

Doctoral Dissertation

Assessing the Effectiveness of Intrapersonal Soft Skills Training in
the Public Sector in Sri Lanka

Summary

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Summary

Soft skills training has become one of the primary areas for organizations, including those in the public sector, to invest in today, aiming to gain a competitive edge in the workplace and enhance their overall performance. Despite considerable investments made by numerous organizations in soft skills training programs, there is still a notable scarcity of studies assessing their effectiveness (Groh et al., 2016), especially within the public sector. Assessing the effectiveness of soft skills training poses several challenges, as highlighted by various scholars (Groh et al., 2016; Hindiarto et al., 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2017). These challenges stem from the intangible nature of outcomes, the time-consuming nature of assessing improvements and the need for long-term observation compound the challenge. Besides that, evaluating soft skills training involves considering factors beyond skill acquisition, including cultural context, individual differences, and organizational climate (Hindiarto et al., 2020; Laker & Powell, 2011). Overall, the complexity of evaluating the effectiveness of soft skills training contributes to the limited empirical evidence in this area. Moreover, the effectiveness of soft skills training remains inconclusive, as highlighted by conflicting findings in existing research (Hindiarto et al., 2020). More specifically, some studies suggest that such trainings have a positive significant effect on both soft skills development and organizational performance and others indicate an insignificant effect. Consequently, there is an ongoing need to assess the effectiveness of soft skills training.

Soft skills training typically encompasses two main categories namely interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Since many studies have focused on interpersonal soft skills, studies examining intrapersonal soft skills are notably lacking especially in the public sector. Intrapersonal soft skills have gained prominence only after 2011 (Aeon & Aguinis, 2017; Arthur & Anku-Tsede, 2019). Moreover, intrapersonal soft skills serve as the foundation for interpersonal soft skills and literature highlights the role of evaluating intrapersonal soft skills is crucially important in enhancing individual well-being, professional achievement, and overall organizational effectiveness (Janasz et al., 2014; Marin-Zapata et al., 2022). Therefore,

considering the gaps in the literature, this study investigated the effectiveness of intrapersonal soft skills training. Further, it selected four intrapersonal soft skills training namely time management, emotional intelligence (EI), stress management, and positive attitude based on literature recommendations, because of inconclusive results and the scarcity of studies, especially in the public sector to assess the effectiveness of the soft skills training.

Kirkpatrick's four-level evaluation model is widely recognized as the leading conceptual framework for assessing training effectiveness (Reio et al., 2017; Urbancová et al., 2021). Arthur Jr et al. (2003) suggested that among those four levels of that model, learning and training transfer/behavioral change as key measures, particularly in evaluating soft skills training evaluation. Additionally, considering the recommendation of the literature, I have opted to focus on learning and behavioral change as the training outcomes for evaluating soft skills training in the dissertation.

Further, Baldwin and Ford's model is a pioneering framework to analyze the antecedents of the training transfer (Baldwin & Ford, 1988) and I utilized that model as the basic theoretical framework for this dissertation. However, it was observed that some limitations in that model and I restructured that model to overcome the limitations as explained in Chapter 1. Therefore, I employed an experimental longitudinal research design in all studies within this dissertation, alongside moderation and mediation analyses to overcome those limitations. Besides, various theories were applied to explore different moderators of the training transfer process in each study.

Based on the considerations outlined and insights from literature recommendations, this dissertation investigates the effectiveness of training interventions in time management, EI, stress management, and positive attitude training with moderation and mediation analysis employing experimental and longitudinal design in the public sector. To address the research objectives outlined above, three experimental studies were conducted.

