

LEARNING FROM EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT SCHEMES

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1. Learning from Employee Development Schemes: Employment Brief

1.1 Introduction

This brief has been produced following interest expressed by members of the IES Research Club in the subject of employee development schemes (EDS). The increasing popularity and diversity of employee development initiatives appears to have generated a demand for a review and clarification of the current state of play in this area. This brief provides such a review by evaluating the available literature including examples of company practice.

Employee development is now, more than ever, a key issue within human resources management and looks set to stay that way. Organisational change, particularly downsizing, has stimulated the need for employees at all levels to become more flexible and responsive (Donaldson, 1993). Developing employees' skills can make them more internally and externally employable and adaptable to different tasks. The required skills are not, however, necessarily directly job-related. Often the skills needed are softer ones. Confidence, communication, initiative and teamworking can all be crucial to the modern, lean organisation, skills which job-related training may not necessarily address. These are sometimes known as 'key' or 'core skills':

'Key skills are central to all work and learning, valued by employers, and essential for individuals ... needed to develop the self reliance, flexibility, and breadth that all individuals need to succeed in the workplace and in life' (CBI, 1998)

Employers also require high levels of commitment from staff, and employee development has been cited as one possible way to increase morale and work satisfaction (HOST, 1998; IDS, 1998). These are the sort of objectives which have helped to generate the current levels of interest in alternative types of employee development.

Against a background populated with concepts such as 'the learning organisation' and 'lifelong learning' and initiatives including Investors in People (IiP) and Individual Learning

Accounts (ILAs) employers have been encouraged from all sides to maximise the learning potential of their employees. The growth of investment in more general skills development for employees is also a reflection of this. Research suggests that this type of non-vocational or non job-specific employee development activity has a variety of benefits for both employer and employee (HOST, 1998; DfEE 1996; Industrial Society, 1996). Ever since Ford introduced their pioneering EDAP scheme, employee development schemes have evolved and diversified to the extent where the term can now encompass a wide variety of definitions. The core characteristics of an employee development scheme have been defined as follows (HOST, 1998):

- Voluntary participation of employees in learning unrelated to their job.
- Learning takes place in employees' own time.
- There is common access to the scheme for all who are eligible.
- Costs (financial or time) are shared between employer and employee.
- Employees take charge of their own development.

There are numerous variations on this model in existence. However, these are the key characteristics which form the basis of most schemes.

Recent research has attempted to evaluate the extent of usage of EDS and the rationale behind companies' introduction of schemes. In addition, the research has begun to draw together best practice for the implementation and maintenance of schemes from the experiences of companies with established EDS in operation. It offers an up-to-date overview of the type of employee development initiative currently in operation, as well as evidence of the potential outcomes for both employer and employee participants.

1.2 Aims of this Employment Brief

By reviewing the available literature this brief will:

- provide a summary of employee development options currently in use and the type of employee targeted by these
- outline the present climate with regard to learning and development
- summarise the key characteristics of an EDS and how the schemes work in practice
- analyse the literature relating to the implementation of EDS to identify key factors for success and common pitfalls
- offer an overview of the potential benefits to employer and employee and assess the evidence in this area.

2. Employee Development: An Overview

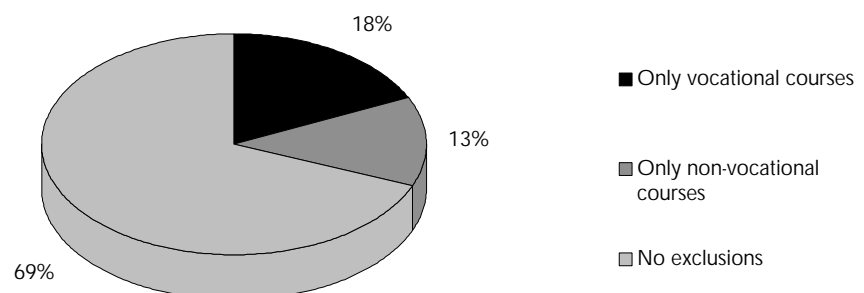
2.1 The Current State of Employee Development

It is expected that employers will train their employees to perform tasks specifically related to their job. This training is carried out in work hours and is paid for by the employer. What is of interest for the purposes of this brief is the tendency in recent years for companies to offer their employees opportunities for broader skills development. These skills may be vocational or indirectly job-related but can also be completely non-vocational.

This type of development has become increasingly common. An estimate in 1993 suggested that approximately 50 UK enterprises supported EDS. A survey conducted by the HOST consultancy for the DfEE last year found that between 1,970 and 2,275 firms in England are now involved in EDS in some way. This finding would suggest that EDS have become firmly established within HR practice.

However, this increase hides changes to the character of EDS and its delivery. The first schemes to be introduced in Britain were predominantly single company schemes. Since then the involvement of TECs and other organisations has generated a number of collaborative schemes which require less commitment and input from the employer. TECs have received development funding from the DfEE to target the development of EDS since 1994. The large numbers of participating companies reported by

Figure 2:1 Type of learning supported under scheme



Source: HOST survey, 1998

some TECs has been linked to group or collaborative schemes (HOST, 1998). The size of organisations involved in EDS may further influence interpretation of the figures. Some TECs have targeted SMEs but others have prioritised companies with over 50 employees. Thirty-four per cent of companies in the HOST survey employed between 200 and 999 employees, and 30 per cent 1,000 or more employees. Only 23 per cent employed fewer than 50 people. This suggests that the targeting of SMEs by TECs has not had a great impact (HOST, 1998), although previous research on the use of EDS by smaller firms has demonstrated the effectiveness of schemes in this environment (Parsons, Gordon and Walsh, 1997; Firth and Goffey, 1997).

EDS has also become something of a catch-all term used to refer to a variety of employee development initiatives in addition to the original single company type, formal EDS. From the literature it is possible to identify several main variations in employee development initiatives which are intended to promote broader skills development among employees.

2.2 Types of Employee Development Initiative

The following are all variations on the core model of an EDS outlined earlier:

- **Learning Centres** — this refers to collections of resources set up by employers, usually contained within a separate room or building which is accessible to all employees during their own time. The learning centre may contain video/audio learning materials, computers, study packs, books and reference material. Employees are encouraged to make use of the resources, sometimes with guidance available although there are not usually formal taught courses. A learning centre may, however, be used to complement taught courses on a more formal EDS.

Case study: Eastern Group

Eastern Group ..., formerly Eastern Electricity, is moving away from the traditional functional model of training to one where responsibility for personal development rests as much with individual employees as with the company. As part of this strategy, Eastern Group is investing a lot of time and money in its new Personal Development Centres (PDCs) PDCs are well-stocked resource centres providing information in a variety of media, available on a drop-in basis with opening hours that are much longer than a public library. Whereas before employees might have been allocated a place on a set training programme, now they have access to a wide range of development and training opportunities, including PDCs The cost of the centres is biased towards the start-up investment—estimated at approximately £20,000 per centre. Once a centre is up and running, and

discounting maintenance costs, to update with new material will cost around £5,000 annually.

Source: Macqueen, 1996

- **Distance learning/Intranets** — Some companies offer distance learning courses to employees either from independent providers or using packages tailored to the company's requirements. The course materials themselves or an index of available topics may be available via an intranet accessible at each employees' computer terminal. This option is most popular where staff are spread over several sites, often some distance apart. As with a learning centre, this option enables staff to learn at their own pace and convenience. Learning via intranet also ensures that the material provided is always the most up-to-date available. The right software can also enable on-line interaction between student and tutor which may include guidance or evaluation. The use of on-line training must, however, be monitored to ensure it is being utilised appropriately, and the possibility of this surveillance opportunity being abused by managers must be recognised and dealt with.

Case study: Ford Motor Company

Ford has a proven record of innovative approaches to training and development ... [and] towards the end of 1997 began to see the potential of combining interactive learning with a delivery system which made use of the corporate intranet A new intranet training delivery system called Solstra ... offers a means of packaging learning materials, including CBT, in a customised and structured way. It is a framework that can provide links to any information available on an intranet In addition, Solstra is capable of providing links to related learning resources on the Internet, or directions to off-line support materials available in libraries or training centres Paul Pestell, manager of Technical and Commercial Services for training and development at Ford] says, '... all we thought we needed to do was to advertise the URL (intranet location address) of a new training programme and let people get on with it. But we realised that we would not be able to keep track of the learning and training that people receive, and whether it was appropriate for their needs'. The Solstra administration system solves this problem because it monitors the progress of learners, keeps records of assessments and modules completed, and can automatically update individual records of training and skills profiles.

Source: Employee Development Bulletin 103, 1998

- **Careers Guidance/Counselling** — Another form of employee development is the provision of guidance to aid staff in identifying their development needs and opportunities. The aim of such provision is not only to enhance the career

development of staff but also to help them to fulfil their personal potential and encourage them to take control of their own development. This type of approach has in some cases been developed by employers in conjunction with the government's Gateways to Learning initiative (Employee Development Bulletin 37, 1993). Under this scheme employees can exchange vouchers for counselling relating to career development and training. The advice is confidential and participation is voluntary. The provision of careers guidance generally forms part of a wider training and development programme and can be linked to both job-related and non-job-related development.

- **Taught Courses/Classes** — This is the main method of development used by the more traditional EDS but the variation within these remains significant.
 - **TEC Supported/Collaborative Schemes** — An estimated 62 per cent of TECs support EDS either through single company or group schemes (HOST, 1998). Collaborative schemes usually involve smaller companies who liaise with the TEC to implement and administer the scheme. Single company schemes can also be supported by TECs in this way but often to a lesser extent, with the TEC taking more of a guiding role. Funding in both cases is usually provided jointly by TEC and employer or by the employer alone. TECs often aim to completely transfer responsibility for funding and running the EDS to individual organisations once the scheme is established. The TEC provides a link between education providers and employers and can offer advice and guidance to both employer and employee. A survey last year found that only 11 per cent of EDS were group or collaborative schemes (HOST, 1998). Collaborative or managed schemes were also found to offer guidance to employees less frequently than single company in-house schemes. However, these figures must be interpreted with care since it has been suggested that there may be a lack of awareness and distinctiveness of EDS among firms involved in multiple schemes, and this could have affected survey responses.

Case study: Heart of England TEC

The project, which began in September 1993 ... has worked with eight employers of different sizes, sectors and philosophies to establish Employee Development Programmes which fit their particular needs. The smallest, Armstrong Staff Bureau, employs just 15 permanent staff and joined the project following successful achievement of IIP status. Oxfordshire County Council Commercial Services on the other hand has 2,400 employees based at 600 locations in the county, including school cleaners, roadworkers and caterers, many of them part-time. Supported by Employment Department funding in a major project managed by

the TEC, the employers have offered typically £100 worth of learning activities to each employee. These activities must be undertaken outside working hours and specifically must not relate to a person's current job (some job-related requests have been generated by the project, but the TEC has insisted that these are funded by the employer alone) The project has built up links between employers and education providers such as colleges and adult education centres. This is helping to tailor the services more closely to the needs of this section of the population.

Source: Corlett, 1994

- **Single-Company EDS** — This is the most common way for an EDS to be organised, the HOST survey suggesting that 85 per cent of EDS are in-house. As mentioned earlier, companies implementing such schemes may make use of an advisory organisation like a TEC, but the characteristics of the scheme itself will be unique to the company in question. In-house EDS are often supported by a resource centre of the type described earlier. However, the EDS is structured around taught courses, the choice of which is left to individual employees. Although single company schemes based around taught courses most closely resemble the original blueprint for an EDS there are several areas of variation within the bounds of this type of scheme. These include type of courses offered, providers of courses and levels of financial support, issues which will be discussed in more detail later.

