

## Back to the workplace

### How organisations can improve their support for management learning and development

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#### Abstract

This paper explores how organisations can become more sophisticated at supporting transfer of learning, by identifying the perceived barriers and facilitators to transfer of learning, by examining a range of individual characteristics and workplace features associated with these barriers and facilitators and then relating these to the type of programme that managers undertake. The longitudinal survey methodology and programme typology used in the research are described. Findings highlight 26 perceived barriers and 17 facilitators to the transfer of learning, significant associations are shown with particular features such as mentoring and personal values. The paper goes on to identify the characteristics associated with a lack of transfer and suggests a tentative model of perceived influences on transfer of learning. Based on this research, it is concluded that it is important to take programme learning design into account when considering support for transfer of learning from management development programmes back to the workplace.

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**Article Type:** Research paper

**Keyword(s):** Management development; Learning processes; Facilitators.

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Leadership and management development are perceived as key issues for corporate life as evidenced by surveys of senior executives (**Watson Wyatt, 2000; CIMA, 2000**) and research conducted on US and UK firms (**Mabey and Martin, 2001**). Group HR Directors in global corporations identified the capability for developing managers as a significant competitive advantage and argued that corporations need to become more sophisticated in their use of in house and business school training programmes (**James and Burgoyne, 2001**).

To develop effective international cadres of leaders and managers, organisations can choose from a variety of educational and developmental routes, including corporate universities and independent business schools. But, whatever the route, supporting transfer and continuing learning is vital to making the best use of investment, particularly in off line activity and development. The importance of having a development strategy, of learning design and the integration of development activity with business aims is recognised (**Conger, 1993**). Although new development designs incorporate action learning and link learning to real work challenges very closely, management development programmes still form a substantial part of organisations' development portfolios. It has been argued that this is necessary to give people time away from the work place, for example at university campuses, to challenge paradigms, reflect and acquire cutting edge thinking (**Fulmer, 1997**). For these events there is a need to attend to the process of transferring learning from formal programmes back to the workplace. However, what is often offered is a support process that does not take the nature of the programme design into account (**Burgoyne and Stuart, 1976**). Nor do support processes relate to the specific barriers and facilitators to transferring learning from a programme to the workplace. This is becoming particularly important since many businesses are moving to short programmes, on different topics, at many points during a manager's career, requiring multiple points for transfer of learning (**Belling, 2001**).

This paper looks at how organisations can become more sophisticated at supporting the transfer of learning, by identifying barriers and facilitators and relating these to the type of programme managers' experience. Our research

enables the development of a tentative model that enables such a tailored process to be developed. First, the relevant knowledge and theory about management learning, development and transfer is considered, then a longitudinal study is described, which identifies managers' perceived barriers and facilitators to transferring their learning from management development programmes. The major findings of this study are highlighted and, based on this research, a model is presented for improving learning transfer.

### **Transfer of managerial learning from formal management development programmes**

Management development involves purposive activities, designed to transform, "... and, as with all transformations, there is a core process involved" (**Burgoyne and Stuart, 1976**, p. 5). This suggests that the learning outcomes, intended or otherwise, which are the source of transfer material, must be set in the context of the core learning processes which produced them (**Burgoyne and Stuart, 1976; Knowles et al., 1998**). These are messy and often confusing aspects of management development, but crucial to take into account when considering what managers learn and apply back in their workplace and what organisations can do to support this learning (**Rouillier and Goldstein, 1991**).

**Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992**, p. 240) define transfer as "... the extent to which trainees effectively apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained in a training context back to the job". Most definitions of transfer portray a process whereby prior learning, such as that from a learning event or experience, affects new learning or performance (**Marini and Genereux, 1995**). Though transfer is not referred to explicitly as having outcomes, this is implied in the notion that transfer can only be detected through generalisation of learning to the job context, over and for an unspecified period of time (**Baldwin and Ford, 1988**).

Views of the feasibility of transferring learning, range from the pessimistic in which little or no learning is seen to be applied (**Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992; Haskell, 2001**), to the more positive. These views acknowledge that transfer is not easy, but that by identifying the kinds of things that help and hinder the application of managers' learning, obstacles can be tackled and by implication, helping factors can be maximised (**Broad and Newstrom, 1992**).

Researchers have identified seven hindering aspects to transfer of learning. These are lack of peer support (**Newstrom, 1986; Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992**); lack of reinforcement back on the job, time and work pressures, lack of authority, perceived irrelevance of the programme (**Newstrom, 1986**); lack of support from the organisation (**Newstrom, 1986; Holton, 1997**) and group resistance to training (**Patching and Higginbotham, 1994; Hastings et al., 1995; Holton, 1997**). Similarly, four support factors have been identified: job/role aids, reward (**Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992**); support, particularly from supervisors and peers (**Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992; Holton, 1997**) and opportunity to use learning (**Holton, 1997**). However, these barriers and facilitators have not been studied together and there has been an implicit assumption in much of the research, that these are all the barriers and support elements that exist, and/or that they are the most significant.

Another important facet in looking at transfer, is that there are a range of potential influences on individuals' experiences of transfer, which broadly fall into three groups: characteristics of the individual learner; aspects of their workplace and facets of the learning experience itself (**Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992; Russ-Eft, 2002**). Operationally, it must be assumed that everyone requires the same form of support, in all circumstances, unless it is possible to discriminate the effects of these factors: Who is most affected by particular barriers and facilitators? (**Williams and Lillibridge, 1992**) Which aspects of the workplace environment impact on managers' perceptions of applying their learning within different contexts? (**Brown and Duguid, 1991; Denison, 1996**) What kind of learning processes, outcomes and applications are involved? (**Knowles, 1998; Argyris, 1999**). Clearly, support cannot be targeted effectively, if it is not known who most needs help, and, what that help should be.

