SUPPORTING VET PROVIDERS
in building capability for the future

Investigating learning and work by Clive Chappell and Geof Hawke

This research developed a tool to enable registered training organisations to identify the environmental factors that lead to greater employee learning at work. The tool was produced through an examination of research that identified the factors facilitating and encouraging greater learning at work.

Introduction

Traditional training designed to improve individual and organisational capability is no longer sufficient to satisfy the needs of the contemporary work environment. A parallel requirement is that organisations use the work environment as a place of learning. A literature review identified the factors that either inhibit or encourage learning at work, and, based on this, a survey instrument— the Provider Learning Environment (PLE) scale—has been developed and trialled. While it is designed to help registered training organisations determine the extent to which employees experience learning while undertaking their work, it also points to strategies that can be used to improve the learning environment of the organisation.

Promoting learning at work

This research identified factors in the work environment with the capacity to either support or inhibit the learning that occurs during the everyday practice of work. Importantly, learning needs to be embedded in real-world contexts as much as possible and involve processes such as small group work, discussion, debate, practical problem-solving, the presentation of alternative perspectives, the sharing of information, reflective practice, modelling,

mentoring and coaching. Also important are cognitive apprenticeships, which are designed, among other things, to bring the tacit processes that underpin being an expert at something into the open, where learners can—with appropriate help—observe, enact, and practise them.

These activities all characterise constructivist approaches to learning, whereby meaning is 'constructed' by learners in a particular real-world context and through social interaction. This approach to organisational learning is the most appropriate alternative to VET especially where work can be organised to help these approaches occur and facilitate learning through working. In the right environment, with the right managers, people and organisational culture, a constructivist approach to learning just happens as a consequence of working.

What was found

The analysis of the factors highlighted by the various conceptions of workplace learning and the construction and trialling of the Provider Learning Environment scale in nine VET providers suggest that an organisation's learning environment can be clustered around two factors: organisational environment and job complexity.

Research activity 5:
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CONSORTIUM RESEARCH PROGRAM

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Organisational environment is defined by items that focus on the following areas:

- manager/management support

- intentional creation of learning opportunities by the registered training organisation

- involvement in teams

- provision of useful feedback on performance

- a clear sense of the organisation's mission/purpose

- ready access to necessary information

- ready access to other people in the organisation.

Job complexity is characterised by:

- work with considerable variety

- regular contact with a variety of people and ideas *external* to the organisation

- regular contact with a variety of people and ideas *within* the organisation

- ongoing change

- work with high intensity/demands.

All of these features help foster an environment where learning at work can flourish.

What can be done with this research?

Registered training organisations can develop strategies that strengthen the learning environment in specific aspects of their operations. This involves recognising the current characteristics that act as enablers and constraints which impact on the registered training organisation's

learning environment and initiating organisational practices to encourage learning at work. In particular, staff with learning and development responsibilities in these training organisations can use the Provider Learning Environment scale to:

- survey staff to create a baseline, in terms of staff perceptions of the learning environment in the organisation, to examine the effect of initiatives intended to improve the learning environment

- identify not only areas of strength and weakness in the learning environment in the two categories of organisational environment and job complexity, but also target specific factors where positive interventions can improve the learning environment of staff

- benchmark either internally or externally to identify similarities and differences in the ways staff perceive the learning environment of their organisation.

A user guide for the Provider Learning Environment scale which supports this overview paper provides a copy of the questionnaire and information about how to use the scale, administer it and interpret the results. The research activity has also produced a summary report, a literature review and a paper which describes the development of the Provider Learning Environment scale in greater detail.

This overview is based on a forthcoming report. Information about the consortium's program can be found at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/workinprogress/projects/10345.html>. Subscribe to *NCVER News* at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/newsevents/subscribe.html> to stay informed about when the report will be released.

Note: The development of this instrument was based on the results from public and private registered training organisations employing 50 or more staff.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations