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BIO

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New Trends and Challenges in Workplace Learning and Education

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Abstract

The world of today is changing at such a pace that people could not have imagined a decade ago. Changes in all forms have affected not only what employees do in the workplace but also how employees should do. To cope with all these changes, employee should learn not only to become efficient in one particular skill but also to become multi-skilled and learn new skills as the previous skill becomes obsolete. Training is thus the best way to align the person's skills with the inevitable changes that will take place in the work environment. Indeed, training is a continuous learning and educational process. In this paper, the author would examine the new trends and challenges in workplace learning and education. Implications would be made to maximize the effectiveness of training in enhancing organizational success.

Keywords: corporate learning, life-long learning and education

New Trends and Challenges in Workplace Learning and Education

Background

Forces affecting the corporate learning function

In Hong Kong, forces such as changes in job nature, expectation of job holders, and supply of skilled employees continue to affect how organizations manage its learning function. Automation to a large extent requires employees' competencies to cope with high technology. Younger generation joining the workforce would not expect life time career and often demonstrate less job commitment particularly when promotion does not match with expectation. While there may seem to be a lack of skilled or high potential employees joining the workforce on one hand, existing work population is in fact facing the aging problem on the other. One needs not be a training expert to see that strengthening the learning function can be the best solution.

Maximizing the contribution of corporate learning

In order to maximize the contribution of corporate training to business success, it should be strategic, integrated, relevant, problem-based, action-oriented, performance-related and continuous. Strategic in the sense that corporate learning should take a long-term perspective in identifying the types and levels of competencies that should be possessed by employees in fulfilling organizational goals.

Corporate learning indeed should be an integral part of the management process and business objectives and be relevant in satisfying identified and appropriate training needs. By taking appropriate action in addressing organizational problems, corporate learning helps bridge the gaps between what employees can do and what they need to do, now and in the future. Indeed, the objectives of any corporate training should be clearly defined in what people will be able to do after training and such objectives should be specifically related to performance requirement and result in measurably improved job performance. Finally, training should be regarded as a continuous process with trainees bearing increasing responsibility for their own learning.

Potential benefits of investment in learning and development for business

Armstrong (2014) identified the potential benefits of investing in learning and development. By providing corporate training, organizations can minimize learning costs; improve individual, team and corporate performance in terms of output, quality, speed and productivity; and improve operational flexibility by extending the range of skills possessed by employees. It also helps to attract high quality staff by developing their competencies and enhancing their skills, thus enabling them to obtain more job satisfaction, to gain higher rewards and to progress within the organization.

Furthermore, it also increases the commitment of staff by encouraging them to

identify with the mission and objectives of organization. Corporate training can also help to manage organizational change by understanding the reasons for change and providing people with the knowledge and skills they need to adjust to new and challenging situations. Finally, it should ideally help to develop a positive culture in the organization and provide higher levels of service to customers.

One recent study conducted by the EvoLLLution (2012) has confirmed that continuous learning and education within the organization is considered to be strategic. The findings have indicated that ongoing education has positive implications for the company and the employees. 96% of the surveyed employers agreed that ongoing education has a positive impact on job performance. 78% of them confirmed that ongoing education has been factored into promotion and advancement. 87 % agreed that ongoing education has an impact on employees' compensation and salary. Indeed, nearly all employers recognized the impact of ongoing education and rewarded their employees accordingly (The EvoLLLution, 2012).

Another survey conducted by Deloitte revealed the types of learning mostly needed by her employees. In its recent report (Deloitte, 2014), Deloitte identified the most crucial skills that London employees should possess in the coming years. The skills increasingly required are digital know-how (16%); management (15%);

creativity (13%); entrepreneurship (10%), problem solving (9%); negotiation (9%); professional qualifications (8%); processing & clerical (6%); social perceptiveness (5%); persuasiveness (5%); and foreign languages (4%). Such findings also shed light on implications for local training.

Armstrong's Systematic Training Model

Using Armstrong's systematic training model, education and learning play crucial roles in each of the four stages involved. In the first stage of identifying training needs, different behaviors, skills and attitudes required for organizational effectiveness will be identified to be acquired by corporate learners. In the second stage of planning different training programmes, different training programmes will be designed with the most appropriate techniques, methods and trainers to facilitate best learning outcomes. In the third stage, training programmes will be implemented to enhance effective transfer of learning. Evaluation of the training effectiveness takes place in the last stage to measure the improvement of job or organizational performance that has occurred in the workplace as a result of learning. Armstrong's model will be used in this paper to illustrate the learning and education trends and challenges in the workplace.

Method

In this survey, training practitioners from six companies have been invited to share views on training trends and related challenges in corporate learning and education.

The business nature of these companies involves manufacturing, property management, banking, logistic, hotel and retail business. These companies have well established training departments and employ over 1000 employees.

Findings

Training needs

In this survey as indicated by the training practitioners, management skills such as coaching and mentoring skills are the most needed among managerial staff. Upgrade of professional qualifications are also popular among managerial staff in order to gain promotion along their career ladders. Lack of industry knowledge and interpersonal skills are commonly found among fresh graduates. Language, communication and presentation skills are areas mostly needed among middle managerial staff. The implication is that companies should conduct regular training needs analysis in order that appropriate and systematic learning curriculum can be instituted to upgrade professional skills of both new or existing employees throughout their careers.

