Accountability in Training Transfer: Adapting Schlenker’s Model of Responsibility to a Persistent but Solvable Problem

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Decades have been spent studying training transfer in organizational environments in recognition of a transfer problem in organizations. Theoretical models of various antecedents, empirical studies of transfer interventions, and studies of best practices have all been advanced to address this continued problem. Yet a solution may not be so elusive. This paper spotlights the crucial role of accountability in solving the transfer problem by applying the theoretical lens of Schlenker’s pyramid of accountability. A conceptual framework is advanced and implications for future research and practice are discussed. Recommendations for practice include conducting a training transfer accountability audit to determine where and for whom accountability lapses exist in an organization, developing and clearly communicating prescriptions and expectations for training transfer for each stakeholder group, and evaluating training transfer outcomes across training programs.

Keywords: Training, transfer, accountability, Schlenker

After decades of probing the training transfer problem, it would seem that more documented successes would exist in the research literature. However, even after producing theoretical models of variables that influence transfer (e.g., Alvarez, Salas, & Garofano, 2004; Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Ford & Weissbein, 1997; Salas, Cannon-Bowers, Rhodenizer, & Bowers, 1999) and conducting empirical studies of various transfer interventions and strategies (e.g., Marx, 1982; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Tziner, Haccoun, & Kadish, 1991), we continue to read disappointing estimates of trained skill
use on the job. Is this problem really unsolvable, or might it be that the transfer problem is not as complex as it has been portrayed, especially when heeding theoretical guidance.

In this article, we review a concept that despite its minimized role in the training literature is poised to have a major impact on buttressing transfer. Specifically, we highlight the critical role of accountability for transfer as applied to the role of the trainee, trainer, immediate supervisor, and top management throughout the training process. According to Kopp (2006, p. 351), “we regularly stop short of holding the trainer accountable for training transfer or lack thereof.” Although Kopp (2006) holds the trainer as “primarily accountable” (p. 353) for enhancing training transfer, others have suggested that management is ultimately responsible for ensuring transfer (Esque & McCausland, 1997). As noted by Esque and McCausland (1997), “The responsibility for effective transfer of training falls into a grey area between trainers, trainees, and management” (p. 116). We believe that many stakeholders can (and should) be held accountable for transfer and the transfer-related activities that they can affect.

Given the criticism that HRD needs to rely more on theory (Bartlett, 2003) we adapt a model of accountability advanced by Schlenker (1997) to frame the discussion of accountability and transfer en route to providing research and practical implications. Next, we briefly assess the transfer problem and then review findings in the training literature dealing with accountability for transfer.

Training Transfer: Significance and Focus of the Study

Training transfer refers to the use of trained knowledge and skill back on the job. For transfer to occur in the workplace, “learned behavior must be generalized to the job context and maintained over a period of time on the job” (Baldwin & Ford, 1988, p. 63). Based on a survey of training professionals, Saks (2002) found that about 40% of trainees fail to transfer immediately after training, 70% falter in transfer 1 year after the program, and ultimately only 50% of training investments result in organizational or individual improvements. In the current economic reality, this sort of return on investment is not acceptable to most managers.

Traditionally, the most talked about factors influencing transfer include learner variables, intervention design, and the work environment or climate (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Ford & Weissbein, 1997; Salas et al., 1999). More recently, Burke and Hutchins (2008) established additional antecedents to transfer in their conceptual model, namely trainer characteristics (e.g., trainer knowledge and experience), along with evaluation. It is the latter factor from which accountability stems, suggesting that merely measuring training outcomes makes transfer more likely (Bates, 2003). That is, in the spirit of
Kopp’s (2006) bold claim, transfer of trained skills seems to be viewed as “nice to have” and few if any stakeholders, especially trainers, are held accountable for evidence of transfer success in a meaningful way. Perhaps trainers fear trainees are not transferring from their programs; perhaps trainers are not asked by top-line managers to provide transfer evidence; perhaps managers do not know how to hold their employees accountable for transfer; and/or perhaps trainees, supervisors, and/or trainers do not want to shoulder the responsibility. However, if certain stakeholders (e.g., trainers, trainees, supervisors) do not take responsibility for transfer, does it mean that they shouldn’t?

Undoubtedly, research has advanced in the field resulting in numerous documented antecedents of transfer, but might there be an “80–20” principle at work here, awaiting our uncovering? In other words, is it possible that many of the variables in our transfer models are perhaps trivial or of minor importance in affecting significant change in transfer, leaving a few variables capable of tackling the brunt of the problem? For example, of the more than 85 transfer antecedents that have been identified (e.g., Hilbert, Preskill, & Russ-Eft, 1997), is it possible that a mere handful of those numerous influences could—by themselves—make a large impact on improving low transfer rates? In addition to Kopp (2006), Longenecker’s (2004) survey of 278 managers suggested that a primary learning imperative to increase transfer of learning is enhancing accountability for application. Similarly, we suggest accountability may be one of the star players for effecting change and attempts should be made to build a theoretical base for its development and further empirical exploration. Next we review what is known about accountability in the training transfer literature.

