

At a glance



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This publication consolidates and synthesises a body of research conducted over the past few years on the topic of training provided by employers for their workforces.

Key messages

- The reasons why employers provide training can be sub-divided into 'push' and 'pull' factors. Push factors are those that compel employers to provide training (for example, equipment licences). Pull factors, on the other hand, are those that encourage employers to provide training (for example, training to meet skills shortages). By and large, employers provide training because they expect it to benefit the organisation.
- There are marked differences in how employers meet their skills needs. These are dependent upon both size of enterprise and industry sector.
- Employers choose the form of skill development that best meets their needs. The relevance of the training and flexibility of delivery are more important to them than who provides it and whether or not it is accredited.
- Employers are generally aware of the formal vocational education and training (VET) system offering nationally recognised training but find it complex and difficult to navigate. Intermediary groups, like industry associations, play an important role in demystifying the system.
- Employers' use of the formal VET system is substantial and growing. Those employers who do not use the VET system can be drawn into it by better provision of information and advice, improving relevance and flexibility, and lowering costs.
- The process of gaining employer commitment to nationally recognised training has been described as a three-stage process of engagement, extension and integration. Reaching the final phase requires a 'VET evangelist' to sell the benefits of nationally recognised training to senior managers and then to embed competency standards in the organisations' human resource systems; for example, in specifying job position profiles for recruitment.



Context

Two well-established findings about employer-provided training form the backdrop to this research. First, the provision of training and its associated expenditure are highly variable across employers, notably by industry and employment size. Second, employer engagement with the formal system of vocational education and training is substantial, and growing, but a number of employers are not satisfied with what the system has to offer them.

What light does this latest research shed on developing an explanation for these two findings? The value of the research lies in the breadth of the settings considered, ranging from the least skilled work (seasonal agricultural labourers) to the most highly skilled (process operators on oil and gas platforms), and from very small firms through to large multi-national corporations. It also lies in its depth, as the projects adopt a case study methodology to examine particular industries or particular types of employers. In synthesising this work, a consistent pattern has emerged which has enabled a number of general findings to be articulated.

Types of employer-provided training

Employer-provided training, more recently referred to as workplace learning (NCVER 2003), comes in many shapes and forms; for example, frontline management training, supply chain training provided by vendors and equipment manufacturers, apprenticeships and traineeships, and training in occupational health and safety. Two ways of categorising the various forms of training are adopted in this publication.

The first is whether the training is *structured* or *unstructured*. Structured training, sometimes also referred to as formal training, has been defined as:

... training activities which have a specified content or predetermined plan designed to develop employment related skills and competencies. It consists of instruction or a combination of instruction and monitored practical work. (ABS 2003, p.43)

In contrast, unstructured training consists of training activities which do not have a specified content or predetermined plan. An example of the distinction is training in a new piece of software. If this is done through a course conducted by the software developers, it would be regarded as structured training. If, however, the employee is expected to learn by experimentation, it would be classified as unstructured training.

The second way of categorising training is whether it is *accredited* or *unaccredited*. As used here, training is accredited only if it is delivered by a registered training organisation *and* leads towards a nationally recognised qualification issued through the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

When these two ways of categorising training are combined in a matrix, the end result provides three distinct types of employer-provided training, as shown in box 1.

Many employers are involved in providing *all three* types of training. Of interest, however, and the focus of this publication, is the decision-making process that employers adopt when opting to provide or purchase training of one type in preference to another. In particular, registered training organisations and policy-makers in government are interested to know the conditions under which employers opt for training provided outside the formal VET system (that is, unaccredited) to inside the system (that is, structured and accredited), and vice versa.

Box 1: Types of employer-provided training*

Unstructured and unaccredited	Informal training, conducted on the job. May take the form of self-directed study using training manuals, but without any formal assessment.
Structured and unaccredited	Formal training, but not nationally recognised under the Australian Qualifications Framework. Examples include training provided by a product supplier installing new equipment or software.
Structured and accredited**	Nationally recognised training, delivered by registered training organisations, including enterprises, and leading to a qualification awarded under the Australian Qualifications Framework. This encompasses employment-based training arrangements, that is, apprenticeships and traineeships.

* The fourth and missing combination, unstructured and accredited is not applicable, except in the sense that unstructured training may eventually become accredited through recognition of prior learning.

** Employers also recognise tickets and licences as accredited and structured training, but these do not result in qualifications against the Australian Qualifications Framework (Keating et al. forthcoming).

How much training do employers provide?

Table 1 shows the provision of different forms of training by industry, drawing on the 2001–02 Training Expenditure and Practices Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and national data on apprentices and trainees held by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). The results provide a stark validation of the finding noted earlier, of substantial variation by industry in training provision for their workforces.

Around four in five employers provided unstructured training, ranging from around half of all employers in transport and storage, and communication services, to almost all employers in government administration and defence, and personal and other services. The proportion of employers providing unstructured training was around double that of those providing structured training, that is, around two in five employers. This ranged from around one in five employers in transport and storage, to around nine in ten employers in electricity, gas and water supply, and in government administration and defence.

Using the categorisation in box 1, one in five employers did not provide any form of training, two in five provided unstructured and unaccredited training only, while the remaining two in five provided structured training in addition to unstructured training. The survey questions do not allow the structured training to be sub-divided into unaccredited and accredited proportions.

The *incidence* of the provision of training as described above does not necessarily bear any relation to its *intensity*. A proxy measure of *intensity* is how much employers spend on structured training. Across all employers this averaged a net \$458.40 per employee (whether full- or part-time) during 2001–02. Mining employers spent a net \$1 643 per employee, more than twelve times the \$127 per employee spent by employers in retail.

Table 1: Employer-provided training, by industry

Industry	Provided unstructured training in 2001-02 %	Provided structured training in 2001-02 %	Expenditure on structured training in 2001-02 Net \$ per employee	New Apprentice training rates as at end 2004 %
Agriculture, forestry and fishing		not available		1.4
Mining	74.3	45.2	1 643.00	2.0
Manufacturing	83.2	33.6	434.30	5.5
Electricity, gas and water supply	90.7	86.7	1 279.10	3.8
Construction	73.4	42.0	207.70	5.9
Wholesale trade	71.1	36.5	422.30	2.1
Retail trade	84.5	34.1	127.00	4.8
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	86.3	41.3	146.80	5.7
Transport and storage	50.4	17.0*	426.30	5.0
Communication services	52.3	37.1*	1 279.30	3.3
Finance and insurance	77.5	64.0	1 323.40	1.8
Property and business services	79.0	42.2	536.70	4.5
Government administration and defence	98.2	87.5	718.80	3.4
Education	92.1	72.9	478.80	1.1
Health and community services	85.2	57.9	382.90	2.3
Cultural and recreational services	79.7	39.7	225.00	2.0
Personal and other services	94.5	47.5	859.40	5.3
All industries	79.2	41.0	458.40	3.9

* Indicates the estimate has a relative standard error of between 25% and 50% and should be used with caution.

Sources: Columns 1-3, ABS (2003)

Column 4, NCVER Apprentice and Trainee Collection, June 2005 estimates; ABS (2005)

Finally, table 1 contains information on the extent to which employers use apprenticeships and traineeships as a means of replenishing their stock of skills. The rate for all employers is 3.9%; that is, one in 25 of those employed at the end of 2004 was an apprentice or trainee. Again, this rate varied substantially by industry, from 1.1% in education, through to a rate five times higher in construction, accommodation, cafes and restaurants, and manufacturing. Industries with a low training rate are more likely to be those with a high quotient of professional workers, which typically require completion of a higher education qualification.

Why do employers provide training?

It is clear from table 1 that not only do employers vary in the form and amount of training provided for their workforces, but some do not provide any form of training whatsoever. An examination of the latter is a useful way of thinking through the issues; that is, why do employers provide training at all? Why not just hire people who already have the skills required?

Employers can meet their skill needs by recruiting people who already have all the skills they require, sometimes referred to as 'poaching'. However, the hiring employer usually bears some or all of the cost of the skill acquisition by offering superior terms and conditions of employment. In other words, employers are prepared to pay for skills and they can do this by buying the skills 'off the rack'. Alternatively, employers can develop the skills as they are required in their workforce by providing training.

