

# what works at work

## Chapter 3: Skills

*This chapter discusses whether an organisation can just recruit the staff it needs or has to train them. It warns of the dangers of subjectivity and not being clear about what is needed. It describes the learning cycle and discusses learning styles. It looks at different kinds of training, and the problems of management training in particular, and addresses how learning transfers to the workplace, and how training can be evaluated.*

*“I don’t think that in my lifetime there will be a woman Prime Minister.”*

*Mrs Margaret Thatcher, 5 March 1973:  
BBC interview by Valerie Singleton and others*

*Key message of this chapter: skill acquisition is well understood. Not everyone can acquire all skills, but mistakes in imparting them can be avoided.*

We get the skills needed in an organisation either by getting the right people into or out of it, as described in the last chapter, or by training and educating the people there already.

Some skills people can only acquire with a struggle, and this may mean it is much easier to recruit new staff who have them already, than to try to make existing staff skilled in them through training. For example, research has found that creativity may well be stimulated by living in a foreign country<sup>57</sup>. Of course, creativity must have many sources and stimuli, not just this one. But it does suggest that, from this perspective at least, firms without overseas offices are more likely to get people with that skill by recruiting for it, than by trying to train it into them.

*Hard-  
to-  
acquire  
skills  
general*

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<sup>57</sup> Maddux W W and Galinsky A D, “Cultural Borders and Mental Barriers: The Relationship Between Living Abroad and Creativity”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2009, vol 96 no 5, pp 1047–1061. This research did not address what aspect of living in a foreign country contributed to creativity (it’s easy to make guesses - perhaps it is a situation where you have to improvise a lot, faced with urgent practical problems?). But it did suggest that, while some aspects of creativity were merely improved in people who had lived abroad, other aspects, which occurred among those who had, were not seen at all among those who had not.

## skills

In many circumstances, however, if skills are needed, it often makes sense to train. There are of course costs, but they are generally the costs of getting the process right, while with recruitment, as we have seen, a lot of effort is often wasted. And training has been demonstrated to be one of the most effective interventions to improve performance<sup>58</sup>.

*Failure  
to train*

Training, however, is an activity on which Britain has for generations had an absurdly poor record, and over which a long succession of governments have wrung their hands. Despite years of attention to this, even in 1990 only 40% of employers had a training budget – which is to say, of course, that more than half did not<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, in some ways our record has got even worse over the years: apprenticeships once meant that many industrial workers, at least, got decent initial training, but the days are now long gone when a study of forty-seven British firms found only three which took no apprentices<sup>60</sup>. The current situation is at least as bad as it ever was<sup>61</sup>.

Why organisations in Britain find it so hard to train people is a bit of a mystery, especially when there isn't a long tradition of high-level training in secondary or tertiary education to make up for it, as there is in, say, Germany (it's only in the last generation that it's become common here for engineers, surveyors, accountants, solicitors or nurses to study the profession at university, rather than practically, on the job, with the help of evening classes or day-release). Where, after all, do employers expect skills to come from?

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<sup>58</sup> Guzzo R A , Jette R D and Katzell R A, 1985, "The effects of psychologically based intervention programs on worker productivity: a meta-analysis", *Personnel Psychology*, vol 38, pp 275-91

<sup>59</sup> Incomes Data Services (1990) *Training Strategies*, Study No. 460.

<sup>60</sup> Gater A, Insull D, Lind H and Seglow P, 1966, *Attitudes in British Management: a P.E.P. Report*, Penguin Press, Harmondsworth, p 94 [PEP was an early think-tank called Political and Economic Planning].

<sup>61</sup> Musset P and Field S, 2013, *A Skills Beyond School Review of England*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD, Paris.

Back in the 1970s the tripartite National Economic Development Council held some bad-tempered debates on the matter. These sounded a bit like the Monty Python sketch of the Three Social Classes. The government said that, as the benefit would go to businesses and employees, these should pay. Employers complained that, if they paid, trained staff would just be poached by firms that didn't meet training costs, and that therefore if it was in the public interest the government should pay – or maybe the employees. The unions said the workers couldn't afford it.

Sometimes one feels that things have hardly moved on from that impasse; and recent OECD work shows all categories of Britons scoring relatively poorly on literacy and numeracy, and all save those with degrees scoring badly on problem-solving in a technological world as well<sup>62</sup>. Today's studies, though, do suggest a slightly different emphasis from that of the 1970s – namely, that now there is a new problem as well, short-termism imposed by the financial institutions, since training is something with longer-term returns that tends to get squeezed out of the budget in order to meet quarterly shareholder targets<sup>63</sup>.

