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Article

Experiences of Private Sector Employees on Transfer of Soft Skills Trainings

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Abstract

The issue of low training transfer remains prevalent despite private organizations' efforts in conducting soft skills training programs for its employees. Varying experiences of training transfer process are also reported. In this context, the purpose of this study aimed to explore the experiences of participants of private organizations of Nepal during soft skills training (reaction level), and their experiences while applying the knowledge and skills back to their workplace. The research design was qualitative and a total of 34 employees from four private companies of Nepal participated in this study who had attended a soft-skills training. Data was collected using five focus group discussions (FGDs) and thematic analysis used in which three overarching themes were generated with 25 categories and 210 codes. The study found that the participants had perceived soft skill training as the means for refreshments and socialization. In the post-training phase, they experienced changes in their mindset and improvement in interpersonal relationship with others in their workplace. Besides, irrespective of whether they participated in indoor or outdoor based programs, the duration and content of the program and their perspective towards whether they took it as an actual training or just a means of refreshment also affected their training transfer intentions. They experienced that for training transfer to occur, their own willingness to transfer guided by training content's job relevance, micro-sessions based training designs, and importantly the post training interventions and support from employers or HR/line managers were necessary. Practical and research implications have been discussed in the paper.

Keywords: training transfer, soft skills training, private organizations, post-training interventions

Introduction

"Did my employee (s) learn during the training program?" or "Will my employee(s) be able to implement those learning from training back to the workplace?" Human resource managers or supervisors are often found to be pondering over such questions. Organizations analyze the need to remain ahead in the stiff competition of the market and one of the major means to lead the market share is through competent and committed

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workforce and enhanced organizational knowledge (Aragón et al., 2012). Hence, they regularly spend substantial amount of their budget on training and development to capacitate their employees. The purpose of sending employees to training is to help employees get knowledge and acquire skills necessary to ensure their performance level on the job to be satisfactory (Armstrong, 2012), and consequently to achieve the organizational objectives (Bhatti, et al., 2013). In this respect, they are expected to implement the learning after they return to their workplace.

While the significance of training is widely acknowledged, it is equally imperative to underscore the significance of transfer of learning from training in enhancing workplace effectiveness (Chiaburu et al., 2010). For training transfer to occur, learning must be generalized in the job context and retained over a period of time (Baldwin & Ford, 1998). Hence, training transfer can be regarded as the process of implementing learning from training back to workplace and retaining learning as well. However, having singular perspective of considering training transfer as same when it comes to all training is misguided since training transfer is influenced by several factors, including the design and content of the training themselves. Further, there are inherent differences between hard and soft skills (Laker & Powell, 2011).

Hard skills are tangible, measurable and quantifiable, while soft skills are intangible and cannot be measured and quantified (Rao, 2018). While hard skills trainings are fundamentally essential for an organization's functional roles. The needs for soft skills are also evident in the past literature (Blume et al., 2010; Ford et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2012) for their roles in organizational effectiveness. The transfer of soft skills is linked to far transfer and that of hard skills is linked to near transfer; however, there is less likelihood of training transfer from soft skills training to job than hard skills training as per earlier research and this inability to transfer any form of training is an extremely costly (Laker & Powell, 2011).

In Nepal, organizations from different industries, such as corporate houses, IT companies, multinational companies, financial institutions frequently conduct soft skills training programs like team building, communication skills and leadership training, among others. However, there have been limited studies on experiences of training transfer on specific soft skills based trainings in private firms in Nepal. For instance, Subedi's (2008) cross-sectional study on two industries- civil and corporate- digged out factors influencing training transfer in Nepali context. Other studies were found on training transfer on specific factors influencing training transfer, such as organizational culture (Gautam & Basnet, 2020), trainee characteristics and supervisory support (Singh, 2017), or cultural factors and beliefs (Subedi, 2006). Concerning the frequency and intensity of such soft skills based programs in private industries, exploring the experiences of the employees attending soft skills trainings is key concern of this study.

Factors Influencing Training Transfer

Highly acclaimed research done by Baldwin & Ford (1988) explained a model which included training inputs, consisting of three

factors: trainee characteristics, training design, and work environment influences that are responsible for training outcomes (which are defined as acquisition of knowledge and skills in the training and retention of that learning back in the job). Trainees' characteristics have been explained in terms of ability, personality and motivation. It also includes trainees' conscientiousness, anxiety, cognitive ability and self-efficacy (Colquitt et al., 2000). Similarly, training design has been explained in terms of principles of learning, sequencing and training content. Training design includes the aspects of training providers, as it constitutes needs assessment, design, delivery, roles of trainers and training facilities. Among the two, trainee characteristics fall under individual level, and training design falls under learning field level (Tonhäuser, & Büker, 2016).

