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annual handling training remains one of the most common workplace safety interventions, but how do you ensure training genuinely changes behaviour rather than simply satisfies compliance requirements?

Across many sectors, online learning has become increasingly attractive because it is efficient, scalable and easier to administer. A module can be completed at a desk in a short period of time, refresher reminders can be automated and completion rates are straightforward to track.

For organisations balancing productivity pressures with legal obligations, the appeal is understandable.

However, does completion mean learning? More importantly, does learning result in people behaving differently in the workplace?

For Holly Godfray, this became the focus of a research project completed as part of her MSc in Occupational Health and Safety Management at the University of Portsmouth. At the time she conducted the research, Holly was working as EHS Advisor at MeiraGTX, where she was responsible for supporting health and safety in a biotechnology environment with a range of manual handling activities and operational pressures. She has since moved to become Health and Safety Manager at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust and is also working towards achieving IIRSM Fellowship as part of her wider professional development.

Her project explored how employees experienced



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frequently struggled to connect with the material and found it difficult to relate it to their day-to-day work.

FINDING GENUINE VALUE

Reflecting on her findings, Holly noted that participants often viewed online learning as generic and compliance-led rather than genuinely valuable.

As she explains: “Participants described the online training as low engagement, ‘tick box’ and easily forgotten; it raised awareness but rarely shifted practice.”

This distinction is significant. Awareness undoubtedly has value. Every organisation needs employees to understand core principles, legal responsibilities and basic safety concepts. Online learning can play an important role in delivering that baseline knowledge, particularly where organisations require consistency and efficiency.

However, awareness and behavioural change are not the same thing.

Employees can understand what they should do and still behave differently when confronted with workplace realities. Time pressures, physical environments, workload demands and long-established habits all influence behaviour. Safe practice is rarely determined by information alone.

Holly’s findings suggested practical learning generated a different response because employees were able to engage with situations that reflected their everyday work. Rather than simply receiving information, participants could discuss real challenges, receive immediate feedback and think through practical solutions within an environment they recognised.

The result was not simply greater engagement. Participants described changes in behaviour and decision-making that extended beyond the training session itself.

TAKING THE PRACTICAL APPROACH

Online training may raise awareness, but does it change behaviour? Research by Holly Godfray found that practical, workplace-based manual handling training had a far greater impact than online learning alone

different forms of manual handling training and whether delivery methods influenced engagement, understanding and workplace behaviour. The findings pointed towards a clear conclusion: organisations should prioritise practical, context-specific training and use online learning as supporting or refresher content rather than relying on it as the primary intervention.

This matters because workplace safety does not ultimately depend on whether someone has completed a

module, passed a quiz or received a certificate. It depends on what people do in real situations, under operational pressures and within the constraints of their working environment.

As part of the project, Holly explored the experiences of employees who had completed both online self-directed manual handling training and practical, workplace-focused sessions. While online learning was recognised as useful for introducing concepts and raising awareness, participants

Reflecting on the outcomes of her work, Holly wrote: “Practical training prompted habit change, risk assessment before lifting, use of mechanical aids and confidence to decline unsafe tasks.”

That final point is particularly interesting because confidence to decline unsafe tasks suggests a shift beyond procedural learning. It indicates stronger judgement, greater ownership of risk and increased confidence to apply learning in practice.

The project also delivered practical outcomes within the workplace itself. Holly’s findings helped support a business case for purchasing a forklift truck to move large pallet cylinders. Rather than focusing solely on lifting techniques, the discussions generated through the project highlighted opportunities to remove or reduce risk altogether through workplace interventions and improved task design.

Training success is often measured through attendance records, completion rates or assessment scores because these are visible and easy to report. Yet these measures do not necessarily indicate whether learning has transferred into everyday practice.

The more difficult questions arise months later. Are people identifying hazards differently? Are they making safer decisions under pressure? Are they applying learning within their own environment? Have behaviours genuinely changed?

Those questions are more difficult to answer, but they may provide a far more meaningful measure of effectiveness.

The findings also reinforce an important lesson about how adults learn. Most professionals arrive at training with existing experiences, established habits and practical knowledge. They are not approaching learning from a blank starting point. Adults tend to engage more deeply when learning feels immediately relevant and when they are active participants in the process.



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This may help explain why practical sessions often become more memorable than passive learning experiences.

Reflecting on her findings, Holly observed: “I learnt that behaviour change is not a linear product of knowledge transfer; it emerges from context, practice, feedback and social learning.”

In her reflective report, Holly notes a limitation in her early interviews: she relied too rigidly on her prepared question list and initially failed to probe participants to elaborate. One of the most interesting accidental findings was that participants were visibly nervous during face-to-face interviews and spoke more freely over Microsoft Teams.

In her current role at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, Holly is building on these insights to develop training that reflects how people learn and work.

The implications extend beyond manual handling. Many workplace interventions still rely heavily on information delivery. Organisations explain a process, provide a module, record completion and assume learning has taken place. Yet changing behaviour is considerably more complex than transferring information from one person to another.

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HOLLY GODFRAY



People learn through repetition, discussion, observation and experience. They learn through applying ideas to situations they recognise and through working through problems in environments that reflect the realities of their jobs.

This does not mean organisations should abandon online learning. Digital training still has an important role, particularly during induction, annual refreshers and reinforcing key principles over time. However, Holly’s research points towards a more balanced approach in which practical learning establishes understanding through experience and workplace relevance, while online content supports retention and reinforcement.

If training improves knowledge but fails to influence workplace behaviour, can it really be considered effective?

Workers do not experience risk in training rooms or online modules. They experience it in laboratories, hospitals, manufacturing facilities and workplaces where pressures shift constantly and decisions are made quickly. If training is expected to influence behaviour in those environments, perhaps learning needs to take place there too. ♥



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