In practice, even work which is relatively unskilled usually requires employers to provide some training, even if this is limited to unstructured training. Box 2 contains a description of a setting where minimal training might be expected—seasonal farm labour. The range of practice in this industry helps to illustrate the circumstances under which employers are willing to provide training.

Box 2: Training seasonal farm labourers

The harvesting of fruit and vegetables has been a seasonal activity since time immemorial. Although mechanisation has increased, it remains in many cases an activity which is highly labour-intensive. By reputation the work is unskilled, albeit physically demanding. Why, then, would employers bother to provide training for these workers?

Kilpatrick and Bound (2005) studied two rural regions—Circular Head in the north-west of Tasmania, and Wide Bay-Burnett in Queensland—where agriculture is a major employer. They found that, in general, 'seasonal workers fall outside funding and institutional arrangements for formal training ... [and] also fall outside enterprise-based learning initiatives' (p. 16).

One employer described his workforce requirements thus:

If they've had experience of fruit and vegies that's an advantage, but it's not necessarily a requirement. The main thing probably is they're hard-working, reliable, got their own transport, and are willing to work outside and work odd hours (Kilpatrick & Bound 2005, p. 19).

Employers have to provide some on-the-job training because labour turnover is high. This is often done with a modicum of instruction. One worker described it as follows: 'You know the cocky will just spend ten minutes with you and showing you and then away you go'. Another reported that after one day she was designated as the expert to instruct other new starters.

In the Wide Bay-Burnett region the seasonal agricultural workforce had a more extensive set of skills than that of Circular Head. Kilpatrick and Bound attribute this to the longer growing season and larger farms in Wide Bay-Burnett, and a greater level of regional cooperation and coordination. For example, one of the local recruitment agencies had developed an induction training course which it could deliver as required for an employer.

Structured training was provided in both regions, mostly health and safety induction training. In Wide Bay-Burnett more structured training was provided with a greater focus on product quality.

In an innovative solution to deal with the problem of high labour turnover, a fruit and vegetable growers' cooperative in Wide Bay-Burnett organised a region-wide approach to training, enabling the costs (and benefits) of the training to be spread around the region. State government grants were accessed to reduce the cost of training.

The reasons why employers provide training can be sub-divided into 'push' and 'pull' factors, which may be either external or internal, as shown in table 2. Push factors are those that compel employers to provide training. Typically, these are regulatory in nature, such as the requirement that people employed in certain occupations must have licences. This has recently extended to licences to work with certain equipment (for example, forklifts) or materials (for example, chemicals) to meet health and safety requirements. Push factors are not all external. Employers might agree as part of enterprise bargaining arrangements to the provision of training for their staff. Similarly, if they wish to bid for contracted work, the contract may mandate certain levels of training provision—a practice common on large building projects.

Training is vital to this facility—it is the key to all of it. Training provides the staff with the skills to achieve excellence and it also provides job satisfaction.

(Respondent comment
from Booth et al. forthcoming)

Pull factors, in contrast, are those which lure employers into providing training. Skill shortages can be seen as an example of a pull factor; because employers will turn to training as a means of meeting a skill requirement if they are experiencing difficulties in recruitment. Most pull factors, however, are internal and are concerned with how employers aim to meet their overall business strategies. For example, if competing with other employers in the same line of business through higher-quality products or services, employers have to ensure that their workers have the skills needed to meet the quality standards. Even in highly competitive industries where the profit margins are tight, unit costs can be lowered by improving productivity; training workers in new skills may be one way of realising this.

Table 2: Reasons for providing training

	Push factors	Pull factors
External	Occupational licences Equipment licences Safety standards	Incentive payments/grants Skill shortages
Internal	Contractual requirements Industrial agreements	Productivity improvements Quality assurance Introduction of new technology Workplace change Managing risk Employer of choice

Choosing what form of training to provide

Although training provision can be understood as meeting employers' skill needs, it is not necessarily the case that employers will have a clearly articulated approach to training. Context, such as size and industry, matters significantly. For example, among the 12 small and medium-sized enterprises studied by Mawer and Jackson, a majority of them 'tended to adopt a primarily reactive approach, where existing workers are trained as identified specific needs arise' (2005, p.6). In contrast, Figgis and Standen in their study of the oil and gas industry found that 'enterprises in the industry take training seriously. Large companies spend many millions of dollars each year on the capability of their workforces and even the smallest companies now regularly review and update their working practices' (Figgis & Standen, forthcoming).