*Training  
down to  
em-  
ployers*

The solution, unwelcome to some, is perhaps suggested by a 1991 study of quality production methods. That noted that British managers are appraised on taking responsibility and meeting financial and production targets, not on how well they are developing their staff; and that practice is quite different in good Japanese companies<sup>64</sup>. It seems inescapable that British firms should meet the costs if they want the

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<sup>62</sup> eg <http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=UKM&treshold=10&topic=AS> [accessed October 2013].

<sup>63</sup> Legge K, 2005, *Human Resource Management: rhetoric and realities*, pp 273-274, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke. There is a brief but helpful discussion of issues such as training which bear on the social responsibility of commercial businesses at Kay J, 1993, *Foundations of Corporate Success*, pp 324-326, OUP, Oxford.

<sup>64</sup> Storey J, Okazaki-Ward L, Edwards P K, Gow I and Sisson K, 1991, "Management Careers and Management Development: a comparative analysis of Britain and Japan", *Human Resource Management Journal*, vol 1(3) pp 33-57.

## skills

skills; and that, as Japan has shown, the cost of training and development can be greatly reduced if these are properly planned, and integrated into the work processes (besides, poor skills lead to a lot of hidden costs in recruitment, which are seldom taken into account in comparisons). The moral is clear. Skills need to be paid for like all other resources: if firms need them they must stop thinking they will appear by magic, and find the time and money to provide training – moreover, if they pay attention and do it cleverly, they can still keep costs to a minimum.

There are other advantages when training is sponsored by the employer. He who pays the piper calls the tune, and an employer commissioning training ought to get precisely the training he needs<sup>65</sup>. Again, acquiring new skills is a risky business. Trainees are often unsure whether they will succeed or fail, and this will cause anxiety, especially if they are being trained within the organisation or alongside colleagues who may report back on them. Hence an important part of training and development is encouraging the confidence of the trainee<sup>66</sup>; this needs the commitment of the line manager as well as training staff.

Who pays can also distort the effectiveness of training. Large organisations, for example in the armed services, which used to fund recruits for general qualifications in technical trades, have sometimes now been encouraged by financial pressures to restrict training to the specific skills only which will be needed on the next project; this diminishes overall workforce skills, and is likely to reduce the sense of autonomy, commitment and performance of employees.

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<sup>65</sup> See Musset P and Field S, 2013, *A Skills Beyond School Review of England*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD, Paris.

<sup>66</sup> Bandura A, 1977, “Self-efficacy: towards a unifying theory of behavioural change”, *Psychological Review*, vol 84 no 2, pp 191-215.

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*Kinds of  
training*

Various kinds of training are needed in organisations. Some training needs to be given on the sheep-dip principle to everyone (such as fire drills, or changes to health and safety rules); some needs to be given to particular divisions or grades (such as technical developments, or changes to employment law). And some is required by individuals, either to improve their performance in their current jobs or to prepare them for future roles. Planning is needed to ensure that the right training goes to the right people at the right time.

The actual process of training is much studied and well understood. Good trainers will pay attention in training design to issues of consistency and repetition, variation to maintain interest, explanation of principles as well as training content, breaking down of complex tasks into their components, timing and specificity of feedback, and the need to train to a somewhat higher level of skill than is likely to be required in routine practice, as well as to handling well the emotional context, for example in relation to the confidence of trainees and the supportiveness of the learning group.

*Management  
training*

Management training sometimes seems especially poor, and this is not new. A speaker in Parliament in 1947 remarked “It is still a widely-held belief that to set up in business it is sufficient to have a little practical experience and some natural aptitude.”<sup>67</sup> Even by the 1960s, the MD of one large shipbuilding firm observed expansively, “I think I’m more successful in training my own managers. Getting intelligent people and then training them in [this firm’s] policies is the most successful way”; at another shipbuilders’ they commented, “We haven’t been successful [with management training] because of the inertia and resistance to anything non-traditional”. And at a booming

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<sup>67</sup> Lord Chorley on the Industrial Organisation Bill, *Hansard*, HL 18 June 1947 vol 148 col 956.