The third factor is about work environment; this can be further explained in the context that even if participant is competent and motivated, and training program is designed and delivered well, training transfer may not happen if there is no supervisory, peer support and opportunity to use the learning. Also, learned behavior should be generalized on the job context and continued over a period of time (Baldwin and Ford, 1988). Tonhäuser and Büker (2016) present work environment as organizational level factor. These factors have been further confirmed later (Cheng & Hampson, 2008; Ford et al., 2018; Renta-Davids et al., 2014) and substantiated for instrumentation (Bates et al., 2012).

Training Transfer in Soft Skills Training

Soft skills are non-domain skills (Rao, 2018) which are explained as important job-related skills that involve little or no interaction with machines and can be applied in a variety of job contexts (Levant et al., 2016). Soft skills can be interpersonal, which is about managing interactions with others and intrapersonal, which is ability to manage oneself (Laker & Powell, 2011). Such skills are also called people skills and there are 11 soft skills that companies value the most: communication, leadership, teamwork, creativity, time management, adaptability, problem-solving, work ethic, critical thinking, conflict management and emotional intelligence (Danao, 2023). Seventy five percent of long-term job success credit has been given to people skills in the research conducted with Fortune 500 CEOs by the Stanford Research Institute International and the Carnegie Melon Foundation (Rao, 2018). Further, studies (Example: Shah et al., 2023; Tripathy 2020) have exhibited stronger associations of soft skills with success careers and better performance and greater job satisfaction. Soft skills play crucial role in enhancing communication, collaboration, relationship building, development of emotional intelligence, adaptation to change, and problem solving at workplace (Srivastava, 2023).

Soft skills trainings are conducted indoor as well as outdoor. Both are widely popular in the current context. Though indoor or classroom based trainings have been common for majority of the training programs globally using all the applicable methods for learning (Mann et al., 2022), outdoor training programs have gradually received higher interests among the training providers and trainees in the industrialized countries (Barfod & Bentsen, 2018). Outdoor experiential training (OET) programs are

such types of programs which are based on experiential learning process and conducted at least partially outdoors, involving participants in physical and mental exercises (Williams et al., 2003). OET programs are not just limited to team building and leadership programs but they also include programs on problem-solving skills, increasing trust, and improving communications. Such programs offer challenging experiences and elements for deeper learning (Bentsen et al., 2009). However, irrespective of literature supporting OET in learning, there are anecdotal evidences and there is less likelihood of training transfer from soft skills training to job than the hard skills training (Kupritz, 2002). In this connection, one of the key factors found out was that in soft skills training, participants are less likely to value a trainer's expertise and they have feeling that they already have required expertise and know what needs to be done (Laker & Powell, 2011). Further, published studies (Example: Botke et al., 2018) have shown that training transfer related to soft skills is influenced by three factors, namely: job-related factors, social support factors, and factors related to the organizational facilitation of learning.

Regarding the extent literature signifying the issues on the soft skills based training transfer, some studies (Example: Charoensap-Kell et al., 2015) suggest the importance of effective evaluation to assess training transfer or training effectiveness in line with the intended goals. Among four levels of training evaluation, reaction level holds importance to draw an overall brief impression of the training, while the behavior level (performance back on the job) measures actual transfer of the training (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006) and has drawn more research attention due to its practical importance to multiple stakeholders (Burke & Hutchins, 2007, Ford et al., 2018). To delve into the subjective and personalized experiences of the trainees during the training transfer process, exploring the first hand experiences of the participants becomes necessary. In this backdrop, this study aims to explore the experiences of the private firms' employees during the soft skills trainings and while transferring the training back to the job.

Research Method

Design

A descriptive qualitative method was used in this study. In this qualitative study adopting inductive approach, thematic analysis was carried out on the transcripts of focus group discussions (FGDs) (Creswell & Poth, 2016). FGD was selected for data collection since it allows data collection in short span of time with limited resource by a small number of researchers and provide in-depth insights on why and how participants feel about the specific issues (Bertrand et al., 1992;Tracy, 2013).

Participants and Groups

In this study, only those soft skills training programs were considered for the study which were carried out within the past nine months during the time of data collection. The selected soft skills training programs included both indoor and outdoor based designs. Regarding the participants, total number of participants was 34, in which, 23 were male and 11 female with the age ranging from 20s to 50s. Greenbaum (1998)

explains that among the types of focused groups, full group consists of 8 to 10 persons, whereas mini group consists of 4 to 6 persons. Hence in this study, both full group and mini groups were used extending from four to nine participants in each group. Purposive sampling was done ensuring participation from diverse departments. In some FGD sessions, the groups were homogeneous in terms of level (all were at Manager level), whereas in others, the groups were heterogeneous, comprising employees from Assistant to Senior Manager. Earlier, researches both mentioned use of homogeneous as well as heterogeneous groups in focus group discussion (Carey, 1994; Fern, 1982; McLafferty, 2004).

Data Collection

In this study, data was collected through five FGDs in four organizations of Kathmandu in which two FGDs were conducted in private conglomerate, whereas in rest of three organizations, one FGD was conducted each based-on availability of candidates physically at the same location. Different companies, such as outsourcing and offshoring consulting private conglomerate, commercial bank and development bank were chosen based on the accessibility of data. Total four companies were included in this study. All these companies were operating across the country while their head offices were based in Kathmandu. The employees who took part in this study were based on Kathmandu offices.

Five FGDs were conducted between March to May 2023 (See Table 1). The trainings, which the study considered for this study, were conducted in between August 2022 and April 2023 in Kathmandu. There were three groups which included participants from Outdoor Experiential Training (OET) which was team building programs. Meanwhile, there were two groups which included participants from indoor based soft skills program, such as leadership and communication, motivation and customer service. Total 34 participants were interviewed through FGDs during this period. Discussions were not digitally recorded rather manual note taking was done.

For FGD, office venues of the respective organizations were used in case of three organizations while a nearby café for one organization. All the selected venues were quiet, ensuring uninterrupted discussions. Each FGD lasted about an hour in average where key guiding questions were used. In order to collect in-depth data, probing techniques were intensively used during the discussion. The FGDs were facilitated by the researchers who were also in the roles of moderator and note taker. FGD commenced with sharing of guidelines by the researchers. The discussion started with their experiences during the program, which then continued with their experiences on training transfer. Although one or two participants tried to dominate the discussion in some FGD sessions, the researchers respectfully controlled the environment and allowed all the participants to share their views freely. This helped in gaining the confidence of the remaining participants and led to rich interactions among the participants.

Prior to the commencement of FGDs, concerned HR departments were asked for permission to audio recording. However, since confidentiality was necessary as per organizational policies of the studied

organizations, recording was not possible in three organizations. In one organization, although recording was allowed, the researcher discontinued the recording in the mid of the discussion since they were found to be a bit reluctant in providing the answers freely. Moreover, the researcher instantly noted participants becoming comfortable afterwards. Hence, the researchers manually noted down all the responses of the participants. The researchers also took a note of their non-verbal language during the course of FGDs which were expressed in terms of excitement or sadness and even frustration. All the responses were transcribed in Word document immediately after the discussions.

Table 1

Focus Group Discussion Characteristics

Company (C)	Date of Interview	Brief on organization	Group (G)	Duration	No. of participants	Department of participants	Training program referred	Date of training program	In-house/external trainer	FGD venue and setup
C1	26 March, 2023	Conglomerate of Companies (private companies into automobile trading, construction, educational, services, etc.)	G1	1 hour (11:20am to 12:20pm)	7	Admin, Spare Parts, HR, Sales, Business Development, IT	Outdoor based (team building)	Dec, 2022	External	Meeting hall; peaceful
			G2	1 hour (12:30pm to 1:30pm)	9	Finance, Spare Parts, Sales, CFD	Outdoor based (team building)	Dec, 2022	External	Meeting hall; peaceful
C2	07May, 2023	Business Process Outsourcing company in mortgage industry	G3	1 hour 5 minutes (12:10-1:15pm)	5	Mortgage, Capability Building, Data processing, Customer relations	Indoor based (leadership module)	August, 2022 to May, 2023	In-house	Computer lab
C3	19May, 2023	Financial institution	G4	1 hour (2:30-3:30pm)	4	Retail credit, IT, Remittance, Strategic Planning and Account	Outdoor based (team building)	May, 2023	External	Space in café
C4	19May, 2023	Financial institution	G5	1 hour 10 minutes (3:45-4:55pm)	9	Branch staffs in various departments such as Marketing, Customer Service, etc.	Indoor based (communication, motivation, customer service)	August, 2022	External	Office workstation
4		Total	5	5 hours and 15 minutes	34					