**The Role of Accountability in the Training Transfer Literature**

Accountability, although strongly undergirding many contemporary management practices (e.g., pay for performance, corporate social responsibility, balanced scorecards; Hess, 2007), has only more recently surfaced in the training literature. Accountability is defined in the training literature as the degree to which the organization, culture, and/or management expects learners to use trained knowledge and skills on the job and holds them responsible for doing so (Brinkerhoff & Montesino, 1995; Kontoghiorghes, 2002). Perhaps the most explicit acknowledgement of the relevance of accountability in transfer can be found in Broad’s work (Broad, 2005; Broad & Newstrom, 1992). For example, Broad and Newstrom (1992) suggested the following accountability-related mechanisms to increase transfer: build transfer of training into supervisory performance standards (i.e., performance standards include an expectation that supervisors will support training and will be held accountable for the results), develop a supervisor–trainee contract to specify each party’s commitment to maximize the results of training, transfer action planning (i.e., commitment
to behavioral change by the trainee and support by the supervisor), plan assessments of transfer (i.e., an evaluation process to provide the supervisor and employee with objective feedback on the use of training-related knowledge and skills), and conduct evaluation surveys and provide feedback (e.g., remind employees of what they learned and that they need to apply it).

However, given the potential influence of accountability on transfer, it is surprising that it has seldom been included explicitly in widely known transfer of training models. For example, in their model of the transfer process, Baldwin and Ford (1988) identified trainee characteristics, instruction design and delivery, and the work environment as predictors of transfer. Factors in the work environment included supervisory and peer support as well as opportunities to perform learned behaviors on the job but not accountability. In a subsequent review of the transfer literature, Ford and Weissbein (1997) noted the use of interventions to change work environment factors such as supervisory support; however, again there was no explicit mention of accountability for transfer of training. Machin (2002) developed an integrated multilevel transfer of training model that includes individual, team, and organizational variables and provided transfer strategies that can be applied before, during, and after training at different levels; however, none of the strategies involved accountability. Russ-Eft (2002) developed a typology of training design and work environment elements (e.g., supervisory support) that can be manipulated to effect learning and transfer. Although the typology includes elements before, during, and after training, it does not include specific aspects of accountability. Finally, a recent review of the training literature concluded that “this body of research points to the importance of considering interpersonal factors such as supervisory and peer support as moderators of the training-transfer of training relationship” (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009, p. 466). Thus, the role of accountability in the transfer process remains overshadowed by an emphasis on social support mechanisms in the work environment.

In the past 15 years, several notable measures have been developed to assess factors influencing transfer; however, like the transfer models, they have for the most part ignored the relevance of accountability for transfer. For example, Rouiller and Goldstein (1993) developed a measure of organizational transfer climate that consists of situations and consequences that can inhibit or facilitate transfer. Situational cues remind trainees to apply their training on the job (goal cues, social cues, task cues, and self-control cues), and consequences can affect trainees’ use of what they have learned on the job (including supervisors’ positive feedback, negative feedback, punishment, no feedback). We should clarify that although reinforcement strategies “support” transfer, they are not genuine accountability strategies in that they do not hold the trainee responsible for transfer; they merely respond to the trainees’ transfer attempts in some way (e.g., with praise). Tracey and Tews (2005) also developed a General Training Climate Scale (GTCS), consisting of three dimensions (managerial support, job support, and organizational support).
measuring the “perceived support from management, work, and the organization for formal and informal training and development activities” (p. 358). Only one of the items specifically speaks to accountability by holding trainees responsible for transfer via the compensation system (i.e., “There is a performance appraisal system that ties financial rewards to use of newly acquired knowledge and skills.”). Finally, Holton and colleagues (Holton, Bates, & Ruona, 2000; Holton, Bates, Seyler, & Carvalho, 1997) developed a diagnostic instrument called the Learning Transfer System Inventory (LTSI) designed to assess “all factors in the person, training, and organization that can influence transfer of learning to job performance” (Holton et al., 2000, pp. 335-336). The LTSI consists of 16 factors, of which 11 assess aspects of a specific training program and 5 are general factors important for all training programs. Although the LTSI consists of many individual, training design, and environmental factors that can influence transfer, it does not include accountability as a specific factor. We should note though that three LTSI factors deal with consequences of using newly learned skills on the job (i.e., personal outcomes–positive, personal outcomes–negative, supervisor sanctions).

Although the inclusion of accountability in transfer theories and measures may be lacking, a handful of studies have reported findings linking accountability to transfer. For example, in an early study by Baldwin and Magjuka (1991), trainees expecting some form of follow-up activity or assessment after training reported stronger intentions to transfer. In commenting on this finding, Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992) stated, “The fact that their supervisor would require them to prepare a post-training report or undergo an assessment meant that they were being held accountable for their own learning and apparently conveyed the message that the training was important” (p. 418).

The effectiveness of posttraining reports as accountability mechanisms for trainees was included in a study by Saks and Belcourt (2006) on training activities and transfer of training in organizations. They found that accountability, as measured by requiring trainees to submit a posttraining report or participate in an interview after attending a training program, was significantly related to transfer ($r = .29, p < .001$). Thus, it seems that posttraining follow-up and/or an awareness that there will be a follow-up is effective. Lastly, in a meta-analysis of the effects of behavior modeling training, Taylor, Russ-Eft, and Chan (2005) found a larger effect size for behavioral transfer when sanctions and rewards were instituted in trainees’ work environments (e.g., the integration of newly learned skills into performance appraisals) for using or not using newly learned skills on the job ($n = 117$ studies) than when they were not instituted (population effect size = .55 vs. .31). In other words, transfer was greater when trainees were rewarded for using new skills or “sanctioned” for not using them.

In summary, based on this review of the training transfer literature, accountability has taken a proverbial backseat in much of the published work on transfer, particularly in regard to accountability mechanisms for trainers and
supervisors. However, the few findings associated with mechanisms of holding trainees accountable for transfer have been noted as critical to transfer by managers and found to be a statistically significant influence on transfer across each published study we reviewed. Because most of the prior work on this variable has been atheoretical, and a clarion call for more theoretical framing in the HRD literature has been advanced (e.g., Bartlett, 2003), we next examine an existing theoretical model to position the role of accountability in the training transfer literature.

**Applying a Theoretical Lens to Accountability in Transfer**

Greek philosophers were concerned with accountability long ago, as well as with the related concepts of duty, fairness, and punishment for wrong-doings. According to Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, and Doherty (1994), “Accountability refers to being answerable to audiences for performing up to certain prescribed standards, thereby fulfilling obligations, duties, expectations, and other charges” (p. 634). They further note that “when people are accountable they can be made to explain and justify their conduct, and their behavior can be scrutinized, judged, and sanctioned by audiences” (p. 634). (Given that Schlenker et al. state, “accountability is still regarded as a synonym for responsibility” [p. 632], we use the terms interchangeably in this article.)

Schlenker et al. (1994) discuss how individuals can be held causally responsible for actions if (a) they are associated or connected with them, (b) they commit to them, and (c) the effects are foreseeable and intended. As applied to the current context, trainers, trainees, and supervisors could be viewed as accountable for transfer because they are associated with the use of trained skills on the job, are engaged or involved in transfer strategies and using trained skills, and because they are expected to transfer because of the firm’s investment in its foreseeable impact on job performance.

“Answerability”—reflecting a sense of “requiredness”—focuses on associated liabilities and sanctions based on a person’s obligations and duties (Schlenker et al., 1994, p. 634). As applied to transfer, trainers, trainees, and supervisors may face liabilities or penalties from the organization if they do not follow through on their obligation to transfer (e.g., a written notation in a performance review, a verbal or written warning in a progressive discipline system). Schlenker’s work states that gaps in a worker’s behavior and “oughts” produce states of incompleteness, such as “I ought to transfer skills I learn,” “I ought to hold my employees responsible for transfer,” or “I ought to share evidence of my training program’s influence on behavioral change with top managers.” Thus, employees and managers need to understand what specific actions are expected of them, how their actions will be measured, and what sanctions or rewards (Santos & Stuart, 2003) will be imposed for their transfer performance (or lack thereof).
Because accountability implies that “evaluative reckonings” (Schlenker et al., 1994, p. 634) take place when persons are judged, Schlenker et al. developed an accountability pyramid to describe and examine this process. As seen in Figure 1, a person’s degree of accountability is proposed to derive from the strength of the links among three primary components. They include (a) the prescriptions or expectations that guide a person’s behavior (in the present case, pretraining transfer expectations, requirements for transfer briefings, reports, or specific action plans), (b) the event or action that occurs or is anticipated (e.g., the use of new knowledge and skills on the job posttraining), and (c) characteristics of a person’s identity or role, qualities, and convictions (e.g., the role of transfer in a trainer’s job description or a trainee’s sense of dedication to using skills provided by the firm).

