A Qualitative Examination of the Role Trainers' Social Support Plays in Employees' Psychological Engagement in an Online Training Program

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Abstract

The digitalization of training programs has been increasing as time has passed, yet questions have arisen about the way that these online trainings can be carried out effectively, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Since trainers and the employees following these trainings form the process of the training sessions together, it is relevant to gain an understanding of the trainer's actions that contribute towards the employees' experiences of their trainings. As such, the aim of this research was to qualitatively examine the role of trainers' social support in employees' psychological engagement in online training programs. I followed an interpretivist paradigm to conduct qualitative research. A sample of 10 participants ($N = 10$) was collected using snowball sampling within my personal network and subsequently, I conducted semi-structured interviews to collect the data for my research. Based on the accounts of participants, I found that trainers can enhance employees' psychological engagement through efforts of social support that could be categorized into four themes: provision of opportunities for interactive communication, incorporating liveliness, provision of structure, and competence with digital tools. These findings provide practical implications for trainers in terms of the way that they can stimulate the engagement of their trainees in training and build upon the existing literature of training and training effectiveness. Limitations of my research and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Trainers, social support, employees, psychological engagement, online training programs, on-site training programs

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Online training programs have become increasingly prevalent across the world, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these programs trainees learn and hone skills that they can apply to their job at their respective organizations in a virtual space. According to Goldstein (1993), training overall is the effort to develop individuals' proficiency in organizations through instructions and practice provided by a trainer that is expected to be utilized in the performance of duties at the workplace. Van Eerde et al. (2008) note that research has "stressed the impact of training on different types of outcomes" (p. 63). Some examples of these outcomes are the efficiency of an organization (van Eerde et al., 2008), productivity, and organizational performance (Huselid, 1995; Kitching & Blackburn, 2002). As such, organizations seek to implement training programs that help to elevate these outcomes. Training programs could consist of educating employees about certain skills in-depth, group discussions, in-class exercises, role-play, writing tasks, games, and other simulation activities (Silberman, 1990), which are all utilized to realize the aforementioned organizational outcomes.

As argued by van Eerde et al. (2008), however, not all training programs suit the needs of the organizations in which they are implemented, limiting the degree to which they are effective. Furthermore, training effectiveness also depends on engagement (Sitzmann & Weinhardt, 2018) and this is not consistently optimal across all training programs. Particularly, in the case of online training programs, Redmond et al. (2018) demonstrated that psychological engagement is a major factor that contributes to successful online learning. Considering how important psychological engagement is in both the online setting (Redmond et al., 2018) and the on-site setting (Sitzmann & Weinhardt, 2018), it is important to understand what psychological engagement entails.

Psychological Engagement

There are three interdependent components that underlie psychological engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004). The behavioral component consists of a learner's actions, participation, and persistence in academic as well as social activities, while the emotional component consists of the positive and negative emotions directed at other individuals in the educational sphere. In addition, the cognitive component consists of mental efforts to understand complex concepts, develop self-regulation skills, and other cognitive strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Besides this, Sitzmann and Weinhardt (2018) have even demonstrated how engagement predicts overall training effectiveness for employees. This is also supported by Poon et al. (2022), who found that learner engagement predicts learning effectiveness in the context of e-learning. To elaborate, Poon et al. (2022) found that learner engagement predicts learning effectiveness through self-efficacy, which is defined as one's belief that he or she has the capabilities to perform a certain task successfully (Bandura, 1987). This links back to the context of my current research since the objectives of teaching and training, whether they are online or on-site, are fundamentally identical in terms of developing skills and knowledge acquisition in a particular area (Goldstein, 1993; Hammer & Schifter, 2001), except for the fact that they occur in different contexts. Jackson (2021) posits that psychological engagement is important because an increased psychological engagement in online training enhances motivation, employee efficiency, productivity, and job satisfaction. As such, one may ponder what could lead trainees towards a state of feeling psychologically engaged in an online training program.

The Role of Social Support

There is some evidence to suggest that social support could play a role in psychological engagement. According to Cohen and Syme (1985), social support refers to the

provision of resources from meaningful groups or individuals around a person. This could be instrumental (i.e. through practical assistance like providing information, services, or goods), or emotional (i.e. emotional comfort provided through warmth, validation, and positive regard) (Taylor, 2011). In this paper, social support will be applied as a term that encapsulates both emotional and instrumental components. Voltron and Vayre (2017) found support for the notion that social support is a factor that plays a role in psychological engagement. They tested how online learning affected students' engagement and they found that social support from tutors was the only interindividual factor that influenced students' psychological engagement in online learning environments. Furthermore, Xu et al. (2020) found how tutors' support facilitation worked to enhance both cognitive and behavioral engagement in online discussion-based learning. Though these studies demonstrate the role of social support in psychological engagement in an academic context. There is, however, a limited amount of literature on the phenomenon in an organizational context.

