

FACTORS INFLUENCING EMPLOYEE LEARNING IN SMALL FIRMS

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of the research was to identify key factors influencing employee learning from the perspective of owners/managers. Data were gathered from owners/managers in a total of 27 small manufacturing and services firms through interviews and analysed using content analytic procedures. The research found that the key factors influencing employee learning could be categorised into four main themes: (1) factors in the external business environment; (2) factors in the work environment; (3) learning potential of the job itself; and (4) learning orientations of employees. Categorisation of the factors produces a preliminary framework that might guide future research. The findings could assist in raising owners'/managers' awareness of the key factors influencing employee learning. Categorisation of the factors could help owners/managers cope with the many factors. The factors identified in this study need to be supplemented by factors identified through further research to develop a comprehensive framework.

Keywords: small business, workplace learning, New Zealand

There is growing interest in making workplaces into effective learning environments (Billett 2001; Eraut 2004). The importance of learning is primarily because of the need for organisations to respond to rapid and continuous change in the organisation's external environment (Ellinger, Watkins & Bostrom 1999). The views that learning is important to the survival of organisations (Schein 1993), and is a significant source of competitive advantage (De Geus 1988), are prevalent in the workplace learning, organisational learning, and 'learning organisation' literatures.

Small firms represent a significant part of the workplace-learning context in New Zealand, and in other Asia-Pacific economies. For example, almost 99 percent of New Zealand enterprises employ 49 or fewer full time equivalent employees, and these firms account for approximately 54 percent of all people employed in enterprises (Statistics New Zealand 2003). In regard to other Asia-Pacific economies, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) views small firms as both the vehicle that creates most of the employment in the Asia-Pacific and the backbone for regional economic growth (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation 2006). Accordingly, development of small firms in the Asia-Pacific has a crucial role in new employment creation and sustained economic growth in the region. This includes development of the human capital in these firms through learning processes.

There is growing awareness that the role and importance of informal training and learning processes in small firms needs to be recognised and appreciated (Field 1998; Kitching & Blackburn 2002). Unfortunately, our understanding of informal training and learning processes in small firms is underdeveloped. For instance, Cardon and Stevens (2004) have noted that "we lack much of the theory and data necessary to understand how small and emerging firms train their employees" (p.295). This is because most research into learning in small firms has focussed on engagement in formal, structured training (Johnson 2002).

With the aim of contributing to developing a better understanding of the broad area of informal training and learning processes in small firms, this paper reports and discusses findings of an exploratory qualitative study that examined owners'/managers' perceptions of factors influencing employee learning in a total of 27 New Zealand small firms operating in the manufacturing and services sectors. In this paper the focus is on employee learning, rather than the learning of owners/managers. Given that the latter are often key workers themselves within small businesses (Johnson 2002), their views are material to the subject at hand. Furthermore, owner-managers can play a critical role in fostering employee learning (Boud & Garrick 1999; Coetzer 2006), thus their beliefs about factors influencing employee learning are important.

TRAINING AND LEARNING IN SMALL FIRMS

Small firms are less likely to provide formal training for staff than larger ones (Bishop & Ritzen 1991; Storey 2004). Formal training is generally not suited to small firms for a variety of reasons. These include the cost of such training, the opportunity cost of employees' time when they attend training

off-the-job, and the perceived lack of relevancy of much off-the-job training, because it usually does not focus on firm-specific problems, priorities and work practices (Johnson 2002; Gibb 1997). When small firms do engage in formal training, such training typically involves apprentice training, supplier-sponsored training, trade association organised training, or training required by regulatory bodies or larger customers (Johnson 2002).

Training is often viewed as the vehicle for fostering learning, disregarding many other approaches (Taylor & Thorpe 2004). Consistent with this view, interest in learning in small firms has focused on the provision or absence of 'training' as the measure of 'learning' (Field 1998; Walton 1999). In fact, most research into employee learning in small firms has involved 'snapshot' quantitative surveys of employee participation in taught courses and structured on-the-job training (Billett, Herson-Tinning & Ehrich 2003). Such research typically relies on definitions of training that are more relevant to large organisations than to smaller organisations (Johnson, 2002). As Cardon and Stevens (2004) have noted, "perhaps additional insights on employee skill development and learning could be gained if a broader perspective on training is taken" (p.308).