These three key components in Schlenker’s model are connected to each other and form three linkages, including the prescription–event link that necessitates goal and process clarity, the prescription–identity link that requires the actor’s sense of perceived obligation, and lastly the identity–event link, which refers to the extent to which the actor is connected to the event. According to Schlenker et al. (1994), the identity–event link increases
in strength as the actor perceives greater personal control over his or her conduct and its consequences. Perceived control is similar to self-efficacy beliefs and in fact Schlenker et al. refer to Bandura’s (1977) work on self-efficacy when describing personal control: “People who believe that they can execute the actions required to bring about valued outcomes, and hence perceive greater personal control, evidence greater determination on tasks, as indicated by less procrastination, greater effort expenditure, and greater persistence in the face of obstacles” (p. 640). The connection between personal control and self-efficacy is important because self-efficacy has been found to be a strong predictor of trainee transfer (Burke & Hutchins, 2007); thus, in the context of training transfer, self-efficacy is likely a meaningful indicator of perceived personal control. Although previous research has focused on the self-efficacy of trainees, the use of the Schlenker (1997) model suggests that the self-efficacy of all stakeholders is important for the identity–event linkage.

According to Schlenker (1997), if prescriptions are clear and specific, the person is connected to the event by having personal control for it, and the actor (in our case, the trainee, trainer, or supervisor) is bound by the prescriptions because of his identity or role (Schlenker, 1997), then the person is viewed as responsible for the behavior or performance in question (in our case transfer). By overlaying accountability mechanisms across all stakeholders involved in training transfer, a psychological adhesive would connect the relevant actors to transfer outcomes and to the relevant expectations for transfer—thus establishing the basis for judgment. As described by Schlenker et al. (1994), “When all three linkages are strong, specific prescriptions clearly indicate what should be done in the situation, the actor is seen as obligated to fulfill these prescriptions, and the actor is seen as having personal control over the event that is to occur” (p. 637).

We can see that via Schlenker’s model components and linkages, the firm can attempt to control workers’ behaviors to achieve an outcome they desire, enhanced training transfer. As seen in Figure 1 there is an audience who judges and appraises the components and the strength of the accountability linkages, which in our case could include a chief human resource or learning officer (CHRO, CLO, or variant title), relevant middle and lower level managers, and ultimately the chief executive offer (CEO). As the strength or potency of the relationships in the model increases, so should the potential for more serious consequences to the actor (Schlenker et al., 1994).

Along with assigned responsibility in organizations inevitably come worker attempts to minimize individual accountability, especially when things go wrong. As applied in the current context, this means that trainers, trainees, and supervisors may shy away from being held accountable or attempt to minimize their personal responsibility for training transfer, and ultimately offer excuses when transfer failure is anticipated, transfer does not occur, or when transfer does not occur to the degree expected. For example, one of the authors
recently made an academic conference presentation about training transfer and in the audience was a corporate trainer who offered several external attributions for poor transfer rates, none of which implicated trainers (e.g., “Once they leave my class, I have no control over whether trainees use the training”). This example only reinforces the need for a firm’s managers to outline clear expectations across all stakeholders involved in training and the need for holding all accountable for any desired transfer outcomes. As Schlenker et al. (1994) state:

“Using the theme of responsibility as a psychology highway for information and outcomes, to say that one is committed to someone or something is to specify, in advance of future events, the highways one will be behaviorally traveling and to open oneself to sanctions for deviations en route. The actor thereby blocks the ability to justify deviations from the chosen path by pointing to alternative goals and rules for conducts.” (p. 637)

In summary, we have argued that an existing theoretical framework can help to advance conceptual and empirical progress in the study and practice of training transfer. Table 1 further explicates how the three linkages of the accountability model can be applied in the area of training transfer with respect to the three stakeholders primarily involved (i.e., trainees, trainer, and supervisor per Burke & Hutchins, 2008). The overlay of the Schlenker model importantly positions the transfer dilemma among relevant actors and provides opportunities to ground future theoretical and empirical work in the field. It is this foundation on which we build implications for research and practice, as discussed in the following sections.