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large manufacturing firm the MD said, "...we felt that we ought to be able to train most decent people up within our own organisation by shunting them around and ... starting to give the chap [*sic*] a chance to develop within the company, so we have not used outside courses to any extent."<sup>68</sup>

Whether things have changed very much since then is an interesting question, though I think there is a much wider perception that ambitious people are especially hungry for training early in their careers; we shall come back to leadership issues in a later chapter. But I should note at this point that, in the important area of first-line managers, a thorough and recent cross-sectoral study has found that the availability of training, both in technical matters and in soft leadership skills, has a huge impact on both the commitment and the job satisfaction of supervisors<sup>69</sup>.

One study also suggests that being in a job that you have opted to be in is linked, through motivation, to positive training outcomes. The authors conclude "it is important, whenever possible, to grant employees their choice of job when being moved within an organization" – not just for the sake of long-term aspirations, or their immediate performance, but in terms of their capacity and willingness to improve over time<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Gater A, Insull D, Lind H and Seglow P, 1966, *Attitudes in British Management: a P.E.P. Report*, Penguin Press, Harmondsworth, p 51.

<sup>69</sup> Purcell J, Kinnie N, Hutchinson S, Rayton B and Swart J, 2003, *Understanding the People and Performance Link: unlocking the black box*, CIPD London, pp 67-68.

<sup>70</sup> Patrick J, Smy V, Tombs M, & Shelton K, 2012, "Being in one's chosen job determines pre-training attitudes and training outcomes", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 85 (2), 245-25.

## what works at work

*How  
people  
learn*

Human capacities for acquiring new skills have their limits, and a good deal is known about what these are<sup>71</sup>. This enables robust training programmes to be designed for enabling people to perform complex and demanding tasks, such as flying aircraft or controlling nuclear reactors. Nevertheless, it is clear that some people seem to respond to certain methods of training better than others, and this has given rise to a continuing debate over how people can be best identified for different kinds of training and development.

One learns by reflecting on experience (sometimes the experience of one's own actions, and sometimes the experience of being taught). Then one acts on the understanding one has gained, and observes what happens, and reflects again on the results. The idea that one builds one's knowledge and skills through such a cyclical process goes back at least to Aristotle. But in the context of work skills this long-standing model was crystallised helpfully by David Kolb of Ohio in the 1970s<sup>72</sup>. This sees people going through repeated cycles of the following stages:

- concrete experience,
- observation of and reflection on that experience,
- formation of abstract concepts based upon the reflection,
- testing the new concepts in practice

*Learn-  
ing  
styles*

Kolb took this idea further by proposing that individuals differ in their effectiveness in or comfortableness with these four stages, and that psychometric tests could identify from this which of four learning styles they exhibit; to these he gave the rather opaque names of “converger”, “diverger”, “assimilator”, and “accommodator”.

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<sup>71</sup> Howell W C and Cooke N J, 1989, “Training the human information processor: A review of cognitive models.”, in Goldstein I L, *Training and development in organizations*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, US, pp 121-182.

<sup>72</sup> Kolb D A and Fry R, 1975, “Toward an applied theory of experiential learning”. in Cooper C (ed.), *Theories of Group Process*, John Wiley, London.

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A quite different and rather more concrete idea of learning styles also came forward at a similar time. The approach known as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) was developed in the 1960s within the human potential movement as part of New Age thinking, and gave rise to a theory that individuals have sensory preferences in how they get and give out information, classifying these into four channels: visual, auditory, reading/writing and kinaesthetic<sup>73</sup>. NLP practitioners in training and development argued that analysis of such preferences would help to assign trainees more effectively to different modes of learning (book study, training course &c).

Though it has achieved a certain foothold in the HR community, NLP is highly controversial, and has been described as pseudo-science<sup>74</sup>.

More broadly, the whole idea of learning styles, however plausible it may sound, has been condemned as lacking any effective evidence in its favour<sup>75</sup>. It is probably

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<sup>73</sup> See now Fleming N D & Mills C, 1992, "Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection", *To Improve the Academy*, 11, 137-155.

<sup>74</sup> e.g. Witkowski T, 2010, "Thirty-Five Years of Research on Neuro-Linguistic Programming. NLP Research Data Base. State of the Art or Pseudoscientific Decoration?", *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, vol 41 (2) pp 58-66; Devilly G J, 2005, "Power therapies and possible threats to the science of psychology and psychiatry". *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, vol 39 (6) pp 437-45. One authority remarks "NLP is a thoroughly fake title, designed to give the impression of scientific respectability. NLP has little to do with neurology, linguistics, or even the respectable sub-discipline of neurolinguistics" (Corballis M C, 1999, "Are we in our right minds?" in Della Sala S (ed.), *Mind myths* (pp. 26-42). Wiley, Chichester).

