

Editorial

Introduction: contemporary perspectives on learning for work

Over the past decade we have continued to witness many changes in the nature of organisations and working life. The need to cope with rapid technological change, greater job mobility and greater job insecurity are increasingly common characteristics of employment. These changes have had a significant impact on the requirements and methods of competence development and workplace learning. Probably the most prevalent trend is the increasing need for life-long learning (Fischer, 2000). Workers cannot expect to acquire all necessary skills in formal education in advance of their careers. Career changes, necessitating further learning are becoming increasingly common. Technological developments are increasing the rate at which methods of working have to change in order to keep up-to-date, efficient and competitive.

Workers must not only continue to learn throughout their careers, but must also adapt to new unfamiliar learning methods. Companies are motivated to make learning as efficient and cost effective as possible. Organisations can try new techniques and methods of competence development in order to gain an advantage over competitors. Developments in learning technologies aim to increase efficiency by, for example, providing learning resources on demand or personalised to learner requirements.

Many alterations in the methods of learning are a result of the changing nature of organisations and the socio-economic climate within which they must operate. In work organisations current trends have been toward company downsizing and virtual corporations where companies make short and long-term alliances with others in order to satisfy customer requests (Carayon and Smith, 2000). These trends can result in the need to learn outside the conventional personnel development structures of the organisation for two reasons. First, smaller companies may have insufficient resources to support competence development. Second, virtual corporations often require knowledge sharing, and therefore learning to occur across company borders (Bal and Teo, 2001).

These were among the influences that motivated the Worklife 2000 Workshop in Östersund, Sweden. It was

one of over sixty workshops organised as part of the Swedish European Presidency of the European Union covering a broad range of issues concerned with modern working life. The workshop in Östersund, dealt with the topic of learning for work in the new economy. The research reported in the following papers developed out of position statements presented by the authors at the workshop. Some of the predicted changes as to the nature of work and organisations prevalent at the time of the workshop were never realised, particularly in the area of e-commerce. However the workshop helped to formulate a research agenda that is reflected in the following papers.

A common theme throughout the papers is the need for organisations to provide the necessary tools and environments for the continuous development in the workplace. As noted above, there is a need for companies to strive for new systems and techniques of competence development in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the learning process. This can, and does, lead to the situation where a company accumulates over time a disparate range of personnel development tools. Ivergård and Hunt describe how cohesion can be created between personnel systems, within a personnel development model combining strategic and cultural development.

One of the most important factors related to competence development is workplace stress. Paulsson, Ivergård and Hunt describe how opportunities to influence one's own competence development lowers stress. Their model outlines some of the conditions required for workplace learning to have positive outcomes, including having a manageable workload.

Due to increased workforce mobility and reduced job security, research into training should not be confined to the workplace, but must also consider training for new careers during periods of unemployment. Røjdalen, Gelin and Ivergård investigate factors determining the success of unemployment training in terms of self assessed mental health and subsequent employment status. In the context of their study, training was found to be most effective among the short term unemployed and those of a lower prior educational level.

Particularly over the past decade, knowledge management technologies have been widely applied in companies as a way supporting competence development. Recently, there has been growing caution and scepticism regarding the potential of knowledge management (Stewart, 2003). Mulholland, Zdrahal and Domingue describe one crucial factor that can help determine the success or failure of a knowledge management initiative—the need to integrate high and low level perspectives in the development of a knowledge management application. They outline their experiences in supporting learning driven by a company-wide initiative and argue for the need to interface correctly with local worker autonomy.

These papers highlight the need for increased research into the human and social factors of rapid technological change and the role that e-learning can play in meeting increasingly high demands for skills and competence. The following papers, we hope, will serve to motivate further research work in this important area.

References

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