Supporting Workplace Learning:

A background paper for IES Research Network Members

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Supporting Workplace Learning

Introduction

In an ever more uncertain external environment with strong skill-based competition, academics, policy makers and organisations have increasingly come to view workplace learning as a means by which they can achieve not only short-terms objectives, but also long-term strategic goals. The current notions that influence approaches to workplace learning have their roots in work system design, flexible learning and employee development. The reach of workplace learning, which is typically associated with on-the-job training, has also been extended to comprise on-the-job learning. Here, learning is seen as a central to the way in which work is designed.

Issues and definitions

Workplace learning is defined as:

> *… an emerging inter-disciplinary field that encompasses the theory and practice of management, individual and organisational learning, formal and informal learning; training, development and education, that takes place within the workplace.* (Workplace Learning Bulletin, 2002)

Workplace learning occurs in a variety of ways, most notably as formal and informal workplace learning. Formal workplace learning is typically associated with training and education, it is:

> *[Learning] which occurs as part of an organised workplace- accredited programme, embedded within the organisation's authority and accountability structure….This kind of learning has a finite end point, and often results in a qualification or licence to undertake specific work activity.* (Owen, 2001)

In contrast, informal workplace learning can be thought of as a process of learning that takes place in everyday work experience. It often combines both learning and practice in one activity, indeed many employees report that learning by doing, is the most effective method of learning. Organisations are starting to realise that informal workplace learning is important because increasingly job roles needs to be designed to include features that characterise learning:

Informal learning is that in which the learning process is neither determined nor designed by the organisation, regardless of the formality or informality of the goals and objectives toward which the learning is directed. (Stamps, 1988)

Although informal workplace learning is the most prevalent form of learning in organisations, it is also the least well supported. (IPD, 2000). However, in spite of the fact that informal learning is closely related to organisational performance, its support is rarely seen as a main element in typical human resource strategies.

Stern and Sommerland (1999) make reference to the various meanings of workplace learning, and argue that the all-encompassing nature of the term makes it difficult to establish how far there has been a shift in human resource management towards making more effective use of the workplace as a source of learning. In a review article, McCormack (2000) points out that various schools of thought such as human resource development, organisational development, training and development, learning organisations and knowledge management all vary in how they conceptualise workplace learning.

Categorising workplace learning

An effective method of categorising the different meanings of workplace learning, as Stern and Sommerland (1999) suggest, is based on the extent to which learning is separated from the workplace itself.

1. There is the understanding that learning and working are spatially separated, where structured learning activity takes place near the job or out of work. Usually, this takes the form of in-house training.

2. Another approach views the workplace itself as a learning environment. Typically, the focus is on a range of on-the-job training activities, where learning is intentional and where employees' learning is supported, observed and evaluated. These on-the-job training activities can take the form of either experience-based learning opportunities (for example, job rotation, enhanced autonomy, increased job scope *etc.*), or training through coaching and mentoring, secondments and team working (possibly in cross-functional teams or action-learning sets).

3. A third view contends that working and learning are heavily linked. The role of 'manager as developer' is highlighted in this approach, and is concerned with appraisal, reaching set objectives and planned development opportunities. While the range of methods for supporting workplace learning has widened, the underlying concept is based on learning goals being clearly specified and learning opportunities being planned. The entire work environment is geared towards and

supports the learning of new skills and knowledge. This is also known as continuous learning (Watkins and Marsick, 1993).

Organisations that take this continuous learning approach all share the view that there are long-term competitive advantages to be had by supporting workplace learning. The approach also emphasises developing skills and understanding by having to deal with the very real challenges that the natural work environment offers. For example, increasing output, increasing quality, coping with change, dealing with colleagues and customers, and solving problems:

> *The behaviours that define learning and the behaviours that define being productive are one and the same. Learning is not something that requires time out from being engaged in productive activity: learning is the heart of productive activity. To put it simply, learning is the new form of labour.* (Zuboff, 1988)

Government initiatives

A recent report by the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit (2002) set workplace learning in the wider context of government policy and mapped out an action plan for the development of policy up to 2010. In last year's budget statement, the government pledged to put £30 million into workplace training during the subsequent two years. The cash injection aims to encourage small businesses to adopt the IiP standard, and will help at least 10,000 organisations achieve the standard.