<sup>75</sup> This debate carries more emotional charge than most in the management field, probably because it applies not just to training for adults who can take responsibility for themselves, but also to the education of children who are more vulnerable. Evidence is reviewed at Coffield F, Moseley D, Hall E and Ecclestone K, 2004, *Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning: a systematic and critical review*, London, Learning and Skills Network; Hargreaves D (chair), 2005, *About Learning: Report of the Learning Working Group*, London, Demos, page 11 (available by download from <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/aboutlearning>); Pashler H, McDaniel M, Rohrer D, Bjork R, 2008, "Learning styles: Concepts and evidence", *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 9, pp. 105-119.

not worth spending money on. If you want to acquire new skills, though, or you want your staff to do so, there will usually be a choice of methods, and of course there are differences between the merits of these. The decision between them will depend mainly on three things: cost, effectiveness and social factors.

Cost is fairly straightforward, varying mainly with the number of learners involved, any need for travel, and the quality of the teachers and institutions.

Effectiveness will also depend on the latter quality. It will also depend on whether what is to be acquired is information or skills: skills need embedding through active repetition<sup>76</sup> and more help from the discipline of social interaction.

Other social factors are often extrinsic to the strict skills agenda, but may be helpful in other ways. Will a course enable the trainee to form useful social or networking connections with people in other parts of the organisation or the industry? Is a training course away from home seen as a “jolly”, or perhaps as essential career development, in either case forming, in effect, a part of the employee’s reward package? Will they get a tablet device for it at the employer’s expense? Will it involve going to a prestigious college about which they can boast, or which will look good on their cv?

Coach-  
ing

Where the need is to improve skills rather than to impart knowledge, coaching has in recent years become a popular, indeed fashionable, route to work-related learning. The coaching discipline has rapidly grown, developing professional associations, and distinctions between different kinds

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<sup>76</sup> Bloom B S, 1984, “The 2 Sigma Problem: The Search for Methods of Group Instruction as Effective as One-to-One Tutoring”, *Educational Researcher* vol 13, No. 6, pp. 4-16.

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of coaching<sup>77</sup>. It involves one-to-one support for learners, so it is expensive, and one might therefore think that its success was driven by marketing hype from the bandwagon of coaching firms which has suddenly sprung up – and this creates a climate which will of course influence even academic papers, however scrupulous the peer-review process. Moreover, the quality of what is offered, both by line managers and by professional coaches, can vary greatly. In addition, it is difficult to find hard evidence comparing its effectiveness and efficiency with other ways of delivering better skills.

However, there are good *a priori* reasons why a one-to-one approach might work well. It is established that we respond best to prompt feedback, and coaching can offer this; coaching is automatically tailored to an individual's needs; it is easier to persuade people to be coached than to go on courses; a good coach will provide better challenge as well as information, not just offering new skills but delving deeper to correct unsatisfactory skillsets; coaching tends to be tailored to practical problems, bringing theory down to earth; a coach, unlike a training course leader, can stay around to supervise the transfer of new skills to the workplace. You might compare the tutorial system at Oxbridge, which has certainly stood the test of time.

Unfortunately it is very difficult to evaluate coaching. There is no shortage of articles (often by coaches) reporting enthusiastic feedback from people coached. But serious analysis is rare. Even the basic credibility of coaching has been questioned, with a recent meta-analysis<sup>78</sup> finding that, if you ask about its effectiveness, people coached will respond saying that their performance had improved by

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<sup>77</sup> These remarks are not intended to address so-called “life coaching”, which can shade into psychotherapy; cp Beltrán R, 2012, *Pensar el Negocio*, Buenos Aires, pp 289-292.

<sup>78</sup> A meta-analysis is a method of combining a number of different studies in order to dilute technical weaknesses and increase statistical reliability.

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about 25%, while their colleagues will say that it had actually fallen off, sometimes by up to 50%<sup>79</sup>. And more traditional studies do not do much better.