A range of individual characteristics which may be involved in influencing transfer, particularly in relation to managers, may be roughly grouped into: biographical elements and psychological elements, (**Kanfer, 1990**), personality (**Krahe, 1992**) and organisational elements, such as managerial experience and job satisfaction (**Noe, 1986**). So too, a range of workplace features have been researched for their impact on the transfer of learning, most notably social support (**Huczynski and Lewis, 1980**), particularly from peers (**Facteau, 1995**). To date there has been little data on what managers perceive as helping or hindering them in transferring their learning and how those perceptions differ, depending on the kind of learning experience/type of programme they have attended. These relationships were

incorporated into the design of the research presented here.

### A framework for typing management development programmes

**Tannenbaum and Yukl's (1992)** definition of transfer of learning, together with the identification of a limited range of barriers and facilitators and some indication of the relevant individual and workplace characteristics which could influence transfer, provided the start point for the study. Learning processes were considered by reference to a framework first described by **Corder (1990)** and adapted to suit management training and development by **Snell and James (1994)**. This framework is built on two dimensions, resulting in a two-by-two matrix. First, is the programme tangible or intangible in its orientation to the subject matter or content? A "tangible" learning orientation is based on the assumption that managerial roles are themselves tangible, with managers focused on attaining clear, practical results, which are quantifiable and can be assessed. Teaching and learning processes used to support the "tangible" orientation, draw on expert knowledge and tools from a variety of functional specialisms, such as law, economics and human resource management. An "intangible" learning orientation, however, views learning as a complex business of secondary socialisation, where personal and situation specific know-how "... cannot be meaningfully distilled ... for mass consumption ..." (**Snell and James, 1994**, p. 321). Instead, ideas and insights from a wide range of disciplines are offered to managers as examples or catalysts for thought (**Burgoyne, 1994**).

The second dimension concerns whether the teaching approach, in terms of intended aims and learning processes used, is "hard" or "soft". The "hard" approach focuses on what to think and leads to "answers" which are dependent on the subject. the "soft" approach focuses on how to think and leads to questions that are dependent on the environment or the person. The resulting quadrants describe a combination of learning orientations and teaching aims, descriptive of the range of most management development programmes.

Hard/tangible programmes are designed with the intention that managers can acquire specific knowledge and master particular analytical tools and techniques, which they can then apply. Soft/tangible programmes are more concerned with raising awareness by providing a basic appreciation and understanding of issues, often through sophisticated experimental and simulated operating environments. Hard/intangible programmes translate ideas and information into guidelines, examples of best practice or map competing theoretical perspectives, while soft/intangible programmes are designed to help managers learn to think for and develop themselves through reflexive enquiry, where the sharing and collective sense-making of personal experiences is encouraged. Any subject or combinations of subjects relevant to management performance, such as strategy, leadership or change management, could be mapped onto this framework, and the resulting programme would be very different in each of the quadrants.

### Research study

This research addresses three key questions. What are the barriers and facilitators to the transfer of learning? Do these barriers and facilitators differ depending on the nature of the learning processes and content used in management development programmes? Do these barriers and facilitators differ depending on the individual characteristics of those experiencing a programme and/or features of the workplace to which they return? These are important questions, if management development specialists are to become more sophisticated in supporting learning transfer.

This research takes a realist perspective (**Harré, 1970, 1995; Outhwaite, 1987**), which is suited to exploratory studies. Emphasis is on building a model of influences on transfer of learning by focusing on individual managers' experiences and identifying patterns of meaning within those experiences. One methodology capable of enabling this search for essentially unobservable "reason explanations" (**Harré, 1995**) is survey methodology (**Moser and Kalton, 1971**). This enabled a large amount of data to be collected over an 18-month period, from managers attending management development programmes of different lengths (from one week to almost a year), from different organisations and at different points in their learning and transfer experiences.

This longitudinal survey comprised questionnaires, plus face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (**Miles and**

**Hubermann, 1994).**

### **Data collection**

Data were collected at three points in time: before the manager's programme, immediately after and at a follow-up stage three to six months after their programme. Questionnaires were administered at each of these points to over 200 managers from 17 different organisations participating in public and tailored management development programmes, designed and delivered either by the organisation itself for its own managers, or by lecturers and management development consultants at a major business school. Sixteen participants were interviewed shortly after completing their follow-up questionnaire.

Information to be gathered by questionnaire was identified from a literature review and comprised four overall areas shown to affect transfer of learning: individual characteristics, features of the workplace environment to which managers returned after a programme or learning experience, learning from the programme and transfer experiences (including perceived barriers and facilitators). **Table I** shows the individual characteristics and workplace features included. Selection depended on demonstration of significant associations with transfer identified during the literature search. Survey questions or items that had been used in these earlier studies were incorporated into the questionnaires' design, where appropriate. Where no such material existed, particularly in relation to learning outcomes and transfer experiences, specific open questions were created.

Information about each manager and their work environment, plus qualitative information in the form of open questions about each manager's expectations of the programme and their working relationships was gathered immediately before each programme, by postal questionnaire.

