Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

WORKPLACE LEARNING: A STUDY OF LEARNING APPROACHES IN TWO ORGANISATIONS IN SARAWAK

Bong Er Huen

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(TANDATANGAN PENULIS)

Alamat tetap:

SL87, Lot.0274, Lrg 4, Tmn. Mutiara,
Jln. Jambusan, 94000 Bau, Sarawak.

Tarikh: 8/5/2007

(TANDATANGAN PENYELIA)

Prof. Datin Dr. Napsiah Mahfoz
Nama Penyelia

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WORKPLACE LEARNING: A STUDY OF LEARNING APPROACHES IN TWO ORGANISATIONS IN SARAWAK

by

Bong Er Huen

This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for a Bachelor of Science with Honours
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The project entitled 'WORKPLACE LEARNING: A STUDY OF LEARNING APPROACHES IN TWO ORGANISATIONS IN SARAWAK' was prepared by Bong Er Huen and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Science with Honours (Human Resource Development).

Received for examination by:

Napsiah

.....

Prof. Datin Dr. Napsiah Mahfoz

Date:

8/5/2007

Grade

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ABSTRACT

WORKPLACE LEARNING: A STUDY OF LEARNING APPROACHES IN TWO ORGANISATIONS IN SARAWAK

Bong Er Huen

The purpose of this study is to analyse the types of learning approaches used in two organisations in Sarawak and the factors influencing it. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. Eighty respondents were selected from two organisations: Public Work Department (PWD) Sarawak and Syarikat SESCO Berhad. The data gathered were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was used to describe respondents' personal characteristics such as gender, age, educational level, length of service and monthly income. Inferential statistics such as Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to determine whether there exists a significant relationship between the independent variables and learning approaches. The findings show that the majority of respondents (78.7%) frequently use informal learning approaches such as conducting discussions with colleagues and supervisors, and obtaining information through resource centres, the Internet, books, magazines and other reading materials in the workplace. In contrast, only a minority of the respondents (11.2%) very often use formal learning approaches in the workplace. Analysis of the results also found that there exist significant positive relationships between the two independent variables – learning attitude and environmental support – and learning approaches used in the workplace. However, both relationships are weak: between learning attitude and learning approaches (r = 0.540), and between environmental support and learning approaches (r = 0.443). Several recommendations are suggested to the organisations, human resource practitioners and for future research in order to encourage continuous learning in the workplace and to help enhance employees' work performance.

ABSTRAK

PEMBELAJARAN DI TEMPAT KERJA: SATU KAJIAN MENGENAI KAEDAH-KAEDAH PEMBELAJARAN DI DALAM DUA ORGANISASI DI SARAWAK

Bong Er Huen

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisa jenis-jenis kaedah pembelajaran yang digunakan di dalam dua organisasi di Sarawak dan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhinya. Borang soal selidik telah digunakan untuk mengumpul data bagi kajian ini. Sebanyak lapan puluh orang responden telah dipilih daripada dua organisasi, iaitu JKR Sarawak dan Syarikat SESCO Berhad. Data yang diperolehi telah dianalisa dengan menggunakan statistik diskriptif dan inferensi. Statistik diskriptif digunakan untuk menganalisa ciri-ciri peribadi responden seperti jantina, umur, kelayakan akademik, tempoh perkhimatan and gaji bulanan. Statistik inferensi seperti Pekali Korelasi Pearson digunakan untuk mengenalpasti samada wujudnya perhubungan yang signifikan di antara pembolehubah-pembolehubah bersandar dengan kaedah-kaedah pembelajaran. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa majoriti responden (78.7%) selalu menggunakan kaedah-kaedah pembelajaran yang tidak formal seperti mengadakan perbincangan dengan rakan sekerja dan penyelia, dan mendapatkan maklumat melalui pusat sumber, Internet, buku, majalah dan bahan bacaan yang lain di dalam tempat kerja. Sementara itu, hanya sembilan orang responden (11.2%) selalu menggunakan kaedah-kaedah pembelajaran secara formal di dalam tempat kerja. Hasil kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa wujudnya perhubungan positif yang signifikan di antara kedua-dua pembolehubah bersandar – sikap pembelajaran dan sokongan persekitaran dengan kaedah-kaedah pembelajaran yang digunakan di dalam tempat kerja. Walaubagaimanapun, kedua-dua perhubungan ini adalah lemah: di antara sikap pembelajaran dengan kaedah-kaedah pembelajaran ($r = 0.540$), dan di antara sokongan persekitaran dengan kaedah-kaedah pembelajaran ($r = 0.443$). Beberapa cadangan telah dikemukakan kepada organisasi, pengamal sumber manusia dan untuk kajian yang akan datang bagi menggalakkan pembelajaran berterusan di tempat kerja dan membantu meningkatkan prestasi kerja pekerja.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In an environment of rapid change, learning is one of the crucial strategies for organisations to assist employees to gain new knowledge and skills needed to meet the changes in technologies (Rosow & Zager, 1988). According to Chan et al. (2002), learning is usually defined in terms of the consequences of message processing to gain knowledge and develop skills. In other words, learning is a continuous process for each individual employee to acquire new knowledge, skill, or attitudes for personal development. Moreover, learning is needed to achieve transfer of knowledge from training to practical application in the workplace. Therefore, learning in the workplace is important to help workers cope with changes in the environment and also to enhance workplace productivity (Leslie et al., 1998).

