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## Enhancing training motivation in the public sector in South Korea: the value of a contingency approach

Yong Hyun Kim, Madeline Ong & Jang Hoon Chung

# Enhancing training motivation in the public sector in South Korea: the value of a contingency approach

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Public sector organisations which invest in training programmes care about their employees' successful application of learnt knowledge and skills in the workplace. The present study finds that leader support positively influences public sector employees' training motivation, specifically the motivation to transfer learnt knowledge and skills to their jobs. However, this positive relationship is moderated by employees' prior knowledge of training content. When employees have high levels of prior knowledge of training content, leader support is not a significant influence on their motivation to transfer learnt knowledge and skills to their jobs. These findings are derived from a survey of 335 South Korean government officials who recently participated in a training programme that focused on performance management systems. The findings suggest that leaders need to take a contingent approach when expressing support for training programmes.

**Keywords:** training motivation; motivation to transfer; contingent leadership; prior knowledge; employee training; South Korea

## Introduction

Many organisations in the public and private sectors require their employees to participate in training programmes as part of their workforce development strategies. Training allows employees to enhance and update their skillsets, thereby improving workplace productivity. Thus, many organisations have long turned to training programmes as solutions to work problems (Goldstein, 1989). With rapid globalisation and technological advancements, today's public sector organisations function in an increasingly unpredictable and ever-changing environment. They are now under great pressure to grow and maintain a knowledgeable and trained workforce. Recognising this pressing need, the public sector in many countries invests considerably in training for its employees.

An important aspect of training programmes is the transfer of training-acquired knowledge and skills to work contexts and demands (Axtell, Maitlis, & Yearta, 1997; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Patrick, 1992; Tracey, Tannenbaum, & Kavanagh, 1995). One key predictor of the effectiveness of training transfer is employees' motivation to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills in the work setting (Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992; Noe, 1986; Noe & Schmitt, 1986; Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1991). There are individual factors (eg., personality) and situational factors (eg., work climate) that influence training motivation (Mathieu & Martineau,

1997; Noe, 1986; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992). A situational factor of particular interest here is leader support. When leaders show encouragement and support for the transfer of learning, employees will be motivated to transfer what they have learnt. The positive link between leader support and training motivation has been established in several training studies (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997; Clark, Dobbins, & Ladd, 1993; Facticeau, Dobbins, Russell, Ladd, & Kudisch, 1995; Warr, Allan, & Birdi, 1999).

While evidence shows that leader support has a positive impact on training motivation, contingency theories of leadership suggest that leader support may not always be helpful in enhancing training motivation (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Hersey & Blanchard, 1974). The effectiveness of leader support is likely to be contingent on various characteristics of the situation; it may be more effective in one circumstance, but less so in others. A significant factor that may influence the impact of leader support on motivation to transfer is the employees' level of prior knowledge of the training content. Employees with low levels of prior knowledge may be more easily affected by leader influences compared to those with high levels of prior knowledge. Employees are likely to be more compliant to requirements of their leaders when they have little prior knowledge of training content. By contrast, when employees with high levels of prior knowledge are sent for training, their leaders are much less likely to affect their training motivation.

Against this background, the discussion here draws on research on training motivation, contingent leadership, and prior knowledge to explain the impact that leader support and employees' prior knowledge have on employees' training motivation. Of particular relevance is a survey conducted involving 335 government officials in South Korea who recently participated in a training programme that focused on performance management systems. The findings of the survey are summarised and discussed.

### **Enhancing training motivation in the public sector**

The ability of employees to apply the knowledge and skills they learn through training is important to employers who invest heavily in training programmes. Training researchers have focused on the factors that influence the degree to which employees can effectively apply what they learn in training programmes once they return to their regular jobs (Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992; Tracey, Tannenbaum, & Kavanagh, 1995). While well-designed and administered training programmes can facilitate training transfer, the motivational attitudes of employees may enhance or reduce the effectiveness of training (Noe, 1986).