Immediately after the programme, participants completed a second questionnaire, describing their key learning points from their programme and what they needed to do to apply their learning. This questionnaire also asked them how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a set of 25 potential barriers and 17 facilitators in terms of the likelihood of each affecting their attempts to transfer learning back to their workplace. This set of items was based on the seven barrier elements and four support elements identified by **Newstrom (1986)**, **Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992)**, **Patching and Higginbotham (1994)**, **Hastings et al. (1995)** and **Holton (1997)**, together with further items based on the researcher's own experience of evaluating management development programmes. Respondents were also given the opportunity to describe barriers or facilitators that were not included within this list.

A third questionnaire was then forwarded to participants. Evaluation research gives little clue as to the most appropriate timing for gathering data once participants have left a programme. This third postal questionnaire was completed between three months later (for programmes of one week and three months duration, where tools and frameworks were anticipated to be applied) and six months later (for programmes of over three months duration, particularly those focused on self-development and requiring reflection time before transfer could be expected). This questionnaire provided an example of something each manager had applied from their programme, an idea of timescale and milestones/critical events in this application and a further rating of the set of barrier and facilitator items, to see which ones had actually helped or hindered transfer.

At this stage, individuals were chosen for interview if they had provided a transfer example that needed further clarification or not provided an example, which may have indicated no transfer. Individuals were also chosen across the range of personality preferences, as defined by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®™, an instrument suited to and often used in management development activities (**Walck, 1990**), which seeks to identify preferences for introversion or extraversion, sensing or intuition, thinking or feeling and judging or perceiving. Feedback on reported type was given to each manager involved in the study.

The 16 interviews allowed a more dynamic focus on the process of transfer and enabled greater understanding of meaning attributed to transfer examples by the participants.

## **Data analysis**

To address the key research questions, interviews were transcribed and categorised using content analysis (**Glaser and Strauss, 1967**) to identify patterns in responses on the nature of learning and transfer and to verify the meaning attributed to these examples by the participants themselves. Quantitative data, from questionnaires and interview data once categorised, were coded and were entered directly to SPSS. This allowed a test of the robustness of the list of perceived barriers and facilitators to transfer, using paired *t*-tests and factor analysis (**Bryman and Cramer, 1990**). The strength of associations between the wide variety of data elements were also examined, including the potential influences on transfer, for which Pearson's chi-square was determined to be the most appropriate statistic (**Siegel and Castellan, 1988**).

Qualitative information from questionnaires was used in two ways. First, to identify the perceived barriers and facilitators, allowing the words and phrases used by participants to guide the refinement of the resulting barriers and facilitators items, working towards theoretical saturation (**Miles and Hubermann, 1994**). Second, using content analysis, the categories originally conceptualised were extended. By summarising and categorising responses, the words and phrases used by participants themselves are grouped into successively higher level categories. These were then added to SPSS as nominal information, allowing their strength of association with transfer and potential influences on transfer to be assessed statistically, again using Pearson's chi-square and the contingency coefficient to minimise the effects of one variable on another (**Everitt, 1992**). Significance level was set at 0.05. A model was then built from these associations, logically and chronologically (**Dale and Davies, 1994**), gradually mapping the details of the significant associations onto a basic chronological template of a learning experience, shown in **Figure 1**.

This chronology, not intended to be exhaustive, nevertheless covered the three stages of the longitudinal survey. Before the programme, participants had expectations of what that programme would be about. These expectations were assumed to influence (or be associated with) an individual's learning outcomes, described immediately after a programme. These were in turn assumed to influence transfer applications three to six months afterwards. It was also assumed that the learning experience itself, categorised by programme type, would influence expectations, learning outcomes and applications.

Each of the management development programmes, which it was assumed were designed with both individual participants and their organisation's needs in mind, were categorised using **Snell and James' (1994)** adaptation of **Corder's (1990)** framework. This categorisation process was based on discussions with each programme's designers and tutors, together with a review of stated aims and objectives from course documentation, using the examples provided by **Snell and James (1994)** to assist them. In the only case where designers and tutors could not reach a consensus over both dimensions, this programme was dropped from the analysis.

## **Sample**

A total of 234 managers responded to the pre-programme questionnaire, 143 to the post-programme questionnaire and 95 to the follow up stage. The managers themselves were between 26 and 55 years of age, 65 per cent having been managers between five and 14 years and were predominantly at middle or senior management levels within their organisations. Of the respondents 76 per cent were male, 24 per cent female, consistent with proportions found elsewhere in comparable samples. However, 85 per cent of managers, however, although coming from different organisations, were from the financial services sector. Of the 234 respondents, 72 per cent came from programmes categorised as hard/intangible, 16 per cent from hard/tangible, 8 per cent soft/intangible. The soft/tangible programme type (3 per cent) was the least well represented and findings concerning this programme type are treated with caution.

## **Findings**

### **What barriers and facilitators do managers perceive as affecting transfer of learning?**

Participants perceived 26 barriers and 17 facilitators that are consistently described as affecting transfer of learning. These comprise all the items from the list used in the questionnaires, plus an additional barrier identified by respondents: organisational politics and hidden agendas. The barriers cluster around: lack of managerial support; time and workload issues; resistance to new ideas; short-termism; lack of opportunity and responsibility; physical structure of the organisation; performance and reward; organisational politics and hidden agendas.