Study 1 discussed in Chapter 2 focused on assessing the effectiveness of time management training on training outcomes namely learning and training transfer using an experimental and longitudinal design. It examined how conscientiousness moderates the training effect on its outcomes and the effect of learning on training

transfer based on expectancy theory. Moreover, the mediating role of learning in the training-transfer relationship was assessed. Data was collected from 120 government officials in the Western Provincial Council (WPC) in Sri Lanka. Data regarding behavioral change was gathered through both self-evaluations by the employees themselves and evaluations by their respective supervisors. The findings indicate a positive impact of time management training on both learning and transfer. The moderation effect of conscientiousness was observed solely on the impact of training on learning. However, such effects were noted on the impact of neither training nor learning on transfer in both evaluation samples. These findings advance the discussion on expectancy theory by showing the applicability of the moderator. Additionally, it was not observed that the effect of learning on training transfer and the mediation of learning in the relationship between training and transfer in both self and supervisor evaluation samples.

Study 2 elaborated in Chapter 3, examines the impact of EI training on learning and training transfer, with the moderating role of social and organizational support and the mediating effect of learning utilizing an experimental and longitudinal design. Data was collected from 176 government officials in WPC and behavioral changes were measured from self and supervisor evaluation samples as in Study 1. Moderation of social and organizational support on the training effect on its outcomes and the effect of learning on training transfer were investigated based on the social exchange theory (SET) and organizational support theory (OST). The study found positive effects of EI training on learning and transfer in both self and supervisor evaluation samples. While the mediation of learning between training and transfer was observed in the self-evaluation sample, it was not significant in the supervisor-evaluation sample. Besides that, in line with SET and OST, social and organizational support strengthened the effect of EI training on learning in both samples and the effect of EI training on transfer in the self-evaluation sample. However, it did not moderate the effect of EI training on transfer in the supervisor-evaluation sample and the effect of learning on transfer in both samples. Given the observed variations in results between self and supervisor evaluations, the chapter delves into the underlying factors contributing to these discrepancies, underscoring the necessity for additional investigation into these distinctions.

Study 3 in Chapter 4 evaluated the effectiveness of stress management training (SMT) and positive attitude training (PAT), examining their individual and interactive impacts on learning and training transfer employing experimental and longitudinal design. The study also explored the moderation role of public service motivation (PSM) based on the self-determination theory (SDT) and learning's mediating effect on the relationship between training and transfer. Data was collected from 125 government officials in the Southern Provincial Council (SPC) in Sri Lanka. Results indicated positive effects of both SMT and PAT on learning and training transfer. However, combining the two programs showed a compensatory effect on learning and OCB, with no significant impact on CWB, accenting the careful planning of the combination of the two trainings. Furthermore, no impact of learning on training transfer was observed, and learning did not mediate the relationship between training and transfer. Moreover, no significant moderation of PSM was observed. All the unexpected results were justified by making the relevant interpretations.

In summary, this dissertation represents a significant advancement by refining the Baldwin and Ford model to evaluate the impact of intrapersonal soft skills training among public sector employees in Sri Lanka. Through three experimental studies, the research demonstrates that this training notably enhances both learning and skill application in the treatment group compared to the control group—results that are not captured by the traditional Baldwin and Ford model. These findings underscore the effectiveness of targeted training interventions in the Sri Lankan public sector, suggesting that intrapersonal soft skills can be comprehensively developed and applied through such intrapersonal soft skills training programs. However, the research also identifies challenges, particularly the inconclusive results regarding the direct effect of learning on skill transfer. This suggests that learning alone may not guarantee successful skill application in the workplace. The study highlights the need for a broader scope of learning content, including essential components like synthesis and integration, and calls for further investigation into additional moderators such as organizational learning culture and reward.

Additionally, even though the results yielded mixed findings of moderation effect across the three studies, this research marks the first attempt to address the Baldwin and Ford model's limitations within this context, providing valuable insights

for training evaluation. The observed insignificance of some moderation effects underscores the need for a comprehensive investigation of potential moderators, including their interactions, rather than relying on a single moderator. Furthermore, the study finds that combining similar training programs may not always yield the expected benefits, stressing the need for strategic planning in training design. Ultimately, by advancing these insights, I believe that this dissertation contributes to one step for theoretical advancements and paves the way for future research in the field of training evaluation.