Salas et al., 2012). While training facilitates employees to improve their skills, knowledge, and abilities (Martins et al., 2019), it also enables organizations to adapt, compete, and innovate while achieving their goals (Salas et al., 2012). Like scholarship originating in Western countries, scholars from non-Western countries (e.g., Attipoe, 2016–Ghana; Ragini & Ghosh, 2022–India; Dirani (2012)–Lebanon; Park et al., 2017–South Korea; Yaghi & Bates, 2020–four countries from the Middle East) are theorizing and conducting studies on the training and development field given its importance. In the Nepali context, scholars (e.g., Basnet, 2018; Bhurtel & Bhattarai, 2023; Gautam & Basnet, 2021; Singh, 2017; Subedi, 2004) have also focused on the training and development field given that training can help organizations enhance workforce effectiveness and productivity in Nepal (Subedi, 2008).

Due to the belief that training can help both employees and organizations, globally, billions of dollars are invested in training employees (Samuel & Durning, 2022). Not surprisingly, organizations conducting training desire and engage in training evaluation to measure the effectiveness of the training programs (Bernardino & Curado, 2020; Bjerregaard et al., 2016; Giangreco et al., 2009). Historically, it has been observed that organizations infrequently conducted training assessments (Kennedy et al., 2014), and when assessments were conducted, organizations frequently omitted certain evaluation steps (Ludwikowska, 2021). The reasons attributed to irregular evaluations were related to organizations facing time constraints in conducting transfer studies since transfer studies take considerable time to conduct, organizations lacking qualified personnel with the necessary skills to conduct behavior-based evaluations, and lacking management support in conducting the evaluation (Kennedy et al., 2014). Despite these reasons, in the last few decades, training evaluation research studies have increasingly been published (Ford et al., 2018).

Among the various models used for evaluating training programs, Kirkpatrick's hierarchical model of training outcomes stands out as a globally recognized and widely utilized assessment tool (Alsalamah & Callina, 2022; Bernardino & Curado, 2020; Reio

et al., 2017; Sitzmann & Weinhardt, 2019). Kirkpatrick's model, often called the four levels (Reio et al., 2017), provides a comprehensive framework for assessing training across four levels: reaction, learning, behavior, and results (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Reactions are evaluative statements trainees provide immediately upon completion of a training program that measure the trainees' views on the training's different dimensions. Learning measures what the trainee has learned during the training. The behavior level measures what behavioral changes have occurred in the workplace after the training on account of the training. Finally, results measure "the final results that occurred because the participants attended the program" (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006, p. 25). Results are measured to gauge the impact of training on the organization's performance (Curado & Sousa, 2021). Of these four levels, measuring reactions is the most popular at the practitioner level, and measuring behavior through the transfer of training literature is popular in academia.

Reactions are generally assessed with Likert-style survey instruments immediately upon completion of the training program (Kim et al., 2020). A 2010 American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) report noted that reaction instruments were used in 91.6% of training programs (Patel, 2010). A significant reason for the global popularity of the Level 1 instrument as the preferred evaluation tool is its speed and ease in collecting reactions from the trainees (Kim et al., 2020). While reaction statements are commonly used to evaluate training programs, reaction statements cannot demonstrate whether or not what was learned in the training was applied back to the workplace. Organizations, thus, are encouraged to engage with the behavior level in the Kirkpatrick model to measure the transfer of training. Transfer of training can be understood as "the extent of retention and application of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes from the training environment to the workplace environment" (Subedi, 2004, p. 591). Transfer of training includes applying the learning to the workplace, generalizing the learning, and retaining the learning in the future (Ford et al., 2018). In other words, transfer implies trainees can apply the knowledge/skills acquired in training to different settings and contexts (generalization) and preserve the changed knowledge/skills for an extended period (maintenance) (Ford et al., 2018). In the Nepali context, few studies have explored the transfer of training in areas like airlines and banks (Basnet, 2018), civil and corporate sector organizations (Subedi, 2008), public enterprises (Singh, 2017), technical and vocational education and training (Bhurtel &

Bhattarai, 2023), school teaching (Dhakal et al., 2022) and undergraduate and masters level teachers (Gautam & Basnet, 2018).