In today's organisation, workplace learning is replacing the traditional learning approaches such as "training", "development" and "workplace education". Workplace learning is being defined in more comprehensive and integrated manner to represent a set of processes that occur within specific organisational contexts (Garavan et al., 2002). According to Spencer (2002, p. 298), "workplace learning refers to the learning that takes place at work, learning that employees engage on a daily basis". Workplace learning focuses on acquiring and assimilating of new knowledge, skills, values and feelings that result in individuals and teams refocusing and fundamentally changing their behaviour. Therefore, to ensure the success of workplace learning, employees must be ready, willing and able to learn before they can hope to acquire new knowledge and skills.

Workplace learning comprises both formal and informal learning (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). According to Collis and Margaryan (2004, p.38), "formal learning is any learning structured into a course or other form of learning event, delivered in classroom or at a distance, and supported by an instructor". For example, formal learning activities include attending courses, workshop, seminar and lectures. In contrast, "informal learning is any unstructured learning that takes place in the work context and arises from individual participation by doing the work without the support of an instructor" (Collis & Margaryan 2004, p.38). Moreover, informal learning also refers to learning resulting from natural opportunities for learning that occur in everyday life when the individual employee controls his or her own learning (Cseh et al., 1999). Informal learning activities include self-learning, self-managed learning and on-site learning.

Workplace expertise often believes that employees are more likely to be developed and learned through formal training. However, a great deal of learning

occurs informally both inside and outside the workplace (Conlon, 2004). A study conducted by Marsick and Watkins (1990) found that only 20 percent of what employees learn comes from the more formalised and structured training. In contrast, majority of workplace learning takes places through informal means.

In the current dynamic environment, organisations need to develop a capacity to learn faster than their competitors, to find solutions for novel and complex problems and to enhance the quantity of what they do through effective learning (Garavan, et al., 2002). Boud and Garrick (1999), for instance, argued that learning is a source of sustainable competitive advantages. Kofman and Senge (1993), on the other hand, agreed that learning in the workplace can facilitate change and renew organisations. Leslia et al. (1998) found that learning which may take place inside and outside of the classroom offers the possibility for enhanced workplace productivity as it helps employees to control their learning process and subsequently to perform their jobs. Developing the human resources of an organisation is, therefore, an important strategy to increase production and to close the knowledge and skills gap of workers.

1.1 Problem Statement

Human Resource Development seeks to embrace the developments in workplace learning and focuses on learning activities that are linked directly to the goals at work, at the individual as well as at the organisation levels. These developments emphasise the need for a variety of learning approaches including formal training and informal learning in the workplace.

According to Garavan et al. (2002), approaches to learning have changed from traditional paradigm where learning is formal, subject driven and organisationally

control led as emphasised in the new millennium paradigm. In this new millennium, learning is experiential, tacit, implicit, either formal or informal, and individually-controlled. Although a formal learning approach may be best for some people or for certain subjects, it is not for all situations. An expert on self-managed learning, Cunningham (1999) suggests that people learn most often from sources other than courses.

In today's organisation, training strategies are changing as many organisations aspire to be learning organisations. Learning in the workplace thus requires commitment from everyone in order to allow individuals to manage their own development and to support the learning process through coaching, feedback and ongoing performance management.

According to Winch and Ingram (2002, p. 361), "workplace learning approaches should no longer be driven by content, but should be more learner centred". Kenney and Reid (1988), for example, noted a shift away from a focus on standardised training programme to an emphasis on the learning process, and to be self-directed and self-managed learners.

It is clear that there is a shift of emphasis from the traditional trainer-centred to learner-centred approach. There is a need to know the extent to which this shift is reflected in the workplace. Are organizational members still practising the traditional trainer-centred approach or are they shifting to the learner-centred approach? What factors influence the learning approaches used?

This study, therefore, will investigate learning approaches used among employees and factors influencing the learning strategies and approaches used in the workplace.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study consists of general objective and specific objectives.

1.2.1 General Objective

To analyse the learning approaches used in the workplace and the factors influencing it.

1.2.2 Specific Objectives

a) To analyse the types of learning approaches used in the workplace.
b) To identify the relationship between attitude towards learning and learning approaches used in the workplace.
c) To identify the relationship between environmental support and learning approaches used in the workplace.

1.3 Research Hypotheses

The hypotheses of this study are as follow:

H_01: There is no significant relationship between learning attitude and learning approaches used in the workplace.

