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Learning in the workplace

Explores what learning at work means in an organisational context, the theories behind it, and the strategic and practical issues involved

Introduction

When undertaken effectively, learning supports organisational strategy, performance and bolsters workplace skills. Theories encouraging employee learning have evolved considerably over the past decade, and employers need to have a working knowledge on emerging insights into how people learn.

This factsheet looks at what ‘helping people learn’ means in a workplace context, focusing on the economic importance of workplace skills and the tangible ways employers can measure the skills and capabilities of their workforce. It signposts evolving theories on supporting learning, looking at the move away from training to learning. It also considers the strategic and practical issues in helping people learn and concludes by looking at the extent to which learning initiatives are effective in helping people to learn.

CIPD viewpoint

While there is widespread recognition of the need to build competitive advantage through the continuing development of workforce knowledge and skills, the methods deployed to support, accelerate and direct learning vary widely and require the support and engagement of a range of stakeholders including line managers and learners.

Fundamental to helping people learn is an organisational culture that is supportive of learning. This requires an awareness of not only which methods are most effective, but also a robust understanding of the behavioural science of learning. The wider culture and environment of an organisation impacts on learning, including permission to learn and support from managers and peers to implement learning.

The additions of digital, interactive and social elements, which are underpinned by a collaborative culture of sharing knowledge, have been the focus of recent research. In light of continuing developments, for example in the field of neuroscience, we must constantly seek evidence of how newer approaches to helping people learn can most

effectively be deployed as part of wider HR and L&D strategy to help achieve organisational goals.

The CIPD is at the heart of change happening across L&D, supporting practitioners in providing insights and resources. We are proud to be at the 'epicentre' of this changing world of L&D.

Why do we need to discuss learning in the workplace?

In the context of the workplace, learning needs to be specifically designed to support the organisation's strategy. Accelerating and facilitating learning for individuals or groups to achieve organisational goals is seen as critical for an organisation's productivity and performance. We've recently produced insights in this area in our report with Towards Maturity, our strategic L&D research partner.

Economic importance of workplace skills

Given that high levels of workforce skills are critical to business productivity and economic prosperity, supporting learning at work is high on the agenda of policy-makers and employers in many parts of the world. For organisations, the skills of the workforce are vital to meet current and future business demands. For individuals, skills levels help to determine their employment and earnings potential.

To improve a country's skills profile, it's not enough to simply focus on pre-employment education and training. It's also crucial for employers to continually invest in and develop the skills levels of their employees through methods such as on-the-job training, in-house development and coaching. Read our factsheet on skills development in the UK.

Driving performance and productivity

The attention to organisational performance is being driven by a number of significant factors. The nature of work is changing with disruptive approaches undermining previously successful business models and past achievements no longer guarantee future success. Globalisation and technology are forcing organisations to embrace new competition and complex challenges. The workforce is at its most diverse with the greatest age range of workers than at any time in history resulting in a variety of needs. Employees are demanding more flexible working and the more frequent transition from one organisation to another creates a constantly evolving workforce. And, the necessity of fixed geographic workplaces is challenged by dispersed staff who must be supported to work and interact using virtual and online solutions.

Evolving theories on supporting learning

Supporting individuals and groups in learning is an essential element of an organisation's strategic human resource management programme – that is, an approach to the management of people that provides a framework to support long-term business goals and outcomes. Within this framework, our work investigating the theories of encouraging employee learning, and the value of the various approaches, has evolved considerably over the last decade.

Emerging learning approaches

Our own work, and Towards Maturity's research, are both consistently showing that the following three themes are crucial in both helping people learn and driving organisational performance:

- social and collaborative learning
- digital learning and training delivery
- coaching and mentoring.

Whilst there is still a clear role for face-to-face learning and training delivery, there's scope to embrace technology further. The challenges include being clear on why digital is being used and the ease of access for learners.

These changes raise the challenge of new skills needed by L&D practitioners particularly around digital abilities in delivering virtual classrooms, developing digital content and supporting learners online.

Shift from instruction to interaction

The move from less instruction to greater interaction has been embraced by a number of organisations. This means that interaction with the job, the organisation, colleagues, customers and suppliers is increasingly a feature of learning – enabled by social technology and increased awareness of a broader range of learning sources.

In addition, this changes the skills needed in an L&D professional from 'sage on the stage', creating and presenting learning, to a 'curator-concierge' model in directing learners to excellent existing learning content. This is also a shift in mindset as well as skill set.

Application of neuroscience in learning

Research is continually advancing our knowledge of how psychology and neuroscience can be applied to learning and several neuroscience models are being applied to learning

design and delivery. Our [factsheet on psychology and neuroscience in learning](#) examines the changes in thinking around the psychology of learning including recent criticism of key models for being, amongst other things, too simplistic and not resulting in consistent learning gains. It also examines some key models which apply neuroscience to learning.

Strategic and practical issues in helping people learn

A range of strategic and practical issues need to be considered when implementing an organisational strategy or introducing techniques to support learning in pursuit of business objectives. Our podcast [Aligning L&D with business objectives and emerging practices](#) explored this in detail.

Learning and development strategy

Given that an effective [learning and development strategy](#) is important to business success, it's essential to regularly review and assess L&D programmes to find out how well they support that strategy. The success of any L&D strategy is also usually depends on how closely it's aligned to an overall business strategy and how much senior stakeholder support there is, plus the agility to move quickly in line with business needs.

