



Mind the Gap: Making a difference, four questions at a time

By Andreas Priestland

If you could get 10% more people to do what they say they would by asking four questions, would you do it? What about if it concerned an annual spend of over £3billion?

According to official statistics, in 2013 UK employers spent over £3billion on third party suppliers of training. 42% of companies said they would have spent more if further time and resources were available!

Despite the size of spend some studies quantify that only about 10% of the expected benefit flows through to the job! The issue is so pervasive that it even has a label: the transfer of training problem.

To put the £3billion into context, according to the BBC, in 2015 just a third of that sum, £1billion, could buy you any one of the following: 167,000 hip replacements or 1.4 million hospital day cases; 2 flagship hospital; 40 Challenger 2 tanks; 27,000 primary or 22,000 secondary school teachers; 16,600 new social homes; or more!

Why does so little of the benefit seem to flow through? Surely 'training + staff = improved performance'? Unfortunately the situation is not as straightforward as the equation might suggest

because as well as the training itself, you need to consider training outputs and transfer conditions. In addition the motivation, intention, planning and execution associated with the learner, as well as their goals, to be taken into account.

As the old English proverb goes “There is many a slip twixt cup and lip.”

Part of the challenge falls into the “intention – behaviour gap”. Thus goal intentions do not always result in action being taken. People often falter along the way. The size of the gap is influenced by the degree of control the individual believes they have, plus any changes to the level of importance attached, and the level of detail that people work through for what is required. In addition to the intention to do something, individuals need to plan how to do it.

A process known as Mental Contrasting with Implementation Intentions (MCII) may provide a possible bridge across the gap.

The first part of the process, mental contrasting, helps to establish motivation by identifying the desired future (questions 1 & 2) and current obstacles standing in the way (question 3). Implementation intentions help with the planning by identifying cues in the environment that people can use to trigger the desired behaviour (question 4).

In a study of 200 junior managers in five different countries and six different locations a RCT was used to test if the application of MCII following attendance at a one day leadership workshop could increase the application of training outcomes to day-to-day jobs.

What did applying MCII look like in practice? Stefan’s (not his real name) response gives an insight:

1) What was his goal?

Stefan wanted to have more open conversations with his employees.

2) What outcome would this give him?

This would help to build trust and engagement within the team, and give more tangible examples of his support for them.

3) What obstacles were getting in the way of this?

He felt that the constant pressure for delivery of tasks meant that he found it hard to find “the time and patience” to talk with his staff

4) Specify the time and behaviour to overcome the obstacle using an ‘if – then’ statement

Stefan wrote “If I have a task that cannot wait, then I will specify a time to catch up with my employee” and “If my employee is having a coffee break, then I will invite him for a coffee”

The study found that just answering the four questions increased implementation by 10%. Although the response rate was too low for statistical significance, scale this up for UK training as a whole and this could lead to a benefit of £100million per year. Not a bad return for a few minutes work.



This blog post was written by Andreas Priestland as a summary of the research undertaken for his dissertation as part of the Executive MSc in Behavioural Science at LSE, 2015-16. Andreas is currently Director at The Learning Project Ltd. Follow him on [linkedin.com/in/andreaspriestland](https://www.linkedin.com/in/andreaspriestland)

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