Gordon Brown has also launched a series of employer training pilot projects (currently being evaluated in six areas of the country by IES) that are designed to encourage workplace learning. These include guaranteed time off for employees to train, and financial support for organisations undertaking training.

In addition, the University for Industry (Ufi) was created to bring about the government's vision of a unique partnership between the government and the private and public sectors. In 2001, it had created '**learndirect**,' the largest publicly funded online learning service in the UK. **learndirect** is hoped to transform the experience of learning and change the way of life for adult learners. Ufi will tell employees what learning is available and offer advice, and provide a course through study at home, at work or at local learning centres.

Workplace development activities

Workplace learning involves many different processes. These are set in a range of learning models that are associated with various objectives and activities, and occur at different levels of the organisational hierarchy. Learning outcomes may be displayed as new skills, knowledge or understanding by the employee, or as

knowledge that is incorporated into organisational culture, systems and management. The present discussion will assess the relative merits of just five methods to supporting workplace learning: coaching and mentoring; secondments; action-learning sets; cross-functional teams; and project working.

Coaching and mentoring

Contemporary research has acknowledged the rise of coaching and mentoring as an effective way of supporting workplace learning, and has been empirically examined by a number of studies. The training and development survey 2001 (CIPD, 2001) found that over 80 per cent of UK organisations were using coaching or mentoring to develop at least some of their employees. As Hirsh and Carter (2002) note, with regard to coaching and mentoring, there are different beliefs about how to define and distinguish between these personal methods of supporting learning.

Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching is explicitly concerned with improving employees' skills, behaviours and performance typically within in their present job role. Definitions from the literature centre around coaching as a task-oriented form of personally tailored training. The main points to note is that coaching is typically short-term, with a task focus. Coaching can be thought of as:

> *… an interactive process that is designed to help individuals to develop more rapidly and produce more satisfying results …. As a result of coaching, clients should be able to set better goals, take more action, make better decisions, and more fully use their natural strengths.* (Carter, 2001)

Unlike coaching's goal-specific approach, mentoring is most often orientated towards an exchange of wisdom, support, learning, or guidance for the purpose of personal, spiritual, career or life growth. Sometimes it is used to achieve strategic business goals, so content can be wide ranging. In this way, mentoring can be typically seen as an open-ended commitment. Coaching helps people learn how to do things more effectively, while mentoring deals with preparing for future changes and promotion.

As Carter *et al.* (2002) note, organisations typically resource one-to-one coaching in one of, or in combination of, three ways: training line managers to coach their own employees; utilising in-house specialist coaches, and commissioning external suppliers as coaches. One-to-one mentoring, on the other hand has typically been resourced by organisations by training managers to mentor employees who are not their own staff. Commissioning external suppliers as coaches is, however, on the increase. Each of these resourcing methods will be discussed briefly in turn in relation to their impact on workplace learning.

Line managers as coaches

In recent years, it has become apparent that in many organisations the responsibility for employee development is being devolved to line managers (Hyman and Cunningham, 1998). More specifically, there has been a shift from the role of the 'manager as a controller' to that of a coach or mentor, of which developing employees is a major part (Tamkin *et al.*, 2003).

A major factor affecting an employees learning at work, according to Dankbaar (1995), is the personality, interpersonal skills, knowledge and learning orientation of their manager. He suggests that employees should:

> *… be encouraged to be creative and make suggestions for technical and organisational improvements, they must be "empowered" and this requires that managers learn to share and delegate power, to trust and coach their personnel, instead of simply giving orders. The capacity of middle managers to adopt such attitudes has been over-estimated.* (Dankbaar, 1995)

Carrington (2001) notes how some organisations are beginning to introduce coaching skills and techniques into line management. For example, Unilever has brought in a coaching firm to help its managers to become coaches. Similarly, Abbey National has introduced a scheme for front-line employees. A recent article in *Personnel Today* magazine reports how Safeway is rolling out a coaching scheme for 900 middle managers after a development programme for top management lead to reduced staff turnover and increased profits.

