



# THE POWER OF IMPLEMENTATION INTENTIONS

In the final part of her series on learning transfer, **Ina Weinbauer-Heidel** explores a simply strategy to help your learners achieve their resolutions

**T**he seminar has ended. Along with the other attendees, you pack up your things – notes, helpful handouts and important papers for further reading. Documents are stowed away in full-to-bursting backpacks. In the office on Monday, you will go through the documents and think about what exactly should be done with them, right?

Well, reality shows: usually not. The folders with the valuable information go, unopened, into the filing cabinet; carefully collected learning materials

eke out a secluded existence in a quiet corner of the learner's hard drive.

So, is a full backpack useful? Hardly. Because the metaphorical journey from the seminar room to everyday working life is rocky enough, even without heavy luggage.

## Research recommends – pack better

Research confirms, what the participants need is a lighter backpack. One that only contains what is necessary, useful and practical.

According to psychologists and health researchers this is not difficult: studies have shown repeatedly how the probability can be increased so that people achieve their resolutions.

One example is the following impressive experiment from sports research, which was published in the *British Journal of Health Psychology*.<sup>1</sup> Here, researchers randomly assigned 248 adult test subjects to three groups.

At the end of the observation period, each test person had to state whether they had participated in sport. The participants were also given a different task, depending on the group.

The control group was instructed to read the first three paragraphs of a novel. The second group, the so-called



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motivation group, received a brochure containing arguments for each sport, such as improved heart health. The third group was given the mundane task of writing down explicitly when they planned to exercise by completing

the sentence: "Next week I will take part in a sports activity of at least 20 minutes on (day) at (time), (location)."

The differences in the results were striking. While in groups one and two, only 38% and 35% respectively exercised for no less than 20 minutes at least once a week in the next two weeks, group three was clearly more successful: an astonishing 91% implemented their resolutions. Specific planning clearly strengthened the success of the implementation.

The good thing is, everyone can apply this miracle cure with little effort. Researchers call it "implementation intention": it is crucial to define an action and plan it precisely, i.e. to determine in advance when and where the specific actions will be carried out. This alone is enough to double or triple the chances of success, according to the researchers.

### **The power of intentions**

Since then, numerous other studies have confirmed that the increase demonstrated in the experiment was not purely coincidental, even in completely different areas. For example:

- ▶ Women who stated when and where they would perform a self-examination of their breasts for cancer screening did so almost twice as often as those who did not plan specifically.
- ▶ Diabetics who wrote down a plan of when and how to eat healthier

were significantly more likely to do so than those who did not.

- ▶ People who wrote down when and where they planned to take their daily vitamins, remembered to take them significantly more often than those who did not write anything down.

Implementation intentions help people take medicines more reliably, and inhibit the automatic activation of women or age stereotypes.<sup>2</sup>

### **How intentions work**

Implementation intentions end the phase of deliberation; they give a clear answer to the question: should I or should I not? Thus, they bring us into a realisation-friendly state of consciousness.

The research work of the psychologist Peter Gollwitzer<sup>3</sup> and his colleagues shows that we perceive information related to our intention differently: we feel more can be done, endurance increases, and we assess the chances of success more optimistically. All quite handy when it comes to achieving our plans.

An implementation intention also causes a high level of mental involvement. When we are occupied with thoughts of when and where we do something, connections and pathways are created in our brain. This makes it easier for us to remember →

# Training transfer with intent

*If you want to increase the transfer effectiveness of your training, you should make transfer planning a standard element of every programme. In particular, you should help the participants to formulate concrete intentions and plan how they would like to implement what they have learned. Ready to start? Take your pick from these five methods*

## **1. Individual work**

Give the participants transfer impulses, which you either write down on a flipchart or distribute on a worksheet. So if you were running a course on presentation training, for example, you could have prompts such as: "At my next presentation I will ...". Give the participants 15 minutes to fill in the sentences.

You can increase the impact of this method by inviting the participants to read out their intentions to all. Because the truth is, what we announce publicly, we implement with higher probability.