Case study: Vauxhall Motors

In November 1993, Vauxhall Motors launched its Employee Development Centre, *Guidelines*. The Guidelines Centre not only provides employees with advice and guidance but in addition provides a wide range of learning opportunities. Before Guidelines was set up, a tuition refund system was in operation but the take-up from this was very small. In addition the scheme was not well publicised ... An open learning centre had been running for approximately seven years but it was geared towards technical skills and was under-utilised In the past, interest had been shown in adult education but, due to working patterns, the majority of employees were unable to enrol for classes. There was a sense of frustration from employees who had attended adult education displays in that interest had been raised, but that any action following this was extremely difficult.

... People are perceived as the company's most valuable asset and therefore investing in those people is seen as a legitimate business objective. Employee development ... encourages employees to take responsibility for their own learning, in a realistic way. The key focus of Guidelines is the guidance interview In order for Guidelines to be credible it was important that right from the start people's identified needs were met. The Guidelines staff liaised

with local education providers who came into the plant to run courses, which follow the shift pattern. The open learning centre went through a massive change Although the courses run in Guidelines are job related, this is defined as widely as possible in order to encourage people back to learning. However, if an employee wanted to take up a non-vocational learning opportunity, which was in no way related to their job, the Guidelines staff would provide necessary information and advocate on their behalf to ensure the learning need was met.

... Guidelines is now two-and-a-half years old and despite the scepticism of some people who saw it as 'the flavour of the month', it is going from strength to strength The range of courses is extensive. Examples include NVQs in welding or car maintenance; a GNVQ in Business Studies; language courses; and a BA in Business Studies There is minimal drop-out from courses, which are running at 'full capacity'.

Source: Parsons and Stickland (1996)

2.3 Summary

These descriptions have given some idea of the type of development initiative which may be referred to by the term employee development scheme. They all aim to promote broader skills development among employees.

Although the definition of an EDS is no longer clear cut the recent HOST survey suggests that the most common type of scheme remains single-company and offers either vocational or non-vocational courses (69 per cent of schemes including both these types of learning). This type of scheme is closest to the original EDS blueprint.

Case study: Ford EDAP – the EDS 'blueprint'

Ford's Employee Development and Assistance Programme was created in 1987 by a joint trade union and management agreement At that time, the improving of industrial relations was an avowed aim of the agreement Subsequently, the objectives were broadened to encompass career development and healthier lifestyles Under the scheme, each Ford UK employee is eligible for an annual grant of up to £200 to go towards the cost of courses which have to be undertaken on a voluntary basis, out of working time, and be distinct from all job-related training which is carried on. From the outset, it was apparent that there would be no shortage of interest in, or enthusiasm for, the programme on the part of the employees ... rather than the five per cent of employees who had been predicted to apply for grants, 15,000 employees, representing one-third of the workforce, applied for grants during the first six months of the programme's operation (Mortimer, 1990). Subsequent events have shown that this was no mere flash in the pan, for progress since then has been substantial The evidence points to Ford UK being completely convinced of

the benefits accruing to the company Individual funding has risen from £40 per employee (gross) in 1988/9 to £56.49 per employee in 1993/4. The benefits of this commitment have become all too apparent to senior staff within Ford UK As far as the participants in the scheme are concerned, there is plentiful evidence of the benefits they have derived.

Source: Maguire and Horrocks, 1995

Since this is the most popular and the most traditional form of EDS the remainder of this brief will concentrate on this type of scheme and the different ways this model is implemented in practice, although many of the points made are applicable to other forms of EDS.

3. The Current Climate Surrounding Learning

The idea of lifelong learning is one that has become progressively more popular and visible recently. Any form of learning is viewed in a positive light and a whole range of initiatives designed to promote it have been developed. This recent focus on learning has been related to societal and economic changes:

'As we approach the twenty-first century ... the challenges of rapid change are evident all around. They can be seen in radical shifts in the organisation of industry and labour markets. They are apparent in rapid changes in occupations and the demand for skills These challenges can be met, at least in part, by moving towards a learning culture for all.' (Fryer, 1997)

The particular demographic characteristics of the current and future British workforce have lent urgency to attempts to address the skill requirements of employers:

'The overwhelming majority of the workforce in the year 2000 is already at work. A smaller proportion of that workforce has undertaken any form of higher education than in most other industrialised countries. Employers which have introduced employee development have, therefore, taken the far-sighted decision to invest in maximising the potential of their existing workforce, helping plug the skills gap.' (Donaldson, 1993)

More specifically for employers, the importance currently attached to learning and the development of skills would appear to stem from the perceived need for a flexible and highly employable workforce. This need is a result of a modern business environment characterised by rapid change, competitiveness and the leaner, fitter company. The origins of the more general interest in employability have been identified as:

'i) the changing nature of the employment contract between employers and employees, with employers looking to encourage employees to take a greater responsibility for managing their own development and to offer 'employability' (ie the ability to get another job) instead of job security

ii) the changing nature of public employment policy with increasing emphasis on skill-based solutions to economic competition and work-based solutions to social deprivation.' (Hillage and Pollard, 1998)

The 'employable' person is seen as motivated, confident, adaptable, articulate, effective manager of change, good team-worker, desiring self-development, committed to quality and customer focused (Clarke, 1997). These are the characteristics required to best navigate the current work environment. The organisation of work is now less structured and the idea of a 'job for life' is unrealistic. Flexibility and adaptability, are desirable at the individual, the organisational and the societal levels:

'Lifelong learning can help people to seize new opportunities, engage critically with change and shape their worlds by asserting some ownership and direction over their own lives, in work and beyond, through both individual and collective activity.' (Fryer, 1997)

There are ideas and initiatives around, which encourage learning at some or all of these levels as a means of working towards this flexibility. However, at present, participation in learning has been found to be skewed towards those who have a previous history of learning, have more qualifications and a well-paid job. Those who are less likely to participate in learning tend to have left school at the minimum leaving age, have a lower paid, often manual job and also tend to be older (Tamkin and Hillage, 1997; Maguire and Horrocks, 1995). Training and development opportunities have not usually been targeted at this 'non-learning' group. Employee development schemes stand out due to their origins as a way of developing manual workers through broader skills development unrelated to the sort of job-related training they would traditionally receive. The EDS approach fits with the current drive to encourage lifelong learning for all, both at a societal and an organisational level.