Training motivation is the direction, intensity and persistence of learning-directed behaviour in training contexts (Kanfer, 1991). Employees with a high level of training motivation typically seek to engage, learn and embrace the training experiences and content (Carlson, Bozeman, Kacmar, Wright, & McMahan, 2000). While training motivation has been a prominent area of research interest in the field of industrial and organisational psychology (Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000), it has been less examined in the field of public administration.

Public sector scholars interested in the motivational bases of public service have studied work motivation (Wright, 2001) and public service motivation (Perry, 1996, 2014; Perry & Wise, 1990). Work motivation and public service motivation have received attention as important factors for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector organisations (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999). They address the motivation employees have towards their jobs and work tasks. Public service motivation is defined as "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely

in public institutions and organizations” (Perry & Wise, 1990). It has been found to be related to individual and organisational performance and to a range of ethical or pro-social behaviours (Perry, 2014).

Training motivation addresses a more specific form of motivation that employees have towards their learning and the application of what they learn from training programmes in which they participate. Public sector organisations have invested considerable resources in training as a means of developing the knowledge and skill sets of their employees in response to increasingly complex and competitive work environments. Unfortunately, these investments may sometimes go to waste if employees who participate in training programmes are unable to transfer the things they learn into their actual day-to-day jobs (Okotoni & Erero, 2005). Therefore, the motivation that employees have towards training and development is crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of training programmes in which public sector organisations invest.

Existing research suggests differences in employee motivation in the private and public sectors. For example, public sector employees are more attentive to intrinsic motivation and rewards compared to private sector employees who are more attentive to extrinsic rewards (Houston, 2000). In some situations, a high level of extrinsic rewards may actually crowd out intrinsically motivated individuals to accept public sector employment (Georgellis, Iossa, & Tabvuma, 2011). While many still debate the extent to which public sector employees are different from private sector employees (Baldwin, 1987, 1990; Boyne, 2002; Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007; Tonin & Vlassopoulos, 2014), most scholars agree that public sector employees have different work-related values and motivations compared to those of private sector employees (Lyons, Duxbury, & Higgins, 2006). This implies possible differences in training motivation that need to be examined through the conduct of more research on such motivation in public sector organisations.

In the industrial and organisational psychology literature, training motivation is often described as having two aspects: motivation to learn and motivation to transfer (Noe, 1986). Motivation to learn is the specific desire of the employee to learn the content of a training programme. Training research has found that motivation to learn has explained significant variances in self-reported learning (Hicks, 1983). Motivation to learn has also been a basis for predicting trainee success and class dropout rates (Ryman & Biesner, 1975).

The second aspect of training motivation – motivation to transfer – refers to employees’ desire to use the knowledge and skills learnt in training programme on the job. Employees are likely to be motivated to transfer acquired knowledge and skills when they are confident in using that knowledge and skills, when they are aware that it is appropriate to apply the knowledge and skills, and when they perceive that the knowledge and skills are useful for solving work problems or enhancing job performance (Noe, 1986; Noe & Schmitt, 1986). Accordingly, training programmes should be more effective for employees with a strong motivation to transfer.

In their meta-analysis of 20 years of research on training motivation, Colquitt, LePine and Noe (2000) confirmed the significance of training motivation involving individual characteristics (eg., locus of control, conscientiousness, cognitive ability, self-efficacy) and situational characteristics (eg., climate, social support). Among these, the discussion here is concerned with the relationship between leader support and employees’ motivation to transfer, on the understanding that when leaders show encouragement and support for the transfer of learning, employees will be more motivated to transfer what they have learnt.