Data Analysis

The approach used for transcribing discussion on paper was 'work with reporter's notes only' among the three approaches suggested by Bertrand et al. (1992) which explains the process of expanding and clarifying notes based on memory immediately after group session. There were total five Word documents which included transcription of each focus group discussion. The entire five documents consisted of 293 paragraphs. Before coding, the documents were read several times. Then, each document was coded using qualitative analysis software - MAXQDA version 2020. While coding, inductive approach in thematic data analysis process was used. This was done by first studying each statement, phrases and texts of each transcribed Word file, which was imported to MAXQDA and suitable codes generated for them. After completing this process, all the generated codes were reviewed and common codes clubbed. Then, report on 'Coded Segments' and 'Overview of Codes' were extracted in MS Excel which was initially categorized into parent code, code and segments. During manual analysis, the generated 210 codes were clubbed to 25 categories and these categories were clubbed up to three overarching themes (See table 2).

Quality and Ethical Concerns

Trustworthiness has been a major focus in any qualitative research while addressing the quality concerns (Johnson & Parry, 2022). The trustworthiness of focus group data implies four criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Denzin &Lincoln, 2018) in which various techniques have been suggested in the literature to ensure each criterion (Korstjens, & Moser, 2018; Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001; Patton, 2014). Credibility was focused through persistent observations. Using detailed FGD guide, relevant issues were identified and focused on. Besides, accuracy was given priority during the course of purposive sampling which was working in the organizations considered. Prolonged engagement was diligently ensured in the field which helped foster immersive involvement throughout the study period. To ensure dependability, the stability of data collected between March 2023 and May 2023 was met by using same interview guide for each group and by preparing transcripts promptly. Moreover, transferability was assured by well describing participant as well as their selection procedures, using verbatim when presenting findings and thick description so that their experiences become meaningful to other readers. To ensure confirmability, findings collected by the researchers are confirmed by other researchers. Neutrality was maintained while drawing findings being based on the data rather than personal preferences.

In this study, participants were well informed regarding the purpose of the study and they were assured of the confidentiality of their identity, their data, as well as name of their companies. Consent was taken prior to data collection in each round of FGD and participants were treated with respect. Place of FGD was selected as per the participants' convenience and comfort. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could decline or withdraw from the study at any time without being penalized.

Table 2

Overarching Themes, Categories and Codes

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories/Codes	Code Frequency
Experiences during soft skills training (reaction level of training evaluation)	Soft skills training as refreshing and 'a moment to bond'	Soft skills training as refreshing event	13
		Soft skills training as opportunity to bond	7
	Soft skills training as an 'opportunity to learn'	Soft skills training as learning experience	19
		Soft skill training as opportunity for understanding self and others	18
	Soft skills' training design being reason for incomplete learning	Ineffective training design impacting learning during soft skill training	17
		Surficial learning during soft skills training	3
Experiences on training transfer of soft skills training	Soft skills training being successful in bringing behavioral changes in individual	Change in mindset/perspective after soft skills training	12
		Soft skills training helpful in interpersonal relationship building after training	17
	Soft skills training in benefitting individual and organization in the long term	Soft skills training's learning remains as repository after training	18
		Soft skills' impact business output in long run	3
	Soft skills training in being unsuccessful in application in spite of good learning	No training transfer because learn fades away	3
		Difficulty in training transfer experience because of others	1
	Soft skills training's inherent nature being reason for no application or time taking application	Long time for implementation for training transfer of soft skills training	5
		Participants' giving no credit to training because of self-pride	6
	Soft skills training's application based on job relevancy only	Easy training transfer experience for only those job-related skills	4
	Soft skills training having zero application experience	No training transfer experience because of no actual learning during program	3

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories/Codes	Code Frequency
	Experience in training transfer in indoor based soft skill training and outdoor experiential training (soft skills based)	Major differences in training transfer in indoor vs. outdoor soft skills trainings	8
Perceptions on reasons behind varying levels of training transfer of soft skills training	Individual's willingness and initiative as important reasons behind training transfer	Individual willingness reason behind application	17
		Individual's uniqueness reason behind application	3
	Post training interventions behind successful training transfer	Immediate tools driven by HR behind successful training transfer	14
		Organization culture of support, guidance and coaching encouraging learning implementation	7
	Job relevance training as an important reason behind training transfer	Avoidance to implement learning for job irrelevant skills	3
		Implementation of learning for job relevant skills	1
	Nature of soft skills program as the reason behind less or no application after the training program	Behavior change taking long time for implementation	5
		Soft skills training's learning being momentary as reason behind no implementation	3
		Total	210