**Implications for Training Transfer Research**

The Schlenker et al. (1994) model can be used to guide transfer research in many fruitful ways and opens up a rich, theoretically grounded avenue for tethering future training transfer research. For starters, it would be worthwhile to assess the extent to which expectations, or prescriptions, currently exist across organizations as related to transfer. In this regard, it would be useful to begin with research asking employees or trainees, trainers, and supervisors or managers what prescriptions exist in their organization (e.g., plans or goals for transfer and expected transfer behaviors) regarding the application of new knowledge and skills on the job. Such research could provide insightful information about why the transfer problem persists and is an appropriate point of departure, because the other elements in the model and the linkages are dependent on there first being expectations for certain behaviors associated with transfer. In other words, we cannot expect a stakeholder (e.g., supervisor) to feel bound by prescriptions for a particular event (i.e., training program transfer) if there are no such prescriptions for persons in his or her role.
TABLE 1: Accountability Linkages for Training Transfer Stakeholders

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<th>Trainee</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Prescription–identity link</strong></td>
<td>requires clear prescriptions (expectations, goals) for each role-player with respect to learning, training, and transfer Trainees have clear goals and expectations for attending training programs and apply what they learn in training on the job. Trainers have clear goals and expectations to design and/or deliver training programs that result in trainee learning and transfer. Supervisors have clear goals and expectations regarding their responsibility to ensure trainees apply what they learn in training on the job.</td>
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<td><strong>Identity–event link</strong></td>
<td>requires role-players to have personal control over their transfer actions and the expected outcomes of their actions Trainees have control over their learning and application of learning on the job and control over the consequences that will result from their transfer behavior. Trainers have control over how they design and/or deliver a training program and other methods to facilitate trainee transfer. They have control over the consequences of their actions in facilitating trainee transfer behavior. Supervisors have control over their actions in aiding trainees in transfer and they have control over the consequences of their actions in supporting employees’ transfer behaviors.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Prescription–event link</strong></td>
<td>requires role-players to have a sense of obligation that applies to a specific training program with respect to learning and transfer Trainees have a clear sense of personal obligation to attend a particular training program and apply what they learn in the program on the job. It is clear to them what they must do when they return to work following the training program (e.g., begin to use the newly learned material as soon as they return to work). Trainers have a clear sense of duty to design and/or deliver a particular training program that results in trainee learning of specific content and transfer to the job. It is clear to trainers what they must do to facilitate trainee transfer before, during, and after training (e.g., communicate learning objectives, conduct follow-ups after training). Supervisors sense a clear obligation regarding what they have to do to ensure that trainees apply what they learn in a particular training program on the job. It should be clear to them what they must do to help trainees transfer (e.g., provide opportunities to practice, mentor employees, and model trained behavior).</td>
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A second avenue for research is to measure in a field sample the strength of the linkages of the accountability pyramid. The prescription–event linkage, for example, “refers to the extent to which a clear and salient set of prescriptions is perceived to exist that should be applied to an event and should govern conduct” (Schlenker et al., 1994, p. 638); for this link to be strong, goals and rules must be clearly specified and pertinent to the event in question. This linkage could be assessed in terms of the extent to which learning, training, and transfer are important responsibilities and inherent expectations of members of an organization. Similar work has been done with Tracey, Tannenbaum, and Kavanagh’s (1995) continuous-learning culture scale, which measures “perceptions, beliefs, expectations, and values that reflect a broad range of individual, task, and organizational factors that support knowledge, skills, and behavior acquisition and application” (p. 244). The belief that continuous learning is a responsibility of all organizational members provides a prescription about learning and transfer that extends to all members of an organization. However, the Tracey et al. (1995) scale does not refer directly to accountability; by using Schlenker’s accountability pyramid, more specific prescriptions about accountability could be measured for each of the stakeholders in transfer (e.g., to what extent is transfer of training a responsibility for trainees, trainers, and their supervisors).

The prescription–identity linkage “refers to the extent to which the prescriptions are perceived as being applicable to the actor by virtue of the actor’s characteristics,” roles, and convictions (Schlenker et al., 1994, p. 638). This link is strong if a particular set of prescriptions unambiguously applies to certain actors; that is, when this link is strong the actor knows what to do. For example, if supervisors are aware of organization-wide prescriptions for them that specify they are accountable for transfer and expected to exhibit certain actions (e.g., meet with employees before and after training to discuss an action plan, set goals), this link would be strong. Research could measure this link in terms of specific actions that are required by each of the stakeholders and the extent to which they know specifically that they are responsible for transfer and what they are supposed to do before, during, and after a training program to facilitate positive transfer.

Lastly, the identity–event link “refers to the extent to which the actor appears to be connected to the event” and “the actor has (or had) personal control over the event” (Schlenker et al., 1994, p. 639). This linkage is strong when the actor can bring about a particular consequence and has the ability and freedom to do so, and could be measured by asking each of the stakeholders the extent to which they believe they have control over transfer-related activities and outcomes from a particular training program.

Given the complexity associated with the measurement of each of the linkages for the three stakeholders, researchers could choose to focus on a particular stakeholder in any given study. For example, researchers could measure trainees’ perceptions of the strength of each linkage (in the accountability
model) for themselves, the trainer, and their supervisor. Specifically, trainees could be asked about the extent to which the trainer, their supervisor, and trainees have clear guidelines and expected courses of action for trainees to apply what they learn in training on the job. Thus, research could measure trainees’ perceptions of the strength of each of the linkages in the accountability pyramid as it pertains to themselves, the trainer, and their supervisor and then examine the relationship between linkage strength and transfer and performance outcomes.