Recent thinking on training in smaller firms suggests that informal training and learning processes fits well with constraints under which small firms operate, and may be effective in improving firm performance (Curran 2000; Field 1998; Rowden 1995; Walton 1999). Hence, the traditional view that only formal training is 'real' training is increasingly being questioned. These commentators argue that training models derived from large firm experiences and practice may be fundamentally inappropriate for small firms, and research, theorising, and practice recommendations regarding employee learning in small firms may be more fruitful if based on different assumptions.

Since the 1990s there have been a growing number of studies in which the findings highlight the value of researchers adopting a perspective that is broader than formal training when examining employee learning in small firms. For example, the findings of case study research by Rowden (1995) in manufacturing organisations challenges the notion that little is done in the way of human resource development (HRD) in successful small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs). This field-based investigation revealed that each organisation studied did a considerable amount of HRD. However, people in the organisations investigated felt that HRD activities were not being undertaken. Rowden contends that interview participants had a narrow concept of HRD, and did not view all the coaching, mentoring, on-the-job training and other forms of informal learning that had been observed during the field based investigation as forms of HRD.

Case study research by Field (1998) also illustrated the range of learning activities that can be overlooked if one adopts a narrow, training perspective. This study showed that limited reliance on structured training does not necessarily mean that learning is also limited. Drawing on a series of eight case studies of training and learning within small manufacturing and services businesses, Field concluded that, consistent with previous findings, the small businesses studied tended to make limited use of structured training. However, Field points out, "when we look at the same case study sites through a learning lens, the picture is much richer and more complex" (p.64).

Gibb (1997) also looks beyond formal training in examining learning processes in small firms. He conceptualises the small and medium size enterprise as an active learning organisation within a stakeholder environment. Gibb argues that the predominant contextual learning mode in this environment is that of: learning from peers; learning by doing; learning by feedback from customers and suppliers; learning by copying; learning by experiment; learning by problem solving and opportunity taking; and learning from making mistakes. This learning environment is continually creating contextual knowledge through the process of the business striving to adapt, survive, and grow. According to Gibb, this contrasts sharply with the largely de-contextualised (from the specific problems/priorities of the firm) learning environment frequently provided by formal training.

The small numbers of studies that have examined employee knowledge and skill acquisition in small firms through a 'learning lens' have had quite diverse research aims. Therefore, any attempt to bring some coherence to the study of employee knowledge and skill acquisition in small firms would be useful. Accordingly, one worthwhile question at this point in the evolution of the literature would be: In the opinion of owners/managers, what are key factors influencing employee learning?

METHOD

To answer this research question a qualitative methodology was used involving the collection of rich data via site visits and in-depth interviews. To recruit participants we purchased a list of 500 randomly selected firms employing up to 49 full-time equivalent staff from a commercial database supplier. Taking into account the need to limit the number of sampling dimensions, a decision was made to focus on manufacturing and service firms, rather than attempting to look at firms from all industries. Thus we purposefully sampled manufacturing and service firms only and a range of different types of manufacturing and service firms were included in our sample. Our aim was to identify a common core of factors influencing employee learning in the firms, rather than reveal major variations. Using these sampling strategies, data were collected from owners/managers of 27 well-established firms in urban and rural settings of the North and South Islands of New Zealand.

Each firm was visited by one of the members of the research team. The owners/managers were taken through a semi-structured interview schedule designed to recover and understand meanings in use by the situated social actors (Gephart 2004). Each interview lasted between 45-90 minutes and was tape-recorded. The interviews were later transcribed. As soon as the transcript of an interview was available for review, it was checked for accuracy and carefully examined repeatedly by the researchers. Reflective remarks were recorded in the margins (Miles & Huberman 1994; Patton 1990). The final transcripts provided rich, contextualised text and were used as the basis for analysis.

Teasing out themes, or looking for 'recurring regularities' (Patton 1990) in the data, was the main tactic for drawing meaning from the data. This involved looking for both recurring phrases in the verbatim expressions of informants, and threads that tied together data. Using this tactic, a total of four themes emerged from the data. To aid in the classification of textual interview data, codes were developed for each theme. The contents of the data were then classified in the theme in which it most clearly belonged by writing codes directly on the relevant data passages. One researcher assessed the reliability of text classification through coding and then later re-coding the same text. Another researcher checked the accuracy of the coding. This check showed high reproducibility. Findings of the content analysis of the verbatim expressions of the 27 participants in the interviews are discussed after the following brief summary of demographic data.

SUMMARY OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Twenty-three (85%) of the 27 participating firms employed fewer than 20 full time equivalent staff (FTEs), and only one firm employed more than 30 FTEs. Seventeen (63%) of the interviewees were male. Most participants (63%) had no post-secondary school formal education qualifications, and just four of the participants (15%) had a bachelor degree or higher qualification. However, the participants did have considerable firm-specific experience. Only six (22%) had been with the firm for less than five years. On the other hand, 15 interviewees (56%) had been with their respective firms for 10 or more years. Thus, the participants were a potentially well-informed and rich source of data on employee learning in the sample firms.

KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING EMPLOYEE LEARNING

Key factors influencing employee learning could be categorised into four main themes. These themes were: (1) factors in the external business environment; (2) factors in the work environment; (3) learning potential of the job itself; and (4) learning orientations of employees.

Theme 1: Factors in the External Business Environment

In the opinion of respondents, two factors in the external environment had important influences on employee learning in the sample firms: (1) learning stimuli; and (2) learning resources. Learning

stimuli included regulation, advances in technology, customer requirements and expectations, and competitive pressures. Each of these learning stimuli is illustrated in Insert 1. As could be expected, similar stimuli are mentioned in literature on training needs analysis. For instance, Noe (2007) identifies several ‘pressure points’ that trigger training needs analysis in organisations. These ‘pressure points’ include legislation, new technology and customer requests.

Insert 1: Learning stimuli

Regulation: *“We’re selling liquor. You’ve just got to follow the rules. You’ve got to learn everything. That is our license on the line, if we lose our license that is our business. It’s very important that they follow all the procedures and learn them very well, because you just don’t get a second chance with a license.”* (Bar & café, 7 employees)

Advances in technology: *“For our trade it is a must, you can’t not carry on learning because the technology is changing. So if you left the trade now and came back in ... if you wanted to work on reasonably late model vehicles, you just couldn’t, without doing a serious amount of training to be up with the play. The technology is just phenomenal, it is changing so fast.”* (Motor vehicle repairs, 6 employees)

Customer requirements: *“Customers come in with different jobs. Every job is different. Essentially, all we’re doing is selling our skills.”* (Farmer-related engineering work, 4 employees)

Customer expectations: *“Customers. We listen to what they say, and if things aren’t done right, that is where you’re learning faster, because you need to come up to speed to keep them happy.”* (Plumbing, 20 employees)

Competition: *“You have got to do things right, you get one chance with people. So I think learning is very important. You are not just competing against other car dealers, you are competing against travel agents, and you are chasing that dollar against a lot of other people. It is about retaining customers.”* (Motor vehicle dealer, 6 employees)

In regard to learning resources in the external business environment, owners/managers highlighted access to low cost external learning resources, such as suppliers, trade associations and small business resource centres within banks, as a key factor influencing learning. Such learning resources were perceived as relevant to the context and learning needs of small firms. In particular, the learning experiences provided by trade associations and suppliers (see Insert 2) were perceived as being very relevant to small firm learning needs. As mentioned previously, both the high cost of much off-the-job training and perceived lack of relevancy of such training are frequently mentioned barriers to small firm engagement in formal training (Gibb 1997; Johnson 2002).

Insert 2: Learning resources

Trade associations: *“I came in here not knowing much about hospitality. So without Hospitality Association of New Zealand help I don’t know how I would’ve got through. Regarding employment issues, dealing with trying to terminate staff, they helped me right through that.”* (Bar & café, 7 employees)

Suppliers: *“We quite regularly upgrade or update machinery. If we buy a brand-new machine, the supplier will come in and do the learning session.”* (Engine reconditioning, 3 employees)

Theme 2: Factors in the Work Environment

In the opinion of informants, there were also two broad factors in the internal organisational environments influencing employee learning. These were: (1) employee practices; and (2) resource paucity. Some owners/managers expressed a strong preference towards employee practices aimed at recruiting, selecting and retaining skilled and experienced staff. Such practices reduced the extent of learning needed by new staff. Also, owners/managers could rely on current experienced employees to impart firm-specific knowledge to newcomers. Adopting such practices should not however diminish the importance of the process of motivating and encouraging participation in learning activities, given the increasing importance of continuous learning by employees in workplaces (Maurer 2002).

Appraising staff performance is another employee practice that has the potential to influence employee learning. Formal staff appraisal is uncommon in small firms (Gilbert & Jones 2000), presumably because of frequent opportunities for interaction between owners/managers and employees. In this study, a fairly formal appraisal system, that also seemed to have a development focus (as suggested by the quotation in Insert 3), was found in a very small minority of firms.