Researchers who study training outcomes have looked at how leader support can have a positive influence on employees' learning and motivation. Fecteau, Dobbins, Russell, Ladd and Kudisch (1995) studied a sample of 967 managers in departments in US state government agencies and found a positive link between support from leaders (both supervisors and top management) and training motivation. Supportive leaders can emphasise the utility and value of training to the job, thus positively impacting employees' training motivation (Clark, Dobbins, & Ladd, 1993; Hardy, et al., 2010). Rouillier and Goldstein (1993) have suggested that a supportive transfer climate provides situational cues that encourage employees to transfer their knowledge and skills and also rewards them for applying what they have learnt. Noe (1986) proposed that a favourable environment affects training motivation, arguing that a supportive social context (eg., supportive leaders) provides employees with opportunities and reinforcement for practicing the skills and using the knowledge they learnt in training. Similarly, Tsai and Tai (2003) also found that when there is a clear organisational message to employees that training is important, employees' training motivation increases. These studies all suggest that when there is strong support from leaders about training transfer, employees will be better able to see the benefits of their training and will be more motivated to apply what they have learnt from training programmes in their work. Therefore, it is hypothesised that there is a positive relationship between leader support and employees' motivation to transfer.

### **The moderating influence of prior knowledge**

Although past research suggests that leader support has a positive impact on employees' motivation to transfer, contingency theories of leadership argue that the relationship is not so clear-cut (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987; Hersey, Blanchard, & Natemeyer, 1979). According to such theories, leader effectiveness is contingent on various demands imposed by the situation. Some situations are more favorable to the leader playing a stronger and more supportive role, while other situations are more favorable to the leader stepping back and taking a passive role.

Following the contingency perspective, the positive influence of leader support on employees' motivation to transfer depends on how much prior knowledge the latter have of training content. Employees who are selected to attend training programmes often possess differing levels of prior knowledge of training content. Such prior knowledge can be a by-product of previous work experience or education, or it can be accumulated through second-hand experience (Huber, 1991; Shepherd & DeTienne, 2005). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have greatly facilitated the ability of individuals to acquire prior knowledge on almost any subject matter (Benkler, 2006). Therefore, it has become increasingly easier to acquire knowledge about a particular job or task even before an individual takes on that job or task.

Employees with a high level of prior knowledge should perform better, especially when it comes to complex tasks that require more inference processes (McNamara & Kintsch, 1996). Prior knowledge is a foundation on which new information can be added, making the learning process more effective (Kujawa & Huske, 1995). Therefore, employees with high levels of prior knowledge should perform better in training and ultimately on the job (Borman, Hanson, Oppler, Pulakos, & White, 1993; Borman, White, Pulakos, & Oppler, 1991; Ree, Carretta, & Teachout, 1995).

Employees' prior knowledge allows them to recognise and identify certain opportunities in a certain direction, but such opportunities and direction may not necessarily be intended by their leaders (Shane, 2000; Shepherd & DeTienne, 2005; Venkataraman, 1997). When employees have a low level of prior knowledge of training content, leader support is likely to have a positive influence on their motivation to transfer. In contrast, when employees have a high level of prior knowledge of training content, leader support may not have a positive influence on their motivation to transfer. In essence, employees are more compliant to their leaders when they have little prior knowledge; but when they have a high level of prior knowledge, they become less affected by their leaders. Therefore, it is hypothesised that the positive relationship between leader support and employees' motivation to transfer is moderated by the latter's prior knowledge of training content, such that when the employee has a high level of prior knowledge, leader support is no longer significantly related to their motivation to transfer.

## **Methodology**

### ***The sample***

The sample for this study comes from a larger survey of the effectiveness of a government-wide performance management system (PMS) involving South Korean government officials across 41 ministries and committees. The sample comprises 335 officials who recently participated in a training programme that focused on knowledge and skills related to performance evaluation and management.<sup>1</sup> Respondents were asked about their intentions to apply practices they learnt in the training programme to their jobs. There was no significant difference between officials who recently participated in the training session and those who did not in terms of demographic information, rank and tenure. The mean age of the respondents was 41.6 ( $SD = 6.9$ ), and on average they had worked for the government for 13.9 years ( $SD = 7.4$ ). Within the sample, 20% of respondents were female and 80% were male.

### ***Measures***

The survey was administered in Korean. Two translators were involved in the translation process to ensure that specific items accurately measured the constructs of interest. The first translator translated the Korean version of the survey into English, after which the second translator translated the English items back into Korean. The translators then discussed and resolved the discrepancies in the two Korean versions. Both translators were blind to the hypotheses and research questions in the study.

