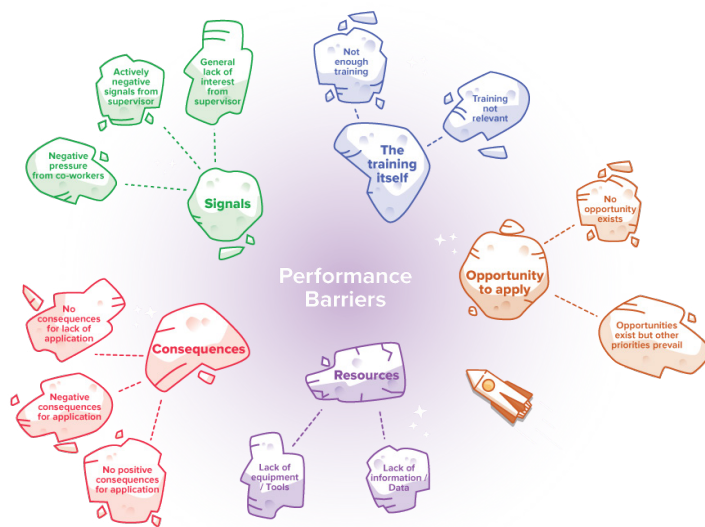


Barriers to Performance and Approaches to Address Them

What are the common barriers to performance that prevent the learner from applying what they have learned and potential approaches to addressing these?

By Alex Brittain-Catlin



There are numerous reasons why trainings may fail to deliver their expected results. As part of the High-Performance Learning Journey program, we asked our participants, who embody years of Learning and Development experience, to conduct interviews as to the challenges that they and their colleagues encounter. We then asked them to prioritise the barriers and to share best practice as to potential ways of countering these.

Our experience is that performance barriers, which represent the white elephant in the room, are often not fully addressed when it comes to the programs that Learning and Development delivers.

Yet it is these factors that prevent learners from really applying what they have learned and realising the value that was intended. When these are addressed, this is frequently done in a way that accepts the status quo, offering up an excuse or an acceptance that it is what it is and that's just part of the organisational culture in which the company operates. The end result is that learning is limited in terms of the value it actually delivers and the individual performance that we are attempting to drive. The challenge remains that we frequently face the same recurring barriers that lead to, at best, sub-optimal results from many learning events.

We asked our participants to prioritise the common causes that have the most impact as barriers to performance and then to give us examples of best practice as to how to address these challenges.

We started off with a list of thirteen common barriers:

Other Priorities Prevail - Not Enough Time.

When the learner returns to work, other priorities come up or there is not enough prioritised time to actually apply what has been learned. The result is that new skills/behaviours are not practices and the old way of doing things persists.

Not a (Frequent) Part of My Job Role - Not Enough Opportunities to Apply

The learnings taken from the training may be interesting enough but in their current role the learner does not have the opportunity to actually put them into practice.

Did Not Learn the Subject Matter Well Enough to Feel Confident to Apply in a Real Situation

The learning covered relevant areas, though this might have been more theoretical than practical and the learner does not feel confident to apply the new skills/behaviour in a real, workplace situation.

Not Enough Feedback to Know Whether I'm Doing Well at Applying the Learning

The learner applies what they have learned but doesn't receive any recognition or feedback that the application of the new skill/behaviour is important or that any change has been made. Particularly during the early stages post training, the learner needs support to support their gradual, ongoing development in the new direction.

Not Enough Feedback to Know Whether I'm Doing Poorly When It Comes to the Application.

The learner has not learned the skills/behaviours sufficiently to be effective when it comes to effective, performance enhancing application. However, the shortfall is either not noticed or feedback to that end is absent. The learner continues to use what they've learned incorrectly, often they fall back on old "more effective" methods or do not deliver on the expected performance but do not know why.

Not Enough Manager Support

The manager does not support the learner either during the learning journey or when they try to apply the new learning. At times the manager may not even know what support they are supposed to provide because they have no or limited awareness of the content of the learning or the reason that it takes place.

Not Enough Peer Support

Peers don't have an understanding of the purpose of the training or what it is supposed to achieve. They do however have the expectation that the learner should perform at least at previous levels, leaving the learner with little room to try out new skills/behaviours without any sort of lag in performance.

No Incentives / Misaligned Incentives to Apply What I've Learned

The learning may clash with the formal incentives system or there is no incentive to do things in a new way. In such cases the learners may actively be discouraged to apply new skills/behaviours that are either not incentivised or actually what is incentivised is counter to the learning.

Pressure from My Manager to Do Things the Old Way

The manager may not understand the purpose of the training and what it is designed to result in and wants things done in the way that have a rationale for. Alternatively, the manager may actively not agree with the purpose behind the learning and prevent the learner from applying what they have learned.