From empirical work, Levy *et al.* (1992) suggest a variety of strategies that managers can adopt to promote workplace learning:

- placing employees into different functions, locations or departments so that they gain experience of different parts of the organisational environment and are able to observe or shadow other employees

- creating learning opportunities by arranging the employee's activities (progressive gradation of tasks)

- widening the scope of employees' job roles by devolving responsibility, changing the depth of supervision and changing the spread of activities engaged in by the employee

- enhancing employees' awareness of skill and understanding by providing candid feedback and debriefing

- helping employees to assess their job roles so that they are aware of the competencies and skills required.

A final note to make is that emphasising role of line manager as coach puts a great reliance on the willingness and ability of line managers to fulfil this role effectively. In organisations where people have traditionally been promoted into management

positions on the basis of their 'hard' skills (*eg* technical knowledge) as opposed to their 'soft' people management skills, it is possible that there will be further development required for these managers before the notion of the manager as developer of their own staff is realistic.

External suppliers as coaches

The credibility of external coaches and mentors may sometimes be greater, as they are likely to have experience within a number of different organisations (Hall *et al.*, 1999). The role of the external coach is also often more focussed, that is, internal coaches are likely to have additional roles and responsibilities, whereas the external coach/mentor is there just for the coaching/mentoring. This in itself can raise issues surrounding trust and confidentiality. That is, coachees are more likely to be trusting of an external coach, as internal coaches may be in the position to influence certain decisions regarding pay and promotion. When this happens, coachees are more likely to withhold vital information, which can devalue the coaching process.

Specialist In-house Coaches

Tyler (2000) notes how it is only in the very recent past that organisations have started to source coaching internally. Mentors, of course, have long been sourced internally. The internal coach is comparable in every sense to the external coach, with the exception that the internal coach is an employee of the same organisation as their coachees. In a more descriptive sense, however, Frisch (2001) offers the following definition:

> *Internal coaching is a one-on-one developmental intervention supported by the organisation and provided by a colleague of those coached who is trusted to shape and deliver a programme yielding individual professional growth.*

However, although internal coaches are part of the same organisation, they should not be a part of the same organisational hierarchy, that is, they should be disassociated from the everyday management of their coachees. The reason for this is to separate the process from the job coaching that line managers may do.

Sourcing coaching or mentoring internally has the advantages of being more cost effective, being familiar with the organisation's culture, practices and policies. However, this can also be a disadvantage because internal coaches may share the same organisational blind spots as the coachee.

Further issues to be considered centre around the extent to which the coach or mentor already knows the employee they are going to be working with. The evidence suggest that the whole process is more likely to be beneficial when the coach or mentor and the

coachee have different mindsets that will create a more stimulating learning environment. However, if the organisation is of considerable size, it is unlikely that the coach and coachee will have ever worked together before.

Although coaching and mentoring has been shown in some instances to be very effective in terms of development, evidence regarding its impact on organisational performance is somewhat lacking. For example, Wigham (2002) found that nearly 80 per cent of organisations introduce coaching initiatives to improve overall company performance, but only a handful actually measure its effectiveness. Moreover, coaching and mentoring is notoriously difficult to evaluate, because of its confidential nature.

Secondments

The term 'secondment' initially referred to the temporary transfer of an employee to another department. Formerly known as 'job-swaps,' the concept has since developed to cover the loan of an employee to another organisation. Secondment is increasingly recognised a key management development tool for junior, middle and senior managers (Carrington, 2001). There is a variety of approaches that organisations can take, these range from traditional long-term secondments through to short-term or day release-type schemes. The advantages of secondments are that the secondee gains experience that their own organisations cannot provide, whist the host organisation gets an extra pair of hands, usually for free.