This reinforces some of the hindering aspects identified by previous researchers: lack of peer support (**Newstrom, 1986; Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992**); group resistance to training (**Patching and Higginbotham, 1994; Hastings et al., 1995; Holton, 1997**); lack of reinforcement back on the job, time and work pressures, lack of authority, perceived irrelevance of the programme (**Newstrom, 1986**) and lack of support from the organisation (**Newstrom, 1986; Holton, 1997**). However, this study has also identified a further set of obstacles to transfer, particularly organisational politics and hidden agendas; short-termism; the importance of lack of managerial support; physical structure of the organisation; responsibility issues and performance criteria.

Similarly with facilitators, this study supports the four areas described by previous researchers: job/role aids, reward (**Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992**); support, particularly from supervisors and peers (**Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992; Holton, 1997**); plus opportunity to use learning (**Holton, 1997**), then adds to these: the importance of having a broader perspective, authority to apply learning and particularly self-determination.

Paired *t*-tests on each of the items, immediately after the programme and three to six months on, showed no significant differences. This means that the transfer environment judged by participants immediately after a programme remained reliably consistent during the first few months of transfer.

**Table II** shows each of the barrier and facilitator items, in order of highest mean score and highest percentage of managers who agreed with each item, i.e. they rated the item from five to seven on the scale.

### **What are the strongest barriers and facilitators affecting the most participants?**

The top three barriers concern pressure to give priority to short-term, financial targets; day-to-day pressures of work and lack of time for planning. The top three facilitators are an individual's own determination, having a greater understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and seeing the benefits of applying their learning. Each is rated highly by over 70-80 per cent of participants. Together, they form an overarching cluster or "layer", affecting the majority of participants.

When participants were grouped according to the type of programme they had experienced, this layer of barriers and facilitators did not change, suggesting that if participants' views of transfer are to be improved, account must be taken of these items, whatever the programme and whatever the organisation.

### **Importance of programme type in perceptions of barriers and facilitators to transfer**

Aside from the overall "layer" of barriers and facilitators, affecting the majority of participants, two further distinct layers were discovered through the "mapping" of statistically significant associations onto the chronological framework described in **Figure 1**. These "layers" affect different groups of individuals or are related to specific workplace features and are dependent on the type of programme experienced.

The first "layer" of characteristics influences perceptions of what helps and hinders transfer regardless of what individuals on each programme expect, learn or apply. This is not evident in previous explorations of barriers and facilitators (**Huczynski and Lewis, 1980; Broad and Newstrom, 1986; Holton, 1997**).

To give an unexpected example, on soft/tangible programmes, having a mentor (as opposed to not having one) is

associated with the barriers of lack of time for planning, temptation to go back to doing things as before a programme and reluctance to take risks. These three barriers are most likely to affect those who have a mentor, regardless of expectation, learning outcomes or application of learning. Identifying those who have a mentor and who attend soft/tangible programmes could be critical in assisting those managers prepare for transfer. At the very least, it could spur an exploration of the circumstances surrounding the position of the mentor (inside or outside the organisation), the nature of risk within the organisational context and whether particular mentoring relationships discourage new ways of working, rather than embracing them. In relation to influences on barriers and facilitators, this suggests that particular groups of individuals, in this case those who have a mentor, experience particular difficulties in transferring their learning, that are only apparent when seen through the lens of programme type. The relationship between programme type, mentoring and obstacles to transfer, requires further exploration.

To give a further example, managers who personally value “helping others do well” are facilitated in their attempts to transfer learning from hard/tangible programmes by improvements in communication between team members. This is not linked to whether they have acquired particular tools and frameworks, knowledge about others or tried to apply their knowledge of strategy or skills in handling meetings. The nature of the facilitator and the managers’ values here, suggest reasons why the two may be associated. Improved communication within the team is likely to support others doing well. If the manager can assist their team members by improving communication between them, then that too reinforces the manager’s values. By identifying key values that managers personally hold, before they return to their workplace, then attempts can be made to help maximise the benefit of communication between team members to assist the manager in transferring their learning from hard/tangible programmes.

A further “layer” of barriers and facilitators also depends on programme type. Again, this is not apparent in previous research into perceived barriers and facilitators to transfer of learning, but is more complicated to unravel, in that particular barriers and facilitators are associated not only with particular groups of individuals or elements of the workplace, but also with specific expectations of the programme, learning outcomes and applications. Understanding the contextual nature of these barriers and facilitators is therefore important to building understanding of transfer of learning.

This can be illustrated in relation to each quadrant of the learning framework. Managers on hard/intangible programmes who expect that there will be some kind of follow-up to the programme and are attempting to solve problems differently as a result of the programme, perceive lack of resources to implement new ideas from the programme to be a barrier. On hard/tangible programmes, those who personally value the independence of the organisation or who are trying to apply tools and frameworks, are most likely to be helped by the knowledge that ideas from the programme will work in their area of responsibility.

On soft/intangible programmes, learning outcomes related to the context of a manager’s own organisation, can help managers feel that how they are rewarded is less of a barrier when they do not know what the organisation expects of them. Statistical analysis could not be performed on the soft/tangible cases owing to low cell numbers, so there is no equivalent example. However, the presence of such cases for other types of programme suggests that it would be unwise to treat every programme as if it were the same in terms of understanding which groups of managers are most likely to experience particular barriers or facilitators in particular contexts. This finding also reinforces the need to carry out further research into the specific influences of programme type.

Thus, there are a set of barriers and facilitators to transfer, that can be divided into clusters or “layers”. One affects the majority of respondents. Another is dependent on programme type, but is not linked in any way to the chronological base model. A further layer, again dependent on programme type but with more complex links to particular parts of the chronological base, shows barriers and facilitators that are also associated with particular individual characteristics and workplace features. These are drawn together and shown in **Figure 2**.