Pressure from Peers to Do Things the Old Way

Peers are happy with the status quo and do not want to "rock the boat" when it comes to new ways of doing things that either may have an impact on them and their performance or may require change. To that end they put pressure on the learner to carry on doing things the old way.

Not Enough Access to Reminders and Resources for Additional Learning

The learner is unable to access reminders and resource to enable them to continue with their development. It may be that these resources do not exist but it could also be that the learner isn't able to access them (they are a blue-collar worker who doesn't have ready access to a work computer).

Not Enough Useful Job Aids Available for Support

When it comes to actual application, the learner does not have actual job aids to help them try out and develop the new skill/behaviour or they are outdated and not directly applicable to what they are trying to do.

Not Enough Resources: Tools and Equipment

The learner is unable to access the physical resources that are designed to support the learning. The company does not have access to different virtual learning tools or even has a policy to restrict the use of those tools that are available.

What the Professionals Say

Perhaps not surprisingly, the area that was highlighted as posing the greatest challenge when it came to the barriers to performance was that other priorities prevailed / not enough time to apply what had been learned. The second area that was identified was the lack of managerial support. There were greater differences of opinion when it came to the third greatest challenge but the no incentives or misaligned incentives was believed to be the third contributory factor for learners not applying what they have learned.

We then asked them to share some examples of best practice, as to how we can potentially head off these barriers through the way in which we design our programs.

Once again, what follows is not the input of Promote alone but the combined wisdom of those with whom we have worked in the course of delivering our High-Performance Learning Journey programs. Whilst this may not be an exhaustive list, nor are the suggestions applicable to each and every program that can be delivered, what we do have is significant input into how we can address the barriers to performance that commonly occur once the learning has taken place.

Other Priorities Prevail - Not Enough Time.

- Make sure that when practicing the lessons learned, that this is not done separately, as in an extra task, from what the participant would normally be doing as part of their job but is directly related to their job and what they are doing. This means that the practice opportunities need to be integrated into the participant's everyday activities and seen as relevant and applicable to them. A question here is if we are providing learners with material which they cannot apply, then why are we doing this. This suggests that there is either unclear direction in the training or unclear expectations on whomever is conducting the training.
- Managers need to have an understanding of what the purpose of the training is and what the intended outputs are. Make sure managers know: a) What content was trained. b) What employees should be able to do with the training. c) What questions and discussions to have after the training. Only then will they put an emphasis on prioritising the output from the training and giving permission to the participants to apply.
- Be clear what the time expectations and the level of effort/commitment required to apply the learnings at the outset of the program. To assist with this there can be an

assignment called “plan your success” that actually involves a sit down between the participant and their manager to plan out the time that is needed. When the manager sees the output, they are far more likely to support the learning and make the application of learning a priority. Make clear the benefit of applying the learning, that the benefit will outweigh the cost/time spent.

- Be clear about the “WIIFY” for the learner and not just the organisation. They are more likely to find the time for things that they see as being valuable and so our responsibility is to help them value the skill/outcome of the learning more.
- Break down the different aspects of the learning into bit sized chunks, so that perhaps it’s not necessary to use a complete model or theory but only parts of it. This should ensure that in their own scenarios, tasks, activities, they should be able to find an aspect that is still relevant to what they are currently doing. To aid this, participants should be encouraged to find their own links during the training, what opportunities do they see to apply what they’ve learned as they cover each new area of information. This can then be used as a basis for a more concrete action plan, where they have made their own links between the learning and opportunities directly related to when and how they can apply in their own working environments. Break down the learning into smaller chunks that can actually be applied, so it doesn’t all have to be done at the same time.
- Use real life examples, participants can be encouraged to gather these even before the training and bring them with them, so they can see that the learning actually addresses areas that they are facing or are likely to face. Show the connections between the content and other time sensitive issues that learners face in order to increase the relevancy.
- Create formal opportunities where participants are able to share learnings with the rest of the team. The responsibility for sharing the learning will also make it more of a priority for them, particularly if they have to run the session themselves. Transfer the practice away from being a secret or private activity that only the learner is involved in and actually involve their team too. Give the learner the opportunity to engage their team on the topics that have been covered.
- Benchmark to other organisations and how they have successfully implemented what you are proposing. That it’s a case of maintaining or gaining competitive advantage for the client and that the business rationale of this is directly linked. Anchor this with senior management. Establishing the risk of not learning the new method and the priority of change. Get buy in and commitment from the senior executives of how they will “make time” throughout the organization (i.e. make it a priority). Help them see it as prioritization vs a “time” discussion.
- Create a momentum and clear and spoken value around the learning process within the organisation. So that all understand what the training is about and why it’s important to the business. That there is a shared benefit of having training. Cultural expectations need to be set throughout the organisation that learning time is also working time.
- Provide more virtual solutions to allow flexibility, these include support information, templates, checklists, videos etc. These should be able to be quickly accessed so that end users can access them just in time, when needed. This is also to build the confidence in the learner when it actually comes to applying what they have learned. Other things will be a priority if the learner does not feel confident to apply what they’ve learned. Address the root of the issue by enabling the increase in confidence to support the application by enabling self-paced learning.
- Ensure that there really is a clear link between what learners are being asked to apply and their work? That learning and applying the skills will enable them to execute the