Importance and Relevance of the current study

As mentioned before, online training programs have become increasingly prevalent especially during the global crisis regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. This has also been suggested in an online article by the organization of OECD (2020), who studied the potential of online training in adults. Furthermore, according to employee development statistics, currently 73% of organizations provide online training programs specific to the respective industries and their developments ("28 Interesting Employee", 2022). Considering how the digitalization of training programs is still increasingly prevalent in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crises, it is important to understand what can be done to enhance employees' psychological engagement in online trainings, which is crucial to the successful results of online trainings (Redmond et al., 2018). This study thus has topical implications through its results that demonstrate how trainers' social support may play a role in this phenomenon.

Research Question

This research aimed to investigate what the role is of trainer's social support in employees' psychological engagement in online training programs. This phenomenon was examined qualitatively by asking participants to compare their online trainings to on-site trainings.

The utilization of a qualitative interview study to examine this phenomenon provides insights into the way that employees of diverse functions and organizations experience the training programs they participate in for both online and on-site sessions. Such insights could be fruitful for the overall understanding of what ultimately makes a training program interesting and engaging for employees, in addition to what trainers can do to contribute towards engaging experiences in trainings. As such, understanding this phenomenon could help in improving training effectiveness through the insights of trainers' actions that enhance psychological engagement in online trainings.

Method

Research Paradigm

The study was guided by the research paradigm of interpretivism. According to this philosophy, reality can be observed in multiple, subjective manners through means of social constructions (Myers, 2009). The study was qualitative in nature and was thus concerned with "understanding human beings' experiences in a humanistic, interpretive approach" (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 21). Through the use of open questions and guided by interpretivism, I sought to elicit employees' experiences of engagement in a training context and, particularly, the role that trainers play in their engagement in training courses. This interpretivist approach of qualitative research allowed me to examine the subjective reality of my participants so that I could construct an overall understanding of psychological engagement.

Research design

For my study, I used semi-structured interviews to explore the role of trainers' social support in trainees engagement in the online trainings that they followed. I compiled a list of questions to help guide me through the interview with the participants. Due to the utilization of such a qualitative research design, I was able to delve into this phenomenon from the subjective point of view of the employees that follow online and on-site trainings in-depth. Further, the provision of room for the participants to answer questions freely and thoroughly allowed a rich amount of data that enhanced my capability to scrutinize this phenomenon in an explorative manner.

Participants

For the sake of this study I required a sample of adult employees that had experience following online and on-site training programs. The inclusion criteria I used to select and contact the participants were as followed: (1) participants had to be adult (i.e. over 18 years-old) workers that had a full time or fixed term contract at an organization, (2) participants had to have experience in following online training(s), and (3) participants had to have experience in following on-site training(s).

The sampling method that I applied for this study was purposive using a snowball sampling method. Overall, in purposive sampling, the researcher sets out to deliberately collect their sample on the basis of criteria that have been defined beforehand (Denieffe, 2020). According to Noy (2008), a sampling method "may be defined as snowball sampling when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants" (p. 330). In essence, this is a repetitive process in which the researcher contacts a potential participant (i.e. informant) who refers the researcher to yet another potential participant, who is then contacted by the researcher again, and so forth (Noy, 2008). I first contacted participants via e-mail and, if interested, I requested them to participate in the study. Five of these participants were contacted through means of my personal network. I then asked

these participants to send the invitation to friends and co-workers who met the inclusion criteria of this study, to invite their participation in this study if they were willing to. Ultimately, 11 participants ($N = 11$) agreed and offered their informed consent to participate in this study. Only one participant was excluded from the data collection and analysis since she did not meet the inclusion criteria (i.e. the participant provided online and on-site trainings as a trainer rather than following them as a trainee). Interviews were therefore conducted with 10 participants ($N = 10$) in total. Each participant held different roles in their respective organizations ranging in seniority and field, with all of them working at different locations within the Netherlands. Additionally, the 10 participants were all Dutch and their ages ranged between 32–65 years old. Half of the sample were male while the other half were female.

Materials

For the sake of this research, a script was written to brief participants at the beginning of the interview and to ask them questions about their thoughts and experiences (see Appendix A). The interviews themselves took place online via Google Meets, while the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using an app called "Otter.ai" (see Appendix B). The transcripts were then edited via means of the Otter.ai app itself as well. I, as the researcher, was one of the materials utilized in this research through the carrying out of the thematic analysis in which my judgment was required to code the data and organize these into themes that arose from the coded data.