Although reaction statements cannot measure transfer, surveys that collect reactions are generally the only tool used to evaluate training programs (Rouse, 2011), and they are the most common tool for evaluating training outcomes (Giangreco et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2020; Ludwikowska, 2021). This then logically leads to whether the reaction statements predict transfer. However, the relationship between reaction and transfer is understudied, and no studies exist in the Nepali context. Despite the popularity of using reactions to evaluate training programs (Andoh et al., 2022), training and development researchers are still determining whether reactions after training are related to the trainees transferring what they learned to their workplace (Ludwikowska, 2021). While some scholars note that reactions and transfer relationships are positive (e.g., Martins et al., 2019; Ludwikowska, 2021), few scholars (e.g., Glerum et al., 2021) note that there might only be a modest relationship. Furthermore, it has also been noted that reactions might not necessarily translate to transfer (Reio et al., 2017).

While the transfer of training studies published in Nepal have studied factors influencing knowledge transfer in the workplace, they have yet to study how reaction statements are related to the transfer. Informal conversations with training and human resources managers in Nepal have revealed that organizations infrequently engage in formal behavior-based evaluations and generally rely on reaction-based evaluations to assess the success of a training program and make decisions to continue or discontinue the training program (Bhattarai, 2013). Since reactions-based evaluations are popular in Nepal and, in many cases, are a stand-in for behavior-based evaluations, this study aimed to explore if trainee reactions translate into the transfer of training in Nepal. This research was guided by the questions: How do trainee reactions compare with the trainees' description of the actual transfer of training in the workplace, and how do the trainees describe the presence/absence of transfer of training?

### **Methodology**

Qualitative researchers explore how individuals make sense of their experiences and interactions in their social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Since I wanted to understand the trainees' reactions towards the training and explore

their views on the transfer of training in their workplace, I designed a qualitative research project to answer the research questions.

### **Participants Selection**

For practical reasons, I bounded this study to one city in Nepal. I recruited participants from one organization, which had nominated 30 staff members to attend a two-day soft-skills training program organized by a training organization. The training organization was chosen based on recommendations from numerous human resources managers I knew as an experienced insider in Nepal's training field, and because the training organization was the industry's apex training organization. When I approached, the training organization agreed to support my research and suggested I pick the research participants from one of their popular soft-skills programs. Subsequently, I approached the trainer to identify possible research participants. Using his recommendations and purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2020), I chose six participants (two females and four males). The trainer recommended participants who were active, silent, and deviant participants (e.g., participants answering phones and side-talking loudly during the training) during the training program. I also chose participants from only one organization because they would work in similar conditions after the training program.

### **Data Collection**

I used semi-structured interviews (Roulston, 2022; Tracy, 2020) as the primary data collection tool to collect data. The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions focusing on the initial reactions, subsequent reactions after six months, and transfer of training. Questions focusing on the initial reactions invited the trainees to discuss things they liked and did not like in the training program and how they found the training. Questions for measuring reactions were based on existing literature and various reaction instruments I had used over fifteen years. Questions relating to the transfer of training were developed from the existing literature and focused on inquiring whether the trainees could transfer the training and discussing reasons that might have influenced the transfer of training or lack thereof. I did not collect any additional data to examine whether the transfer had occurred or not. The transfer of training discussed in this article is solely based on the participants' responses. Once the instruments were

developed, I conducted a small pilot study in my organization and was satisfied as the questions elicited responses that answered the research questions.

Guided by an interview schedule, I conducted multiple interviews with six participants. The research design required me to interview the participants twice at an interval of six months. However, I had to conduct five interviews with one of the participants to understand and clarify her points. All of the interviews ranged between 45 minutes to 60 minutes. A third-party transcription service provider transcribed interviews upon the participants' consent, and anonymity measures (e.g., masking/removing the names of people and organizations mentioned in the interviews) were taken to protect the participants' identities.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the interviews' data using a cross-case "inductive analysis approach" (Patton, 2002, p. 453), which involved discovering patterns, themes, and categories in data where findings emerged from the data through my interactions with the data. This inductive analysis included identifying and connecting recurring patterns, critical events, themes, relationships, and narrative threads in the trainees' statements regarding reaction and transfer of training. To maintain the study's quality, I took steps to ensure the study's credibility (e.g., prolonged engagement with the trainees, providing the interview transcripts to the participants and my initial interpretations for verification), transferability (e.g., describing steps in the inquiry and my values), dependability (e.g., all the trainees were asked the same questions at the start of their interviews), and conformability (e.g., methodically recording the data, maintaining proper referencing mechanisms and critiquing myself) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Moreover, I adhered to responsible research practices (Dhakal, 2016) in educational research.