very goals that seem to be competing with this training. Also, how interesting is the assignment and does it have any inherent value to the learner.

- Get the learners to build their own plan for application early on in the program so that they have this in mind during the learning event. In the case of classroom learnings, build the plan in the classroom and make sure that each learner has their own concrete plan. This plan can then be checked with other learners and signed off by the manager.
- Be flexible in the design phase, so that application and building of knowledge can be done at a time best suited to the learner. Potentially have alternative assignments for the same learning, which demand different levels of effort to achieve.
- Provide formal open trainings in-house, such as professional development workshops once a month on Fridays.
- Make completion mandatory, top down from the manager and run regular completion reports. That the application needs to be obligatory and not optional. That it is seen as part of the job and not as something disassociated from the terms of our employ. This may also need to be made clear to the manager. Create clear consequences for those who apply the learning and for those who do not.
- Check the business diary, there will be times when a training shouldn't be rolled out. Be alert to when these are as application during the busy phases is harder to achieve. Build programs that fit with people's ever busier schedules.
- Indicate what the new behaviour will replace; what gets taken off the plate.
- Set up team accountability groups, where learners apply the skills they have learnt in their safe groups before applying them on the job. Groups can meet every two weeks or so for six months to apply all the learning.

Not Enough Manager Support

- Involve managers in designing the business outcomes and the "moments that matter" for each participant, so they can draw a direct line from the learning outcome, through the moments that matter and into the performance outcomes and how these directly relate to their business environment. Managers are paid to make decisions; be sure that they see the business linkage for providing support. Give them a say in what should go in the program - then they have buy-in!
- Get the managers involved with a shorter version of the training - or virtual. To ensure that the managers have the competencies that they are supposed to be supporting their learners with. Many managers were promoted on individual skill/ability, but never provided the opportunity to develop expertise on coaching/feedback = Coaches need coaches!
- Where possible involve managers throughout the program, not just as part of follow-up conversations but as co-designers/co-facilitators or in relation to the application tasks.
- Communicate clearly how the results of the participants applying what they have learned can contribute to the results of the manager. Identify the manager's pain points and address these. To enable this, the managers need to be included from the very beginning. That the learning can help them reach their goals/solve the problems. Managers should then be kept up to date throughout the course of the program to make sure that there is still alignment. Link the learning application to achieving KPIs.

- Kick-off workshops with the managers, to explain their role in the learning, part of getting them committed is to really clearly break down the benefits to them. To create awareness that managers need to set aside time for this early on, so that they are able to plan accordingly. That they need to have one-to-one conversations with their learners before, during and after the completion of the program.
- Help the managers out, give them job aids, templates, lists of applicable questions, or tool kits to assist with follow-up conversations. The easier it is for managers to support their direct reports the more likely they are to actually do it and get their buy-in for the learning. It may also be possible to give the managers updates on how those for whom they are responsible for are progressing during the training. This could be at the individual level but even if a manager were provided with a more general information about what has been covered that would help.
- Establish what barriers the managers are facing when it comes to supporting the learning, do their directors support the learning? If the learning is not supported higher up the chain then it's less likely that the managers themselves will allocate time for it. If the learning is supported higher up in the organisation, encourage these executives to use their own channels to emphasize the importance of the initiative and manager's role in it.
- Provide evidence to the managers that their engagement with their learners has been of value. If there is no evidence, then why should they be engaged.
- Make the relevant trainings more visible and higher profile, that there is something for the manager in having attendees on a given training. Build accountability into the managers for the application of tasks by their direct reports. Include manager support of organizational learning in monthly/annual performance reviews.
- Highlight the role of managers to take responsibility for the development of their people, that a pure focus on numbers will not work.
- Nomination process, whereby the managers have to nominate potential attendees to programs. This supports the buy-in with the manager as to who is attending a program and why, which in turn assists with them having more frequent follow-up meetings and setting realistic goals around the utilisation of the new skills.
- Establish learner contracts between the learner and their manager.
- Managers often have their own barriers (particularly not enough time). Get their buy in early. Get them sold on benefits. Consider incentivising. Then check in with them to see how it's going. Ask them not just "how are people doing" - but proactive questions such as why are people struggling, how are you approaching/support them with that. Build their accountability and reward it when it goes well.