Identifying learning needs

An important initial step when implementing development activities is to clearly [identify learning needs](#) and the objectives of L&D programmes (that is, how they will meet such needs) in line with the L&D strategy, carrying out robust learning needs analysis (LNA). The challenge now facing L&D in this area is having the ability to respond to the needs quickly enough. This is no longer an occasional activity but a live and active part of supporting agile learning within fast change workplace scenarios.

Barriers to supporting learning

An issue identified by our Helping People Learn research programme in the early 2000s is that many key problems associated with L&D appear at the operational level, and may therefore be difficult to solve through policy statements. Subsequent research has helped show how this can be tackled through methods including performance management and involving line managers in supporting learning culture.

Performance management

[Performance management](#) involves establishing a culture in which individuals and groups

take responsibility for the continuous improvement of business processes and of their own skills, behaviour and contributions. Providing a supportive environment to help people learn is therefore an essential part of any performance management programme. Tied into the LNA mentioned above and the need for agility, reviewing frequency of performance management can be increasingly important.

Role of managers

As with implementing any HR or L&D policy, the role of line managers is critical in helping people learn and the influence of this group is frequently highlighted in our research. Managers are typically involved in determining L&D needs and may crucially influence organisational culture in respect of supporting learning. Increasingly their role, via coaching and permission to learn, can impact on the success of learning and become more involved in people development.

Updated thinking on learning styles

In the early 1980s, psychologists Peter Honey and Alan Mumford developed a learning styles classification based on the work of David Kolb. Through a Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) they suggested that individuals have 'preferred ways of learning' and they identified four 'styles'. The premise of their theory is that a learner aware of their preferred style can identify learning approaches that will be most effective, and L&D practitioners can design and deliver learning that can best accommodate learner needs. Honey and Mumford's learning style theory has been widely used by L&D practitioners and educationalists.

However, in their 2004 publication Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning: a systematic and critical review, Coffield and colleagues found insufficient empirical evidence to support the theory.

The concept of assigning personal preferred learning styles is now widely accepted as too simplistic and therefore unhelpful, although the general approach of enhancing learning engagement through a range of methods remains useful.

Accelerated learning

Accelerated learning focuses on understanding the psychology of how we learn and on how to create an optimal learning environment through factors such as:

- a positive learning environment
- engaging not just the rational mind but the whole body
- learner involvement and collaboration
- establishing the learning context

- learning through work itself.

Building ownership in learning

In our research on performance and learning, we asked our Leaders in Learning community to share their insights on how to build ownership – see their [top tips infographic](#). Their top three were:

- Link goals to role needs and performance discussions.
- Goal setting and monitoring should be an integral part of 1 to 1 meetings
- Make goals objective not subjective.

How effective are initiatives to help people learn?

When reviewing what's involved in helping people learn, it's essential to consider the results of any initiatives to build on successes, while also learning the lessons of programmes that work less well.

Any analysis of particular techniques needs to be placed firmly in the broader context of how well the underlying organisational culture supports L&D across the workforce.

Evaluating learning

Approaches to [learning and development evaluation](#) involve the formal or informal assessment of the impact and effectiveness of any training and learning provision. In most organisations there's a focus on the reaction to the event (the input, for example the quality of course content and presentation). It's harder to monitor impact (the outcomes, for example improved skills/qualifications or enhanced productivity/profitability).

Which are the most effective techniques?

Our research report with Towards Maturity, [Future of learning: a changing perspective for L&D leaders](#), notes significant changes in the delivery of learning in the organisation with the top three shifts being to use online delivery, social and collaborative learning facilitation and coaching and mentoring.

This doesn't mean that traditional face-to-face learning hasn't an important place in organisational learning but that there are trends to provide learning 'in the flow' of work rather than removing learners from their work context.

Towards Maturity noted in its report [Unlocking potential: releasing the potential of the business](#) and its people through learning that nearly three-quarters of those surveyed expected face-to-face learning to decrease in favour of blended and online learning, although the proportion of learning offered face-to-face still remains quite high with:

- 56% of programmes offered by face-to-face alone
- 22% of programmes offered online only
- 22% offered using a blend of face-to-face and online.

Effective learning demands a range of approaches with learner needs and preference placed at the top of the choice of a design and delivery method.

For an analysis of a wider range of ways of learning, go to our [learning methods factsheet](#).

Further reading

Books and reports

BEEVERS, K. and REA, A. (2016) *Learning and development practice in the workplace*. 3rd ed. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

ILLERIS, K (2010) *The fundamentals of workplace learning: understanding how people learn in working life*. London: Routledge.

MERRIAM, S.B. and BIEREMA, L.L. (2013) *Adult learning: linking theory and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

PAGE-TICKELL, R. (2018) *Learning and development: a practical introduction*. 2nd ed. HR Fundamentals. London: CIPD and Kogan Page.

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Journal articles

DAM, N. (2013) Inside the learning brain. *T+D*. Vol 67, No 4, April. pp30-35.

DRANITSARIS, A. (2013) Lessons to learn. *Human Resources*. January. pp50-52.

JENSEN, M. (2012) Engaging the learner. *T+D*. Vol 66, No 1, January. pp41-44.

MANUTI, A., PASTORE, S. and SCARDIGNO, A.F. (2015) Formal and informal learning in the workplace: a research review. *International Journal of Training and Development*. Vol 19, No 1, March. pp1-17.

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This factsheet was last updated by David Hayden.