### ***Independent variables***

Each respondent was asked about the extent to which their leader supports specific training concerning the PMS. Four items ( $\alpha = .86$ ) were used: "my leader participates actively in this specific PMS", "my leader takes responsibility for outcomes related to this specific PMS", "my leader underlines the importance of this specific PMS", and "my leader believes it is very important to use information derived from this specific PMS". As a measure of prior knowledge on PMSs in general, respondents were asked how much they knew about nine other PMSs ( $\alpha = .93$ ) that were similar to the specific PMS questioned in the four items measuring leader support.

### ***Dependent variable***

For the dependent variable, respondents' motivation to apply what they have learnt about the specific PMS in their jobs was measured using eight items ( $\alpha = .98$ ). Respondents were asked the extent to which they would apply knowledge and skills they learnt from the specific PMS training programme in various tasks such as resource allocation, employee remuneration, prioritising projects, and making suggestions for their work.

### ***Control variables***

To ensure the robustness of the results, several individual characteristics were controlled for that may have significant impacts on employees' motivation to transfer. Based on prior research (eg., Bertolino, Truxillo, & Fraccaroli, 2011; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004), among demographic factors, each government official's age and gender were controlled for; and there was no variance in race and ethnicity. Tenure was measured as the number of years they had worked for the government. Their rank was controlled by dividing them into four categories depending on their pay grade on the job ladder: non-manager, supervisor, senior-supervisor, and director. Non-managers comprised 67.2% of the entire sample.

A set of control variables was included which directly relate to the training programme. Eight items ( $\alpha = .97$ ) were used to address the extent to which the respondents were currently using knowledge and skills covered in the specific PMS training programme – as the “current usage of the programme”. The structure of these items was identical to the measure of the dependent variable. It was expected that this variable would be positively related to employees' motivation to transfer. Similarly, the “current objection against the programme” was measured using five items ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Respondents were asked to state any reservations on such pressing issues as the mismatch between policy and reality, the training programme's ambiguous legal status, and the redundancy caused by other similar programmes. In addition to the employees' objections, the item “current trust of the programme” was included to measure the extent to which the respondents thought the materials covered in the training programme were trustworthy and able to be accounted for. There was a moderate negative correlation between the level of objection against the programme and the level of trust of the programme ( $r = -0.20, p < 0.001$ ).

## **Results**

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for key variables and the correlations between them, and Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis. A multi-level mixed-effects modeling approach was adopted, allowing each ministry and committee with which respondents were affiliated to have different baseline levels (intercepts). This approach made it possible to control for contextual effects of ministry-level and committee-level processes, and assisted in the effective explanation of the data.

Model 1 in Table 2 comprises all of the control variables. None of the demographic characteristics such as age, gender and tenure was statistically significant in explaining employees' motivation to transfer. An employee's age, tenure and rank are inter-correlated due to the seniority system long implemented in the South Korean public sector, which may cause a multi-collinearity issue. Therefore, age, tenure and rank were considered separately, but none of these three variables was statistically significant.



Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

Variable name	Mean	S.D.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Leader support	0.11	0.86								
(2) Prior level of knowledge	0.31	0.91	0.42							
(3) Motivation to transfer	0.10	0.95	0.60	0.44						
(4) Age	41.59	6.87	0.23	0.20	0.20					
(5) Tenure	13.89	7.40	0.21	0.22	0.20	0.76				
(6) Rank	1.37	0.61	0.14	0.09	0.08	0.30	0.25			
(7) Current usage of the programme	0.17	0.95	0.66	0.45	0.76	0.19	0.21	0.09		
(8) Current trust of the programme	3.48	0.79	0.63	0.32	0.60	0.16	0.16	-0.04	0.63	
(9) Current objection against the programme	-0.08	0.96	-0.21	-0.12	-0.18	-0.10	-0.11	-0.05	-0.27	-0.20