3.1 Government-led initiatives

Britain lags behind its European competitors in terms of the level of adult participation in training and development outside work, reducing our ability to compete effectively in the skills market. This makes the development of skill levels necessarily a top priority for government. The overall approach being taken is two-fold. Firstly, to improve the opportunities and funding available and secondly, to heighten the awareness and motivation of individuals when it comes to learning. The creation of a culture of lifetime learning in Britain is the ultimate goal.

Government policy is still evolving in the area of lifelong learning. The Investors in People initiative has helped encourage employers to develop their employees and relate this development more closely to business objectives. The introduction of an EDS has been linked to the achievement of the standard in some cases (DfEE, 1996). However, more recent developments have focused on enabling individuals to take charge of their own learning so as to improve their overall skills and therefore employability. This trend is reflected in the

rationale behind Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) which are currently building up to a full launch in the year 2000. These aim to stimulate interest in learning amongst individuals, who will be expected to invest some of their own money as well as receiving funding from other sources such as the government or employers. Individuals will be offered help to plan their development and further learning opportunities may come in the form of the University for Industry which will be launched shortly after ILAs.

3.2 The Learning Organisation

Some employers have come to realise the competitive value of employees in terms of the skills and knowledge they possess, and are seeking to maximise and harness this resource. By developing employees at all levels, employers can increase the depth and range of this reservoir of knowledge. A survey carried out by The Industrial Society in 1997 found that over two-thirds of organisations are striving to become learning organisations, a finding which demonstrates the perceived value of learning. Employee development fits in with the desire to initiate new learning, but also contributes to another aspect of creating a learning organisation, namely sharing knowledge. Knowledge is most valuable to the organisation when there is a process of exchange and communication supporting it, enabling employees to learn from each other. The establishment of a learning culture within an organisation both helps such processes develop but is also sustained by the learning initiatives themselves. For example, the existence of a learning culture which values and encourages learning can ease the introduction of new learning and development initiatives by making them more readily accepted within the organisation. Projects such as an EDS may help sustain a learning culture by making development opportunities more accessible, especially to those employees to whom learning is an unfamiliar and perhaps daunting prospect.

Case study: London Borough of Lewisham

Like many other local authorities Lewisham is under severe financial constraints To survive and improve in this environment would require the involvement of all employees There had always existed a high level of support for training and development amongst the ranks of elected members and the corporate management team. The benefits of creating a learning authority were quickly picked up on by elected members and senior managers.

... Learning is now recognised as something that everyone is personally responsible for and involved in. It is no longer seen as something which is 'done to you'. Although many staff have always been willing learners, there previously existed no expectation that what they learnt they would share with others ... This new expectation that learning will be shared with others – to

avoid re-inventing the wheel, utilise time and be more accountable for costs – is now more evident.

Source: Industrial Society (1997)

The increased interest shown by companies in becoming learning organisations and, as part of this process, generating a culture of learning among employees, is an important feature of an environment which has seen a significant growth in employee development (Donaldson, 1993). The Industrial Society's findings indicate that many employers believe common sense dictates that knowledge and learning should be shared and a significant number think that learning can give a competitive edge to a company. The concept of a learning organisation can be seen to have influenced attempts via EDS to involve all employees in some form of learning (Holden, 1996; Metcalf, 1992).

3.3 Summary

As well as offering an overview of the current climate surrounding learning, this section has outlined two broad areas which characterise current attitudes to learning. Firstly, government led initiatives aimed at introducing the idea of lifelong learning to Britain as a whole and secondly, the concept of the learning organisation which has prompted many employers to recognise the potential value of a learning culture within their organisation. This gives some idea of the environment in which EDS have become more and more popular and the background against which schemes are operating. The next chapter looks more specifically at issues associated with the introduction of an employee development scheme.

4. Developing an Employee Development Scheme

4.1 Key characteristics of an EDS

From the literature several basic features can be identified which can be said to characterise the classic type EDS.

- The **voluntary** nature of participation. Employees are encouraged to take part in learning unrelated to their job as a means of personal development but participation is optional rather than compulsory.
- **Employees' own time** is used for the learning which may take a range of different forms.
- **Common access** means that everyone eligible to take part in the scheme (usually the whole workforce) has the same entitlement to participate.
- **Costs are shared** between employer and employee. The employer pays all or part of course costs and the employee may be required to make a small, financial contribution, buy a course book or simply contribute their own time.
- **Learning is self-directed** with employees taking charge of their own development. Some schemes do, however, provide guidance for employees on their choice of activity.

These are core characteristics which typify an EDS in its traditional form (DfEE, 1996). EDS often have a variety of other features, but these are not generally fundamental to the design of a scheme, instead being more incidental to the operation of a particular scheme. Characteristics such as access, cost-sharing and the type of course offered, vary between individual schemes. For example, some schemes only allow completely non-vocational courses while others sanction both vocational and non-vocational choices. Levels of funding vary (in the main between £50 and £150 per participant, with significant exceptions) and in some cases vocational courses may have more available funding than non-vocational. Although EDS are usually open to all, schemes may be targeted at certain groups within the workforce, most frequently lower level employees. This gives some idea of the type of variation which can occur around the core features mentioned above. As each scheme is unique and tailored to the requirements of the individual

organisation, the use of a model EDS with the aforementioned core characteristics is a way of making more generalised comments.

It should be remembered that approaches to developing and implementing an EDS will necessarily vary according to the characteristics and requirements of a particular company. These may include the size of the organisation, the existing situation with regard to training and development, or the strategy and priorities of the company (DfEE, 1996).

4.2 Why introduce an EDS?

There appears to be a range of reasons why companies decide to introduce an employee development scheme. It seems to be a combination of some of these reasons rather than a single one which motivates most employers (HOST, 1998; Employee Development Bulletin 37, 1993).