### ***Job satisfaction and mentoring***

Two individual characteristics which in this study demonstrate association with perceptions of barriers and facilitators and which are also dependent on programme type, are job satisfaction and having a mentor. Job satisfaction has been much researched and particularly in connection with transfer (**Noe, 1986**). This research therefore reinforces the need to consider job satisfaction as a motivational element in transfer, but also gives clues as to specific elements and

relationships that may give rise to a feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a manager's particular role.

On hard/tangible programmes, those who are satisfied with their current role are the most likely to perceive that they have the support of their manager in taking risks to apply their learning. Conversely, those who are dissatisfied with their roles are most likely to perceive a lack of interest by their manager in what they are trying to do. It is possible, therefore, that on hard programmes, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a participant's current role, is linked to perceptions of support (or the lack of it) from their immediate manager.

Why this association between dissatisfaction with role, lack of managerial support and difficulties in transferring learning, should be confined to hard programmes is not clear. Programme duration did not appear to be a significant factor. However, there is some evidence to suggest that the managers attending these particular programmes are at more junior to middle manager levels in their organisation. It is possible that freedom to apply their learning, together with their motivation to do so, may hinge on their relationship with their immediate manager. Those on the soft programmes who tended to be in more senior positions, may be less reliant on the goodwill or permission of others to implement their learning.

Managerial support is also important for transfer, whatever the programme, but was particularly stressed by 25 per cent of those interviewed from hard programmes, who felt that their managers needed to be aware when they were going on a programme and why. It was particularly important for managers from hard programmes to have someone who could help them before and after the programme, preferably someone who had been through the programme themselves and could relate that to what each individual was trying to achieve.

The second individual characteristic, which needs careful interpretation in relation to programme type, is the presence or absence of a mentor. What works for one programme, does not necessarily work on another. An illustration of this on hard/tangible programmes, is that not having a mentor is associated with three barriers. These are: being reluctant to take risks in applying learning because failure is not tolerated as part of the learning process; temptation to going back to old ways of doing things and; a perceived lack of commitment to ideas in the programme by others. On soft/tangible programmes, however, having a mentor is associated with very similar difficulties. On soft/intangible programmes, not having a mentor is significantly associated with taking others into account. On hard/intangible programmes, having a mentor is associated with perceptions of progress in transferring learning, when a manager has learned to think more widely and is trying to apply that wider thinking back in the workplace. Interview data supports the view, particularly from hard programme participants, that having a mentor would be useful for some (18 per cent), particularly where the immediate manager may be unable to take on that role. Clearly, there is no one prescription for dealing with barriers and facilitators associated with having or not having a mentor, but unless programme type is identified and considered, any support provided by an organisation could completely miss the mark.

### ***Importance of good working relationships on perceptions of transfer***

Several workplace features were also significantly associated with barriers and facilitators. Relationships with immediate manager, peers or direct reports as described on the questionnaire, were not significantly associated with differences in perceptions of barriers and facilitators or transfer applications, since 92 per cent of respondents described these relationships as good. This supports **Huczynski and Lewis (1980)** and **Facteau (1995)** in suggesting that good working relationships are important in assisting transfer, since the 8 per cent who described these relationships as poor, were the least likely to transfer their learning. Positive perceptions of working relationships therefore, may be a pre-requisite for transfer back to the workplace.

### ***Positive view of transfer***

An unexpected finding from this research was the positive view of transfer presented by participants. Much of the literature (**Haskell, 2001**; **Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1994**) presents a bleak view of learners attending programmes, where, regardless of what they learn, they appear to transfer little or nothing from their experiences. An overwhelming 92 per cent of respondents in this study, however, were able to describe something that they had transferred or were in the process of transferring, from each of the programmes they had attended. In these instances, participants did of

course have some of the obvious prerequisites for transfer, such as having learned something from a programme, feeling the material was relevant for them and their organisations. Without these factors there can be little or no transfer (Haskell, 2001).

### ***When do managers not transfer learning?***

The 8 per cent who did not transfer their learning however, all came from hard programmes. These managers operated at more junior to middle levels than those on soft programmes, but were not located in any particular function and showed no correspondence in terms of age, length of time in their role or any other demographic characteristics. What they did have in common was their reporting of several factors significantly associated with doing nothing differently. On hard/tangible programmes these were lack of reward, not knowing what the organisation expects of you and not feeling valued. On hard/intangible programmes, lack of reward was also associated with perceptions of no progress in relation to transfer and particularly the barriers of own short-term priorities and lack of resources. Feelings of insufficient reward, not feeling valued and lack of knowledge of organisational expectations, then, may be particularly important in considering why transfer may not occur on hard programmes.

Possible reasons why managers may not feel sufficiently rewarded particularly, may be gleaned from the barriers with which this phenomenon is associated: day-to-day pressures of work, short-term priorities and lack of resources. This suggests that feelings of reward are bound up with day to day pressures and workloads which can make managers question whether they are receiving sufficient benefit for long hours, heavy work schedules and tight deadlines. These difficulties are unlikely to be resolved easily, but they need to be tackled if organisations are serious about improving transfer. An assumption that could be explored during pre-transfer discussions is exactly what "reward" means to the managers involved. There is a danger that organisations may be put off exploring "reward" options if they feel that reward equals money. Some managers when asked about what would help them transfer their learning said receiving feedback about their performance was often seen as a reward in itself.

