

Knowledge Transfer Networks

By Madeleine Butschler

With the emergence of e-learning, predictions for training's evolution suggest a shift from delivering traditional training to designing, facilitating, and managing various types of learning experiences. Although direct interaction between trainers and learners will decrease, it will not cease to exist. Therefore, designers must consider how to capture the greatest value from trainer-to-learner involvement. Enter the knowledge transfer network.

In the traditional classroom, knowledge transfer is considered a unidirectional activity--trainers transfer knowledge to learners. As e-learning evolves and the influence of knowledge management grows, developers must reframe communication to be multidirectional between instructors, learners, managers, change agents, and so forth.

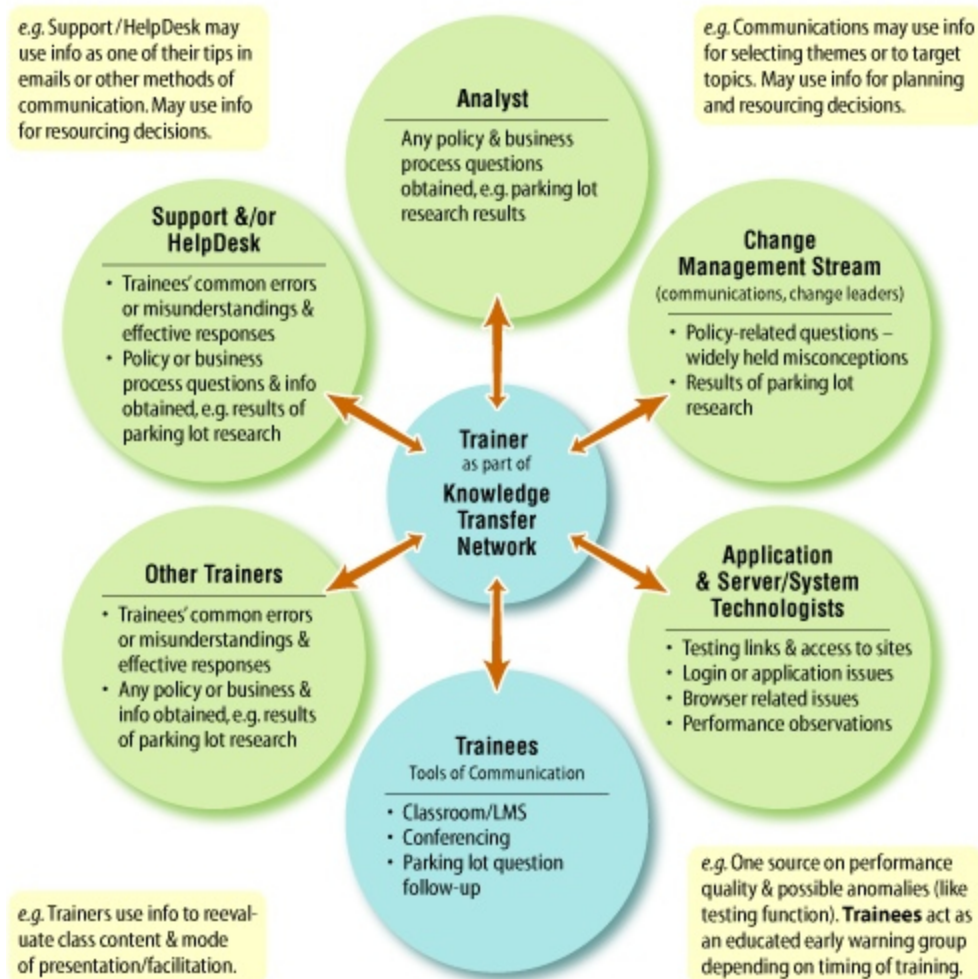
For example, whether the environment is a face-to-face classroom or online, trainers receive the following types of information from participants without soliciting it:

- suggestions for improvement
- concerns about how a change may not work effectively or in conjunction with various equipment, shifts, and job roles or for all organizational environments, such as large versus small departments
- indications of potential support needs and about possible inconsistencies between training and management messages
- observations of common misconceptions or errors
- personal experiences with speed and stability of information technology.

Ironically, trainers often use surveys or interviews--which can be costly and distances the data from its original context--to retrieve this type of information. More important, surveys leave learners' questions, concerns, and observations untapped and unresolved during the actual learning experience. A functional knowledge transfer network can fix those problems. Here's a map of a sample network in action.

Knowledge Transfer Network*

Figure 1



*Note: The Trainer's role includes knowledge transfer (KT) activity beyond the classroom. This KnowledgeTransfer Map suggests a KT Network from the point of view of the Trainer.