The ABS survey referred to in table 1 found that the provision of structured training was strongly associated with the size of the employer. In small businesses (those with fewer than 20 employees), around two in five (38.5%) provided structured training, while almost all large businesses (those with 100 employees or more) did so (97.5%). The survey was unable to determine whether the structured training was accredited or not.

Box 3 examines the provision of training by small and medium-sized enterprises. It illustrates the range of training provision, and the importance of the content and cost of the training in determining the kind of training provided.

Box 3: Training in small and medium-sized enterprises

Mawer and Jackson (2005) conducted 12 case studies of training in retail, manufacturing, and building and construction companies, ranging in size from eight to 110 employees.

Eleven of the 12 companies had strong positive attitudes towards the continuous development of the skills of their existing workforce—with higher productivity, improvements in job satisfaction, and a reduction in down time foreseen as the benefits.

A majority of them were involved in a considerable amount of training of a variety of kinds, including unstructured training, supplier training in products and equipment, workplace language and literacy courses, health and safety courses, and apprenticeships and traineeships.

On the whole, these small and medium-sized enterprises preferred training that was seen as highly relevant, most likely to be that which was conducted on site, and focused on particular equipment, products, or skills that could be immediately put to practice.

It was also largely unaccredited, although in many cases capable of contributing towards accredited qualifications. With the exception of mandated training, such as occupational health and safety courses and licences, accredited training was not highly regarded by the majority of companies.

The bulk of training was free of direct costs to the employer, or it was subsidised by government or statewide industry levies.

How do employers find out what training is available?

If employers are to provide training, they must select from what is on offer in the training market. As with any other market, it is important for consumers, in this instance, employers, to have access to all the information they require to make an informed choice about purchasing the training that best meets their needs.

A strong finding to emerge from this body of research is that employers find it difficult to organise training for their workforces; in particular, they find the formal VET system to be complex.

It is a battle for us to keep up to date, makes it hard for us to know what we are getting from the registered training organisation.

(Respondent comment
from Booth et al. forthcoming)

Booth et al. (forthcoming) claim that 'there is overwhelming confusion among managers and workers in many aged care facilities about the VET sector'. The types of problems experienced include staying informed about the operation of the New Apprenticeships program and financial entitlements. Similarly, Mawer and Jackson (2004, p.20) report that the small and medium-sized enterprises they studied 'found the training world confusing, and sourcing appropriate training information and provision difficult'.

This problem is not isolated to small and medium-sized enterprises, although the problem is more concentrated in these businesses. Understanding and support of the formal VET system varies markedly according to the size of the business. A key determinant is whether any staff with formal responsibilities for training are employed. However, even large employers find the system to be complex and with an apparent overuse of jargon. The only general exception to this rule is enterprise registered training organisations, where the information required is already known to them, or they know how and where to source it.

A recent national study on the information needs of VET clients found that employers are especially interested in evidence on the returns to investment of particular kinds of training; they also want to be able to identify quickly providers who are able to offer them the training service they require (Quay Connection & Phillips KPA 2005). Often this information is needed to persuade others within the organisation of the value of the training. Clear information about costs, including incentive payments and wage subsidies, is also critical to employers.

As the Quay Connection study notes, employers rely heavily on advice in making decisions about what kind of training to provide. Intermediaries, such as employer associations, New Apprenticeships Centres, group training organisations and professional associations, play an important role in demystifying the system. Employers want face-to-face contact with informed agents as well as information.

Why do employers provide nationally recognised training?

As outlined in box 1, nationally recognised training is training which is both structured and accredited. For it to be nationally recognised, it must be delivered by a registered training organisation and lead to qualifications awarded under the Australian Qualifications Framework. This form of training has value not only for its content, but also because the nationally recognised 'brand' serves as a useful labour market signal in providing certified evidence of skill attainment (Blythe & Bowman 2005).