Procedure

Due to the participants living in various locations across the country and varying working schedules, it was difficult to arrange and travel to an on-site meeting location. For this reason the interviews took place online. After having provided their informed consent to participate in the study, I briefed the participants about the study at the beginning of the

interview and how their data was going to be used. Though the interviews were primarily carried out in English, I explained to the participants that if they at some points did not know how to translate certain words or phrases from Dutch to English, they were allowed to verbalize these in Dutch. This was done to minimize discomfort of the participants and help them phrase their thoughts better since English was not their first language. Subsequently, I asked them eight questions that were designed to elicit their thoughts and experiences regarding online and on-site trainings and the role of the trainer in these settings. I also asked participants additional probing questions to elaborate on some points that they mentioned during their answers to the main questions that I asked. As mentioned previously, the interviews were all audio recorded using Otter.ai, which can not only record conversations between people but also turn their voices into smart notes that one can be found easily and shared across digital platforms, essentially transcribing the conversations as a whole (Lai, 2022). Finally, at the conclusion of the interview I thanked the participants for their participation in this study and I informed them that they would be sent a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy.

Data analysis

After the interviews have been conducted and transcribed accordingly, I carried out a thematic analysis to analyze the data. The steps to carry out the thematic analysis that I followed were in accordance with the paper by Braun and Clarke (2006), who discussed six phases that illustrate how to perform a thematic analysis in qualitative, psychological research.

The first phase of the thematic analysis was familiarizing myself with the data. In this phase, I transcribed the data, read my data repeatedly to gain a better understanding of the data, and I noted down my initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the second phase, I generated initial codes. Codes are used to label features of the data that appear interesting and

relevant to the analyst (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and they refer to "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). Braun and Clarke (2006) did stress, however, that one's codes are different from one's themes as themes are (often) broader than the codes one generates. For the thematic analysis of my data, I applied an inductive approach in coding, in which I coded the data without attempting to fit it in a preexisting coding frame or into any analytic preconceptions that I may have had (Nowell et al., 2017) so in that sense this approach in coding is data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third phase included my search for themes after I organized the codes in a manner that is consistent across all transcripts. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined a theme as an important aspect of the data that is relevant towards the research question and represents reoccurring responses that form a pattern or meaning within the data. They further emphasized that a researcher's judgment is the element that determines what a theme is in actuality, and that flexibility is necessary in the process of identifying themes. Thus, definite rules for the identification of themes within the data do not apply (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fourth phase consisted of reviewing the themes. This would mean checking if the themes function in relevance to the coded extracts, as well as the entire data set, thus creating a thematic 'map' of the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, it consisted of refining the themes that I have identified during the analysis of my data. In the fifth phase, there was a continuous analysis of the refinement of the specifics of each theme, and "the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Finally, I produced the report of the results in the sixth face.

Reflexivity

With the carrying out of the data analysis in qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge one's own role in the entire process. That is the purpose of reflexivity in

qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2022), where one reflects upon the way in which their prior beliefs, knowledge, and assumptions can influence the study and its findings. This was necessary in my research as well because it helped me to explore my views in relation to the way that I interpreted my data and the action(s) I could take to limit the degree to which my biases impacted my findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Besides this, engaging in reflexivity delves into the ways in which researchers learn and overcome any challenges during their research (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings

General Findings

The findings demonstrate that the social support provided by trainers to positively affect trainees' psychological engagement online and on-site can be categorized into four main themes. These themes are the provision of communication, incorporating liveliness, provision of structure, and competence with digital tools. In the section below, these themes will be defined and supported by participants' quotes. Besides this, the links of these themes to the two aforementioned types of social support (i.e. emotional and instrumental support) from trainers will be explained too.

Provision of Opportunities for Interactive Communication

Interactive communication, in both online and on-site trainings, was mentioned consistently by all participants as the essence of engaging and meaningful training. The provision of interactive communication was described as the eliciting of interaction by trainers through connecting with their trainees and connecting trainees with each other. This can be done through exchanging thoughts and conversations in addition to talking to trainees when they sense that the trainees' energy levels are low. Participants noted that online trainers that effectively and continuously communicate with trainees during their training sessions can support trainees emotionally by making them feel heard and maintaining attention levels.

Furthermore, participants also expressed that the opportunities provided to them by the trainer to interact with fellow trainees made the training sessions more engaging and meaningful too. This notion is evident in the data, where participants have mentioned this multiple times across the whole sample.

> "Yes, she used polls, she used questions on the screen that you could answer during her presentation. You had to be fairly focused and it was very fun to do because there was not only the story, but there was more than that… and it became more interactive" (P 7, male, organizational advisor).

> "So again, the interaction between people is very important. I think that when there is a lot of interaction that people much faster have a happy experience that they feel good about" (P 3, female, landscape architect).

One mentioned how his online trainer elicited interaction within the group and between herself and the trainees by asking questions to the trainees through polls that were presented on the screen of the presentation. As such, the polls were used as a method to stimulate interaction with the trainer and between the trainees. The efficiency of eliciting interaction in this manner demonstrates that an online trainer needs to be "consciously aware that people are quiet," and "that they keep asking questions to them so that people will be more awake and active" (P7 male, organizational advisor). The examples of the two participants above illustrate the overall importance of the manner in which trainers provide opportunities for trainees to interact with each other and for the trainer to interact with their trainees. Participants also mentioned other techniques by online trainers to stimulate interactive communication during the training sessions, like asking questions, raising discussions within the group, or breakout rooms.

