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# How does training improve customer service quality? The roles of transfer of training and job satisfaction

Jie Shen <sup>a, \*</sup>, Chunyong Tang <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Shenzhen Audencia Business School - Shenzhen University, Shenzhen University, China

<sup>b</sup> School of Management, Southwest Jiaotong University, China

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the roles of transfer of training and job satisfaction in the relationship between training and customer service quality. The data were collected from 230 employees and their supervisors and analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results show that training indirectly influences customer service quality through the mediation of transfer of training and job satisfaction. Moreover, training directly and indirectly affects transfer of training through the mediation of job satisfaction, which in turn partially mediates the relationship between transfer of training and customer service quality. Furthermore, perceived organizational support (POS) moderates the relationship between training and transfer of training. This study extends social exchange theory, norm of reciprocity, and goal setting theory. Practical implications and future research directions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizations invest in employee training with the expectation that training will enable employees to perform better and more efficiently, thus improving the organization's productivity (Nielsen, Randall, & Christensen, 2010; Sahinidis & Bouris, 2008). However, the literature on the effect of training on individual and organizational performance is equivocal (Tharenou, Saks, & Moore, 2007). There is a strong argument that training is of little use to organizations if the knowledge and skills learned are not transferred to job performance (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Holton). As a result, the past several decades have witnessed increasing academic interest in interventions of transfer of training (e.g., Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2010; Roberson, Kulik, & Pepper, 2009). Transfer of training refers to using the knowledge and skills acquired from training in the workplace (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2009; Holton, Bates, & Ruona, 2000). However, the literature about the relationship between training and transfer of training is also ambiguous. Specifically, there is empirical evidence that approximately 40% of trainees fail to transfer knowledge and skills immediately after training and that

70% fail to transfer one year after the training (Saks, 2002). Further, the effect of transfer of training on employee work performance (e.g., in customer service quality) has not been clearly ascertained because of a lack of research. Consequently, knowledge on the genuine relationships among training, transfer of training, and employee work outcomes is limited. Greater research is necessary to gain better understanding of the roles of training and organizational support in eliciting improved employee work performance and thus improved organizational productivity.

The ambiguity in the literature results from the lack of comprehensive analysis of the underlying mechanism linking training, transfer of training, and employee work performance. Past studies have focused on exploring the relationships of these variables "in pairs". Further, prior research on factors that influence the effect of training on transfer of training has focused on learner characteristics, such as learning ability, self-motivation and personality, and the organizational climate in relation to transfer of training (Burke & Hutchins, 2007). The roles of employees' perceptions of and reactions to the organization, such as perceived organizational support (POS) and job satisfaction, have been largely neglected in research.

These limitations constitute important gaps in the training literature. Therefore, researchers have issued calls for studies to develop a better understanding of the relationships among training, transfer of training, and employee work performance

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [jie.shen@szu.edu.cn](mailto:jie.shen@szu.edu.cn), [Shen1000@hotmail.com](mailto:Shen1000@hotmail.com) (J. Shen), [cttang@swjtu.edu.cn](mailto:cttang@swjtu.edu.cn) (C. Tang).

(Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Pineda, 2010; Tharenou et al., 2007). To address this gap, the current study explores the relationships among training, transfer of training, and customer service quality, as well as the underlying mechanisms for the relationships. As presented in Fig. 1, our conceptual model is underpinned by social exchange theory, norm of reciprocity theory and goal setting theory. We propose that job satisfaction is a mediator in the relationships between training and transfer of training, and training and customer service quality, as well as between transfer of training and customer service quality. The model also suggests that POS moderates the relationship between training and transfer of training.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