Findings

The study had documented experiences of the employees during the training and training transfer phase. The findings have been grouped into three broad themes which are further managed into 13 categories. Participants' quotes from transcripts had also been presented below each theme and categories. Quotes were identified by number assigned to each focus group (FG) and participant (P).

Experiences of Learning during Soft Skills Training

The study had captured experiences of trainees on their perception of learning during soft skills training they had attended. Their experiences during the program had been further grouped into 3 categories and 6 sub-categories. Although the initial question tried to capture 'level 1- reaction' and 'level 2-learning' (Armstrong, 2012), there were some participants who shared only level 1-reaction part on their perception towards training and did not focus on learning aspect. However, there were many participants who specifically shared their learning from the program as well. Hence, the following categories include perception about training as well as learning during the program.

Soft Skills Training: Refreshing, 'a Moment to Bond'

Participants shared their perception towards soft skills program as the refreshing event. This can be further expressed as "motivating", "fun activities", "energizing", "enjoyment", "refreshing", etc. In one of the focus group discussions, it was articulated that even people with negative mindset were doing the activities. One of the participants shared observation on such program as-

> Compared to the training program where more theory and lecture are given, these programs not boring at all, for there were energizing activities (FG5_P3).

Most of the participants felt that the program was a good opportunity for foster bond among employees. Since employees at different locations hardly get opportunity to meet and talk in person, attending such program was an opportunity to meet with various persons working in the same organization. They felt connected with different levels of employees which are expressed as follows:

> No feeling of hierarchy- senior and junior (FG2_P3).

> After the program, I felt it would foster further relations (FG2_P8).

Soft Skills Training also an 'Opportunity to Learn'

In all focus group discussions, most of the participants mentioned learning experiences. Apart from their perception of the training being "energizing" and "connected" as per above categories, these forms of training also had imparted required contents. A participant in customer service training shared her learning about customer handling skills as follows:

> Able to understand type of customers and learnt how to handle customers accordingly. Earlier, focus was on asking customers to do account opening. Now, I have tried to do need assessment of customers first then only decide to give products/services (FG5_P3).

Another very important learning experience had been on the self-awareness and understanding others. Self-awareness was not only limited to learning but was also realizing one's own capacity, which was powerful realization indeed. This was expressed by few participants as mentioned below:

> The awareness to me was these are possible ways that I can do. Self-awareness is important, especially in soft skills training (FG5_P5).

> During such program, one can observe behavior of other people (FG3_P2).

Soft Skills Training Design Reason behind Incomplete Learning

Although above categories were focusing on positive learning experiences of participants during the program, there were experiences shared by participants regarding ineffective training and surficial learning. To mention, ineffective learning was because of choice of activities which were not relatable to work; choice of games were too simple; no debriefing was done after activity, etc. One participant had shared his/her experience this way:

> Some topics which I have not experienced were difficult to relate (FG3_P3).

Also, one participant had expressed concern that there was no in-depth study under each topic:

> There are lots of things which are yet to learn, more than what were taught in activity in the program. Things learnt are yet to be implemented as well (FG2_P9).

Experiences on Transfer of Soft Skills Training

Apart from learning during the soft skills training program, it is also imperative to know whether there had been any training transfer or not on their job. Responses of participants had been discussed in detail and studied in seven categories. Out of seven categories, two of them had recorded positive experiences on successful training transfer and four categories focused on challenging and difficult experiences on training transfer. Meanwhile, the last category was focused on the experience in training transfer in indoor and outdoor based experiential training (soft skills based). Considering the responses, many of them had shared positive experiences on training transfer compared to challenging ones.

Soft Skills Training Successful in Bringing Behavioral Changes in Individual

After returning from training, participants shared that their perspectives, behavior and mindset changed for better reason. They were able to handle emotions and situations as demanded; mindset became positive towards organization as they expressed:

> I could control my emotions after returning from training (FG2_P7).

> I got ideas how to handle as situation demands (FG3_P1).

Also, many had experienced that their relations with peers and team had improved after attending soft skills training.