### **Participants' Initial Reactions**

The participants were interviewed immediately after completing the training to understand their reactions to the training. Four trainees had positive reactions, one had a negative reaction, and one had a neutral reaction to the training. Trainees' immediate reaction to a training program and, in particular, their overall satisfaction with given courses is affected by how useful they think the course will likely be for their work and personal development (Giangreco et al., 2009; Ludwikowska, 2021). Nita, the trainee with a negative reaction, had clear expectations from the program. However, she

believed the training only covered the basics of the training topic, which she generally knew, and did not provide any specific answers to her questions. In contrast to Nita, trainees like Suraj, holding a positive reaction, noted the usefulness of the course as:

*This was a very good capacity-building training. Since I have learned many skills, I am sure that with this training, I will be able to improve my work and get better results in the future.*

Trainees with positive reactions also stated that they were quite excited to attend a training program and had looked forward to attending the training program. Studies have confirmed a significant relationship between pre-training motivation and trainee reactions (Kim et al., 2020; Kodwani & Prashar, 2019) and that trainee pre-training motivation is positively related to reactions (Kim et al., 2020). Multiple trainees also attributed their positive reactions to the training content—soft skills—skills that could help their professional and personal lives. Giangreco et al. (2009) note that positive reaction is usually associated with training programs that deal with ‘soft’ behavioral and relational topics, tending to be associated with higher satisfaction scores than courses that deal with ‘hard’ managerial and technical topics.

### **Relationship Between Initial Trainee Reactions and Transfer of Training**

In-depth interviews were again conducted with all six trainees after six months to explore whether the initial reactions had translated into transfer and how the trainees described the presence/absence of transfer of training. At the six-month mark, only one of the four participants with a positive reaction transferred the learning to their workplace; two of the four had only partially transferred, and one had not. Surprisingly, the participant with a negative reaction initially transferred the training to the workplace, as had the trainee with a neutral reaction.

The findings mimic the ambiguity in the extant literature exploring the relationship between reaction and transfer of training: participants with positive reactions transfer knowledge (Kim et al., 2020; Martins et al., 2019; Ludwikowska, 2021), modest transfer (Glerum et al., 2021), and participants with positive reactions not transferring knowledge (Arthur et al., 2003). However, the findings also revealed that trainees without positive reactions had transferred learning, a unique finding from this study that was not addressed in the literature. Further analysis of the interviews was conducted to understand the trainee responses further and explore how positive reactions did not

translate into transfer or partial transfer and how a trainee with a negative reaction and a neutral reaction could transfer. The analysis revealed two themes: post-training support and trainee characteristics, which trainees used to describe the presence/absence of transfer of training.

### **Post-Training Support**

When discussing the transfer in their workplace after the training, a commonality amongst the participants was the presence or absence of post-training support. All the participants opined that the role of support from their supervisor, colleagues, training unit, and trainer had affected the transfer.

#### ***Support From Supervisors and Colleagues***

With one exception, the trainees reported minimal interaction between the trainees and their supervisors upon completing the training. In most cases, the supervisors showed little interest in the participants learning and how or if the new learning could be implemented in the workplace. In most cases, the supervisors showed little interest in what the trainees had learned and how or if the new learning could be implemented in the workplace.