Table 2. Regression results for employees' motivation to transfer.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-1.029*** (0.309)	-0.784** (0.325)	-0.986*** (0.306)	-0.831*** (0.318)
Age	0.005 (0.007)	0.004 (0.007)	0.005 (0.007)	0.004 (0.007)
Female	-0.041 (0.085)	-0.050 (0.084)	-0.053 (0.084)	-0.048 (0.083)
Tenure	-0.000 (0.007)	0.000 (0.007)	-0.002 (0.007)	-0.001 (0.007)
Rank	0.020 (0.058)	0.001 (0.058)	0.018 (0.057)	-0.008 (0.057)
Current usage of the programme	0.631*** (0.045)	0.590*** (0.049)	0.590*** (0.047)	0.540*** (0.050)
Current trust of the programme	0.230*** (0.054)	0.180*** (0.058)	0.223*** (0.054)	0.207*** (0.058)
Current objection against the programme	0.033 (0.035)	0.036 (0.035)	0.032 (0.035)	0.020 (0.034)
Leader support		0.118** (0.054)		0.140** (0.056)
Prior level of knowledge			0.110*** (0.040)	0.121*** (0.041)
Knowledge x Leader support				-0.116*** (0.040)
Observations	335	335	335	335
Number of groups	40	40	40	40
Standard errors in parentheses				

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*p&lt;0.01, \*\*p&lt;0.05, \*p&lt;0.1 (two-tailed)

The data show that the more the respondents thought that materials covered in the training programme were trustworthy and accountable, the higher their level of motivation to transfer. The extent to which they were currently using knowledge and skills covered in the specific PMS training programme was a strong and positive predictor of motivation to transfer. The structure of the items used to measure this variable was identical to the measure of the dependent variable – motivation to transfer – and thus, the estimation includes a lagged dependent variable. The inclusion of the lagged dependent variable helps in the adjustment for a potential omitted variable bias stemming from auto-correlation between measures, with the results showing robust effects of predictors even after controlling for the previous value of the dependent variable.

Models 2 and 3 in Table 2 test the main effect of leader support and prior level of knowledge, respectively. The finding is a significant main effect of leader support on motivation to transfer,  $p < .05$ ,  $b = .12$ ,  $SE = .05$ . In addition, prior knowledge also positively influenced motivation to transfer,  $p < .01$ ,  $b = .11$ ,  $SE = .04$ . The main effects of leader support and prior level of knowledge are consistent when two variables are combined in the same model. A positive relationship is found between leader support and employees' motivation to transfer, supporting the first of the two hypotheses.

Model 4 in Table 2 adds an interaction term between leader support and prior level of knowledge. A negative and statistically significant interaction effect is found between leader support and prior knowledge,  $p < .01$ ,  $b = -.12$ ,  $SE = .04$ , supporting the second hypothesis.

As shown in Figure 1, when respondents had a low level of prior knowledge, leader support had a positive influence on their motivation to transfer. By contrast, when they had a high level of prior knowledge, the effect of leader support on their motivation to transfer was insignificant. Thus, leader support was only effective for respondents who did not have a high level of prior knowledge.