Employers are very poor at assessing coaching<sup>80</sup>, and results are so inconsistent as to be, to say the least, suspect. One fairly sophisticated US study found return on investment of well over 2000%<sup>81</sup>, another 200%<sup>82</sup>; both the magnitude and the diversity of these figures suggest serious methodological problems, and it is no surprise that a more thoughtful survey has concluded “data from such studies are at the level of collective anecdote”<sup>83</sup>.

There are formal reasons why evaluation is difficult: since coaching focuses so much on the individual, the classic scientific pre-post study with a control group is not practical. But one also needs to bear in mind that there are poor reasons as well as good ones for going for coaching. The person coached gets the ego-massaging experience of

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<sup>79</sup> De Meusea K P, Daia G & Leeb R J, 2009, “Evaluating the effectiveness of executive coaching: beyond ROI?”, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, Volume 2, Issue 2, pages 117-134.

<sup>80</sup> CIPD, 2011, *The Coaching Climate: survey report*. CIPD, pp 7-8.

<sup>81</sup> Bernard P, 2006, *ROI and Coaching: Applying Metrics to Measure the Effectiveness of Coaching Programs*, Paul Bernard Associates: pdf at [www.paulbernard.net/articles/Sample\\_ROI\\_study.pdf](http://www.paulbernard.net/articles/Sample_ROI_study.pdf) [accessed 9 November 2012]: there is a major weakness in its approach, an assumption that all performance improvement in the period is caused by the coaching alone – though this must be seen in the light of very high ROIs rising to 52,000%. See also the studies cited in De Meusea 2009 ranging between 470% and 790% ROI, figures which the author generously describes as “tenuous”.

<sup>82</sup> Anderson M, 2001, “Case study on the return on investment of executive coaching”, Executive briefing, Metrix Global, Des Moines, USA: available at <http://www.coachfederation.org/includes/docs/053metrixglobal-coaching-roi-briefing.pdf> [accessed 10 November 2012]. Quantification of the benefits in this study was by subjective judgement by the beneficiaries.

<sup>83</sup> MacKie D, 2007, “Evaluating the effectiveness of executive coaching: Where are we now and where do we need to be?”. *Australian Psychologist*, 42: 310–318. An example is Parker-Wilkins V, 2006, “The business impact of executive coaching: demonstrating monetary value”, *Industrial and Commercial Training*, vol 38 issue 3 pp 122-127: the method here was to ask 28 volunteers (ie a small and non-random sample) in one US company each to estimate the benefits they had got from coaching, their monetary value, and how confident they were in their estimates; and then proudly to claim a 700% ROI.

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personal attention. Colleagues and bosses are not inconvenienced by him or her going off for training at a busy time. HR gets to set up training without the administrative hassle of having to get a dozen busy people together at the same time for a course. The coach gets a good fee, and work that generally needs less elaborate planning than a more formal programme.

Hence it is taking a while for the evaluation of coaching as a way of gaining skills to shake down. That is not a good reason to avoid coaching altogether: it has significant attractions, even if its benefits are not yet as robustly identified as they might be. However, it is a warning not to regard it as a panacea.

And there are some guidelines it is worth following. To be effective a coaching intervention should not be open-ended: organisational data needs to be used to align it with business goals<sup>84</sup>. It is important that clear objectives are set for a coaching programme before it is embarked on, and progress against them monitored. Once coaching begins, it is often found that the apparent problem is not the real one and that the direction of travel needs to be changed, so the objectives need frequent formal reviews at the early stages. Personal chemistry between the coach and their executive can be important, and people need to understand that the coach can be changed if it is not working. There needs from the start to be an evaluation plan. If these guidelines are used, then coaching will have its place in a skills development or CPD programme.

More recent than coaching are the opportunities that new technology offers for skills development. People have always sought advice from colleagues about their work, especially within the professions, and the web has much

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<sup>84</sup> CIPD, 2012, *Coaching: the evidence base*, CIPD, pp 8-10; this is contrary to early coaching approaches which were influenced by psychotherapy ethics and saw coaching by definition as private and confidential.

increased the opportunities for this on sites from Twitter to those of professional institutions. Video clips can be developed to be shown to staff just before they undertake tasks, so they can perform them with a model fresh in their minds. Data analysis of performance reports can also be used to identify training opportunities<sup>85</sup>.