> Since I built camaraderie during the program, it became easy to open up (FG4_P4).

> The way I do conversation with my peers changed after session (FG3_P2).

Soft Skills Training in Benefitting Individual and Organization on Long Term

Many participants shared that learning from soft skills training were applied by them and some even shared that even if learning implementation is not immediate, it will remain as repository, i.e., they can refer to it as and when it will be required.

> We learnt 'source outcome'- rather than solution, it will be beneficial to understand source. Such things are now in our memory (FG3_P4).

It was really good to know from some participants that soft skills training program could have such big impact. Although the organization had not measured result or ROI after the program, the participants had beautifully explained correlation between individual's mindset and its impact in business output.

> If such programs happen, there won't be any fraud. People will think if I do anything wrong, it will spoil my family, i.e., my organization. Such mindset encourages individual to avoid involving in fraud. (FG4_P4).

> Helped to decrease turnaround time in decision making as I know the person (FG4_P1).

Soft Skills Training: Unsuccessful in Application despite Good Learning

In case of soft skills training, some activities are motivating, but learning remains for that time only. This is expressed by one participant as follows:

> After watching motivational video during training, it was inspiring, but it did not remain for long (FG5_P8).

Although a participant felt that he had realized importance of working in team, one is required to work with others who had not attended the program. This creates hindrance in implementing learning.

Everybody knows what is right and it may not be practical while implementing, as others may not be thinking the way I do; many other factors do not allow this to happen (FG5_P3).

Soft Skills Training's Inherent Nature: Reason behind No Application or Time Taking Application

Although participants had shared good experiences on training transfer, they had also shared that it would take long time to implement learning from soft skills training.

> Soft skills bring behavior change which cannot come in short time (FG5_P3).

> Implementation takes time. Sometimes it may not happen as expected (FG3_P1).

There are some participants who do not want to give credit to behavior changes after attending the training, as they believe that they have inherent skills. In soft skills training, trainees feel they already have appropriate expertise and they already know 'how' and 'what' part (Laker & Powell, 2011).

> When I already have skills, I don't need to change (FG5_P1).

Soft Skills Training's Application for Job Relevancy Skills Only

Another reality on training transfer of soft skills training was shared by one of the participants, i.e., only those skills, which are relevant to the job holders get implemented and others get ignored.

> As this program is related to my marketing work, I implement it, whereas there could be some other learnings which are not required for me. So, I don't use it (FG4_P6).

Soft Skills Training Having Zero Application Experience

Since learning during training was focused on awareness and no in-depth discussion was done, some participants had found it difficult to implement.

> We know that team building is important, but question on 'how to apply?', "where to apply" is missing (FG2_P8).

Experiences in Training Transfer in Indoor Based Soft kill Training and Outdoor Experiential Training (Soft Skills Based)

The fundamental differences of outdoor based experiential training (OET) (on softs skills) as well as indoor based soft skills training could also be observed among the participating organizations. In terms of training design, outdoor experiential training programs (conducted on soft skills) were of short duration and activity led sessions, whereas indoor based soft skills programs were of long period, which were conducted including various training methods of lectures as well as simulation exercises, such as role plays, case studies and games. Since the duration of outdoor based soft skills program in the study were of short duration compared to indoor based, it was not content heavy, hence in depth discussion and study seemed lacking. One of the participants had mentioned:

> I am aware why team building is important, but I don't know how to implement that. (FG1_P4)

In contrast, as the duration was long in the indoor based soft skills programs, content was also heavy. Hence more detailed discussions were possible. When participants were expected to implement learning back to the workplace, having in-depth knowledge or not could also impact training transfer. Another important difference between outdoor experiential training and indoor based soft skills training explored in this study was perceptions of the participants about the program itself affected in the transfer intention. In the study, outdoor experiential training was not perceived as training in itself by the participants at first hand due to which individuals were not concerned whether they have to implement learning back to the workplace or not. To them, sessions were meant only as the means for refreshments. One of the participants mentioned:

> We had never thought about implementation after attending training, neither HR did ask nor I thought about it. (FG4_P2)

On the other hand, in the case of indoor based soft skills training, participants regarded the program as proper training. Such first-hand perception towards sessions could also have a big impact on the whole experience of training transfer.

Perception on Reasons Behind Successful Training Transfer or No Application from Soft Skills Training

Since the study had captured experiences of participants on learning during the program as well as on training transfer, it had also asked participants to share their views on reasons behind possibility of training transfer or less/no training transfer of soft skills training. Under this last theme, participants' responses had been presented under four categories/sub-themes.