Some participants noted that this type of interaction is occasionally lacking for them in the online trainings that they attend. Thus, non-interactive online trainings, where the trainer

predominantly presents the content of their program with little to no interactive communication with individuals in the audience, were criticized for making them feel disengaged and finding it more difficult to pay attention to the trainer and the content that they teach.

"If they organize the training well and if there is a lot of room for discussion being possible, then the training could be nice. Especially if you can often talk about the content of the training with other people in the training but if the trainer doesn't provide the room for that you will mostly end up with a session where the trainer just keeps teaching the course from one subject to the next" (P 4, male, HR advisor).

"Because it's a lot of talk–there are some pictures and because of the lack of interaction that it can become dull" (P 5, male, real estate agent).

"Yeah, because it's hard to keep on listening to somebody who's talking out of a screen, basically… it's more difficult to interact and then you're sitting, just listening to somebody who's just talking the entire time and not interacting with the class" (P 10, female, university teacher).

As evident in the quotes from participants above, a lack of interaction is detrimental to the engagement of trainees during training sessions, which was further demonstrated in the quote by Participant 5 who described non-interactive trainings as "dull" and others who have mentioned that non-interactive trainings are "boring". In contrast, participants further praised interactive trainings to be the opposite of that and allowed them to learn more that way.

"Well now, the trainer I have for inclusive leadership, he's a guy and he offers great trainings in my opinion. He usually starts with an animation or shows us a video and then he teaches the course while talking to us; just really interacting a lot. Kind of like a dialogue and I like those kinds of online training. I had that

training for one day and I loved it because I learned a lot from it" (P 4, male,

HR advisor).

"She collected the texts so she could show it on screen. That way it was easier

for the rest of us to just read along with it and to learn from each other's

mistakes. In my opinion that was very effective… it had a very interactive

aspect and I think that worked better online…" (P 8, female, lawyer)

This further supports the notion that the provision of opportunities for interactive

communication in online training is important to make trainees feel heard and to maintain

their attention levels for an online training in addition to the manner in which it helps cultivate

learning during trainings. Participants have underlined the importance of the provision of

communication in on-site trainings as well, though several of the participants have argued that

this is even more important in online trainings due to the "distant" feeling they get from

sitting behind a screen.

Incorporating Liveliness

Besides the provision of communication, participants have consistently mentioned the

importance of liveliness in a trainer as well in both online and on-site trainings. The theme,

incorporating liveliness was described as the efforts by the trainer to be energetic through

actions like displaying enthusiasm, confidence, applying humor, and utilizing active body

language. The trainer supports their trainees emotionally this way by energizing them and,

similar to what provision of communication does, maintaining their attention levels. The data

from numerous of the participants resounds this notion too.

"Well, I think an example of somebody who really contributed to the

experience was somebody who took care of the room where he was giving the

online training. He had a lively background with nice colors. It was nice to

look at. He was also very active by actively standing up, kind of moving

around, forward, and backward a little bit. That kind of performance keeps you awake" (P 6, male, account manager).

"If a trainer is standing up in front of the group you see him or her make gestures and offer examples and I think that gets me much more stimulated" (P 9, female, psychologist).

From the participants' experiences it was noted that they valued an online trainer who can hold trainees' attention by considering their body language (e.g. actively standing up and moving around), the background they use and offering examples to stimulate thinking. Participants also valued humor in their training sessions, in both online and on-site settings. Participant 1 (male, strategic supplier manager) mentioned: "For instance, humor is always something that helps in training. Then it makes people wake up and feel more active. And there are a lot of jokes and just pictures which you can show which, well, you can either do it online or in a physical meeting…" Similar to the effect that I discussed of body language, this quote suggests that humor is yet another tool that a trainer can utilize to enhance trainees' psychological engagement by energizing them and maintaining their attention levels. Besides this, participants have stated how confident trainers made online trainings more engaging for them.

"I follow this training which, for every day there is another trainer. There really is such a difference in how at ease they are on the screen. The feeling of being on screen or live is kind of blurred then. If they are confident in themselves and they know what they want to say and they know what goals in the training they want to reach that is especially the case" (P 3, female, landscape architect).

This quote by Participant 3 (female, landscape architect) supports how confident trainers can make online trainings feel more engaging for trainees. This is demonstrated through the way in which she depicted how "the feeling of being on screen or live is kind of

blurred", emphasizing that an online trainer who displays confidence can raise trainees'
psychological engagement by blurring the feeling that trainees are following a training behind
their screen rather than in a physical classroom. Participant 3 (female, landscape architect)
added to this: "But a trainer who is more personal and dares to show and express him or
herself is the best way to do a training in both options I think." Hence, all in all, the aspects of
body language, humor, and display of confidence are thus techniques that contribute to how
lively a trainer is perceived to be and which can be used to emotionally support trainees in
feeling psychologically engaged during both online and on-site trainings.