According to the survey carried out by HOST last year the most popular reason for introducing an EDS is to encourage learning in the work environment and create a learning culture. The second most common motive is the desire to establish a wider base for staff development, *ie* offering a different but complementary approach to development to those already in operation. The final main motive of employers is the idea of an EDS improving the motivation, commitment and loyalty of staff. Other reasons have been given for introducing a scheme but these tend to be peripheral rather than central. For example, EDS as support to liP, industrial relations support, or a way of achieving targets set out in the company business plan. These findings concerning the reasons cited by companies for the

Table 4.1 Main reasons for introducing the scheme*

	Number	%
To encourage learning in the work environment	22	34.3
Wider basis for staff development	20	31.2
To encourage staff commitment, motivation and loyalty	12	18.7
To assist the acquisition/reacquisition of the learning habit	11	17.1
Achieve targets in company business plan	7	10.9
As support to liP programme	4	6.2
Restores employees' confidence in firm	3	4.6
Industrial relations support/bargaining	2	3.1
Other	4	6.2

*Percentages do not sum to 100 per cent because of multiple response

Source: HOST EDS survey, 1998

introduction of an EDS are widely supported in the literature (PSI, 1993; Donaldson, 1993; Maguire and Horrocks, 1995)

4.2.1 Who is using EDS?

The HOST research found that the biggest take-up of EDS has been by organisations with over 200 employees. By sector the highest take-up of schemes is in production and public services. Information regarding the degree of use by different levels of staff within an organisation suggests a fairly consistent pattern across staff groups. However, research has also suggested that those who gain most from EDS participation are lower level employees. A survey conducted by The Industrial Society in 1996 indicated that higher level staff have more access to other forms of development such as mentoring and coaching. Although EDS have roots amongst the manual workers in the car manufacturing industry, there is evidence to suggest that lower level white collar employees are now also being targeted by EDS (IDS, 1998; Employee Development Bulletin 60, 1994; Donaldson, 1996)

4.3 Implementing an EDS

Recent surveys and case study literature provide an insight into which factors combine to form a 'recipe for success' when introducing an EDS to a company. Before outlining these specific factors it is helpful to look at the bigger picture. The 1998 HOST report suggests that employers take a range of views on how an EDS is positioned within the organisation.

- The EDS may be seen as a central part of overall organisational strategy and culture.
- The EDS may be viewed as a significant part of the company's HR policy.
- The scheme can be seen as a positive benefit or extra opportunity for staff.

These views reflect three levels at which an EDS may be established within the organisation. The report's findings indicate that the most successful level at which to locate an EDS is the first, because it aligns most closely with the factors (such as those below) identified in effective schemes. This is the approach which gives a scheme the most significant role at the heart of the organisation, particularly as it gives the EDS an important position in processes of organisational change.

More specific factors to consider when dealing with the practicalities of implementing an EDS can also be identified from the literature.

- **Sustained commitment** — It must be recognised from the outset that the scheme will take time to become established and successful. Visible evidence of long-term commitment will help allay staff fears that funding may be cut off, leaving them unable to complete courses. (Firth and Goffey, 1997)
- The **credibility** of the scheme must be established within the company. A demonstration of commitment to it may help, but it is also wise to be open and clear about the reasons behind the introduction of the EDS (Employee Development Bulletin 37, 1993). This can help to reduce the cynicism of employees in the early stages.
- **Management commitment** is crucial to success. Senior managers must be seen to actively support the scheme. Commitment from the highest level will help to make the learning principles behind an EDS part of the culture of the organisation. (Maguire and Horrocks, 1995)
- **Marketing** the EDS to the employees helps improve take-up of the scheme. It also ensures that the opportunities offered by the EDS are not confused with other training and development initiatives available within the company. The best approach seems to be to promote EDS as something which is separate but linked to other initiatives (HOST, 1998; DfEE, 1996). It should be emphasised that job-related training will not diminish as a result of introducing an EDS (Maguire and Horrocks, 1995). Offering taster sessions of potential courses can also help attract participants (DfEE, 1996).
- **Guidance** — Since EDS are often targeted at those employees with distant or negative experiences of education and those with few qualifications, the provision of an advisory service can be an important factor in maximising take up of the scheme. Guidance can also help ensure that employees choose the type and level of learning which is right for them, thus minimising the risk of creating more negative experiences. (Firth and Goffey, 1997; Gibbs, 1995)
- **Employee Involvement** — Successful schemes often have some form of employee involvement. This could be through trade union input or by including several employees in the running of the EDS (Gibbs, 1995; Maguire and Horrocks, 1995).
- **Good Administration** of the scheme and adequate resources are essential to its success (DfEE, 1996). The amount of time and investment required will of course vary according to the size and complexity of the scheme. It should be made as easy as possible for participants to enrol, and response to their applications must be as rapid as possible (IDS, 1998; DfEE, 1996).
- **Provision determined by employee needs** — Decisions such as the choice of education provider and the timing and location of classes should be made according to the needs of

employees rather than what would suit the company. For example, some organisations have surveyed employees to find out the most convenient times and locations for classes, and others have run the same classes at different times to accommodate shiftworkers (Maguire and Horrocks, 1995). It has been found that courses run on-site are better attended, although for this to be economically viable, a sufficient number of employees must be willing to participate (PSI, 1993). Schemes which offer a choice of learning styles have also been acknowledged as being more successful (DfEE, 1996).

- **Feedback and Evaluation** procedures should be built into the scheme to facilitate continuous improvement. These can be simple and help measure the success of the EDS. Participants often welcome feedback and recognition of their progress too (DfEE, 1996).

Naturally there are many other ways to help an EDS become established and successful. One example is the idea adopted by some firms to reward particularly outstanding participants in their EDS and to publicise their achievements. However, the above list comprises practices found to be common to the majority of successful schemes.