Suraj, who had a positive reaction but had only partially transferred, reminisced:

*Frankly and honestly speaking, she [his supervisor] did not ask even a single letter of "T" [with significant stress on T]. She asked nothing about training.*

Like other trainees with positive reactions but who have not entirely transferred or transferred at all, Suraj noted that the largely absent supervisory support negatively impacted the complete transfer of training. This finding is not surprising since the training scholarship has consistently noted that supervisor support can facilitate transfer (Park et al., 2018; Yaghi & Bates, 2020; Yaqub et al., 2020). Managers and/or supervisors in the trainee's workplaces are critical partners in influencing the transfer process (Subedi, 2008). Multiple participants noted that transfer would have been higher if the supervisors had exhibited enthusiasm or provided support. Strengthening this line of argument, one of the participants, Niraj, shared how his supervisor showed interest by asking questions and discussing the possibilities of joint implementation. Even a few months after the training had elapsed, Niraj's supervisor continued the discussion and consistently encouraged Niraj to implement what was learned in



training. Niraj noted that he successfully transferred learning to the workplace with his supervisor's help. Interest and encouragement from the supervisor in implementing new learnings from the training programs influence transfer (Basnet, 2018; Mdhlalose, 2022; Park et al., 2018; Ragini & Ghosh, 2022).

Further, three trainees (Gagan–neutral reaction, Nita–negative reaction, and Niraj–positive reaction) who transferred what they learned to their workplace noted that support from their work colleagues helped them transfer what they had learned. Studies have noted that coworker support also positively influences the transfer of training (Ford et al., 2018; Sharif et al., 2023; Yaghi & Bates, 2020). Further, post-training peer support can also help diminish the impact of a negative work climate that might hinder the transfer of training (Martin, 2010).

### ***Support From Trainer and Training Department***

In contrast to the limited participant-supervisor interactions, not a single participant interacted with the training unit overseeing the overall training function after the training. All participants had submitted the required training report to the training unit. However, none of them were contacted by the training unit. Two sentiments are produced below, echoing all the participants' views, noting the training unit's inaction.

No one from the training unit approached me after the training to seek any feedback.

*We could have done so much more if the training unit had put in a little extra. So much money was expended to conduct this training. But it now seems a waste because we have not implemented so much.*

Further, the participants revealed that the trainer had assured the trainees that he would be coming back to review how they were doing and would provide feedback. Thus, some participants expected the trainer to come at least once to enquire about the progress and answer the trainees' questions. Since the trainer had not come even in six months, some participants slowly lost enthusiasm and reverted to older practices. While the absence of post-training support negatively impacted the transfer, the above discussion shows why a participant like Nita, who had a negative reaction and reported a lack of supervisory support, could transfer her learning.

In the next section, I discuss the second theme derived from the interviews, trainee characteristics, which helps us understand further why transfer happened or did not happen for trainees holding positive or negative reactions.

### **Trainee Characteristics**

Scholarship following Baldwin and Ford's (1988) seminal framework on the transfer of training has consistently noted that trainee characteristics also influence the transfer of training. In this study, the trainees discussed some personal characteristics that influenced the transfer process.

#### ***Locus of Control***

Locus of control refers “to the extent to which a person believes that the occurrence of an event is dependent on their own behavior, that is, controlling convictions are an individual's internal and external attribution of their work results to themselves” (Tonhäuser & Bükér, 2016, pp. 144-145). Individuals with an internal locus of control tend to attribute life events to their actions (Nießen et al., 2022; Schlechter et al., 2023). In contrast, an individual with an external locus of control attributes events to external factors like power and luck (Nießen et al., 2022; Schlechter et al., 2023; Weissbein et al., 2011). Trainees like Gagan and Nita, who have transferred their learning, demonstrated a strong internal locus of control and believed their transfer efforts would lead to positive work outcomes (Weissbein et al., 2011). For them, the keys to successful training transfer were with them and not the supervisors, but with themselves. Despite their training reactions (neutral and negative), they strongly felt that since there were many things in the training that, if implemented, could bring about subtle but significant changes, they went forward, accepting the challenges and initiating the changes. Further, trainees like Gagan with high self-efficacy, i.e., those who believe they can perform well, are more likely to view difficult tasks as something to be mastered rather than avoided (Bandura, 1977).