Provision of Structure

Another important element that participants consistently expressed was the importance
of structure in online trainings. In fact, most participants named the structure of online
trainings to be an advantage over on-site trainings where, participants noted, that there is
room for improvement due to abundance in niceties like small-talk. To elaborate, participants
expressed that trainers in the on-site context are more lenient in providing opportunities for
small-talk which often means time is spent on niceties rather than adhering strictly to the
schedule of the training session; meaning a lack of structure in on-site trainings. Participants
argued that this case is different for online trainings where trainers can put a stronger
emphasis in adhering to their planning of the training session(s). Hence, the provision of
structure was conceptualized as the manner in which a trainer can offer their trainees an
organized, well-planned training through the provision of schedules, clarification of training
goals, utilization of exercises, and ensuring that trainees prepare for the training in advance
should that be necessary.

Participants who expressed some criticisms of online training in social aspects argued
that, while some online trainings lack communication, they valued how online trainers exerted
effort in organizing their training sessions in a structured manner. In contrast, participants also

mentioned that, although the communicational aspect is often more free, open and evident in on-site training, on-site trainers have the occasional tendency of losing time on "chit-chat" and a lack of strict adherence to the schedule of their training sessions. Furthermore, participants stated that the most effective online trainings they had were the sessions where the trainer clarified the goals of their training and utilized interactive training exercises to enhance the utility of the trainer's planning for the session in addition to making the training sessions more interesting and enjoyable for the trainees. Some participants also provided me with examples where the online trainer was "checking up" with the trainees whether they truly prepared for the training session, stimulating the trainees to commit themselves towards necessary preparations in advance of the training. Regarding the manner that online trainers structure their training session, one of the participants commented the following:

> "Yeah you learn more, or well, I don't really know if you learn more but there's more time to get through the whole curriculum. Everything that you need to address is addressed online. For instance, today I had a training in medical aspects of personal injury, yes, that was the name of the course. We skipped probably a quarter of the program just because there wasn't enough time. Indeed, that was a physical (on-site) training and online everything takes less time. So I think those are some positive aspects of online training" (P 8, female, lawyer).

This highlights the fact that trainers often need to organize online trainings in a more structured manner, which is an advantage that online training has over on-site training. It also supports learning and is time efficient as the focus is put onto the course material rather than other matters. Moreover, as mentioned previously, online trainers that make use of exercises to organize the structure of their training also engage their trainees. Though participants have conveyed that this is the case for both online and on-site trainers, they also stressed the

importance of that for online training in particular because that helps to establish directed focus onto the course material, reduce fatigue, and stimulate trainees to collaborate interactively.

> "That trainer did something really well. He structured the training in little blocks and all the blocks were different in what he wanted from us. And he had little energizers for us in between these blocks… Also he arranged for many breaks as well so I think that's also a good thing" (P 2, female, lawyer & legal aid provider).
>
> "I think I did some courses online, in which the trainer really thought about the medium and really tried to engage the people by using polls in which we could answer questions. At the time we had to wait with the system to hear everyone using the mobile phones… That way you are more engaged and then I think it's a valuable experience, the training, but when it's just the person talking for four hours… it's kind of pointless and then I'm working during the training" (P 8, female, lawyer).

These quotations from participants 2 and 8 support the notion that the way in which online trainers can structure their trainings using plannings, energizers, polls, and breaks helps trainees focus more on the course material and gain a more valuable experience from training in terms of engagement and learning. Other participants have made similar remarks, suggesting that utilization of exercises to structure trainings makes trainees feel more engaged in online trainings. Lastly, participants shared that online trainers who provided information in advance about the planning and structure of the training program through schedules were successful in making them feel more motivated to participate in training. Therefore, I find how the provision of structure from online trainers supports trainees through providing clear

schedules, clarifying goals of training, utilization of exercises, and ensuring that trainees prepare themselves for the training sessions in advance.

Competence With Digital Tools

Lastly, the trainers' competence to work with digital tools, particularly in the context of online trainings was a significant contributor to the way that participants experienced their online trainings positively or negatively. Competence with digital tools was defined as the trainers' ability to provide their trainees with a fluent training through effective utilization of all the possibilities available within the digital system they work with in addition to doing what is possible to ensure that the digital system is functioning well. For instance, participants have consistently mentioned the use of breakout rooms, videos, animations, applications to have the trainees complete exercises, and online polls. It has been conveyed that the trainer's competence with such digital tools in online trainings help the facilitation of effective time management and stimulate trainees to be active and attentive during trainings. In contrast, online trainers that are insufficiently competent with using digital tools have been pointed out by participants to impair the engagement of their trainees since it limits the possibility to engage in exercises online and consumes an excess amount of time when trainers do not know what to do. For instance, Participant 6 (male, account manager) described an online training in language which "was not performed well" and that it was "difficult to follow because the trainer was not sufficiently prepared for an online training". Participant 10 (female, university teacher) mentioned: "So for example, these breakout rooms, some don't know how to use them and then it's more difficult to get people to cooperate with each other." These two quotes from the participants display how a trainer's insufficient competence with digital tools can impair engagement in online trainings by the trainees' difficulty to follow what is being said and the trainer's difficulty to stimulate trainees to cooperate together. The following quote, on the other hand, delves into the efficiency of online trainers' competence with digital tools.