Also on hard/tangible programmes, not knowing what the organisation expects, is associated with four barriers: how performance is measured; lack of commitment to ideas in the programme by others; lack of time to introduce new ideas and; lack of interest/support from senior managers. Without the knowledge of what the organisation expects from an individual, how would they know which ideas they most needed to gain commitment to or which ideas they most needed to spend time introducing?

On soft/intangible programmes the reverse is true: actually knowing what the organisation expects can create difficulties in terms of physical distance of team members and lack of commitment to ideas from the programme by others. Two possible reasons for these differences between programme types are in terms of management level and the nature of ideas introduced on the programme itself.

Another difference is the nature of the ideas introduced on the soft/intangible programmes, which focused on concepts to reintroduce and re-examine the nature of balance in personal and professional lives, a process which may challenge managers' perceptions of the organisation's expectations of them. In these ways, management level and nature of ideas introduced on the programme, may help explain some of the incongruity between what is found on soft/intangible and hard/tangible programmes. Again, this reinforces the view that perceptions of barriers and facilitators to transfer make sense in the context of each type of programme.

The final element in the web of influences on the absence of transfer from hard programmes, is not feeling valued by the organisation. Interestingly, on hard/intangible programmes, those who do not feel valued by the organisation are also the most likely to perceive the opportunity to step back from their day to day activities and reflect as helpful to them in transferring their learning. Organisations who provide the time for reflection or otherwise encourage reflection, could not only reduce the likelihood that their managers will not transfer what they have learned, but also help to demonstrate that their contributions are of value.

### ***Limitations of this study***

The study has several limitations. Though the study may inform research into transfer from management education and specific skills training, these distinct types of management learning require further research to increase our understanding of how transfer operates within these particular contexts.

The organisational base of the study is biased towards financial services organisations, despite the fact that 17 different organisations are represented in the sample. Care is needed in interpreting the model within the specific contexts of other industries or sectors.

Finally, the data relating to soft/tangible programmes should be treated with caution owing to the small sample of managers from this programme type who took part in this research. Future studies should ensure larger numbers from this type of programme to further understanding of this particular kind of learning experience.

## Discussion and conclusions

What do these findings mean for those involved in supporting managers in transferring learning from management development programmes? First, it shows that it is possible to identify the kinds of things that managers find difficult in transferring their learning as well as the kinds of things they find helpful. While previously identified barriers clearly persist for many participants, the range of obstacles has also widened. Difficulties created by organisational politics and hidden agendas, for example, may not have surfaced so readily even a few years ago, but with most organisations having faced and still facing major change, these are often times when political behaviour becomes more necessary and more noticeable. Acknowledging the existence of hidden agendas and continuing to help managers deal more effectively with political behaviour, could improve the transfer experience for those facing these circumstances, particularly during off line development.

Although barriers and facilitators must be constantly checked to ensure that organisations are not missing vital new difficulties or support factors, this research suggests three categories of barriers and facilitators that HR professionals must take into account. Essentially, we start with a large group of managers experiencing the same kinds of problems and feeling that the same kinds of things, such as their own determination, are what really help. Time, workload and financial pressures experienced by managers may be deep-rooted, but efforts targeted here have the potential to lessen burdens on 70-80 per cent of those who have attended the four different types of management development programmes. Similar focus on maximising the benefits of self-determination, capitalising on individual strengths, supporting managers' development needs and promoting examples of transfer which highlight both individual and organisational benefits of applying learning, also has the potential to reap greater rewards among 70-80 per cent of managers.

After this, the scope for assisting managers becomes more specific, targeted at particular groups with particular characteristics, depending on the kind of programme they have attended. Support for learning and transfer requires organisations to identify and understand the teaching and learning processes and assumptions underlying the programmes they design, deliver or commission. Managers and leaders learn different things, apply different things and experience different obstacles and support factors depending on the kind of programme or learning experience they have attended. One size does not fit all. **Corder's (1990)** framework adapted by **Snell and James (1994)**, clearly has potential to better understand these differences.

Organisations also need to consider what impact particular attitudes, such as job dissatisfaction, and workplace practices, may have in applying learning. **Figure 2** gives a guide to characteristics that organisations should at least be aware of, to better target support for those groups most likely to feel the effects of particular barriers, while encouraging good practice in maximising facilitative elements.

In the absence of independent measures of changes in individual performance, or in addition to those already used by organisations, gauging perceptions immediately after a programme (if not during) provides a consistent and reliable portrait of transfer as it is likely to remain throughout the first few months of application. Individuals and organisations can capitalise on this knowledge, using it to help prepare managers for the obstacles they may face, through coaching and action planning for example, before they return to their workplaces.

The findings do, however, suggest some caution may be needed in the use of certain practices that are becoming very popular in organisations as a form of support, most notably mentoring. This study shows that some reference is needed to the type of programme attended by managers and that both managerial level and the context of the organisation itself, are key in making appropriate and effective use of mentoring. More junior-to-middle managers may find a mentor helpful, as an alternative to their immediate manager. However, for more senior managers there may be issues around the position of a mentor as internal or external to the organisation and the mentor's ability to provide advice that is appropriate, relevant and carries an acceptable level of risk within the organisation.