Individual's Willingness and Initiative as an Important Reason Behind Training Transfer

There could be so many other reasons behind successful and unsuccessful training transfer; however, many participants had expressed one very important reason impacting training transfer, i.e., an individual's initiative/willingness and application of learning differently and uniquely by individual.

> Learning never happens with outsiders' push. Motivation is something that depends on how individual takes it (FG5_P3).

> People want to be in comfort zone. Implementation depends on individuals; some do not change even after program (FG5_P3).

> We cannot claim what has been learnt (FG1_P1).

Post Training Interventions in Work Behind Successful Training Transfer

Although soft training program could be really effective in terms of learning, many participants in one focus group discussion shared the importance of post training interventions used by the organizations as reflection exercises, peer learning session, study of session wise feedback form by HR and organizational culture of top management support, guidance from supervisor/HR as well as required coaching to implement learning.

> When we heard from peers with examples, it was effective (FG3_P2).

> If we had confusions, we had conversations. With this, it became easier (FG3_P3).

> In one to two situations, when I faced challenge related to team members, I reached out to Learning and Development (L&D) department. Those things learnt in session could not be applied here, and he (L&D Manager) explained in different way (FG3_P3).

> Organization culture and support goes proportionately. In some organizations, there might have been difficulty to implement learning (FG3_P4).

Job Relevance as an Important Reason Behind Training Transfer

There was an important revelation from some participants that although learning might had happened, only those learning required in the job could be implemented.

> Things that are related to individual get implemented, while unrelated ones get ignored (FG5_P3).

Nature of Soft Skills Program Reason Behind Less or No Application After Program

Some participants were also of the view that soft skills program is such form of training that though learning had happened in the program, learning transfer may not have happened. They had expressed that since it takes longer time for behavior change and in case of soft skills training, implementation cannot be realized immediately. Also, another important perception shared by participants was that soft skills training's learning was momentary, as one reason behind it was lack of implementation.

> After participating in such programs, there is realization that I want to make changes for some months; honestly speaking, later on, we forget and are back to normal wither earlier mindset. (FG5_P1)

> Implementation takes time. Sometimes it may not happen as expected (FG3_P1).

> In case of outdoor experiential training, where/how to apply is difficult (FG2_P3).

The findings exhibit that in spite of careful design, the nature of training program influences the experience of training transfer process which suggests careful analysis should be done while planning such training to ensure higher learning application.

Discussions

Soft skills training programs have been highlighted for several features along with the acquisition of non-technical skills. In this study, soft skills training programs have been observed as generating refresher in the private organizations. Besides, individuals' bond with colleagues was found to have improved and trainees' mindsets positively transformed after coming back to the workplace. Such programs boosting the socialization process in the organization have prominent contributions to promote employee's organizational adjustments and boost their self-esteem. It also enhances their job performance through the improvement in their intrinsic motivation (Gardner et al., 2021). Along with skills transfer, such soft skills programs in private organizations serve as the means for socialization which foster employees' organizational commitment.

The study highlights the influences of all three major factors: trainee characteristics, training design, and most importantly, the work environment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Ford et al., 2018). The study shows pertinent roles of the employers (work environment) and the need for prior planning to be carried out by the employers regarding post-training interventions in the training transfer process. One of the findings of this study suggests that recording only the reaction level of the participants is not sufficient. Despite positive overwhelming response during the training, the transfer of learning may not occur. Such soft skills training, especially outdoor experiential training as team building programs, are regarded interesting and entertaining, but may not be relevant as a training program (Wagner & Campbell, 1994). Therefore, to assess the overall effectiveness of the soft skills training, training transfer should be assessed for which roles of human resource (HR) managers or line managers come to the frontline. In this study, irrespective of outdoor or indoor training design, the experiences of training transfer level among the trainees varied notably. Therefore, this study made it evident that for effective training transfer to occur, the employers should apply

appropriate strategies, such as peer to peer learning, reflective exercises and some of the post-training intervention activities. Without training intervention plans, such soft skills training only become limited to a refreshing event. Past studies (Example: Richman-Hirsch, 2001) also have indicated strong role of a supportive environment provided by the employer in fostering training transfer and moderating the relationship between post-training interventions and training transfer.