No Incentives / Misaligned Incentives to Apply What I've Learned

- The business can include key tasks in their performance objectives or other evaluation criteria, so that their support and follow-up are directly linked to their own, personal KPIs. Additionally, make the clear connection between attendance on a learning and that person's own development plan and performance discussion. So, that when performance conversations occur the link is made between attendance on a training and the performance dialogue. Continued progress then needs to be addressed in follow-up development talks.
- Anchor the expected outcomes of the learning with the managers, so that the output is directly relevant and can be utilised.

- Enable the manager to give feedback. Is my manager actually noticing what I'm doing? Learners will use the learning as long as someone notices and responds. So, designing tasks and assignments that have a thought through feedback dynamic.
- Track the performance and behaviour shifts using the tools that the business already employs, such as the CRM or Employee voice feedback.
- Have a clear way to recognise/reward application from learnings and the eventual results. Share any incentive gaps that arise with leadership during the design phase or that come up during implementation.
- Anchor the skills learning in promotional / desired project decision making criteria.
- Involve stakeholders at multiple levels, sometimes top leadership, middle managers and first level managers deem different things to be important and reward accordingly.
- Performance measures often do not support the "right" behaviours. Work is needed in the business to ensure alignment of performance goals and metrics to reward behaviours and not solely performance. Peer support is vital - employees learn best and most from their peers outside of the classroom.

Not Enough Feedback to Know Whether I'm Doing Well at Applying the Learning

- Create a broader group of relationships around the learner who are able to provide feedback on the application of the learning. This can be peers, customers, subject matter experts etc. These relationships should be built into the design of the program where possible. Ask the learners who would be most useful to get feedback from. And how they can get that feedback
- Build feedback into the learning intervention and minimise the costs of this by utilising technology rather than face-to-face. Allow confidential feedback, so that barriers are not created through individuals learning at different paces.
- Share with the managers what they should be looking out for, so that they know what they are expected to give feedback on. Create (forced if necessary) interactions with managers to address the common lack of an active feedback culture. Also set expectations as to their role when it comes to supporting learning in the organisation to ensure they provide the right feedback.
- Have very clear objectives for how you evaluate the training. What are you trying to show? Who do you want to convince that what you're doing is working?
- Create peer to peer groups, where those who work together on a regular basis are able to give feedback in relation to the learning.
- Get the learner to actually ask for feedback.
- This can be an aspect of the corporate culture itself, a general lack of feedback will only contribute to this barrier. Help managers adopt a 'coaching in the moment' mindset; regular connection with people; recognition of differences between managing and coaching.

Did Not Learn the Subject Matter Well Enough to Feel Confident to Apply in a Real Situation

- Ensure that there is the right amount of practice. There is a huge difference between understanding what needs to be done and actually doing so in reality. This can only be seen through practice. If they have not had the opportunity to actually practice what they are being asked to do in a safe environment, then will they have the confidence to do so in a real-life environment, where there may be very real risks and consequences.
- Encourage peer to peer learning and the sharing of best practice. Have a buddy system.
- Provide effective job aids to support the learner. Use different types of technology for this. Ensure practice resources are available online, so the learners continue to practice outside of the classroom, and to create ample of space in the classroom setting to build on their confidence.
- Create playbooks of tools to support the learning. Create multi-media "toolkits".
- Utilise on the job learning, through shadowing etc.
- Support through mentors and coaches, who can support the workshop learning.
- Keep the learning short and simple, micro learnings so that people can learn and apply one thing at a time. Small ongoing improvements.
- Provide opportunities for follow-up training activities and that's it not necessarily a once only occasion.
- Offer instructor Office hours post learning sessions, where learners can get additional assistance.

Not a (Frequent) Part of My Job Role - Not Enough Opportunities to Apply

- Make sure that the training is relevant in the first place.
- Ensure that only those with the need of the subject being covered in relation to their jobs actually attend the training. Have a minimum requirement for training, where exposure to the subject matter is on the list.
- Once again, the opportunity might be there but the learner doesn't have the confidence or commitment to actually apply the learning. Another aspect might be that the learner doesn't feel that they are in a safe environment to apply the learning, that there is a significant risk of trying to apply something and getting it wrong. Risk of failure.
- Enable participants to choose specific activities that *are* relevant to them, where they have opportunity, and get them to identify these clearly in advance Giving the learners the opportunity to present their learnings and skills to teach them to others (depending on the subject matter).

For more information on High Performance Learning Journeys, visit HPLJ.org.