Case study: Peugeot Talbot

The Assisted Development Programme (ADP) was set up in 1991 as a joint initiative between management and trade unions It was recognised that for most shopfloor workers training had traditionally been limited to the technical aspects of their jobs. Through the ADP, the intention was to direct educational opportunities towards a wider pool of employees than before The programme offers a wide range of opportunities for learning and study which are not necessarily job-related. A joint steering committee has been set up to oversee the administration of the programme. This consists of national officers from all the recognised trade unions at Peugeot Talbot ..., together with the company's personnel director and ADP training advisor. In addition there are four local level joint committees to cover each of the company's four Coventry sites.

... News about the ADP is publicised in the company newspaper, on noticeboards and in announcements broadcast over the internal radio system To apply for ADP assistance, the employee completes a form which goes to the company's administration unit When the application has been processed, the employee will receive a voucher to the value of £250 to present to the training provider. This will then be submitted by the provider to Peugeot Talbot for payment.

Source: Employee Development Bulletin 53, 1994

4.4 Realistic Expectations

Employers should not expect an EDS to be an overnight success. As mentioned earlier, it takes some time for schemes to become established and even longer for them to become embedded in company practice and culture. It has been suggested that it can take approximately six months to set up an EDS (DfEE, 1996). Case studies suggest that a single company scheme will take approximately a year to become properly established (significantly longer for group schemes). In the vast majority of cases employee take-up also improves, often greatly, with time (HOST, 1998). For example the Ford EDAP scheme reached a participation rate of over 50 per cent three years into its existence (Holden, 1996). Exact data on take-up can be limited as companies often prefer not to monitor usage of such an open access, voluntary scheme too closely, to avoid giving a negative impression to participants. What data there is indicates that repeat use of an EDS by employees is relatively high, and there is evidence that a smaller proportion go on to pursue vocational courses outside the scheme (HOST, 1998). The literature suggests that although the original choice made by employees with regard to type of learning may be completely non-vocational, later choices tend to move in a more vocational direction (Holden, 1996).

Keeping the range of subjects available to EDS participants as wide as possible ensures maximum appeal and encourages less experienced learners (Donaldson, 1993) but as they gain experience, participants may be more likely to make vocational choices which have a more direct benefit to the company, or be more likely to participate in work-related training (Maguire and Horrocks, 1995). It is notable that many case studies of EDS have found IT/computer skills courses to be one of the most popular choices (Donaldson, 1993, 1996; HOST, 1998; Employee Development Bulletin 60, 1994). Evidence of the potential overall benefits to both employer and employee will be discussed in the next chapter.

4.4.1 Potential pitfalls

As well as identifying common factors from successful schemes, an analysis of the literature can provide advance warning of common problems which may be encountered when introducing an EDS to a company. The main challenge for employers has been to overcome the initial suspicion of employees at the introduction of a scheme (Holden, 1996). The first type of suspicion stems from the fact that EDS are often introduced as part of a change process which may involve restructuring or downsizing. This is reflected in a common rationale behind a scheme's introduction, *ie* to improve the adaptability and flexibility of employees. It can often seem contradictory to employees that at a time of cost-cutting and redundancies the

company should invest in a scheme which could enable them to have golf lessons or learn French. Another cause of initial suspicion is the cynicism of staff regarding the company's rationale for introducing an EDS (Holden, 1996). This can be an important factor even in times of stability. 'There's no such thing as a free lunch' is often the prevailing attitude and some sort of catch or hidden agenda is anticipated. To help avoid or counteract the feelings of employees in both scenarios, the company's motives in introducing the scheme must be clarified. It is essential that the employer is open about the potential benefits to the firm as well as to individual participants. This will make it clear that the EDS is not simply the provision of 'something for nothing' and that returns are expected from both the company's and the participant's investment.

Case Study: a recently privatised water company

It became increasingly apparent that the launch of the pilot had coincided with a significant downturn in relations between the company and its staff Introduced when it was, the scheme raised a degree of suspicion in the minds of employees Evidence of the cynicism and scepticism reported elsewhere was clearly found in this case Views were expressed that the scheme was, for example, a 'sweetener', a 'soft soap' and that the company was using the scheme to 'buy us off'. 'You don't get something for nothing'. Another interviewee commented, 'the Gas Board did something similar and then a lot of jobs went'. Such attitudes...can be seen as reflecting a hardening of attitudes to the company more generally. Others expressed a degree of confusion: 'what is the motive behind it?' ... The longer term rationale linked to ideas of personal learning and a return to learning were lost on the majority of the target workforce.

A commonly held view amongst both participants and non-participants was that the company could have done more by way of illustrating possible learning activities and following up initial interest. ... [This] raises an interesting dilemma. Clearly such schemes are about individuals taking responsibility for their own learning, yet how much of a helping hand might be required to set them on their way? ... [There was some] speculation that if the initiative had been 'jointly' introduced as a union-management venture it would have reduced the level of cynicism which it subsequently attracted. ... The company's success in achieving a participation rate on a par with the best elsewhere lends justification to their argument that 'it should not make a difference'.

Source: Holden, 1996

Convincing managers to offer their commitment can also be problematic for similar reasons. One example of this from the literature is the experience of ICI:

Some managers have been scornful of what they called "ballet lessons for fitters". But Malcolm James [employee relations manager]

defends an open approach to development, adding: 'You might think: "How on earth can they support that!" But if that is the first step to get back into the learning habit, then we should support it. The next step from that might be far more supportable'. (Donaldson, 1993).

Embarrassment may discourage participation, especially in the face of peer pressure. There is a possibility of the EDS being given a 'back to school' association. At Baxi, for example, employees nicknamed their open learning centre 'the early learning centre' (Donaldson, 1993)

There is a danger of the line between job-related training and EDS activity becoming blurred. Applications for EDS funding must be screened in order to identify any requests for development which should be covered by existing job-related training provision. The HOST survey found limited evidence to suggest that substitution of EDS courses for job-based training may be taking place in some companies with an EDS. This goes against the aims and rationale behind the traditional type of EDS described earlier.