Box 4 provides an illustration of how the Certificate III in Aged Care Work has become the default level of training required by personal care workers in the industry. In this case, the certified evidence is of value to employers by showing that they meet national accreditation standards—even though the certificate III qualification is not mandated.

Box 4: Nationally recognised training in aged care

Booth et al. (forthcoming) conducted case studies of eight residential aged care facilities in four states and territories. In each, interviews were conducted with the facility manager, the human resources or training manager, training providers and between four and 12 personal care workers.

Aged care is a rapidly growing industry sector, reflecting growing demand for sophisticated health services and an ageing population. The industry is regulated by national accreditation standards. These do not require personal care workers to have specified qualifications, but according to the employers interviewed by Booth et al., it would be difficult to meet the standards without the training having been provided.

Managers tended to recruit new personal care workers on the basis of their personal attributes, not their educational qualifications. Attributes sought included 'flexibility, sensitivity, an understanding of care, dignity and respect, empathy, people skills, honesty, dedication, life experience and rapport with the elderly'. Training was undertaken after they had been employed. Four in five personal care workers have completed a Certificate III in Aged Care Work and a further one in ten has a certificate IV qualification.

In all of the sites studied by Booth et al. there was a strong belief in and support for training. A key driver is the Australian Government policy, 'Ageing in Place', which is forcing improvements in the quality of medical care and emotional support to residents. Several facilities had developed partnership arrangements with training providers to deliver components of the certificate III in house.

Smith et al. (2005, p.10) in their study of larger employers describe the process of gaining commitment to nationally recognised training as made up of three phases: engagement, extension and integration.

In the first phase, engagement, a mass training need could be met by competencies within training packages. This was strongly related to employer size, particularly having a large number of staff concentrated in particular occupations.

To extend it into the second phase there needed to be a 'VET evangelist' to sell the concept to senior managers. Any poor experience put further extension in jeopardy. In box 5, the views of VET evangelists on the benefits of nationally recognised training are outlined.

The final phase, integration, occurred once competency standards had become embedded in the human resource management process, for example, in specifying job position profiles for recruitment.

Training packages are a vital part of our organisation.

(Respondent comment from Smith et al. 2005, p.45)

Nationally recognised training is a big asset not only to our organisation but to the community and region as a whole.

(Respondent comment from Smith et al. 2005, p.47)

Box 5: Seven benefits of providing nationally recognised training

1. A structured approach to training and career progression
2. The opportunity to integrate training with normal work and to customise training packages to enterprise needs
3. Confidence in the quality of work undertaken by employees and the ability to demonstrate this to external parties
4. A competitive edge in attracting and retaining staff
5. Access to funding to help cover training costs
6. The ability to reward and motivate employees and validate their working experiences
7. A basis for reshaping human resource management systems around competency standards

Source: Smith et al. (2005, p.11)

Employers as registered training organisations

A feature of the Australian vocational education and training system is that it is possible for employers to become registered training organisations in their own right.

A recent study conducted by the Allen Consulting Group (2004) for the Business Council of Australia examined ten member companies of the council. Of these, eight were enterprise registered training organisations and one (Australia Post) had been, but had since relinquished that status.

Only three of these companies—the Commonwealth Bank, McDonalds and Coles-Myer—provided all of their training in house. For these companies, having the status of a registered training organisation ‘is celebrated as a valuable asset’ (p.81). These companies were also those which had most directly tied training provision (and career progression) to the Australian Qualifications Framework. Smith et al. found that having this status is no guarantee that an employer will opt to provide the training themselves: ‘every time a new training need presented itself, enterprises needed to make decisions afresh about whether to use their RTO status or to seek training externally’ (Smith et al. 2005, p.10).

A number of the other companies in the Allen Consulting Group study chose to become registered training organisations by default; that is, because of ‘inadequate provision by external providers in responding to their specific training needs’ (p.82). Offsetting this are the registration requirements which were generally seen as cumbersome and, in the case of Australia Post, led to a conscious decision to not run a training business.

The report is relatively circumspect about the matter; but it does appear that the ability to capture government funding—user choice funding and incentives associated with employment of apprentices and trainees—is also a driver for the acquisition of registered training organisation status.

Why don't employers provide nationally recognised training?