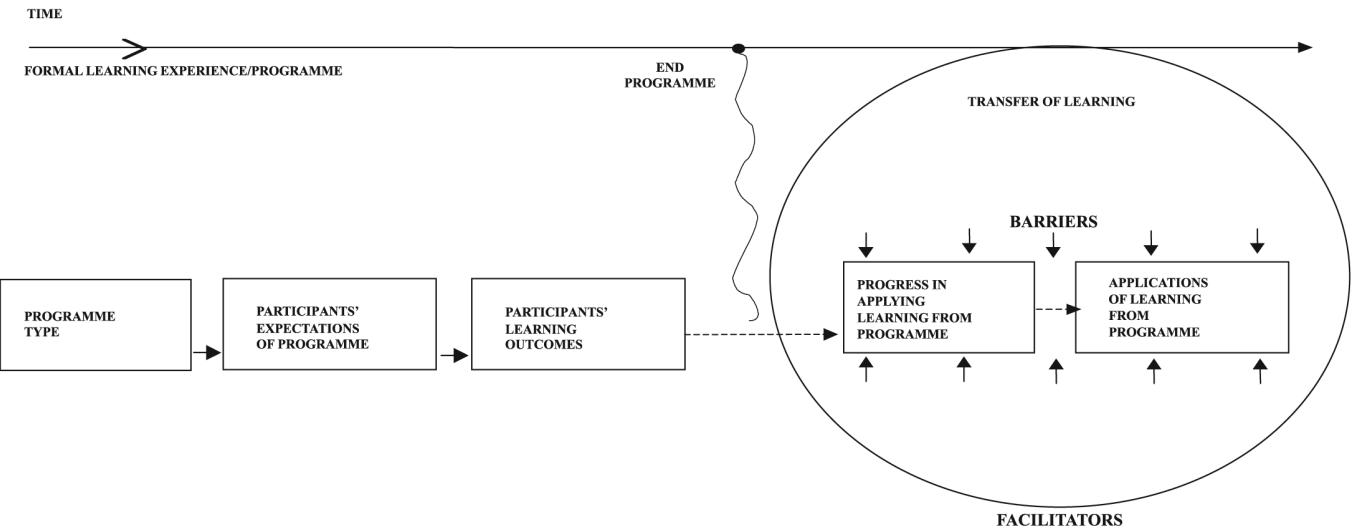
When programmes are designed and delivered effectively and participants acquire learning outcomes as a result, those who do apply their learning are not restricted to any particular kind of programme. All types of management and leadership development programmes, therefore, if they are designed and delivered appropriately, have the potential to enable participants to learn and transfer their learning back to their organisations. However, programmes that take a hard/tangible or hard/intangible perspective may need to be considered carefully. An exploration is needed to see if they are chosen by managers who are more junior, dissatisfied with their job, feel unrewarded, undervalued and do not know what the organisation expects of them. The more senior a manager becomes, the more likely they are to know what the organisation expects of them, particularly in organisations where strategy is debated and defined within those top levels of management. They are also more likely to be aware of the difficulties such strategies may bring and whether they will be able to meet those expectations.

While there are no easy answers, greater clarity about what is expected of an individual, together with the provision or encouragement of opportunity to step back from day-to-day events and reflect, are areas about which organisations could become more proactive. This may reduce some of the uncertainty and feelings of lack of worth that may prevent individuals from applying their learning. The "lean" organisations of the 1990s reduced the availability of space for reflection and for learning activity that could not demonstrate an immediate link to the business. This may have been particularly the case for managers below the top echelons. At the strategic level the "personal" dimension is acknowledged. Yet, paradoxically this research suggests that the task and business related payoffs expected from sending people on "hard" courses at business schools, may not transpire because the appropriate motivation and support for the transfer of learning may not have been understood sufficiently. It is even possible that the "soft" programmes, for which the learning outcomes are less specific, are those in which managers can tailor their own learning so it can be transferred back to diverse organisation settings.

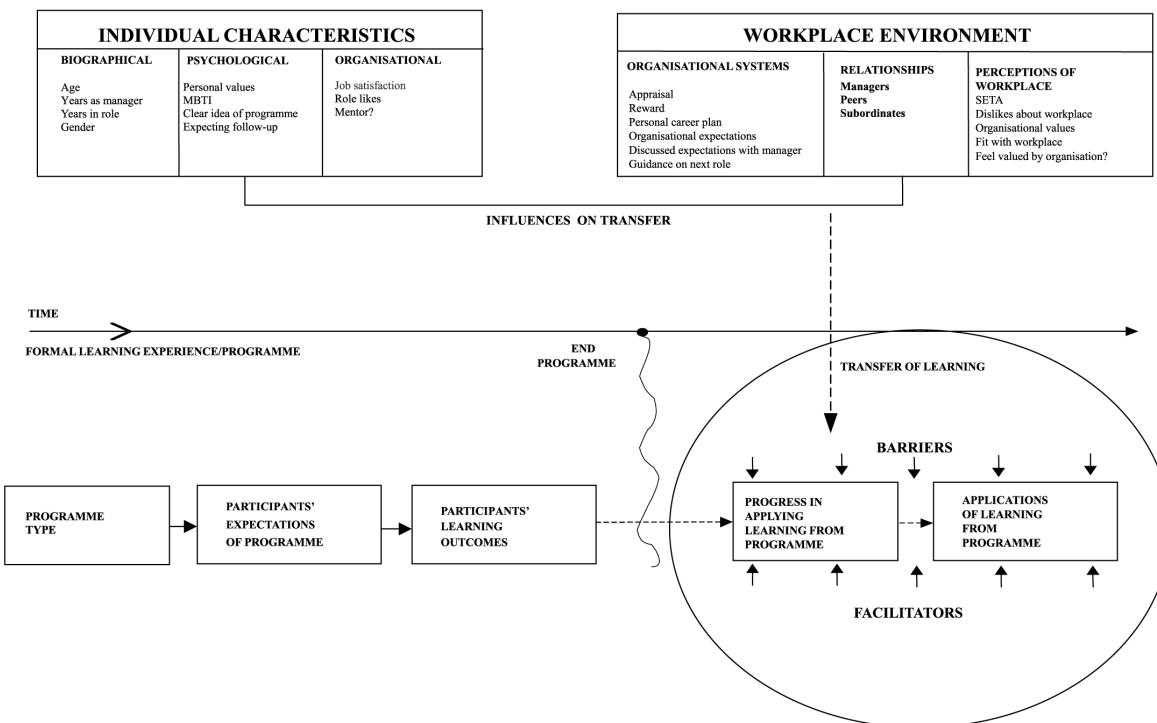
Through building a model of the influences on transfer, collecting together the significant differences between expectations, learning outcomes, applications, individual characteristics and workplace features, a picture begins to emerge of how different learning and transfer processes are, depending on the kind of programme a participant has experienced. What also emerges is how complex the nature of both learning and transfer is when trying to capture this in any simplified form for the purpose of exploration. However, with a clearer idea of the difficulties individuals may face and the support factors open to them, organisations can learn to provide appropriate relevant and worthwhile support where it is needed and by whom.