#### ***Proactiveness***

Three trainees who successfully transferred and one participant who had partially transferred noted they could transfer partly because of their proactiveness. The importance the trainees placed on proactiveness can be observed in the following quote from one trainee:

*As trainees, it is up to us to implement what we have learned. If we do not take the initiative, we will not be able to implement anything we learned in our training.*

Another trainee further pointed out the critical role the trainees themselves play in transferring their learning as follows:

*The onus of applying things learned in training rests with me. If I do not take the initiative, I do not think I can be forced into using what I have learned.*

Research has demonstrated that proactiveness in learners can predict learners' motivation to learn (Vignoli & Depolo, 2019; Zajda, 2021). However, not much is known about how post-training trainee proactiveness influences the transfer of training (Vignoli & Depolo, 2019). In their longitudinal study, Vignoli and Depolo (2019), which the authors note is one of the first research to study “the role of proactive personality in enhancing the transfer of training” (p. 62), found “no direct effect between proactive personality and transfer of training” (p. 62). However, their study revealed that proactiveness influenced learning motivation, ultimately influencing training transfer. In contrast to the Vignoli and Depolo (2019) study, multiple trainees in my study noted the positive influence of proactiveness in the transfer of training. Further, and more importantly, the trainees also noted that their proactiveness in implementing what they had learned helped overcome the lack of supervisory support to transfer. One participant, Gagan, the one with a neutral reaction, noted that while his supervisor was apathetic, his supervisor also did not discourage him from sharing and transferring the learning in his workplace. With a tone showing his pride, Gagan explained that he could implement many things with his colleagues' support without supervisor involvement. Gagan noted:

*You cannot wait forever for others' help; we need to help ourselves.*

The importance of proactiveness was also described by Nita, the participant with a negative reaction but who transferred what she learned in training to her workplace. She revealed,

*I believe I have been able to implement almost half of the things I learned in training. I am trying my best to implement many things in my office and, in many cases, take the lead in implementing the changes in my behavior and colleagues.*

Although the trainees listed specific reasons for their ability or inability to transfer learning to their workplace, it is relevant to analyze the issue from what psychologists call "self-serving biases." Be it one respondent's assertion that he could implement without supervisory support or others lamenting that the internal environment is not conducive to transfer, their claims can also be interpreted as cases of self-serving bias. Self-serving bias is used when people judge themselves and attribute success to their efforts and abilities while attributing failures to external factors (Robbins & Judge, 2021). When explaining positive transfer, trainees credited internal or dispositional causes, but when identifying the reasons for the absence of transfer, the respondents stressed external situational factors.

### **Conclusion**

Trainee reactions capture the trainees' emotional opinions about a training program, and trivial issues can potentially sway the trainees' reactions. Positive reactions do not always translate into transfer; a negative or neutral opinion also does not mean the trainee will not transfer. Instead, various organizational factors and trainee attributes can influence the transfer. Since initial reactions are unrelated to the actual transfer, results from reaction statements should not be constituted as the trainees' willingness or ability to transfer training. Judging a training program only based on reaction statements may lead to a wrong interpretation of the program's effectiveness. Nevertheless, reaction statements are important since they provide feedback that can help make changes and add value to the training program. However, reactions-based evaluations should not substitute behavior-based evaluations to assess the transfer of training. Although behavior-based evaluations are challenging to design and engage with and are expensive, the overall cost of only conducting reaction-based evaluations and not measuring transfer is much higher, leading to wasted training costs, wasted working hours, and the possibility of continuing with faulty work procedures that could lead to dire consequences.

This study implies that trainers can facilitate transfer by creating and maintaining post-training communication channels with the trainees so that the trainees can freely communicate for feedback, confirmation, or disconfirmation of what was learned. Supervisors, rather than badgering trainees to implement, can ask questions like, "How can we transfer the learning?", or "Do you need any assistance in transferring?" and

thus provide post-training support, which could make a difference in training transfer. Further, the training manager can reach out to the trainees before and after the training and help create a culture whereby the training unit or the trainer provides feedback when needed. Future researchers can expand this research by increasing the number of participants and using a different group of participants, such as senior management personnel, technical training trainees, or self-starters. Research in these lines can provide a further understanding of the complex psyche of a trainee and further our understanding of how the transfer of training can be more effective.

### **Disclosure**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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