H_02: There is no significant relationship between environmental support and learning approaches used in the workplace.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

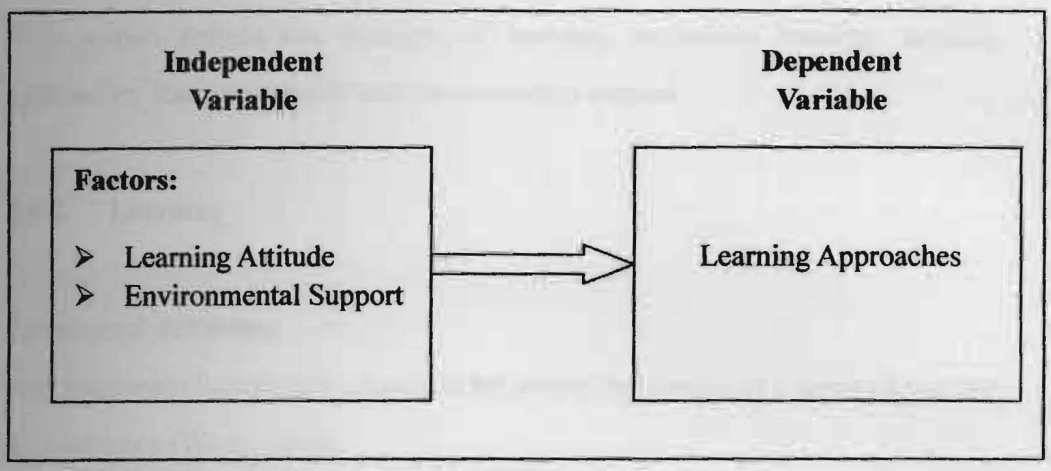

Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework for this study is depicted as above. The dependent variable is the learning approaches used in the workplace while the independent variables are learning attitude and environmental support. This study looks into the relationship between learning attitude and environmental support and the learning approaches used in the workplace.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study provide a better understanding of the factors that influence the learning approaches used in the workplace, namely learning attitude and environmental support. This study may also contribute towards the existing organisations in term of planning to implement workplace learning.

The findings of this study are important to the human practitioners who are involved in the field of learning, training and development, to help identify the types of learning approaches used in the workplace.

1.6 Definition of Terms

This section defines the concepts of learning, workplace learning, learning approaches, learning attitude and environmental support.

1.6.1 Learning

Conceptual definition

Any permanent incremental change in behaviour that occurs as a result of practice or experience (Warty, 1990).

Operational definition

A continuous process for each individual employee to acquire new knowledge, skills, or attitudes for personal development as well as to reinforce applications and experiences for future success.

1.6.2 Workplace Learning

Conceptual definition

Learning that takes place at work in which employees engage in on a daily basis (Spencer, 2002).

Operational definition

The means, processes, and activities through which employees learn in the workplace, from basic skills to high technology and management practices that are immediately applicable to workers' jobs, duties and roles.

1.6.3 Learning Approaches

Conceptual definition

Composites of strategies and motives that guide and sustain learning (Biggs, 1993).

Operational definition

Learning strategies currently used in the workplace and encompassing both formal and informal approaches.

1.6.4 Learning Attitude

Conceptual definition

The cluster of beliefs, assessed feelings, and behavioural intentions toward learning (McShane & Von Glinow, 2004)

Operational definition

An individual employee's general feeling of favourableness or unfavourableness toward the learning approaches used in the workplace.

1.6.5 Environmental Support

Conceptual definition

According to Robbins and Coulter (2005),

1. "External environment refers to the forces and institutions outside the organisation that potentially can affect the organisation's performance" (p. 64).
2. "Internal environment refers to the factors inside the organisation that

potentially can affect the organisation's performance" (p. 64).

Operational definition

The various aspects such as supervisory support, peer support, financial support as well as time support that influence the learning approaches used in the workplace.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

There are three limitations that the researcher encountered. Firstly, this study was conducted in two organisations and thus, the findings of this study may not be generalised to reflect the practices of other organisations. Similar study should be replicated in other organisations in order to compare the findings with that of this study.

Secondly, since the data for this study was collected via questionnaires, the reliability and the information gathered depends a great deal on the sincerity of the respondents in answering the questionnaire. The researcher is assuming that all the answer to the statements in the questionnaire reflect their true feelings and views.

Finally, there are many other factors that might influence learning approaches used in the workplace. This study, however only investigate learning attitude and environmental support as factors influencing the learning approaches used in the workplace.

1.8 Summary

This chapter aims at providing an introduction on topic to be studied and discussing on the statement of problems, objectives and conceptual framework of the study. In addition, this chapter also states the hypotheses to be tested, significance and limitation of the study. Definitions of important terms are also included to ensure a better understanding of this research.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the concepts and definitions of learning, workplace learning, and learning strategies and approaches used in the workplace. Besides, the theories relating to learning approaches are also discussed.

In addition, the literature findings on the factors influencing the learning approaches used are also presented. These factors are learning attitude and environmental support.

2.1 Learning: A Definition

Increases in competition, globalisation, and the speed of change have helped to highlight the importance of the capacity for learning in organisation as a key to both survival and success (Dumphy et al., 1997; Easterby-Smith et al., 1998;