Supportive environment also includes a feedback mechanism (Simosi, 2012), which was also found in this study as an influencing factor in training transfer. Proper and balanced feedback is necessary to improve the post-training performance while excess or improper feedback system adversely affects the motivation to transfer and transfer of training. With regards to the role of feedback in training transfer, taking feedback on the training design and implementation allows the employers to collect immediate responses of the trainees to reflect on positive aspects and work on their weaknesses. Therefore, along with the trainees' motivation to transfer, the employers' involvement in the planning phase of training design collectively have significant roles to foster the training transfer process. Employers can decide on the techniques for training transfer ahead as well as on the evaluation of changes in behavioral level after the completion of such soft skills training.

The study also found that that individual participants' willingness and initiative to transfer the training was also among the key factors in the training transfer process. Trainees having willingness to learn were found to have experienced positive behavioral changes (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2015). This willingness or motivation to transfer and transfer behavior both are highly influenced by their job relevancy (Bhatti et al., 2014). Such willingness is also affected by their perceptions that they already have inherent skills prior to participating in such soft skills training and therefore prefer not giving any credit to the training for some changes. Soft skills participants feel they already have appropriate expertise and they already know 'how' and 'what' part and because of this, they do not give attribution to the trainer as an expert (Laker & Powell, 2011). Such challenges of ensuring job relevancy perceptions, enhancing the perceived worth of soft skills training programs and fostering their readiness to engage again underscore the need for robust involvement of HR managers or the employers.

One of the major knowledge contributions of this study was that compared to soft skills training programs which are conducted in a stretch of one entire day or a few days, or long hours, those training programs which are organized in bite-sized, micro-sessions and conducted periodically are more effective. Micro learning is designed in such a way that small and focused learning units are developed and accordingly, short-term focused learning classes are conducted or short-term activities are given (Hug, 2005). Such training programs with micro-sessions are conducted in a certain gap of a week or fortnight. After one small round of sessions, allowing participants time and opportunity to implement their learning during that break becomes instrumental to apply the learning. Such design of training reduces information load on the participants, thereby aiding in their learning process (Nikou, 2019). Trainees

can discuss or reflect their experience of application of the learning (eases or difficulties) back in their next consecutive sessions in peer or individually, which adds value to the learning process. Hence, studies (Example: Nikou & Econoides, 2018; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2020) also have explained the higher effectiveness of such training which is one of the major findings of this research. Such training programs have been gaining much popularity in recent years (Leong et al., 2021). These programs seem to be simple, yet are effective in reflecting back on what one has learnt as well as what one was un/able to implement. These techniques also align with Laker and Powell's (2011) study which explains that soft skills training takes a long time to implement compared to hard skills/technical skills training (near transfer vs. far transfer).

Conclusion and Future Implications

The study has made an effort to capture experiences of participants regarding training transfer from soft skills programs. The study findings highlight the positive reception of soft skills training during the training which aligns with the reaction level with the training participants expressing enjoyment and perceiving it as both a refreshing experience and an opportunity for learning and socialization. Even though the training was considered helpful in the long run, difficulties emerged when it came to applying the training in real-world situations. Participants found it difficult to effectively apply the acquired soft skills in their professional roles. The training transfer process gets influenced by participants' own perceptions towards the training and also their willingness to transfer the learning. Hence, with the focus of the training on job related skills and post-training intervention activities by the employers and even micro or macro learning activities. More than the indoor or outdoor design, greater significance was held by the content and duration of the program, as well as the employers' role in informing participants to internalize the training program as a learning opportunity rather than refreshing event. These insights underscore the importance of aligning training content with job requirements and activating the roles of the employers to enhance the transferability and practical application of acquired skills in the workplace. With increased awareness among the employers and trainers regarding how the employees experience the training transfer process, they can plan for during and post-training activities to increase their employees' training transfer.

The study holds practical implications at different levels. First, it highlights the need for rigorous training design to the training providers. Though such training programs may be featured with amusements, their relevance and application must be studied through training needs assessment. Second, employers, along with trainers, can explore ways to apply such skills by communicating and reinforcing the learning transfer process. Employers may rethink on the post-training interventions to encourage them to take initiatives for applying the learning. Regarding research implications, this study offers avenues to conduct further studies on specific soft skills based training transfer to generate knowledge on skill specific training transfer. Further, research works can be carried on homogeneous participants to explore the

experiences of training transfer. Studies can also be expanded on other private as well as public organizations which would also ensure knowledge expansion as well as room to compare the experiences of employees of public and private organizations.

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