Typically, the organisation that supplies the secondee continues to pay their wages during the secondment period. Sometimes, however, this cost may be reimbursed by the host organisation. Despite an apparent lack of research, there appears to be growing interest in the secondment approach (Bond, 2002). Recent national policies concerned with promoting nursing practice, for example, recognise the value to workplace learning (Scottish Executive, 2001). The Civil Service is currently running a secondment scheme called Interchange. It is designed to provide civil servants with experience of business, and to give business people first-hand knowledge of government. Interchange is also aimed at bringing fresh, new, business skills into government. So far, nearly 4,000 Interchanges have taken place. These include long-term secondments of up to three years, shorter attachments, job shadowing, and coaching and mentoring.

In an evaluation of the secondment approach adopted by NHS Scotland's Nursing Practice development unit, Bond (2002) found that all the secondees reacted positively about how the secondments had broadened their perspectives. Secondees felt that their thinking had become more generic. Secondees also mentioned the opportunities that the secondment had provided to broaden contacts through networking. In addition, some

mentioned how the experience had contributed to their own self-development, for example through opportunities to undertake research and development and deliver presentations. Overall, all the secondees felt that they had gained from the experience, and that they had developed increased knowledge and awareness of other areas of work. Moreover, they were noted to be particularly good for developing interpersonal skills such as confidence, initiative, problem-solving and negotiation skills.

Other authors have also asserted the positive benefits of secondments. Critchley (2002) notes nine benefits of which organisations should be aware.

● They offer security in the sense that they allow staff to gain experience with other teams or organisations, whilst they know that their normal job is kept open for them until the end of the secondment.

● They allow employees the opportunity to be exposed to environments that may not exist in their everyday jobs. This is often more applicable when secondments are undertaken outside the normal places of work.

● The failure of employees to find employment in new posts is often due to a lack of experience in the relevant areas. Secondments enable employees to gain new skills in different environments.

● They create opportunities by opening doors to new work. They can give employees who have spent a lot of time in their normal jobs the chance to test out new managerial styles to enhance their personal growth and development.

● They expose employees to vast networking opportunities.

● They offer the opportunity to work with a diverse range of colleagues and client groups offering a wealth of experience that can enhance personal skills and competencies.

● Employees may have been in their normal job roles for a long time; secondments can offer the opportunity to do something new and refreshing, enhancing motivation.

● They offer exposure to different ways of working, different cultures and different management styles. The opportunity to observe different behaviour in work situations contributes to the development of new knowledge and understanding.

● They can help to can help nurture employees, particularly if the secondee is assigned a coach or mentors. The opportunity to work differently and in different environments can sometimes be all that employees need to attain their potential. Secondments can present opportunities for individuals to explore their potential.

However, these benefits will only accrue if the process is managed in an effective manner. Secondments require a tremendous

amount of preparation and there are several crucial aspects that organisations need to consider (Forrest, 2001). Clear learning goals must be set, these goals must stretch the secondee, but at the same time they must be achievable. Programmes should also build in a time for 'testing the water'. Secondees need to become accustomed to the organisational culture and management style of the host organisations. In addition, the secondees' expectations at the end of the process must be managed effectively. A secondment may often result in the employee wanting to take a more strategic role in the organisation.

In practical terms, Whyte (1999) advises matching the requirements of the employee with the needs of the organisation in order to maximise the benefits of the secondment. Failure to do so can often lead to the developmental aspects being nullified. Other potential problems to be aware of include failing to clearly define the contractual relationship and responsibilities between the host and supplier organisation. Lewis (2002) notes how secondments, especially international secondments, involve complex issues relating to individual income tax and employee benefits that organisations also need to be aware of.