Formally programmed education is now available on-line very cost-effectively, at a basic level through websites such as Khan Academy, and at a higher one through networks such as Futurelearn, EdX, Coursera and Udacity. They clearly offer a huge opportunity for wider access to teaching excellence<sup>86</sup>. The efficacy of new technology approaches has not been effectively analysed. It is notable that they have suffered in the past from a weakness in social support to the learning process. They more recently claim to have overcome this, but there is as yet little firm evidence either way.

*Barriers  
to learning*

There is a tendency for employees and their line managers to struggle somewhat to get training set up: those affected often have to be persuaded to accept the need for training, a suitable course has to be identified, money has to be found to pay for it, the time of the employee has to be freed up for the training activity, and cover often needs to be put in place so that the work gets done in their absence. This often leaves people rather sitting back once the course has begun, with an assumption that the effort is now over, and that the new skills and knowledge will follow automatically. Unfortunately this is not the case: though the trainers have a job to do, training is unlikely to produce real

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<sup>85</sup> Bird J, 2013, "Technology means wisdom is shared on demand", *Financial Times*, 6 November 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Means B *et al.*, 2010, *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies*, US Department of Education, Washington DC.

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improvement without further input both by the trainee and by their line manager.

Thus a lot of effort goes into training. But less goes into whether it works, and a lot of organisational psychologists' effort has rightly gone into this issue. Two things are particularly important: (i) evaluation, both of whether a particular training course is generally effective, and of whether it has brought about change in a particular trainee, and (ii) whether skills imparted in the safe context of the training course actually survive into real life in the workplace<sup>87</sup>.

A robust model of evaluation was developed in the 1960s by Donald Kirkpatrick of Wisconsin in the USA, and is still the gold standard for such examination. It assesses training at four levels:

*Training  
evalu-  
ation*

- > the reaction of the trainee to the training
- > the increase in knowledge or skills resulting from the training
- > the change in behaviour on the job and improvement in job performance of the trainee
- > the results of the training on business outcomes<sup>88</sup>.

This model has been found successful and is still widely followed. But it is not always all that easy to use. For example, even when the question someone is asked is how much they learned on a course, then if they enjoyed it, even if they learned nothing, they are fairly likely to score it highly. And if someone gets trained in a skill which is important but which they only expect to use occasionally (such as emergency response, or maybe media interview technique) then assessing the effect of the training on business outcomes, or often even of their job performance

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<sup>87</sup> One US study found that only 10% of training spend actually resulted in transfer to the job: Georgenson D L, 1982, "The problem of transfer calls for partnership", *Training and Development Journal*, vol 36(10) pp 75-78.

<sup>88</sup> Most recently in Kirkpatrick D L and Kirkpatrick J D, 2006, *Evaluating Training Programs*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, USA.

overall, is not always easy, or even possible. Hence advice will usually be helpful.

*Appli-  
cation  
of  
training*

Making sure that training actually transfers into real life is a slightly different problem. Good trainers will be able to build mechanisms into training to support such a transfer. However, while evaluation may be left to training professionals, the transfer is always going to depend very much on the line manager. This will usually be the person who can ensure, after the training, that the trainee has the chance to embed their new skills by exercising them while they are still fresh, who can support them in their faltering steps on new ground so as to ensure that they do not lose their confidence, and who can make sure that new skills are reinforced and developed from time to time by appropriate in-service training<sup>89</sup>.

A word about men and women, too. We all know that you're not allowed to discriminate against women in recruitment and promotion, but many of us have been told that women are better at "soft skills" or "communication" or "people skills", or men are better at difficult decisions. This may or may not be true as a generalisation. What is certainly true is that it is not a biological difference between men and women, and that many men are better than many women at some of the things they are supposed to be worse at, and *vice versa*<sup>90</sup>. So don't stereotype, or you may make the wrong decisions.

Thus people with the right skills are essential for all organisations. Whether we recruit them, or train them, we can look to pretty good expert advice on how to do it well.

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<sup>89</sup> Baldwin T T and Ford J K, 1988, "Transfer of Training: a review and directions for further research", *Personnel Psychology*, 41, pp 63-105.

<sup>90</sup> Fine C, 2011, *Delusions of Gender: the real science behind sex differences*, Icon Books, London.

## skills

However, even if we do it well, we should reconcile ourselves to the fact that a proportion of our decisions about this will go wrong.

Whether people's skills are good or just adequate, the effectiveness of their contribution to the organisation depends on whether they choose to use them or not. This will generally depend on how engaged they are with their jobs.