

# They Think It's All Over

Why what happens after the training  
is as important as the training itself

A business white paper by Kevin Lovell  
January 2010



# They Think It's All Over

## Why what happens after the training is as important as the training itself

In this paper Kevin Lovell shows that, if training is to lead to performance improvement, learners must use what they learned. Line managers play a pivotal role in this process, yet 25% of all training fails to yield significant performance improvement – why is that?

In the first of two papers Lovell unpacks key findings from three years' worth of KnowledgePool's 'learning outcomes' evaluation. The survey is issued to learners 3 months after they complete their training. It assesses transfer of learning to the workplace and performance improvement which results from training.

A great deal of Learning & Development effort goes into providing the right training: good content targeting specific needs; well designed; and delivered in the best possible way. Quite right too. The problem is that we think it's all over once the training is delivered. There is much to do, so as soon as the training finishes, our attention turns to making the next programme happen.

The fact is that when training finishes, we have only just begun the process of converting training into business benefit (the reason why we do training in the first place). Think of the process as having three stages:

**Stage 1:** Good training causes learning to happen.

**Stage 2:** Learners use what they have learned, their skills increase and they become more productive.

**Stage 3:** Greater productivity leads to business benefit.

Stage 2 is pivotal – unless learners use what they learn, how can any learning convert into business benefit? And yet this is precisely the point where we usually stop paying attention, and turn to the next programme.

As we'll see later, our data shows that a quarter of all training fails to yield significant performance improvement. This paper will show you how we arrive at that figure, and we'll also show how you can go about reducing it.

### Learning Outcomes evaluation

Three years ago, KnowledgePool launched a 'learning outcomes' evaluation. This is automatically issued online, three months after training is completed. It asks learners and their line managers to give their opinions on transfer of

learning to the workplace and performance improvement<sup>1</sup>. This generic questionnaire gathers a variety of scored data and free text responses, which allow us to assess the relative success of different training. With over 10,000 responses from training on everything from 'Achieving Higher Self-Esteem' to 'XML Fundamentals', this large body of data gives us insights into what is and isn't happening in Stage 2 above.

---

## Performance improvement occurs when learners use what they learn and when their line managers help them to do so

---

The 'learning outcomes' evaluation provides scored data in two main areas:

1. **Transfer of learning to the workplace:** how much learners use what they learned and how much their line managers helped them to do so.
2. **Individual performance improvement:** the extent to which the learner's performance at work has improved, as a consequence of the learning.

Our data shows a clear correlation between these three factors:

- Performance improvement
- Transfer of learning to the workplace
- Line manager support for transfer of learning

As any one of these factors increases, so do the other two. Let's take a look at the statistics.

## Transfer of learning to the workplace

For each learner we calculated their average performance improvement score, and for each level of performance improvement, we calculated the average transfer of learning to the workplace score. The results are plotted in Figure 1 opposite.

Next, we looked at the relationship between the extent of transfer of learning to the workplace and the extent to which line managers helped learners to use what they learned. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Together these two graphs show quite clearly that line manager support, transfer of learning and performance improvement all go hand in hand. Put another way: performance improvement occurs when learners use what they learn; and learners use what they learn when their line managers help them to do so.

In a way, this only tells us what we already thought we knew – that line managers are crucial in the process of turning learning into performance improvement. But here we have clear evidence and we can quantify the scale of the impact.

## Quantifying the Problem

By re-drawing Figure 1, we can show the distribution of individual scores. Figure 3 shows this in simplified form. We chose a threshold percentage which separates acceptable scores from unacceptable. Given the questions are scored on a five-point scale, a 40% threshold separates out the 1s and 2s from those who score 3 or above. On this basis, Figure 3 shows the responses in four quadrants, which tells us:

- **69% of learners use what they learn and experience significant performance improvement.** This is good news! We hope that all learners would be in this quadrant, however three out of ten learners fall outside of it.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a full description of the 'Learning Outcomes' evaluation, see the KnowledgePool white paper 'Getting the Value out of Evaluation' available from [www.knowledgepool.com/downloads/home.html](http://www.knowledgepool.com/downloads/home.html)