"I think that can make it more lively and the first times we had online training, it was kind of standard. They talked and we listened. However, during the second year of the pandemic, sessions became more interactive and differing software was used to have online discussions, questions, interviews, or multiple choice. Things they implemented. It became better but like I said, everybody had to get used to the new system… yeah, if you use the tools better you can engage people more and you can also challenge and encourage them to interact about the subject" (P 5, male, real estate agent).

This demonstrates how an online trainers' competence can enhance trainees engagement through the use of differing software to bring about online discussions, interviews, and multiple choice questions. During the interviews, it also became apparent that participants felt that the familiarity and utilization of all the possible tools available to trainers within a digital system can provide trainers with possibilities that are otherwise unavailable to them in on-site trainings. One of the participants has expressed how she experienced this too.

"The better physical trainers are also the ones who aren't just talking but who are also handing out assignments, group work, and other stuff, so that is kind of the same in both online training and physical training. But in the case of an online trainer, on the other hand, they have a lot more possibilities with the system. In a physical training they can just point to a group of people and say: 'okay, you guys will discuss whiplash and I want you to sit in the next room,' after which they then say, 'I will call you 20 minutes later'. In that case the trainer cannot really control the discussion of the group and it could even be counterproductive because then you have a group of people that are discussing the subject for six minutes and then chit chatting about other stuff for the remainder of that time. Online that isn't really the case because there the trainer

has a lot more control over that with the different digital rooms for each group

and they can check in with participants every now and then. They can give

people little group assignments to do where they would be asked, for instance,

to talk about whiplash but also to fill in an online form too. I think that offers

possibilities to control and follow the thinking process of the students better

than the trainer can in a physical training" (P 8, female, lawyer).

This demonstrates how online trainers' competence with utilizing digital tools is

beneficial for trainees' engagement through the way that it can offer more possibilities than in

the context of on-site trainings. Hence, these findings work to provide evidence for the notion

that trainers, especially in online trainings, should be competent with utilizing digital tools

available within the systems they work in order to elevate trainees' engagement and learning

processes during the trainings.

Reflexivity

For me it was informative to speak to the participants due to their diverse occupations

and training experiences. As a result, I learned about the various ways in which trainers can

make a positive contribution to trainees' experience of engagement in online trainings as well

as on-site trainings. Furthermore, I also learned about potential aspects of trainers' roles that

may impair trainees' experience of engagement, such as the lack of opportunities for

interactive communication, or an insufficient level of competence with digital tools. This does

not imply, however, that the research process was undergone without challenges. For instance,

I had personal experiences with following online lectures at my university and thus, I had my

positive and negative opinions about the provision of online trainings. Some of the

participants expressed similar opinions, so I was quick to agree with some of their sentiments.

To limit the extent to which my bias could impact the interpretation of the data during the data

analysis, I ensured to strictly adhere to the steps of conducting the thematic analysis provided

by Braun and Clarke (2006) and to place an emphasis on maintaining an open mind during the exploration process of this qualitative research. Another challenge in the interpretation of the data was the identifying and coding of relevant segments in the transcripts of the interviews. Rather than exploring the role of the trainer, my initial interview questions were focused on the participants' positive and negative experiences of online trainings in addition to the difference in their experiences between online trainings and on-site trainings. Hence, this made it challenging for me to identify underlying viewpoints of trainers' actions in the participants' responses to these initial questions. Nevertheless, I tackled this challenge by highlighting any segment in the participants' responses that seemed relevant for later scrutiny during the analysis. All in all though, through the conducting of my study, I was able to develop my skills as an interviewer and active listener besides learning how to code data and categorize these into themes (i.e. carrying out a thematic analysis). Prior to this study I have never engaged in such a manner of analyzing my data so carrying out this research broadened my knowledge about the way in which researchers can conduct qualitative research.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to qualitatively examine the role of trainers' social support in employees' psychological engagement in online training programs (by comparing it to on-site training programs). To realize this aim, I conducted a qualitative study via semi-structured interviews where I asked the participants questions about their experiences with online and onsite trainings and the ways in which their trainers have contributed towards these experiences. The findings highlighted four key themes that demonstrated the different ways in which trainers can offer social support to maintain or enhance trainees' psychological engagement in online and on-site trainings. The four themes I found after interviewing the participants are provision of opportunities for interactive communication, incorporating liveliness, provision of structure, and competence with digital tools. Provision of

opportunities for interactive communication and incorporating liveliness from trainers would fall under emotional support through the way that communication and trainer liveliness work to optimize trainees' energy levels, attention during training, and the feeling of being heard which are all in line with the aspect of validation provided in emotional support (Taylor, 2011). Provision of structure and competence with digital tools by a trainer on the other hand, would both be categorized as instrumental support through the way that structure and competence with digital tools work to optimize effective time management and provision of information, which are in line with the aspects of information and services in instrumental support (Taylor, 2011).