Other problems which may arise include over-popularity, which could result from over zealous publicising of the scheme. There is a danger of demand for courses exceeding the estimates used to decide the scheme's budget (IDS, 1998). Potential levels of demand could be ascertained to some degree by levels of response to surveys of employees' interests, or by examining the experiences of other schemes. It may be necessary to allocate extra resources to cope with demand, reduce the amount of individual grants, or have waiting lists, although this risks losing momentum and the interest of employees. The EDS must be launched with just the right amount of in-house publicity. Other potential problems are a lack of support for the scheme from line managers who may fail to encourage staff, or over-complicated application procedures which may deter potential participants.

However, despite evidence of teething problems, the overall reception given to EDS by both employers and employees is overwhelmingly positive, and very few firms seem likely to discontinue their EDS (HOST, 1998).

5. Potential Benefits of an Employee Development Scheme

The response to EDS at both employee and employer level is generally found to be overwhelmingly positive. However, the actual benefits of schemes to either group can be difficult to quantify and evidence is often anecdotal. Benefits to companies can be seen as a continuation of the benefits experienced by employees. The literature suggests that the ways employers gain from the scheme may be less tangible than expected but are nevertheless very positive.

5.1 Benefits for employees

The evidence would appear to suggest that many employees sign up to take part in an EDS with fairly modest expectations. These largely relate to attaining new skills to improve job prospects, continuing a personal interest, or simply general self development. The HOST survey found that courses leading to a qualification are more popular, which reinforces the finding that employees want to attain new skills through EDS. However, a significant minority cite the fact that the courses are discounted or free and easily accessible as their main reason for participation. However, there is no evidence to suggest that less ambitious motives result in fewer or less significant benefits to the participant.

A positive outcome commonly reported by participants is an increase in their confidence, both in their ability to learn and in themselves generally (PSI, 1993). This seems particularly to be the experience of employees with no previous qualifications at all who are more likely to have negative memories of education. The literature is littered with examples of individuals for whom participation in their company's EDS has been a revolutionary experience. For others the process has been less dramatic but no less significant in terms of personal achievement. For many employees EDS learning is an opportunity which would otherwise have been unavailable to them, for example due to financial barriers. In fact, when examining the benefits of EDS to participants it should be noted that this type of development opportunity has traditionally been aimed at lower level employees with less access to or experience of broader skills development, within or outside the workplace (PSI, 1993). The

effects of encouraging and enabling these groups to develop skills is therefore likely to be more noticeable than it would be for a target group more familiar with such opportunity.

Many employees also say that having made use of an EDS they are now more willing to learn. Repeat use of schemes is common (Employee Development Bulletin 60, 1994). The HOST research found that in embedded schemes repeat use can be over 50 per cent of participating employees. Participants can also be keen to continue learning activities either within or outside the EDS:

'An overwhelming 93 per cent [of staff who took part in an EDS at Oxford Brookes University] said that now they had started learning, they wished to go on with their studies. However, only half of these said they would do so if they had to pay — probably because of low salaries in this group.' (Donaldson, 1996)

The literature also suggests that employees may be more responsive to training which is work-related (Maguire and Horrocks, 1995). It also bodes well for companies whose aim is to create a culture of learning within the organisation for which the willingness of employees to learn is a prerequisite. Research findings also suggest that the provision of non-work related training makes employees feel more committed and valued (HOST, 1998). This is especially true of lower level staff whose only previous experience of training may be highly job-specific. The open choice provided by an EDS gives employees the chance for broader development not tied to their job. This is a chance which is welcomed by those who participate, both initially and once the scheme becomes more established (DfEE, 1996). The literature cites few instances where participants have expressed regret at taking up the opportunity (DfEE, 1996). Problems cited are generally with the design or administration of the scheme rather than with the challenges or demands of learning. Designing a scheme which incorporates appropriate support for inexperienced learners is important.

Another area in which positive outcomes have been reported by EDS participants is that of motivation at work. This is perhaps not surprising, given that improved staff motivation is often cited by employers as a reason for introducing a scheme. EDS provision often seems to foster a better relationship between staff and employer. Relationships between individuals and their colleagues have also been reported to benefit from EDS participation. Classes may provide an opportunity for employees to interact outside a work environment and a better understanding of colleagues' concerns can result.

The qualifications which can be gained by employees through an EDS (ranging from GCSEs or NVQs to a university degree) enhance the employability of individuals even if the skills are unrelated to their current job. A qualification provides concrete evidence of their ability and willingness to learn. Cases have been cited in the literature of employees who have gone on to

higher level jobs since gaining a qualification with the assistance of the EDS (Donaldson, 1996; Employee Development Bulletin 53, 1994). Skills and knowledge gained which have not been formally recognised with a qualification can also enhance an individual's employability and their confidence in their position within the labour market (IDS, 1998).

The widespread enthusiasm amongst employees with regard to EDS can even be seen to have an influence outside the firm. A 'halo' effect has been noticed in some research whereby the positive effects on scheme participants can rub off on their friends and family (Gibbs, Glendinning and McCarthy, 1995). It has been found that the experiences of the EDS participant can encourage others to take part in learning. Some more mature EDS now allow family members to make some use of the scheme, and the popularity of this is an encouraging sign for advocates of a lifelong learning culture in Britain.

5.2 Benefits for employers

The benefits of EDS reported by employers are numerous. They are, for the most part, related to motives cited for introducing schemes, but perhaps not with the same emphasis. The available literature suggests that employers currently view improved learning skills and a flexible workforce as the most desirable outcome of an EDS. However, from evidence of the actual outcomes it would seem that increased motivation and confidence of the workforce are the most extensively noticed benefit.