### 2.1. Social exchange, norm of reciprocity and goal setting theories

Social exchange theory posits that all human relationships develop on the basis of subjective cost–benefit analyses and comparisons of alternatives in the process of negotiated exchanges between parties (Blau, 1964). Social exchanges are principally about trust rather than legal obligations (Standford, 2008). Social exchange relationships establish and evolve between employees and the organization when employees perceive a high level of organizational support. POS in turn engenders positive employee consequences, such as positive employee attitudes and work behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The norm of reciprocity states that people tend to respond to each other in kind (i.e., returning favors for favors and hatred for hatred) by assessing consequences and the causes of the actions of other people (Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1961). It is not necessary for the proportions and nature of the favors to be equal. That is, a small favor can result in a larger return favor and one person's generosity can lead to other people's loyalty (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). Based on the social exchange and norm of reciprocity theories, we suggest that when employees perceive a high level of organizational support, including training opportunities and general support, they tend to repay the organization through effective work practices. For example, employees that receive adequate training will be more likely to apply the learned knowledge and skills on the job, which in turn leads to better work performance, including better customer service.

Employees attend training programs with the goal of acquiring new knowledge and skills to perform better at work. Goal setting theory holds that once a goal is set and accepted by a person, logically, the person will work toward achieving the goal (Locke, 1968). Therefore, goal setting is positively related to work performance (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). From the perspective

of goal setting theory, it would be logical to argue that after the training is completed, the trainee will be motivated to transfer the new knowledge and skills on the job to achieve the preset goal. Consequently, the trainee's work performance will be improved. Using this logic, we argue that transfer of training mediates the relationship between training and improved customer service quality.

### 2.2. Effects of training on customer service quality: mediation of transfer of training

Customer service quality describes the extent to which service is delivered to match customer expectations (Lewis & Booms, 1983). To date, research on the effects of training on customer service quality is sparse. In fact, training in prior studies has often been explored with other practices related to human-resources management (Chand & Katou, 2007; Hung, 2006; Schneider & Bowen, 1993; Zerbe, Dobni, & Harel, 1998). However, the findings of the limited published research on the effects of training on customer service quality are contentious. There is empirical evidence that training is positively related to customer service quality. For example, examining the Indian hotel industry, Chand and Katou (2007) found that provision of training has a stronger correlation with service quality than other human resource practices such as recruitment and selection, appraisal, and reward. This positive correlation was also found in the US banking and health industries (Schneider & Bowen, 1993). The rationale behind this correlation is that training improves employee competence because of upgraded knowledge, skills, and abilities in relation to products and services, communications, complaints handling, and managing difficult customers (Keltner, 1995; Tsai & Tang, 2008). Customer service-focused training also helps develop the organizational service climate, which is positively related to customer service quality (Gracia, Cifre, & Grau, 2010; Johnson, 1996; Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998). However, other studies have found that training is not associated with customer service quality (e.g., Zerbe et al., 1998) and can even detract from service quality (Hung, 2006).

The inconsistent research findings seem to result from the missing mechanisms through which training influences customer service quality. We argue that transfer of training is one of the mediators through which training influences customer service quality. Employees learn new knowledge and skills that are essential to providing high-quality customer service through training. To better communicate and build better relationships with customers, as goal setting theory would suggest, trainees transfer the new knowledge and skills to service to customers. There is some empirical support for a similar argument. For example,

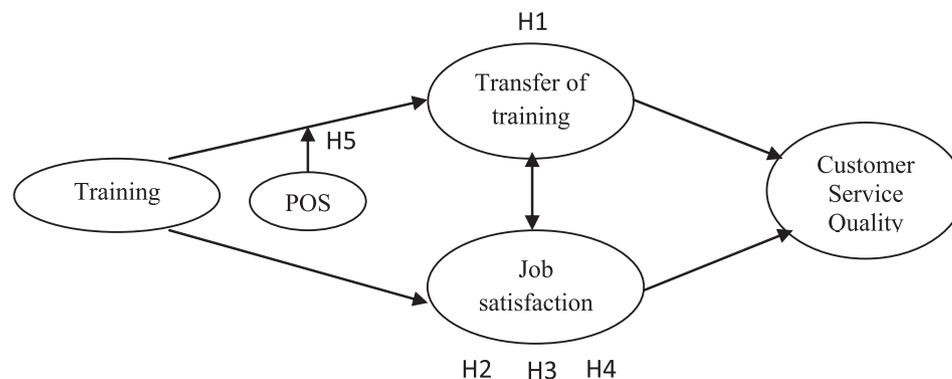


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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