To understand how the existing literature links towards the four themes I identified, it is necessary to revisit what these themes entail and how they relate towards any of the three components of psychological engagements. Firstly, the provision of opportunities for interactive communication from trainers is done through the eliciting of interaction by connecting with trainees and connecting trainees with each other. Participants have shared that this is often done through the exchange of thoughts and ideas, collaboration through exercises, and talking to trainees when the trainer senses that their energy levels are low. There is evidence that communication provided by trainers is essential in on-site training programs (Pagnoccolo & Bertone, 2021) and trainings in general (Compeau, 2002), which participants in my research have expressed too particularly in online trainings due the feelings of distance amongst trainees and between trainees and their trainers. The e-learning study by Thach and Murphy (1995) further supports this in the context of online trainings, where communication was identified to be one of the most crucial competencies of e-learning professionals to provide effective e-learning experiences for their participants. It is likely that the provision of opportunities for interactive communication has an impact on trainees' emotional component of engagement. This may be due to the positive emotions experienced by trainees when a

trainer provides opportunities for interactive communication, as noted by my participants, or the negative emotions experienced by trainees when trainers are non-communicative during their trainings.

Secondly, trainers can incorporate liveliness into their presentations through the effort to be energetic with actions like displaying enthusiasm, confidence, applying humor, and utilizing active body language. Participants expressed how trainers that applied this in their training aided them in "staying awake" and being engaged in the session. Compeau (2002) proposed several behaviors that trainers engage in that optimize training effectiveness for a training in "end user software". One of these behaviors was the showing of sympathy to trainees which consists of elements like the trainer demonstrating their own mistakes, utilizing humor, participatory approach of encouraging trainees to engage, and enthusiasm, all of which is similar to the elements I identified for incorporating liveliness by the trainer. Similar to the provision of communication, the incorporation of liveliness by a trainer would also influence the emotional component of engagement as a result of the positive emotions felt when the trainer is lively in contrast to the negative emotions (i.e. boredom or disengagement) experienced by trainees when trainers are not lively.

Thirdly, the provision of structure–the manner in which a trainer can offer their trainees an organized, well-planned training through the provision of schedules, clarification of training goals, utilization of exercises, and ensuring that trainees prepare for the training in advance should it be necessary. The participants conveyed that trainers' provision of structure in online trainings is often an advantage over on-site trainings where the structural element in planning can sometimes be lacking. Besides this, participants noted that the trainers' provision of structure online helped them in their learning process, their engagement, and experiencing valuable training experiences overall. Support for the provision of structure by trainers in general has been found to be effective in meeting training objectives (Compeau,

2002). Compeau (2002) refers to "course design" which essentially describes what the trainer needs to consider when designing the course in order to ensure the provision of structure. This consists of aspects like goal setting, goal management, determination of objectives, and organization of the training material. This supports my findings for the provision of structure by trainers in online and on-site trainings to enhance engagement through the similarities in aspects shared between course design and provision of structure such as the similarity between goal clarification (for provision of structure), goal setting and goal management (for course design). With that being the case, it is probable that the provision of structure by a trainer influences both the cognitive and the behavioral components of engagement, because it elevates trainees' learning processes (i.e. cognitive) as well as their ability to prepare for the training sessions in advance (i.e. behavioral).

Lastly, trainers' competence with digital tools through their display of familiarity and knowledge of using the possible digital tools available within the software systems they work with, including the utilization of breakout rooms, videos, animations, applications to have the trainees complete exercises, and online polls. As mentioned earlier, participants suggested that this was especially important for online training where it can aid in effective time management of the session and stimulate trainees to be active and attentive during training sessions. Other than communication provided by trainers, the study by Thach and Murphy (1995) also found digital skills to be one of the most crucial competencies for e-learning professionals. Biletska et al. (2021) further supported the notion that a trainer's competence to work with digital tools can be useful in enhancing trainee's psychological engagement through a study that provided evidence in the effectiveness of teachers utilizing digital tools in foreign language classes. Therefore, trainees' cognitive component of engagement is likely affected by a trainer's competence with digital tools through the resulting activeness and attentiveness of the trainees that aligns with mental effort to understand complex concepts.