## **2. With a peer transfer coach**

Each participant selects a partner from the training group. They help each other to write down their plans as precisely as possible by asking: What exactly will you do? When exactly will you deal with it? What does the implementation look like step by step?

Give the transfer coaches a worksheet on which they write everything down, including a time when they will

TRAINING TRANSFER WITH INTENT CONTINUES OVERLEAF

our intention or to recognise situations in which the plan can be actioned.

It is particularly practical when intentions link our intended actions to a concrete situation or condition. This often leads to the action being triggered automatically without us having to cognitively re-engage with it.

This makes the difference between the formulation “I will eat healthier” and “Whenever I go to a restaurant at lunchtime, I order salad.” In the first case, we have to think over and over again how exactly we want to implement the intention. In the second case it is clear what has to be done.

### Using intentions for training transfer

Of course, all these findings also apply to our training participants. Clear initiatives and a concrete plan increase the probability that they will implement what they have learned. Trainers who want to increase the transfer effectiveness of their seminars should therefore make use of these research results in earnest.

So how can you ensure that at the end of the seminar the attendees define their transfer intentions and plan them in as much detail as possible?

The first aspect is to make the transfer planning at the end of the seminar a standard element of any training event. The proven rule of thumb is to reserve 10–20% of the time for this. With two days of training, that's 90 minutes to three hours.

The second aspect is an increase in your own repertoire of methods. Every good trainer has exercises in their toolbox to get to know, to activate, to repeat and so on, from which they can choose. Such a collection is also needed for transfer planning (see section headed Training Transfer with Intent).

### Let's plan!

For the purpose of transfer effectiveness, it is always about giving the participants the time and space to plan their implementation intentions properly; not only to define their goals after the training, but above all to specify when, where and how they will put them into action.

If this is successful, they will be able to appreciate the impressive effect of the implementation intent.

By the way, you can, and should,

also use implementation intentions for yourself. For example, by taking on the following task: “On Friday at 8.30am I will google two new transfer planning methods that I can use for my next training programme.” But beware, with an intention of this kind it will actually happen with twice the probability! **TJ**

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### References

- 1 Milne, S., Orbell, S., & Sheeran, P. (2002). Combining motivational and volitional interventions to promote exercise participation: Protection motivation theory and implementation intentions. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 7(2), 163–184. <https://doi.org/10.1348/135910702169420>
- 2 Gollwitzer, P. M., & Sheeran, P., “Implementation intentions and goal achievement: A meta-analysis of effects and processes” in *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 2006, 38: pp.69 – 119.
3. Peter Gollwitzer is a German professor of psychology in the psychology department at New York University. In his research he focuses on how goals and plans (intentions) affect behavior, emotions and cognition.



### TRAINING TRANSFER WITH INTENT CONTINUED

ask their coachees how they are getting on. Tip: As a trainer, take a picture of the worksheets with the agreed terms and attach them to the protocol. Or make a note of the date and remind the coach of their duty, for example with a short email: “Good luck and an exciting exchange in today's conversation with your transfer coachee.”

### 3. With transfer cards

Transfer cards are the quintessence of your training in pocket format: an infographic the size of a postcard or business card with summarised key points. On the back, the participants have space to write down their plans.

### 4. With planning folders

Develop a standardised transfer planning tool for all your training programmes for your participants to repeatedly use. Typical fields are:

- ▶ Key learnings – “I remember that.”
- ▶ Benefits – “It benefits me”.
- ▶ Plan – “I will do something specifically.”
- ▶ Resources – “This will support me.”
- ▶ Progress – “So I know I'm on the right track”



### 5. With future interviews

In the transfer planning phase at the end of the training, the participants move into the future and imagine that they have already achieved their goals.

From this position they give an interview in which they explain which actions and routines established after the training aided the success. The interview is videoed – hand out the questions in advance, as the participants can write down their answers beforehand.

Send each participant a copy of their interview a few weeks after the training. This way, they will recall the training and the projects more vividly.