It is equally important to look at the circumstances in which employers provide structured training, but do not opt for nationally recognised training.

The study by Smith et al. found that nationally recognised training is well suited to meeting the mass training needs of large employers, which raises the obvious question of how suited it is to meeting niche requirements. Box 6, with reference to the oil and gas industry, illustrates this tension. This appears to validate Smith et al.'s finding that niche training needs are 'well served by strategies already well known to enterprises (such as vendor training and proprietary courses)' (2005, p. 12).

Box 6: Training in the oil and gas industry

The oil and gas industry is a small employer, but a significant contributor to the Australian economy, particularly through export earnings. It is concentrated around the north-west shelf of Western Australia. Figgis and Standen (forthcoming) conducted over 50 in-depth interviews with people at all levels in the industry, from managing directors through to control room operators, and visited one offshore and one onshore site.

The industry spends millions of dollars per year on training, the vast majority of which is done in house or through private providers (which may or may not be registered training organisations). The industry is a sophisticated purchaser of training programs. It is routine for workers to be sent overseas to learn new skills if that is the best place to learn them, or for the training providers to be brought in from overseas.

Prime among the reasons why the industry takes this approach to training is the specialist equipment. It is 'highly specific, frequently updated and often fearsomely expensive' (Figgis & Standen forthcoming). Moreover, the consequences of equipment failure can be catastrophic, for example, the explosion at the Esso plant in Longford in 1998.

Figgis and Standen found that 'training delivered within the oil and gas industry has essentially been conducted in isolation from the formal VET sector'. There are a number of reasons for this, including the industry's requirements for developing advanced skills (not entry-level skills), and insufficient understanding by public training providers of the nuances of the industry and its training requirements.

An important finding is that 'competencies, not qualifications, are what enterprises in this industry care about both in recruiting and advancing their workforces'. That would appear to dovetail with the changes in training delivery in the formal VET sector, particularly the advent of training packages. A notable development in the oil and gas industry in recent times has been growing interest in the Chemical, Hydrocarbons and Oil Refining Training Package. This specifically incorporates new incident response and emergency management competencies; it appears to be valuable to employers in the industry for these competencies to be independently certified (that is, so they can readily demonstrate that they adhere to the legal standard).

But this is not, as Figgis and Standen put it, the 'main game'. They conclude that, if public providers are to join the main game, 'they are going to have to develop strategies for delivering advanced skills'.

The development of a training package tailored to the oil and gas industry has brought renewed interest in the formal VET system, but it remains an open question whether it is the role of public providers to be involved in industry-specific, advanced skills training.

The case study also illustrates the need to carefully separate the concept of nationally recognised training into two parts, content and providers. Content is training which leads towards a nationally recognised qualification, while providers are those registered to deliver this content. The content can only be delivered by registered training organisations, but these providers are also able to deliver other courses which can be customised for their clients. The considerable growth in the past decade in fee-for-service activity by technical and further education (TAFE) institutes reflects this development.

Employers who do not engage with nationally recognised training may be dissatisfied with the content or with the providers, or with both. For example, in the seasonal agricultural industry, employers were of the view that the industry training packages available 'do not fit readily with the bundle of skills that employers and seasonal workers themselves believe are needed' (Kilpatrick & Bound 2005, p. 11). In the oil and gas industry, in contrast, private providers (whether registered or not) tended to be used in preference to public providers such as TAFE institutes because they were seen as more attuned to the needs of the industry.

Conclusion

Employer provision of training is a significant component of the total amount of training effort undertaken each year in Australia. Even though it is poorly measured (in contrast to publicly funded training), there is a wide body of evidence which shows it to be substantial and variable in terms of its intensity and type. Industry and employment size are two important contextual factors in understanding what training is done.

There is an extensive training market, consisting of nationally recognised training and unaccredited training delivered by public or private providers, from which employers can purchase the training that best meets their skill needs. Employers can also elect to bypass the training market and provide training themselves.

Many employers do make use of the formal VET sector in organising training for their workforces. Where they do, it is usually valued, but any poor experiences can jeopardise ongoing use. Where they do not, the evidence from the case studies considered in this publication suggest that employers can be drawn into it by better provision of information and advice, improving relevance and flexibility, and lowering costs.

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