- **Motivation/confidence of employees** — As mentioned above this is an outcome often reported by participants. For the company the benefits of this improvement across a significant section of the workforce are seen as considerable. Employees are considered to be more independent and responsible for themselves and more positive in their relationship with the firm, which means improved morale (DfEE, 1996, IDS, 1998). They also have more confidence in adapting to new working practices and are less likely to be intimidated by change. The extent and range of such benefits are difficult to measure, but the fact that these type of improvements can be a result of a successful EDS is almost universally acknowledged. (Donaldson, 1993; DfEE, 1996)
- **The Learning Organisation** — The fact that employees are often more willing to learn, and have more confidence in their ability as a result of participation, can help move the organisation as a whole in the direction of becoming a learning organisation (DfEE, 1996). An EDS can help encourage openness to learning and an awareness that the company values it. The survey conducted by HOST found that over half of employees surveyed felt that EDS generated a more positive attitude to learning among employees. EDS

participation can also improve the skills actually required in the learning process or reintroduce employees to them, especially those with negative or distant memories of education. A good take-up level for an EDS can make learning seem a natural part of organisational life rather than something out of the ordinary — the beginnings of a learning culture.

- **Skills/Knowledge** — The actual knowledge and skills gained by employees through an EDS, which may or may not result in a recognised qualification, adds to the resources available to the company. Skills such as IT, languages or even sign language or first aid may be of direct use to the company (IDS, 1998; Donaldson, 1996). In the right environment the knowledge gained through an EDS can be shared, widening the influence of the scheme. Softer skills learned by employees during EDS participation are also recognised to be of value to organisations. These could include communication, learning skills or managing time and tasks (Employee Development Bulletin 60, 1994).
- **Marketing** — Many companies also see an EDS as a good selling point for them as an organisation, although this is not generally found to be a significant reason for the introduction of a scheme. An EDS can be good PR for a company, for example in the local community. This type of benefit can be maximised with presentations and recognition for particularly successful learners (DfEE, 1996). A scheme is also thought to be helpful, to a certain extent, in the recruitment and retention of staff (Gibbs, Glendinning and McCarthy, 1995). Retention issues can be particularly important for lower level staff with little prospect of promotion. An EDS develops these employees sideways rather than leaving them in a static position (Industrial Society, 1996)
- **Support to other initiatives** — It has been suggested that an EDS can support initiatives such as IIP or the quality movement (DfEE, 1996). There is evidence of this in some case studies but overall evidence is inconclusive. An EDS can be seen as enhancing general support for the development strategy of the firm amongst employees (Industrial Society, 1996) but has not been shown to have a significant influence on the success of other initiatives.
- **Spin-off benefits** — The effects of an EDS on the workforce is not necessarily restricted to those employees who actually take up the development opportunities available through the scheme. For example, following the introduction of the REAL scheme, Rover noticed an increase of involvement in development activity generally, over and above that directly related to the EDS. There was also a growth in requests from employees to see their personal development file. Use of the development centres was up by 25 per cent, compared to a ten per cent participation rate for the EDS. Rover also noticed a

decrease in absenteeism and a strong upturn in the number of inputs to its suggestion scheme. (Donaldson, 1993)

Overall, the evidence suggests that the development of employees can enable them to make a more significant contribution to the achievement of business goals. A more highly skilled and adaptable workforce can give the competitive edge required for success (Industrial Society, 1996).

6. Conclusions

The literature shows that in the relatively short space of time since EDS first arrived on the scene, the term 'employee development scheme' has come to refer to a diverse variety of initiatives related to the development of broader skills for employees. However, within this diversity the most popular type of scheme remains that closely related to the original, and a number of characteristics common to such schemes can be outlined. The popularity of EDS amongst employers has been linked to the current climate which places great value on lifelong learning. The desire for companies to become learning organisations with an internal culture of learning has also been influential in the expansion of the EDS model.

Research into EDS provision and evidence from case studies of specific organisations offers an insight into best practice for implementing an EDS. The experience of organisations with schemes has identified problems which can arise and ways to prevent or overcome these. Responses to EDS from both employers and employees who participate have been overwhelmingly positive and there is evidence of considerable benefits to both parties. Benefits for employers closely relate to their main reasons for introducing a scheme, namely increasing competitiveness, flexibility, staff motivation and job satisfaction.

In summary, these are the key points to remember in order to successfully plan, implement and maintain an EDS:

Offer sustained commitment — recognise that a scheme will take time to become established and offer visible evidence of the company's commitment.

Establish the **credibility** of the scheme by clarifying the reasons for its introduction and being open about the motivation behind it.

Secure high level commitment and ensure that this is actively demonstrated.

Effective marketing of the scheme is essential to explain the scheme to employees and attract participants.

Provide guidance to participants on choice of activity and learning skills.

Involve employees in the running of the scheme, either directly or through trade unions.

Set up **good administrative procedures** to make it as easy as possible for participants to enrol. Ensure applications are processed rapidly.

Determine employee needs in terms of type of course, timing and location of classes and learning style. These needs, not the company's, should determine provision. Employee needs could be ascertained using a survey.

Build in **feedback and evaluation** procedures as part of the scheme, to facilitate continuous improvement and measure success. Participants welcome feedback and recognition of achievements too, but this type of monitoring must not be too formal or threatening.

6.1 The future

The future looks good for EDS. The available research suggests that few firms are likely to stop investing in schemes. Employee take-up has often been shown to rise year on year and repeat use of schemes by participants is relatively common. The introduction of Individual Learning Accounts looks set to encourage more people to get involved in learning and they are likely to complement and work alongside employer driven EDS.

A couple of trends within EDS provision have been identified. Employees' EDS participation is increasingly becoming linked to their personal development plan (IDS, 1998). It is now more common for participants to articulate what they expect to gain or have already gained from their EDS learning. There may also be a requirement for the benefit of the learning to the company to be demonstrated. Employers believe that these moves will help maximise the benefits of the learning. However, such requirements could be seen to contradict the idea of open choice inherent in the traditional model of an EDS. A more general trend within the HR function is the delegation of many duties and responsibilities to the line. This means line managers are increasingly involved in employee development activities. Some cases suggest that encouragement from this level can increase take-up of an EDS.

As broader skills development and learning becomes more popular and widespread, the issue of how to deal with non-participation in learning becomes more pressing. At present employers encourage take-up of learning opportunities, but there is little evidence of any action being taken with regard to involving persistent non-learners. This is an area where further research is needed.

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