Duration of learning

Findings also indicated that the duration of training tends to be shorter than before. One-week training programme for managerial staff may be welcome a decade ago. Due to busy business schedule, training programmes with long duration may only be applicable to high potential (HiPo) employees. Overseas training and training with longer duration and education sponsorship such as a Master degree is in general often confined to HiPo. For average employees, half day training or 3-hour business-related learning is more popular. The average number of training hours per employee per annum is 18 hours which more or less took place during the past five years.

Mode of learning delivery

Half of the surveyed companies had a budget for e-learning for the past five years and the budget will be slightly increased for the coming year. E-learning and mobile learning may become more popularly used in corporate learning and education because it can encourage individual employees to customize learning environment to fit their needs. Another major benefit for learners is that they can have autonomy to control their own learning pace. But the challenge is that learners need to exercise self-discipline in the learning process. The implication is that training practitioners

may need to provide a mixed mode of learning delivery to cater for the needs of individual learners.

Learning content with practicality

As indicated by training practitioners, learners, whether senior managerial staff or frontline supervisors, tend to look for learning contents with high practicality rather than theoretically focused materials. This trend of looking for quick fix is commonly found among learners at all levels. The implication for training practitioners is to design learning packages with enriched content and context to enhance effective learning transfer.

Use of experiential training methods

Findings also indicated that learners nowadays prefer more experiential training methods than informational training method. Although the informational training method is still used for some technical training programmes, elements of experiential training methods have to be frequently used to augment the informational approach particularly in the changing learners' attitudes. However, it may present challenges to training practitioners when they find it difficult to make those basic and technical training programmes "interesting", "interactive" and "experiential".

Indeed, e-learning or mobile learning may present some solutions to the

practitioners. With the popular use of computers and mobile phone, instant feedback and interaction is possible even for those basic and technical training to arouse interest of learner and facilitate effective learning transfer.

Learning on-the-job

Among the on-the-job learning techniques, it was found that coaching tends to be most preferred by the learner since it is a personal technique designed to develop individual skills, knowledge and attitudes where informal but planned encounters take place between trainees and trainers. Coaching can also let learners know what their supervisors think about how they do their jobs and enable supervisors and employees to work together on ways in which employees can improve their performance. It also improves communication and collaboration between supervisors and employees. Indeed, it can provide a framework for establishing short- and long-term personal career goals. As indicated by the surveyed practitioners, coaching and mentoring by immediate supervisor or senior executives are commonly used as a means to develop staff, especially HiPo. But the challenge is that not all supervisors who serve as coaches or mentors possess the competency of a good coach or a professional mentor. And they do not know how to conduct coaching sessions with motivational purposes. Appropriate training for supervisors may be helpful in enhancing their effective

coaching and mentoring for success.

Life-long learning and credit accumulation and transfer (CAT)

All the surveyed practitioners indicated that the company encourages life-long learning for their employees. It serves not only as motivation within the workplace but can benefit the wellbeing of their employees. Indeed, among the surveyed companies, two companies have indicated that Qualifications Framework (QF) as launched by the Education Bureau in 2008 has served as a good mechanism to facilitate the lifelong learning of their employees. As indicated by the surveyed practitioners, corporate learners are not simply satisfied with finding quick fix solutions to problems in their workplace. They are keen to seek accessible articulation pathways for lifelong learning.

Indeed, the Education Bureau launched the policy and principles of credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) under the QF to further strengthen the support to learners' mobility in their learning pathways in July 2014. For example, one surveyed company enables their learners who have successfully completed a QF programme or have a Recognition of Prior Learning ("RPL") certificate to continue their learning pathway in external educational institutions using credit transfer. This provides learners with high mobility in their learning and seamless pathways towards higher

qualifications and enables their life-long learning.

But the challenge is that the process in obtaining QF can be long and expensive. Not many companies have the resources to provide a such mechanism. The implication is that closer cooperation and partnership should be strengthened among corporate, industry and academia in designing appropriate programmes in enhancing the learning pathways of local workforce at large.

Training Evaluation

All surveyed companies have indicated they have conducted some forms of training evaluation in measuring the effectiveness of all the learning activities. Among the four levels of training evaluation advocated by Kirkpatrick (1998) i.e. reactions; learning; behavior; and results, training evaluation conducted by the surveyed companies is often confined to the levels of reactions and learning. The challenge is that what is often ignored is the extent to which trainees have applied learning on the job, i.e. evaluation of job behavior; and how changes in the job behaviour of trainees affect the functioning of the organization such as improvement in output, productivity, quality and morale, i.e. evaluation at results level. One observation is that impact of training has not been factored into any forms of reward or promotion system of the companies. The implication is that although it may be costly and time consuming in

conducting evaluation at all levels, with the assistance of training experts in developing appropriate evaluation mechanisms, training evaluation can help to quantify and maximize the impact of learning on corporate performance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the new frontier for training practitioners to explore is the design of interesting and attractive learning materials which can ideally address both personal as well organizational needs. The use of high technology in facilitating the learning process may help enable effective learning transfer. Indeed, life-long learning and education continues to play a crucial role within the corporate arena. In order to be competitive in the dynamic and rapidly changing market, it will be wise for organizations to implement a business strategy that can maximize the synergies between lifelong learning and workforce productivity.

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