Identified groups include

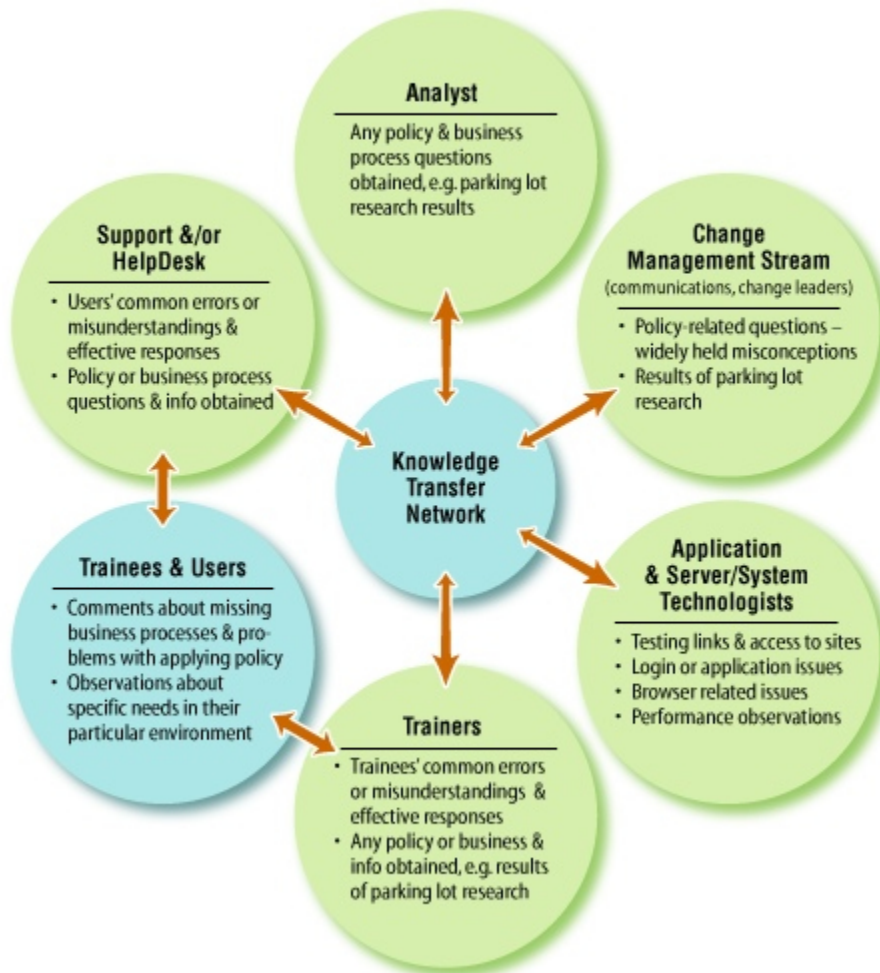
- analysts, change leaders, communications
- application and systems technologists
- learners
- trainers
- support and helpdesk staff.

Each orb suggests the kind of knowledge that can be passed between specific groups. The squares illustrate how that group might use the information and the potential value of an exchange. The dual-directional arrows emphasize that the trainer receives knowledge and support while providing information to learners.

While the above map is trainer-centric, a second sample map (seen below) places the various groups in an equal relationship, illustrating a network with several main representatives. However, you might start a knowledge transfer network with only two or three in the group.

Knowledge Transfer Network

Figure 2



Before setting up a network, several factors should be considered.

Timing. Consider when knowledge exchange will be most intense and pad the schedule, leaving time to address issues as they unfold. For instance, a new learning cycle will spur more questions and observations. Unfortunately, train-the-trainer sessions can't address every possible scenario that trainers will face and they will likely receive questions during the course that need a quick response. In addition, even if IT is involved with stress testing, usability studies, and so forth, the first few online sessions will expose several surprises. Extending the schedule relieves trainers of potential time stresses.

Content. Knowledge transfer encompasses at least three types of content:

- observations of patterns, such as common errors
- comments that allow groups outside the network environment to see the big picture
- questions that weren't addressed in the planning stage, often referred to as *parking lot questions*.

Parking lot questions will need a quick resolution so that the knowledge can be passed on to the next set of learners. Trainers should pass on queries to an appropriate network member. The response should be recorded and disseminated to the instructor, learner, support groups, and other members of the knowledge network. Those answers and other observations will form a core element to the network's long-term knowledge repository and internal communications.

Resources. Companies develop a knowledge transfer network through a range of means. Although allocating resources is a promise of commitment, following up on results more visibly demonstrates management's support for the initiative.

The network's plan needs to determine specific communication processes, including periodic meetings and Web exchanges. It should outline an infrastructure and specific communication tools such as email lists, Web-conferencing tools, or features within the learning management system.

The group also needs to develop detailed formats for knowledge exchange. For example, IT may need more than a simple voicemail stating that there's a problem with the program. To hasten a swift repair, they may need the date, time of incident, a sample screen capture, as well as a description of the issue.

In addition to ensuring sufficient resources for communication and effective processes, people in the network need to participate in teambuilding exercises. Because a majority of the initial contact is intensive, they need to develop an understanding of other members' business and communication requirements. Spending time early to address teambuilding issues will gel the group's identity and reduce future frustration.

As the knowledge transfer network grows, additional issues and concerns will emerge. Periodically reassess the network's goals, knowledge, and accomplishments. In the beginning stages of creating a knowledge transfer network, small victories are important foundations on which to build. However, whether large or small, record lessons learned and best practices for future iterations of the knowledge network and additional participants to review. Once in place, the knowledge transfer network is sure to build competencies and take the value of online and traditional trainers to a new level.

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