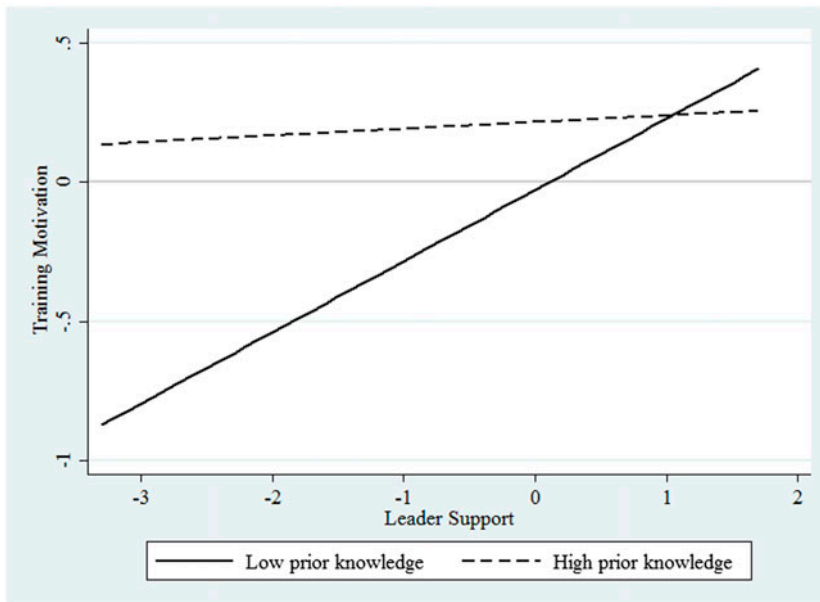


Figure 1. Interaction of leader support and prior knowledge on motivation to transfer.

## Discussion

The results provide support for both hypotheses. When a leader showed support for the PMS training, the respondents were more likely to be motivated to apply the knowledge and skills learnt through training in their actual work. Their prior knowledge of the training content influenced this relationship, such that when they had a low level of prior knowledge of the training content, leader support had a significant influence on their motivation to transfer; whereas, when they had a high level of prior knowledge, leader support did not have a significant influence on their motivation to transfer what they had learnt from the programme.

The sample draws from a population long influenced by Confucian philosophy, which essentially equates leader-subordinate relationships with parent-child relationships, with the Confucian focus on hierarchical relationships likely to maximise the effect of leader support on employees' behaviour and decision-making (Park, Rehg, & Lee, 2005). Yet, the findings here suggest that leader support has no effect on certain employees, even in a Confucian setting.

Employee training contributes to the efficiency of the public sector, as is increasingly recognised in South Korea and many other parts of the world, including South Asia (eg., Arora & Hingar, 1981; Rani & Garg, 2014), South-East Asia and the Pacific (eg., Payani, 2000; Quah, 2006), and Africa (eg., Okotoni & Erero, 2005). The present study highlights the importance of employees' training motivation in the effective transfer of knowledge and skills to jobs, with the findings largely being expected to apply to public sectors in Asia and beyond.

The findings of the study have practical implications for implementing training programmes in the public sector. Leaders should exercise a contingent form of leadership when expressing their support for certain training programmes. For employees with low levels of prior knowledge of training content, leaders need to put more effort into openly expressing how important it is to learn and apply the content and lessons of training. For employees with higher levels of prior knowledge of training content, it is less necessary, or even unnecessary, for leaders to express their support for relevant training programmes, not because such support is detrimental to the employees involved, but rather because the support does not have any positive effect on them and there are other employees who could better benefit from it.

## Concluding comments

With the ever-increasing focus on training in the public sectors of Asian countries, especially when it comes to the subject of performance management systems, the proportion of public sector employees who possess a high level of knowledge of training content prior to their participation in training programmes is sure to increase in the future. Accordingly, it may be wise for the leaders involved to become more aware of the needs of, and to give priority to, employees who do not possess relevant prior knowledge, even if the latter may not be the top performers within a ministry. At the same time, in relation to employees with a high level of prior knowledge of training content, they should think of alternative ways to promote employees' motivation to transfer, instead of simply emphasising leader support for the training. Other forms of social support may be relevant, such as peer support and a supportive organisational climate. An organisational climate that promotes training motivation may include adequate resources, cues that serve to remind employees of the purposes of training,

opportunities for them to use knowledge and skills creatively, frequent feedback on performance, and favorable outcomes stemming from training transfers.

### Note

1. From the questionnaire, all items except for five items showed a response rate higher than 98%. The five items were about employees' objection against PMS, which showed 49.9% response rate. Given the hierarchical organisational culture within Korean government agencies, this low response is not surprising. Although none of these objection-related items were statistically significant in any models, it was decided to keep them in the analysis since their inclusion resulted in a slightly better model fit. In addition, there was no systematic difference in key variables between employees who answered the five questions and those who did not. All key variables show the same pattern regardless of keeping them in our models. Full results for models without objection-related items are available from the authors on request.

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