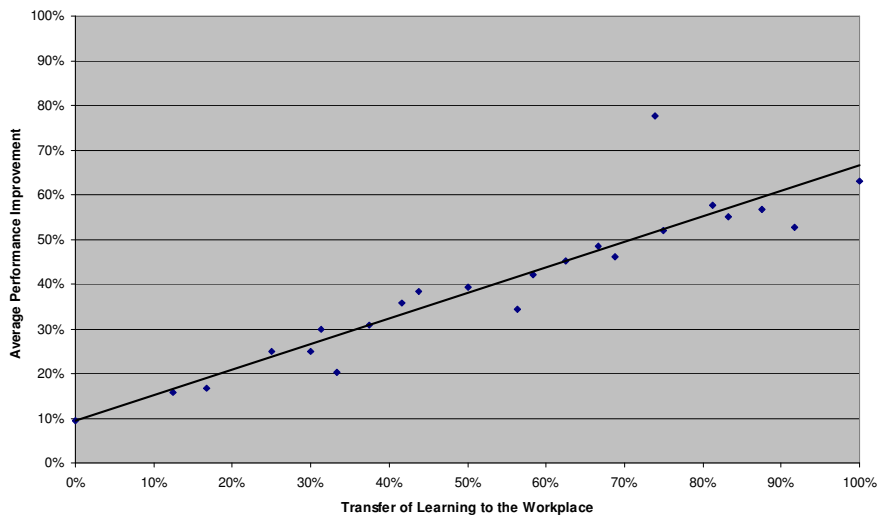


Figure 1: Relationship between Transfer of Learning to the Workplace and Performance Improvement

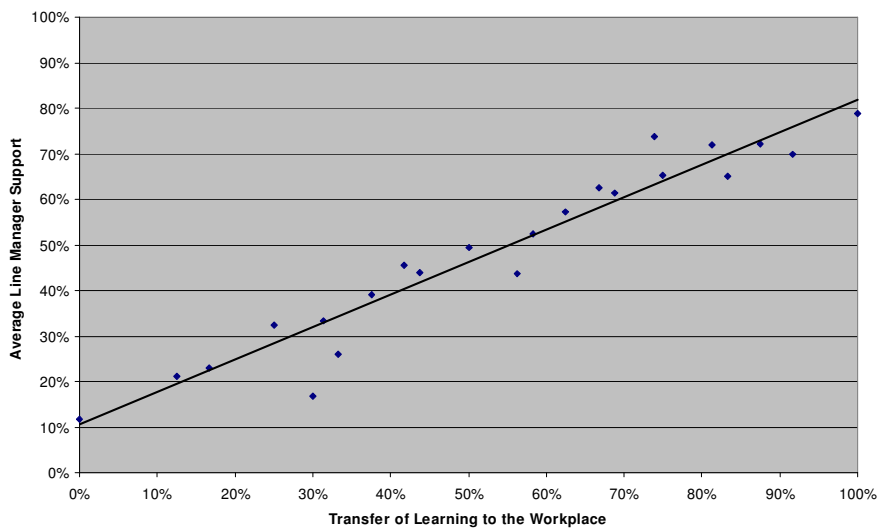


Figure 2: Relationship between Transfer of Learning to the Workplace and Line Manager Support