An area for future theoretical research would be to investigate the process variables associated with the three links in the model; these variables might in fact fully or partially mediate the relationship between the accountability linkages and transfer performance. For example, the prescription–event link requires that trainees have clear goals for a training program in terms of what they learn and how they will use their new learning on the job. The identity–event link requires that stakeholders have personal control and self-efficacy for transfer actions and outcomes, and a strong prescription–identity linkage requires the actor’s sense of personal obligation for transfer. As such, future studies could establish the psychological mechanisms (or even national cultural variables; see Gelfand, Beng-Chong, & Raver, 2004) responsible for the working of the accountability model, including actors’ goals and intentions for transfer, sense of obligation to transfer, and self-efficacy for transfer actions and outcomes. Although there is evidence that trainees’ self-efficacy predicts transfer outcomes (Burke & Hutchins, 2007), we are not aware of published research investigating the self-efficacy of trainers or supervisors.

Researchers and training professionals could also use the model for organizational-level transfer research. For example, Saks and Belcourt (2006) asked training professionals about the extent to which transfer strategies were used in their organization before, during, and after training as well as the extent to which training programs transfer in their organization. A similar strategy might be used to assess the relationship between the three linkages of the Schlenker et al. (1994) model as it pertains to trainees, trainers, and managers and training transfer at the organizational level. Questions worth investigating include “Do the linkages for all stakeholders have to be strong for transfer?” or “If the linkages are strong for one stakeholder, is that enough for transfer and if so for which stakeholder?” Research along these lines not only allows testing of relationships between the linkages and transfer but it would also help determine which linkages are most predictive of transfer and which stakeholder linkages are most important.

In addition to field survey research, there are many possibilities for experimental research. In this regard, accountability interventions might be designed and implemented for trainees, trainers, and supervisors and involve general interventions that pertain to accountability for transfer as well as more specific interventions that attempt to strengthen the linkages of the accountability pyramid. The interventions can be directed at all stakeholders or tailored to
particular ones. For example, some general accountability interventions might include informing the stakeholders prior to a training program that trainees’ behavior and performance will be measured at specific time intervals following a training program. Simpler interventions could involve a pretraining meeting in which the trainer meets with trainees and their supervisors to discuss the objectives of a training program and what each stakeholder will do to facilitate transfer as well as an action plan and contract between the stakeholders that commits them to certain actions for positive transfer. A related intervention might require each of the stakeholders to submit reports indicating what they have done to facilitate transfer following a training program. In addition, sanctions (e.g., notation in a performance review) and rewards (e.g., small lump-sum bonus) might be given to the stakeholders based on their transfer results.

Specific accountability interventions could also be tested with respect to the linkages in the Schlenker et al. (1994) model and for specific stakeholders. For example, research could focus on a particular linkage for each stakeholder or it might attempt to strengthen all three linkages for one or more of the stakeholders.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, construct validation research is needed to develop a measure of training transfer accountability. As we indicated earlier, although numerous measures of transfer practices and the transfer climate have been developed, items that pertain to accountability are rare. Such a measure could be based on the Schlenker et al. (1994) model in which the “event” pertains to the transfer of a training program, the “identity” can refer to each of the stakeholders (trainees, trainer, supervisors), and the “prescription” refers to the extent to which there are clear guidelines and expectations pertaining to training transfer in the organization. Clearly, the development of a reliable and valid measure of training transfer accountability is necessary to conduct research on accountability and transfer. Table 2 provides proposed sample items we created on the basis of Schlenker’s work for a measure of training transfer accountability, which could be expanded and tested for inter-item reliability and validity.

Implications for Training Transfer Practice

We propose three major strategies that organizations could use to enhance transfer. First, organizations could conduct an audit to determine the extent to which each of the stakeholders in their organization believes they are accountable for transfer. We suggest the use of a “training transfer accountability audit” (TTAA), which could indicate the extent to which accountability is a problem and where interventions are most needed. For example, if supervisors or trainers do not believe that they are responsible for transfer then interventions to create a greater sense of responsibility for trainers and supervisors would be the focus of future interventions. In addition, a TTAA might be used as part of a
needs assessment and the results might have implications for the design of training programs in terms of the inclusion of accountability strategies.