Insert 3: Employee practices

Qualified staff: *“If I employ skilled, qualified trades people, I would expect them to be setting the standard already. If the interview process has gone correctly, I’ve done the correct check and I’ve got the right person, they’ll have the correct skill level before they even start here.”* (Printing, 16 employees)

Minimising learning: *“Ideally we would recruit someone who is a tradesman, with a trade certificate. Therefore in the first year, they would only have to learn our operating procedures and safety.”* (General engineering, 4 employees)

Retention: *“The backbone of my staff has been with us for 15, 16, 17 or 18 years. So it is less of a problem introducing a new worker into the workforce. All we do is put them next to one guy, and then they move on to another guy. There is nothing formal.”* (Manufacturer of heating installations, 15 employees)

Performance appraisal: *“When you have their appraisals, you ask them what their interests are, what they would like to do, where they can see themselves developing extra skills.”* (Crèche, 8 employees)

According to respondents, resource constraints were a factor constraining employee learning in their firms. This is not surprising, given that resource paucity has been identified as a common feature of small businesses (Ghobadian & Gallear 1997). In the opinion of owner-managers, there were three key resource constraints on employee learning when taking the form of participation in training: (1) the costs of training, especially when considered in relation to perceived low levels of transfer of learning to the workplace; (2) the opportunity costs of employees’ time while they attended training; and (3) lack of time for learning because of work pressures. (Each of these three constraints is illustrated in Insert 4.) The finding that owner-managers perceived the costs associated with employee engagement in formal training as a factor constraining employee learning is somewhat surprising, given that most owner-managers seemed to believe that their firms could operate effectively without recourse to formal training. Training was viewed as just one of several mechanisms for facilitating employee learning.

Insert 4: Constraints on learning when applied to training

Cost constraints: *“The cost, it’s very high. If I send Jared to one of the Employers and Manufacturers Association programmes, it takes me down by almost five or six hundred dollars. That’s a bit on the*

high side in the sense that it's to go mingle, and to find out what's happening. So the cost is preventative." (Warehousing and storage, 6 employees)

Opportunity cost: *"If you take a mechanic off the floor for a week, that's a lot of downtime that you can't charge out. That costs you a lot of money. You have to be lean and mean in small to medium businesses. It is the time away that really hurts."* (Motor vehicle repairs, 6 employees)

Time constraints: *"If they have been shown how to do it two or three times and it is not sinking in and the job has to be done by a certain time, they will get taken off the job and someone else will do the job. Later on, when there is not much to do, you'll probably go back to them and say, 'this is what you were doing wrong then, we could not let you finish the job because the customer wanted it, but have a practice now.' Quite often they do it much better when there is no real pressure on."* (General engineering, 4 employees)

Theme 3: Learning Potential of the Job

There is a consistent view in the literature that job assignments, the kinds of work activities that individuals engage in, can be a primary source of learning for employees in the wide variety of workplace contexts (Billett 2001; Campion, Cheraskin & Stevens 1994; Ortega 2001). For example, according to (Billett 2002), "engagement in work activities incites change in individuals' capacities: learning." Job characteristics, such as task complexity, task variety and scope for action are important determinants of the learning potential of a work system (Ellstrom 2001).

The learning potential of the work systems varied markedly among the 27 workplaces. To illustrate, in the chemist, rest home and crèche, risks involved in providing some services to clients added considerably to the importance of employee learning. Similarly, employee learning was important in the engineering firm that provided customised services to local farmers. Also, according to some owners/managers, their employees had broadly defined task roles (high task variety) and access to a wide range of workplace activities. Providing access to a wide range of work activities is likely to make effective contributions to employees' learning. On the other hand, in workplaces such as the tearoom and the manufacturer of woodfires, tasks were generally low-skill and work practices did not seem to change often. This limited the potential of these workplaces as sites for employee learning (Billett 2001). Thus, although work assignments presented opportunities for growth and learning in some of the workplaces in the sample, this was by no means always the case. As the quotations in Insert 5 illustrate, other workplaces were characterised by low skill work, with low learning potential.