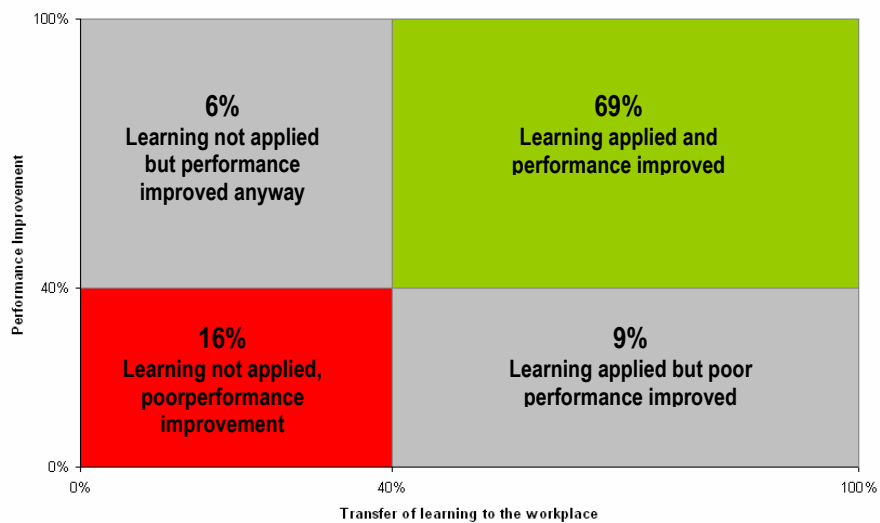


Figure 3: Distribution of Scores

- **9% of learners use what they learn, but it does not lead to significant performance improvement.** The implications here may be that either the learning did not address the challenges in the workplace well enough, or that the learning tackled things that were not the root cause of low performance levels. It could also be that there was no real need or scope for performance improvement, or that the training was for compliance purposes: the box has been ‘ticked’, but there is no noticeable change in what the learner does back in the workplace.
- **6% don’t use what they learn, but experience performance improvement anyway.** At first glance this seems a curious outcome. However, analysis of the evaluation comments reveal the main reasons why learners fall into this quadrant, with roughly equal frequency:
  - Training that is relevant to a small part of their role
  - Training that is relevant to the staff they manage
  - Training that is not relevant to their role, but which offers some unexpected benefits, or results in a feeling of ‘increased confidence’, for example.
- **16% don’t use what they learn and don’t experience performance improvement either.** This is the second largest quadrant, accounting for one in six learners, and the cause for the greatest concern. It is a concern not just for the lack of performance improvement, but because it is combined with low application of the learning. Which suggests this 16% is avoidable.

---

## A quarter of all learning fails to deliver significant performance improvement

---

Of particular concern is the conclusion that  $9\% + 16\% = 25\%$  of all training fails to deliver significant performance improvement. Our survey data, together with other more limited studies, helps to quantify the impact.

## Four reasons why Performance Improvement doesn’t happen

Further analysis and investigation into results over the last three years gives us four main reasons why learners do not convert learning into performance improvement.

### Reason #1:

13% of learners don’t use what they learn, don’t experience performance improvement and also lack line manager support.

In other words, nearly all of the 16% mentioned above failed to receive support from their line manager. They scored below 40% on all three factors (performance improvement, opportunity to use and line manager support).

---

## Where learners receive line manager support, 94% go on to apply what they learned

---

The data also shows that where learners do receive line manager support, 94% go on to apply what they learned. Of course there are times when circumstances are beyond the line manager’s influence, but most of the time the line manager’s influence is sufficient to ensure a learner gets the opportunity to use what they learned.

So a key factor in reducing this core of 13% of unsuccessful learners is the more active involvement of line managers.

### Reason #2:

Around 10% of learners receive training that is ill-suited to their needs

We all know that sometimes people go on courses which are not well suited to their needs. Our investigations indicate this number is about 10%: here is a typical example which shows the impact.

Table 1 shows the performance improvement (PI) scores for 85 delegates on a 2-day Project Control Officer foundation course, split by their job title.

**Table 1: Average PI scores for course delegates by job role**

Job Title (no of delegates)	Average PI Score
Project Co-ordinators (43)	43.86%
Graduate Trainees (18)	36.91%
Project Managers (15)	31.91%
Technical specialists (6)	28.57%
Project Control Officers (3)	22.60%

Clearly the benefit to project managers, technical specialists and those who are already project control officers is limited. Project coordinators and graduate trainees (aspiring project control officers) gain far more.

It's very reassuring to see that the course addresses its core target audience, but it raises serious questions about the value of sending technical specialists and project control officers (around 10% of the learners) on such training. The low PI scores for these roles indicates little or no behavioural change. Would they be better served by other courses – if indeed training is an appropriate intervention?