A second strategy would be to develop and communicate clear prescriptions for learning and transfer for each of the stakeholders in the organization. Training transfer prescriptions could clearly indicate that each stakeholder is responsible for transfer along with specific actions expected of them to ensure that transfer is positive. For example, supervisors might be required to meet with employees before a training program to set specific, measurable goals for transfer so that accountability for transfer is built into the work environment (Noe, 1986, 2002). They might also meet after training to discuss valuable opportunities for practice (Salas, Rozell, Mullen, & Driskell, 1999) and how those will be assessed. Developing and communicating prescriptions for learning and transfer is likely a fundamental requirement because all of the linkages in the pyramid of accountability depend on there being such prescriptions.

### TABLE 2: Proposed Items for a Training Transfer Accountability Scale

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<tr>
<th>Prescription–identity link</th>
<th>Trainee</th>
<th>Trainer</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
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<tr>
<td>“It is my responsibility to apply what I learn in training programs on the job when I return to work.”</td>
<td>“It is my responsibility as a trainer to help ensure that trainees apply what they have learned in training programs on the job.”</td>
<td>“It is my responsibility as a supervisor to help ensure that trainees apply what they have learned in training programs on the job.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I will be able to control my use of what I learn from training in my job.”</td>
<td>“I have some degree of control over trainees’ applying what they learn in this training program in their job.”</td>
<td>“I have some degree of control over trainees’ likelihood of applying what they learned in this training program on the job.”</td>
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<td>“Trainees in this organization are expected to apply what they learn in training on the job.”</td>
<td>“Trainers in this organization are expected to help trainees apply what they learn in training on the job.”</td>
<td>“Supervisors in this organization are expected to assist employees in applying what they learn in training on the job.”</td>
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Third, organizations can evaluate their training programs for transfer behavior and enhanced job performance. As noted by Bates (2003), “assessment of transfer makes trainees, trainers, and others accountable for transfer success and helps create a culture that values learning and its application to the job” (p. 264). In a recent study on best practices for transfer, based on a sample of 139 training professionals, Burke and Hutchins (2008) found that at least 7% of survey responses specifically tapped evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1976) or measurement methods as a best transfer practice, often reflecting a theme of accountability. According to Burke and Hutchins (2008), “Put simply, what gets measured gets done; so if firms measure transfer, it has a better chance of being attended to” (p. 118).

Evaluation might be the single most important strategy to ensure accountability and improve training transfer. Clearly, we cannot make people accountable for something if we do not evaluate what it is that they are accountable for doing (Giovannini, 2004). The paradox, however, is that very few organizations conduct evaluations of training at this level (Blanchard, Thacker, & Way, 2000; Kraiger, 2003), which might in part explain why transfer of training remains a problem in organizations today. Thus, organizations should evaluate trainees’ transfer behavior and performance as it would be nearly impossible to hold stakeholders accountable for transfer without evaluation data.

Once organizations have performed a TTAA, developed and communicated prescriptions for transfer, and evaluated training transfer, they could begin to focus on accountability transfer interventions. Interventions can be directed at particular stakeholders; for example, trainers and supervisors might be required to prepare a written report for top managers in which they describe what they have done before, during, and after a training program to facilitate transfer. Trainees might be required to present a report to members of their department in which they describe situations in which they have used newly acquired knowledge and skills and the consequences. Performance reviews of the stakeholders could include a training transfer dimension to ensure that employees are evaluated on transfer and that performance rewards are in part based on their training transfer performance.

Other interventions might focus on strengthening each of the linkages in the accountability pyramid. For example, the stakeholders might be periodically reminded of the transfer prescriptions for their roles; in this way the prescription–event link and the prescription–identity link can be strengthened. Pretraining interventions that focus on how a training program is relevant for trainees’ work behavior and job performance might be used to strengthen the identity–event link. Goal-setting interventions (Locke & Latham, 2002) that focus on the objectives of a training program and required behaviors of the stakeholders could also be effective for strengthening the prescription–event link. And given the importance of personal control for the identity–event linkage, it is probably important that stakeholders have strong self-efficacy beliefs for transfer actions and outcomes. As indicated in our earlier example, some
trainers do not believe they have control over what trainees do once they leave training. Thus, we recommend self-efficacy-transfer interventions not only for trainees (e.g., Gist, Schwoerer, & Rosen, 1989; Latham & Frayne, 1989) but also for trainers and supervisors. If the stakeholders do not possess strong self-efficacy beliefs for transfer, the identity–event link will likely be weak and this will provide a means for people to minimize their accountability for transfer.

In summary, we believe that there are several inexpensive and relatively easy strategies that organizations could use to bolster accountability for training transfer. Table 3 provides a summary of our proposed training transfer accountability strategies (some of which require further empirical study). To the extent that senior management and the leaders of organizations support and enforce accountability prescriptions, employees, trainers, and supervisors will come to accept their responsibility for ensuring that employees apply what they learn in training on the job.