Action-learning sets

Action-learning sets are used to make their members consider action and promise to do it, this action usually being centred on a live work issue in their normal environment. It involves a group of employees, a set, working together for a certain period of time on the work-based issues brought by each employee. The group is used as a resource or instrument for individual decision-making. Employees are able to try out different approaches at work, knowing they will have learning set colleagues who will support them in thinking through what to do and help them to reflect on its impact.

Stated simply, action-learning is:

> … *learning by doing and the two objectives of action learning programs are business results and leadership development … It accommodates different learning styles and challenges the traditional leadership practices and unconscious culture.* (Managing and Training Development, 2002)

Action-learning is a process that is far removed from formal training and education. It relies instead on the ability of the members of the action-learning set to challenge and support each other. The process requires each member of the set to have their own airtime during which they and their chosen issue or project are the focus of attention. During this time slot, other participants question, support and challenge, knowing that their turn will come later. The outcome is an increase in employees' skills in building and maintaining relationships and in dealing with complexity, enabling them to operate with more confidence and agility.

An action-learning project must address an issue that will have a large impact on organisational performance, or it will not get the senior management support it needs. Members of the set learn new things and reflect on the process as they are doing it. The action-learning project also is an extraordinary development opportunity in which high-potential employees reach way beyond their comfort zones to learn, interact with new people, and form critical long-term networks with the organisation.

In terms of practical recommendations, the selection process for the action-learning team is counterintuitive. Choosing experienced employees with knowledge of the topic should be resisted. Instead, it is advantageous if the majority of the set is made up of novices who will ask basic, yet important, questions and look at problems in a new way. Neither should the set be made up of those who do the same work in their normal job. It can be helpful to have one person who knows the topic, as they will have some knowledge of the people who could help the team.

One of the disadvantages of action-learning sets is cost. The amount of time it takes makes it very expensive. Many employees do the action-learning work on top of their regular jobs. Furthermore, action-learning sets must achieve positive outcomes to make it worthwhile, otherwise the organisation will quickly undermine action-learning efforts. Without positive outcomes, action-learning would not be otherwise sustainable.

Although there has been a steady use of action-learning sets over the last ten years, it is in the related area of project working that the most recent growth appears to have occurred. Kettley and Hirsh (2000) found from their survey of managers and professionals working in cross-functional teams that, managers in such teams had a big learning gain in personal effectiveness, and it is to cross-functional teams that the discussion now turns.

Cross-functional teams

Employees' ability to work together with employees in other departments, locations and functions has become a key competence sought by many organisations. Many organisations are starting to see the potential of cross-functional teams as an effective means of supporting workplace learning. Cross-functional teams vary tremendously in how they are comprised; their form is directly related to the team's goals and the organisation in which the team exists. In terms of a definition:

> *Cross-functional teams are typically composed of individuals who have a functional home base (eg engineering, personnel, marketing etc.) but who work collaboratively on issues or processes requiring diverse resources.* (Kettley and Hirsh, 2000)

One benefit of employees working in cross-functional teams is that by combining individual expertise, it is possible for the team

to optimise how tasks are carried out, maximising their speed and efficiency (McComb *et al.*, 1999).

In a study of ten cross-functional teams from six major UK organisations, Kettley and Hirsh (2000) asked cross-functional team members about learning. Four distinct learning methods were made explicit regarding how employees learn in cross-functional teams.

4. Knowledge and skills from other team members is transferred directly and formally.

5. Informal learning occurs by team members picking things up from observing others working.

6. Learning occurs as a result of group action to seek or give new information and test out ideas.

7. Team members have the opportunity to reflect on hidden assumptions and the reasoning behind their own behaviour.

Of these four methods, direct transfer of learning from other team members was deemed to be the most important and effective way of learning in cross-functional teams. This suggests that the way in which the team is comprised, in terms of the quality of its individual members, is very important for learning.