**Reason #3:**

**Around 5% of learners don't use what they learned because of bad timing**

Over the last three years we have spotted a number of learners with very low PI scores. On closer investigation this was surprising since the courses concerned were highly rated overall and the learners were well-matched to them. The problem lay in the timing. There are two main problems:

1. The training was either too late (the work requirement came and went before the training took place) or too soon (they forgot what they had learned before having the chance to apply the learning). One such example was training for annual appraisal interviews, some of which was delivered too far in advance, and some booked too late to happen in time.
2. A change in work circumstances prevented them applying their learning. A typical example is someone who attends a selection interview course, after which there is a halt on recruitment. Or a reorganisation

takes place and the task for which the learner has been trained goes elsewhere.

We only conducted a limited study, but it revealed that the number of learners affected in this way was around 5%.

**Reason #4:**

**Around 3% of learners complete training, knowing they will not use what they learn**

I'm sure we can also think of instances where someone goes on a course to 'keep them happy'. This often happens with experts - intelligent, specialist workers - and they tend to be expensive courses. Again this is based on a limited study, but in knowledge-based industries, around 3% of bookings might fall into this category.

To illustrate the consequences of such training, here are the average PI scores for three delegates on a highly technical 4-day course, one of which was sent to 'keep them happy', in the knowledge that afterwards they would not use what they learned. See if you can spot which one it is:

51.8%    87.5%    17.9%

This approach can help keep staff motivated, but with a PI score of just 17.9% you are unlikely to see much return from this training investment in terms of performance improvement.

---

## Is this the most effective way to invest in your best talent?

---

You might still think this a worthwhile use of 3% of your training budget, but is it really the most effective way to invest in your best talent?

### So what are the lessons?

We have a huge amount of learning outcomes data, and there are many ways of analysing it. No matter which way we look at the data, we find that 20% to 30% of learners are unsuccessful in converting learning into performance improvement. By looking at the data from a transfer of learning to the workplace perspective, we put that figure at 25%.

### Lesson #1: Capture post training data

Kirkpatrick Level 1 (happy sheet) evaluations are usually the full extent of evaluation activity, but they tell you nothing about what *actually* happens after training finishes. The best training course in the world is worthless unless learners subsequently use what they learn – so you need to know what happens after they go back to the workplace.

Unless you gather this data, you won't know what's working (or not) and how well it's working. Our automated online evaluation tools have enabled this analysis: it's highly cost-effective and an integral part of the training booking process.

### Lesson #2: Line managers need to support learners after training

Line managers are often among those who 'think it's all over' once training finishes. If so, they won't ensure their staff use what they have learned. This leads to 13% of learners failing to be more productive when that need not have been the case. This is entirely avoidable and could convert 12% of learners (94% of the 13%) from being unsuccessful into being significantly more productive.

### Lesson #3: Line managers and Learning & Development must work closely to ensure training is properly targeted

Around 15% of learners attend training that is either ill-suited to their needs or badly timed. Both situations result in a waste of training investment because learners cannot convert learning into performance improvement. That's doubly irritating, as line managers are often reluctant to release staff for off-the-job training

15% is a significant slice of your training spend, which suggests that closer working between Learning & Development and line managers out in the business would have significant mutual benefits.

### Lesson #4: Analyse the learning outcomes data!

This paper has discussed a high level analysis of our 'learning outcomes' evaluation data - what happens after training finishes. When looking at data for your own organisation, you'll spot trends in particular courses, or specific areas of your business. That detail allows you to target specific areas of concern – and tracking them over time to demonstrate the impact you are having.

There's an inefficiency equivalent to around 25% of your training spend, but you'll need to invest a little time and effort in order to work out an action plan.

---

Kevin Lovell is Learning Strategy Director at KnowledgePool. He can be contacted at [kevin.lovell@knowledgepool.com](mailto:kevin.lovell@knowledgepool.com)

While you've been reading this article, KnowledgePool have been capturing learning outcomes data. To find out more, visit [www.knowledgepool.com](http://www.knowledgepool.com) and click on 'Our Services'.