**Conclusion**

Although there has been considerable progress in transfer of training research during the past decade, there remains a research-to-practice gap (Hutchins & Burke, 2007) and transfer remains a persistent problem in organizations despite advances in our knowledge of the transfer problem and best practices for training transfer (Burke & Hutchins, 2008; Saks & Belcourt, 2006). Although training transfer has been positioned as an entrenched and persistent problem throughout the training literature, it is not necessarily unsolvable. We believe that an area of transfer research that has been neglected but might help to bolster transfer rates is research on accountability for transfer.

Our review of the transfer literature indicates that accountability is a largely ignored factor in transfer models, measures, and research even though there is evidence pointing to its importance for transfer. As such, we have argued that training transfer research and practice have much to gain by focusing more on accountability as a key factor for improving training transfer in organizations. Along these lines we offered the Schlenker et al. (1994) accountability pyramid as a prosperous and theoretically grounded guide for research and practice on training transfer accountability. We believe that a focus on accountability and the accountability pyramid offers many insights and directions for new research on training transfer yet minimizes the cumbersomeness and impracticality of system models in the field (Kozlowski & Salas, 1997).

In addition, we have offered various relatively simple and inexpensive strategies and interventions that stem from the model for increasing training transfer accountability. In particular, we recommend that organizations first conduct a TTAA to identify where accountability weaknesses exist in an organization and which stakeholder groups require clearer prescriptions and expectations for transfer. We also advise that organizations develop and communicate
### TABLE 3: Proposed Training Transfer Accountability Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Trainees Can</th>
<th>Trainers Can</th>
<th>Supervisors Can</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before training</strong></td>
<td>Acknowledge the firm’s expectations of employees for training transfer. Understand that a follow-up (written or oral) report will be required after training on their transfer attempts and outcomes (for submission to the supervisor). Set specific goals for transfer (with help from the supervisor), relevant to the training program and job requirements.</td>
<td>Acknowledge the firm’s expectations of trainers for training transfer as well as clarify expectations for trainees and supervisors before programs. Understand that a follow-up (written or oral) report of documented transfer outcomes will be required by the Chief Learning Officer (CLO) after training programs. Prepare a list of activities to commit to after training for facilitating training transfer (e.g., booster sessions or e-mails; individualized follow-ups).</td>
<td>Acknowledge the firm’s expectations for supervisors regarding their employees’ transfer. Understand that a follow-up (oral or written) report will be required from employees after training regarding transfer attempts and outcomes. Prepare a list of activities to commit to after training for facilitating training transfer (e.g., coaching employees, role-modeling trained behaviors, providing opportunities to use new skills).</td>
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<td><strong>During training</strong></td>
<td>Participate in signing a “transfer agreement” (signed by trainee, trainer, and supervisor) to commit to applying trained knowledge and skills on the job.</td>
<td>Require a signed “transfer agreement” (of each trainee, trainer, and supervisor) for commitment to applying trained knowledge and skills on the job.</td>
<td>Participate in signing a “transfer agreement” (signed by trainee, trainer, and supervisor) for employees who attend formal training.</td>
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(continued)
TABLE 3: (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Trainees Can</th>
<th>Trainers Can</th>
<th>Supervisors Can</th>
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<tr>
<td>After training</td>
<td>Document training transfer at several time periods following training (e.g., self-monitoring).</td>
<td>Evaluate training transfer (in aggregate) at several time periods following training and present results to the CLO and top managers.</td>
<td>Document training transfer at several time periods following training (e.g., view trainees’ self-monitoring records in lieu of the transfer agreement).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Include training transfer efforts and behaviors in any performance appraisal.</td>
<td>Include training transfer support efforts and behaviors in any performance appraisal.</td>
<td>Include training transfer outcomes in all employees’ performance appraisals.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Submit a report to the supervisor and trainer describing transfer attempts and outcomes taken before, during, and after training to achieve transfer.</td>
<td>Provide rewards for trainees based on transfer results.</td>
<td>Provide rewards and sanctions to employees according to transfer outcomes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Submit a report to the CLO and top managers describing actions taken before, during, and after training to support training transfer.</td>
<td>Submit a report to the CLO and top managers describing actions taken before, during, and after training to support training transfer.</td>
<td>Submit a report to top managers, trainers, and the CLO describing actions taken before, during, and after training to support training transfer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

prescriptions for training transfer and expected behaviors for each of the stakeholders. Lastly, we believe that organizations must evaluate their training programs for transfer-related outcomes and incorporate the results into performance reviews and use them as a basis for stakeholder rewards and sanctions. Ultimately, enhancing the accountability of transfer stakeholders could be the critical link for fixing a persistent and expensive but solvable training problem.

References


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