In addition to new learning about job roles, cross-functional teams also offer a good opportunity for self-development. This remains true even for members who have no intention or desire to learn. Kettley and Hirsh (2000) suggest that there are at least three types of learning that are distinguishable from one another in terms of the knowledge and skills acquired by cross-functional teams:

● **Learning about the self:** Through social interaction with other team members, employees can enhance their soft skills. Specifically, Kettley and Hirsh suggest influencing others, handling conflict, listening, and giving feedback, as competencies that can be made more effective by working with others in cross-functional teams.

● **Learning about the organisation:** Through working in cross-functional teams, a deeper understanding of the how different departments/functions of the organisation are related becomes apparent. This can lead to more 'systems thinking' in the way employees approach their work.

● **Learning about other functions:** Team members are able to learn about particular competencies, tools and techniques that are used by other departments/functions. Kettley and Hirsh found that participants in their study specifically stated how they became more familiar with the requirements of other employees, professional standards, regulatory requirements.

Contextual factors can also affect the amount and quality of learning that occurs in cross-functional teams. For instance, how much the cross-functional team is seen to be a potential learning experience and has the autonomy to organise its own work. The extent to which team members have positive attitudes towards their department/function is also important.

Another important aspect of cross-function teams concerns how the team is managed, and the qualities of the leader. In this regard, Parker (2003) notes the difficulty that leaders of cross-functional teams face in managing a diverse group of people with a wide variety of backgrounds, cultural values, languages, training, and interests. In addition to the people management skills required, he suggests that cross-functional teams may sometimes operate in a virtual world where members communicate electronically and may never meet in person.

Project working

An objective of project working that has recently received attention entails using project work as an explicit learning strategy in two ways. Firstly, the project team as a strategy for the development of individual competence places emphasis on such aspects as job rotation, task enrichment, problem solving and mutual learning processes. Secondly, at the organisational level, the insights and intuitions of individual employees are made available for testing and use by the organisation as a whole. Project teams are seen as an effective way to stimulate organisational innovation, since they bring together complementary skills and experiences out of which new products can be created.

Onstenk (1997) suggests how the project teams can be designed and managed so as to optimise the potential for learning. Drawing together his findings from research, he identifies the following as being important:

- broadening the set of tasks undertaken by the team so that there is scope for performing more tasks, *eg* by rotation to the work posts within the group

- enriching the job through integrating simple maintenance, repair and quality control tasks into the job

- giving the group responsibility for problem-solving as well as extending the domain of authority to make decisions

- organising team meetings and discussion opportunities which allow team/cross-team members to learn from one another and to come up with ideas for improvement

- structuring the composition of groups to include employees with different qualifications in the work group

- including coaching of colleagues and team members as an explicit part of job descriptions.

The Institute for Employment Studies

Cummings (2001) notes the optimism about the potential for high performance in 'virtual teams.' Members of these teams span physical distances and organisational boundaries, often communicating through computer technologies to complete their work across multiple locations. A number of past researchers have examined the negative consequences of physical distance for group processes, such as information exchange, interpersonal friendship, and work satisfaction. In a descriptive account, Cramton (2002) illustrates 'the mutual knowledge problem' for distributed project teams, which includes failures to discuss contextual information, uneven communication among members, and discrepancies in how quickly information is accessed. Being in different places simply makes communication more difficult for members who are geographically distributed rather than co-located.

Organisational approaches

The above discussion of strategies to support workplace learning is by no means exhaustive. Organisations have implemented a range of initiatives and strategies as part of a 'whole of organisation' approach to workplace learning. These include:

- employee development schemes, providing opportunities to develop basic skills that were not acquired in the education system, as well as a general 'learning how to learn' capability and a more positive attitude towards learning

- developmental learning plans

- learning diaries that help employees reflect on what they are learning from their day to day work, and, often, contribute to continuing professional development records

- the use of professional learning guidance/counsellors

- learning maps that help employees plan for their own learning and give the organisation a way to monitor activities that are otherwise hard to monitor, evaluate and explain to higher levels of management

- establishment of open-learning centres.