**Figure 1** Chronological base model of learning experience and transfer

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**Figure 2** Chronological base model of potential influences on learning experience and transfer



**Table I** Individual characteristics and workplace features included in pre-programme questionnaire

Individual characteristics	Workplace features
<i>Biographical:</i>	<i>Organisational systems:</i>
Age	Job appraisal
Years as a manager	Reward
Years in role	Personal career plan
Gender	Organisational expectations
Educational qualifications	Discussion of programme expectations
Nationality	Guidance on next role
<i>Psychological:</i>	<i>Quality of relationships:</i>
Personal values (motivation – Herzberg, 1959; Tubbs and Ekeberg, 1991)	(Baldwin and Ford, 1988)
Personality type preferences – MBTI®™ (Myers, 1980)	Managers
Clear idea of programme	Peers
Expectations of follow-up	Subordinates
Locus of control (Spector, 1988)	
<i>Organisational:</i>	<i>Perceptions of the workplace:</i>
Job satisfaction (Noe, 1986)	Supporting/unsupporting aspects
Role likes/dislikes (Williams and Lillibridge, 1992)	Likes/dislikes about organisation
Mentor	Salter environmental type assessment (Salter, 1995a, 1995b)
	Organisational values (Herzberg, 1959)
	Perceived fit with environment (Moos, 1987)

**Table I.**  
Individual characteristics and workplace features included in pre-programme questionnaire

**Table II** Perceived barriers and facilitators to transfer of learning

	Percentage agreeing item is a barrier (%)	Mean score
<i>Barrier item</i>		
Pressure to give priority to "bottom line", short-term, financial targets	70	5.2
Day-to-day pressure of work	72	5.1
Lack of time for planning	80	5.0
Lack of time for reflection	68	4.9
Lack of time to introduce new ideas	63	4.9
Lack of forum for discussion in the organisation	57	4.8
My own short-term priorities	67	4.7
Internal structure of the organisation	44	4.3
Lack of resources to implement new ideas/plans from the programme	42	4.2
How your performance is measured	40	4.2
Lack of internal co-operation within the company	42	4.1
Temptation to go back to doing things as before	47	4.0
How you are rewarded	27	4.0
Lack of interest and support from senior managers	33	3.9
Resistance to new ideas in the organisation	35	3.9
Convincing those who haven't been on the programme of the usefulness of new tools/concepts	25	3.8
Not having the opportunity to apply learning	31	3.8
Lack of commitment to the ideas in the programme by others	23	3.7
Lack of awareness by your manager about what needs to change to meet the company's strategy	25	3.5
Lack of knowledge/interest by your manager of why you have attended the programme	27	3.5
I am reluctant to take risks in this organisation because failure is not tolerated as a necessary part of the learning process	26	3.4
Lack of interest and support from your manager in what you are trying to do	22	3.2
Too many changes in the workforce	24	2.8
Physical location of other members of my team	19	2.7
The ideas in the programme will not work in my area of responsibility	6	2.2
<i>Facilitator item</i>		
My own determination	87	5.5
An appreciation of my own strengths and weaknesses	87	5.3
I can see the benefits of applying what I have learned	88	5.3
Having a broader perspective of the business	74	5.2
A better appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of those I work with	66	5.0
Knowing that the ideas in the programme will work in my area of responsibility	66	4.8
Opportunity to apply what I have learned	55	4.6

(continued)

**Table II.**  
Perceived barriers and facilitators to transfer of learning

**Table II** continued

	Percentage agreeing item is a barrier (%)	Mean score
Support of colleagues who have attended the programme	59	4.5
Shared language/common approach with others who have attended the programme	48	4.3
Improved communication between team members	48	4.3
Support of my manager	52	4.3
Having the support of my colleagues in taking whatever risks I consider necessary to put my learning into practice	44	4.3
Opportunity to input to the strategic planning process	51	4.2
Having the authority to make whatever changes I consider necessary	52	4.0
Having the support of my manager to take whatever risks I consider necessary to put my learning into practice	38	4.0
Receiving regular feedback on how I am performing	36	3.7
Opportunity to step back from day to day activities and reflect	35	3.7

Source: Follow-up questionnaire, n = 95

Table II.

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