Insert 5: Learning potential of the job

High learning potential: *"It's one of the most skilled jobs in the world, jobbing work. You've got to be quick on your feet. You've got to know what to do on each job and you've got to be able to do it in the time which is going to be competitive. You've got to be able to balance speed and quality of the job."* (Farmer-related engineering work, 4 employees)

Low learning potential: *"It is not highly skilled, it is just welding fire boxes and becoming familiar with different heaters. Once they become familiar with the heaters, it is repetitious and there is not a huge amount of difference between one heater and another. So we don't send them on any courses. Two or three have been away on forklift training and some have been away on safety courses, but that is all."* (Manufacturer of heating installations, 15 employees)

High task variety: *"We're shop fitters, cabinet makers, we're in the wood-working trade. So we do anything from traditional furniture right through to a little bit of carpentry as well. Because of the game that we're in, there's quite a wide scope of jobs to do."* (Cabinet maker, 5 employees)

Also, *within* each small firm the learning potential of the different jobs being performed by employees varied noticeably. For example, in the rest home the nursing staff required regular technical up-dating on a wide range of subjects, such as medication management, infection control and dementia. In contrast, within the same organisation the scope for learning was limited for the kitchen, laundry and cleaning staff.

Theme 4: Learning Orientations of Employees

In the opinion of respondents, differences in learning orientations of employees was a key factor influencing employee engagement in ongoing learning. In their view, some employees lacked interest in learning, whereas others proactively sought access to learning opportunities and needed little motivating and encouragement. In addition to lack of interest in ongoing learning on the part of some employees, owners/managers also identified lack of career motivation and poor work ethic as factors limiting learning. Quotations in Insert 6 illustrate the general idea of employees possessing a learning orientation.

Insert 6: Employee learning orientations

Lack of interest: *“We have two staff here who take more interest than the rest of them. The others just cruise along. They are just happy to come in and do their job and get their pay at the end of the week and they have got no ambition. That is just how they are and you are never going to change that. Even with this small staff, there are two distinct groups, the ‘want to haves’, and the ‘don’t cares’. It doesn’t make the ones that don’t want to learn any worse employees, but that is all they are ever going to do. The others might move on to management or owning their own business.”* (Tearoom, 5 employees)

Career motivation: *“It is hard getting guys out of secondary school that are willing to listen and learn properly. They’re taught by teachers that manual labour isn’t a good career path. And they come in here with that sort of attitude.”* (Engine reconditioning, 3 employees)

Work ethic: *“There is another thing which is family related, people just don’t have a work ethic. Their parents don’t have it so they can’t bring it in to the workshop and I end up becoming a teacher and trying to train them into a work ethic. But then they go home and they haven’t got the work ethic at home, so it falls down.”* (Farmer-related engineering work, 4 employees)

DISCUSSION

The view that there should be increased emphasis on learning in workplaces because of rapid changes in business environments is prevalent in the literature. In New Zealand, and in other developed economies, small firms represent a very significant part of the workplace-learning context. Given the vast knowledge and skills base vested in small firms, how knowledge and skills are developed and maintained through learning processes in these firms are matters of major interest.

The focus, in much of the small business literature, on formal training has diverted attention away from other forms of learning that can be effective in meeting the needs of small firms. Only a small number of studies have examined employee knowledge and skill acquisition from a learning perspective. This study of factors influencing employee learning was a tentative attempt to bring some coherence to the study of employee learning in small firms. It adopts an interpretative perspective by surfacing factors from the perceived realities of owners/managers and developing categories of the several factors. These categories were: (1) factors in the external business environment; (2) factors in the work environment; (3) learning potential of the job itself; and (4) learning orientations of employees.

This is a tentative effort to identify factors influencing employee learning. Although the study is limited in breadth and depth, it provides a useful starting point for developing a comprehensive framework. The factors identified in this study need to be supplemented by factors identified through further research. One obvious omission is factors related to the owner/manager, such as his or her attitude toward learning and understanding of employee learning processes. This omission may be due to the limitation of using a single-source (the owner/manager) in this study (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone 2002). In the firms studied, owners/managers and employees will understandably have different perceptions of factors influencing learning, even though owners/managers are often key workers themselves within small firms. Thus future research should obtain employee perspectives on factors influencing learning. A further limitation of this study is that the findings may be prone to social desirability bias (Zikmund 2003). Some participants may have responded in a way intended to create a favourable impression of their practices related to employee learning. Finally, given the predominance of firms with less than 20 staff in the sample, the findings presented here cannot be extrapolated to all small firms.

The findings have implications for both researching and managing employee learning in small firms. As regards research, a researcher examining employee learning in small firms can use the preliminary framework (produced by categorisation of the factors) as a research conceptual framework to guide his or her study. The preliminary framework can also help to evaluate the current state of research in the field, and where gaps remain – that is, where more research is needed. As regards management practice, the findings could aid in raising owners'/managers' awareness of the key factors influencing employee learning. The categorisation of the factors could help owners/managers cope with the many factors. Finally, owners/managers can use the preliminary framework to analyse factors that may be helping or hindering employee learning in their firms.

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