Learning plans or individual professional plans, dissociated from performance appraisal systems or other mechanisms for career development, are favoured by many organisations as a means of guiding learning. Such plans cover both short-term and long-term learning goals and include realistic strategies to achieve them by specifying a combination of employees, activities, mentoring and coaching, job assignments and other resources to achieve goals. Some plans also emphasise strategies to obtain feedback necessary for self-assessment and reshaping of goals. Evaluation of employee development schemes has pointed to the importance of independent learning advisers, located in open learning centres,

as a critical factor in raising participation levels and delivering learning outcomes (Toronto, 1993).

Workplace learning and organisational performance

Workplace learning and new job responsibility

Wahlgren (2002) discusses the ways in which employees can get up to speed in their new jobs. He suggests that the main source of information is the existing employee (that is, if they are still there). The informal workplace learning that occurs by spending time with the job's predecessor is immense. The veteran is the best source of information about a new job; they will be able to tell the new employee about the challenges the job presents and changes that need to be made. New employees should seek feedback on their efforts to understand their job and the organisation. Talking to customers and clients is also an effective method of learning, finding out what they like about the job that the predecessor had done, and how they could do it better. Colleagues are precious resources. It is very important to get comments from colleagues on current processes. Moreover, new employees should spend time getting to know their colleagues socially. Being well liked in the workplace can be as important as how well an employee does their job.

Workplace learning and performance

Stern and Sommerland (1999) make reference to the various meanings of workplace learning, and explain how the all-encompassing nature of the term makes it difficult to establish how far there has been a shift in human resource management towards making more effective use of the workplace as a source of learning. Is there more of it? Or a shift in the balance between different kinds of learning at work? Or simply a labelling or re-packaging of learning that has always gone on but has not been recognised in the past?

In a similar vein, McCormack (2000) notes that workplace learning and performance cannot be linked directly, because of the number of variables that can be identified in the organisational setting. This lends weight to the argument that workplace learning needs to be carefully integrated with other human resource strategies in order to achieve effective working practices:

> *Establishing the linkage between workplace learning and performance improvement is hazardous. Surveys that seek to establish a relationship between employers' training practices and productivity tend to capture the 'hard end' of on-the-job and formal training, and not the more qualitative effects associated with on-the-job learning as a continuous and fluid process.* (Stern and Sommerland, 1999)

The success or failure of any strategy to support workplace learning, as Owen (2001) argues, may not rest with the strategy itself, but may be influenced by a range of other contextual factors. For example, an organisation may have implemented action-learning sets, secondments or cross-functional teams, with a sophisticated means by which to evaluate success or failure of learning outcomes; but the initiatives may still have difficulties because other policies, procedures or cultures may be in contradiction with aspects of the initiative. Owen concludes by suggesting that when implementing strategies to support workplace learning, it is necessary to widen the focus beyond the immediate goals of the initiative and to consider the ways in which organisational factors enhance or inhibit achievement of successful learning outcomes.

Despite considerable research, very few studies address what has actually been learned. Unlike training, which has specified learning outcomes, a great deal of workplace learning is open-ended and informal. Recent UK studies suggest that most learning in the workplace arises naturally out of the demands and challenges of work, solving problems, social interactions in the workplace with colleagues, customers or clients *etc.*

In sum, there is evidence linking workplace learning and performance improvement, but it is mostly indirect. The reasons for this are many and complex, but primarily because of the elusive and informal nature of much workplace learning. Even when employee learning is achieved, there are many reasons why the wider workplace may not benefit. Organisations must be aware that the developmental aspects of workplace learning can be hampered by careerism, anxiety, stress, deference and unresolved conflict.

Introducing workplace learning in practice

Barriers to workplace learning

The research literature regarding the actual issues associated with the introduction of workplace learning generally focuses on the barriers faced in moving towards or achieving a learning environment. In terms of the kinds of organisational enabling structures that can facilitate or hinder workplace learning, Schuck (1996) draws attention to the need to foster an 'environment of inquiry,' in which employees talk to each other, share ideas and recognise workplace learning opportunities. Whether employees respond to a workplace designed to support inquiry, depends largely on the quality of social interactions and the attitudes of employees and managers. Employees must feel free and be eager to ask questions, to feel that their requests would be received positively, and must demonstrate a willingness to share their knowledge.

The beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of the manager are crucial here. As Eraut *et al.* (1998) concluded from their study:

> *… it follows that of all the mechanisms used at organisational level to promote learning, the most significant is likely to be the appointment and development of its managers.*

This quote begs the question as to why some managers, and indeed some organisations, would not want to support workplace learning. In the majority of organisations, managers are rewarded for their skills, knowledge and understanding. More specifically, managers are rewarded for possessing that skill, knowledge and understanding, and not for disseminating that skill, knowledge and understanding to their employees. As skill, knowledge and understanding is an important resource, it follows that there are likely to be considerable organisational politics associated with how it is acquired, and how access to it is controlled.

For example, Coopey (1996) has emphasised the way in which employees who perceive themselves to be disadvantaged in organisations that support workplace learning, are likely to try and defend their skill, knowledge and understanding to protect the status and influence that it gives them. This applies not only to managers, but also to employees lower down the organisational hierarchy, who may not want their skills, knowledge and understanding to be elicited, as others may use it for the purposes of control. There is also a danger that by encouraging continuous learning and development among employees, they will begin to question the way in which managers behave. This is a good thing for the organisation, but some managers may not like it, and some organisational cultures may not be compatible with this.

Skruber (1987) highlights the importance of a workplace learning culture that encourages, rewards and provides mechanisms for learning. Barriers in the culture include the need to be right every time, a tendency not to admit mistakes and therefore not to learn from them, and a feeling that formal classroom learning is the only way to acquire new skills and knowledge. The extent to which individual employees are ready and willing for workplace learning is also an important issue. Employees may be content with jobs that are clearly defined and that do not require ongoing learning and reflection. Learning and reflection requires personal change that might not be desired by the employee or the organisation.

It is important to note that all employees do not receive the same opportunities for learning in the workplace. Research by Rainband (2000) suggests that unskilled employees are the least likely to receive opportunities for learning. More specifically, part-time employees, many of whom are women, have less access to opportunities for workplace learning than full-time employees. In a recent article in *People Management* Magazine, Deeks (2001) cites figures from a recent CIPD annual training and development

survey that reports that three-quarters of organisations reported that their manual staff had no formally appointed coach or mentor, and almost half admitted that they had no structured on-the-job training.

Workplace learning can be enhanced by employees being encouraged to be proactive, reflective and creative about their learning. Some employees are motivated to take charge of their learning. However, many employees may not have such a positive orientation towards learning, nor the skills and capacities that would allow them to exploit the learning opportunities available in their workplace. Research studies suggest that employees lower down the organisational hierarchy are often ready for greater levels of autonomy than they typically exercise, and want to learn how to participate more fully in decision-making relevant to their own jobs.

Self-directed learning

Many initiatives or techniques that have been introduced by human resource departments to support workplace learning are based on the assumption that employees are motivated and skilled enough to be self-directed learners. Self-directed learning should not be difficult for employees who already know how to set realistic goals, deal with the ambiguity of unstructured learning and who can assess their progress (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). However, many employees do not have these skills. Some organisations have addressed these problems by providing a degree of structured guidance, assisted by managers, colleagues, or specialist coaches or mentors, as discussed previously.

Pay and reward

With the exception of higher education, there is very little evidence that pay and reward structures are able to provide substantial incentives to employees to acquire skills. Research by Bennett *et al.* (1992) shows that many young people are quite rational in not pursuing training — it does not give them great enough reward. In many UK organisation pay and status are rarely linked to the attainment of qualifications and to attendance at training courses, so they provide little incentive to employees to seek further training. Moreover, a significant proportion of firms offer their employees extremely limited opportunity for progression.

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