Practical Implications

The findings have key implications for the practice of online and on-site training, besides addition of literature on this phenomenon. The findings of my research provide an insight into the differing types of social support behaviors that a trainer can provide to their trainees to stimulate their engagement in both online and on-site training programs through the perspective of the employees that participate in them. As such, this insight builds onto the existing literature about training programs. It delves into the role of trainers in the engagement of their trainees and thus ultimately, what shapes an effective online training program since engagement and effectiveness are positively associated with each other in learning online (Poon et al., 2022). Therefore, online trainers and trainers that work on-site can apply the findings of my research to improve their provision of effective training through the implementation of efforts associated with communication, liveliness, structure, and competence with digital tools in their training. Not to mention, training effectiveness has been demonstrated to predict many positive work outcomes like job performance (Arthur et al., 2003) and organizational productivity (Zwick, 2006). Hence it would not be an overstatement to state that, to a certain extent, my findings of trainers' social support and trainee engagement can aid in the elevation of those positive work outcomes as a result of training. Besides this, because I qualitatively examined the role of trainers' social support in employees' engagement in online training programs as well as on-site training programs, my findings are exploratory in nature and pave the way for future research related to this phenomenon.

Limitations and Future Research

Nevertheless, in spite of the positive practical implications provided by my findings, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the limitations of my research as well. As my research was qualitative in nature utilizing a sample size of 10 participants (N=10), these findings cannot be generalized to a population. Although it is also true that qualitative research is not aimed at

being a source of generalizability, but rather "to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of some aspect of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases" (Polit & Beck, 2010, p. 1451). Furthermore, another limitation stems from the sampling method applied in my study. As mentioned earlier, a snowball sampling method was used to acquire the sample for my research. While it is true that snowball sampling is arguably the most widely used sampling method in qualitative research in addition to being a useful tool in finding "hidden populations" (Noy, 2008), it is also criticized for not meeting the criteria of random samples in accordance with statistical methodologies and failing to achieve representativeness (Parker et al., 2020). Besides the fact that representativeness is not the goal of qualitative research though, the usage of a snowball sampling method allowed me to collect a rich amount of insightful data from employees of various occupations across differing organizations, adding to the value of insights that my findings provide.

Still, while valuable in terms of providing rich data, qualitative research alone is not sufficient in attaining a complete, thorough understanding of this phenomenon. As this is the case it could be fruitful for future research, via quantitative research methods, to delve deeper into the relationship between trainer behaviors and training effectiveness, and how trainee engagement could potentially moderate that relationship within differing types of organizations. Additionally, future research can further examine how trainee engagement in training programs can contribute to individual work outcomes like job productivity, job performance, and job satisfaction. All in all, the findings of my research may serve as a basis on this phenomenon that researchers can use to conduct future research that examines the role of trainer support in trainee engagement via a variety of diverse research methods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, trainers have an integral role in the manner that their trainees experience training programs and how transfer of training is optimized in such a way that all

parties involved benefit from the trainings. Accordingly, trainers should continuously strive to further develop their efforts to provide social support towards their trainees of emotional and instrumental nature. By doing so, organizational investments in diverse training programs could be made worthwhile and the outcomes of training can augment to an effective degree.

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Appendices

Appendix A

<u>Script for the Interviews</u>

Hello, thank you for wanting to participate in my study. This is an interview study that aims to examine the role of trainers in your engagement in online trainings. In a bit you will be asked some questions about your experiences of online trainings compared to physical trainings and about your experience with trainers in your online and physical trainings. The interview will be recorded and written as a transcript for further analysis in my master thesis. After completion of my thesis, these transcripts will be deleted but after our interview today you are welcome to contact me via email if you are interested in reading or correcting certain details in the transcript of the interview. You may also contact me or my thesis supervisor if you have any further questions in regard to this research.

Please be aware that this interview will be in English, so my questions including your responses will be in English. If you would like to say something which you do not know how to translate from Dutch to English, feel free to just say it in Dutch and I will translate that later on during the writing of the transcripts. Lastly, I would like to emphasize that your participation is completely voluntary and that you may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

Have you completed the consent form? Please send it to me as soon as possible.

Are there any questions before we begin?

[Answer yes and ask the questions/answer no] …

Okay, then let us begin.

<u>Questions:</u>

1. Firstly, could you tell me what kind of work you do?
2. Can you tell me about an online training you recently attended? What was it about?
3. Could you please tell me about positive aspects that you experience in online training?
4. Now that you told me about some benefits of online training that you experience, what kind of negative aspects do you experience during online training?
5. Can you tell me about a physical/in-person training that you recently attended?
6. If you think about physical trainings in-person, how would you say that differs from your experiences of online trainings?
7. What does the trainer do to contribute towards the way you experience online training?
8. How is your experience with trainers different online compared to physical (on-site)? Does the trainer's role change in the online training?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix B

Link to the Otter.ai application:

https://apps.apple.com/us/app/otter-transcribe-voice-notes/id1276437113