

When formal training leads to informal learning among colleagues: antecedents of training transfer and knowledge sharing

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the underexplored intersection of formal training outcomes and informal workplace learning, specifically examining what predicts training transfer (applying learned skills on the job) and knowledge sharing (disseminating learned content to colleagues). The authors argue that these two post-training behaviors share common motivational and volitional mechanisms and can be understood within a unified antecedent framework spanning individual, training-related, and organizational factors. Across two studies — a German-speaking sample (N=537) for scale development and a U.S. longitudinal sample (N=507) for validation — the researchers employ confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling to test their hypotheses. Key findings confirm that motivation predicts volition, which predicts behavior, for both transfer and knowledge sharing. However, antecedent effects were selective: training reflection, goal clarity, peer support, and feedback predicted both motivational outcomes, while constructs such as transfer self-efficacy and opportunity to apply showed limited or unexpected effects. The study concludes that formal training can catalyze informal learning among colleagues, but sustainable impact requires coordinated support across multiple organizational levels. Limitations include a managerially skewed sample, reliance on self-report data, and separate rather than integrated structural models for each antecedent cluster.

Key Insights

1. Motivation and volition function as sequential mediators linking antecedents to both training transfer and knowledge sharing behaviors, with motivation also exerting a direct effect on behavior independent of volition.
2. Training transfer and knowledge sharing share overlapping but distinct antecedent profiles: growth orientation, goal clarity, training reflection, peer support, and feedback predicted both motivational outcomes, while deficit orientation predicted only transfer motivation and supervisor support predicted only knowledge sharing motivation.
3. Formal training can serve as a trigger for informal workplace learning when trained employees share acquired knowledge with untrained colleagues, suggesting these two learning modes are interconnected rather than isolated organizational phenomena.
4. Opportunity to apply showed no significant effect on motivation for either process, implying its influence may operate at a later behavioral stage rather than at the motivational readiness level.
5. Transfer self-efficacy unexpectedly showed a negative association with motivation to share knowledge, a finding the authors attribute to a possible individual-performance orientation that may

conflict with dissemination behaviors.

Practical Takeaways

- Systematic diagnostic assessment of antecedents across individual, training, and organizational levels can identify barriers to both training transfer and knowledge sharing before and after training programs.
- Peer support and feedback mechanisms within and after training consistently predicted motivational outcomes for both transfer and knowledge sharing, indicating these environmental features are associated with broader post-training learning engagement.

Frameworks Mentioned

Rubicon Model — A motivational framework distinguishing pre-decisional (motivation) from post-decisional (volition) phases of goal pursuit, used here to model the motivation-volition-behavior sequence in training transfer and knowledge sharing.

Learning Transfer System Inventory — A validated instrument developed by Holton et al. for assessing factors that influence the transfer of training to the workplace, cited as a foundational reference in the study's antecedent framework.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The two-study sequential design with cross-national samples (German-speaking and U.S.) strengthens both scale development and external validity. Temporal separation of antecedent and outcome measurement in Study 2 reduces common method bias to some extent. Confirmatory factor analysis and latent mediation modeling with bootstrapped confidence intervals represent appropriate and rigorous analytical choices. The integration of training transfer and knowledge sharing within a single motivational framework is a genuine theoretical contribution. **Limitations:** Hypotheses 2.2, 3.2, and 4.2 received only partial support, indicating the antecedent-motivation relationships are more selective than the authors initially proposed. The sample in Study 2 is skewed toward highly educated, managerial, and U.S.-based participants, limiting generalizability. Antecedent clusters were modeled separately rather than simultaneously, preventing assessment of relative predictive strength. All measures are self-reported, introducing social desirability and recall bias risks, particularly given the retrospective training reporting (average seven months prior). The one-month lag in the longitudinal design may be insufficient to capture longer-term transfer dynamics. High inter-factor correlations among some constructs, especially organizational antecedents (0.53–0.91), raise questions about discriminant validity despite Fornell-Larcker support. The temporal and causal relationship between training transfer and knowledge sharing remains unmodeled and unresolved.

Organizational Practice

Organizations in the study used formal job-related training programs followed by post-training measurement of whether employees applied learned content (training transfer) and shared it with colleagues who had not attended training (knowledge sharing). Antecedent conditions assessed include supervisor support, peer support, feedback mechanisms, opportunities to apply skills, and resource availability for transfer. Both German-speaking and U.S. employee populations participated, spanning service, industry, and other sectors, with a notable proportion holding managerial or leadership roles.

Strategic Implications

The findings indicate that post-training knowledge sharing represents an additional, measurable pathway through which formal training investments propagate across organizations, extending learning impact beyond direct participants. The selective effects of antecedents across transfer and sharing motivation suggest that organizations measuring only training transfer may be underestimating or misattributing the full return on training investment. The supervisory role appears more strongly associated with knowledge dissemination than with direct skill application, which has implications for how supervisory behaviors are positioned in learning transfer strategies. Cultural and labor market differences between Germany and the U.S. samples, though not fully analyzed, point to the possibility that antecedent-outcome relationships in performance management and learning contexts may not be uniform across national settings.

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