

Employee Perceptions of an Organization's Learning Climate: Effects of Employee Orientation Training

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The most important goal of any given training effort is to achieve learning at the individual, group/team, and organizational levels. This study used a repeated measures design to measure the change in employee perception of an organization's learning environment in a large U.S. manufacturing company. The time period examined included an employee orientation training program and also time spent in the workplace. The results and implications for training and development are discussed.

Keywords: Organizational learning, Training & Development, Human Resource Development

The importance of training and development opportunities in the workplace cannot be overemphasized. An organization's philosophy on workplace learning is a factor evaluated by potential employees in the job-hunting process. It is a factor that influences why workers accept jobs with certain employers. It is a reason why employees stay with an employer, and why they leave one employer for another. It is a key component in what employees look for in their jobs and in their organizations.

Many organizations offer new employee orientation training as a way to introduce new hires to a variety of organization-specific topics. New employee orientation training serves many purposes and has many meanings from both an organizational and employee perspective. For trainers to get leaders to transfer learning to behavior, and for leaders to get their employees to transfer learning to behavior, a lot of disciplined, consistent effort is needed (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 14). Researchers have found that successful new employee orientation training helps new employees become familiar with their organizational environment. Often included in orientation training is information on the organization's philosophy on learning, and on training and development opportunities within the organization. This study looks at the influence new employee orientation training actually has on employees' perceptions of their organization's philosophy on workplace learning. Using a repeated measures design, we measured the changes in employee perceptions of workplace learning.

Argyris and Schon (1978) describe organizational learning as occurring when "members of the organization act as learning agents of the organization, responding to changes in the internal and external environments of the organization by detecting and correcting errors in organizational theory-in-use, and embedding the results of their enquiry in private images and shared maps of organization" (p. 16). Organizational learning has also been described as "ongoing learning in a deliberate manner with a view to improvements supporting the organization's goals" (Collinson, Cook, & Conley, 2006, p. 107). Rowland (2004) posits that concepts involving intellectual capital, including organizational learning, are "more important in today's organizations than traditional assets such as natural resources and skilled labor" (p. 33).

Organizational learning takes place at a variety of different levels – at the individual level, group level, and ultimately, at the organizational level (Zietsma, Winn, Branzei, & Vertinsky, 2002). It "provides a sustainable avenue for change and an opportunity for continuous renewal from within" (Collinson, Cook, & Conley, 2006, p. 109). Rowland (2004) notes that the processes associated with learning and knowledge structure are similar at the individual and organizational levels: "The organization as well as the individual is thought to be a cognitive entity (or) information processor" (p. 34). Sharing knowledge, Rowland (2004) posits, "is a matter of how information can be communicated to others, readily interpreted, and used" (p. 34). Organizational learning adds dimensions to the individual learning process, however, in that what is learned by the individual is shared with the group:

Group interpreting facilitates the development of shared understandings and prompts integrating, which focuses on coherent collective action within a group. Shared understandings become preserved in language, embedded in shared cognitive maps, and enacted in a coordinated fashion. Institutionalizing involves embedding new

actions and interpretations into routines, rules, information systems, strategy and structure of the organization (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999, cited in Zietsma et al., 2002, p. S62).

Organizational learning theorists struggle with some of the same issues that perplex all educators. Just as educators wonder why individuals learn at different rates, organizational learning theorists note that “research has not progressed to the point of explaining the variation of learning rates observed across organizations” (Epple et al., 1991). Researchers have concluded that organizational learning can be impeded in a variety of ways. Zietsma (2002) notes that organizations may get caught in a legitimacy trap, whereby learning may be rejected based on the organization’s perceived legitimacy of the source. Organizational learning can also be impeded (or encouraged) by an organization’s power structure. Clifford and Thorpe (2007) define learning and development as:

a term that is now used because the focus has shifted from the person delivering the training to the learner and the impact of learning upon their performance. There is a movement away from the delivery of content to the development of learning capabilities, hence the responsibility being given to the individual and their line manager. A training and development function is more likely to be seen as the central point from which all staff development activity comes, where a learning and development function can be more readily perceived in a consultancy/advisory/facilitatory capacity. Training is one method, out of many, for achieving learning (p. 8).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on both adult learning theory and organizational learning theory. Adult learning theory used to guide this study included Mezirow’s (1991) theory of perspective transformation, which examines issues of meaning-making and development on individual bases. This was important in that our study surveyed respondents over a period of time which included formal training and interaction with peers while on the job. Social learning theory (Bandura and Walters, 1963) is also important for similar reasons. Social learning theory examines learning and social contexts, which were different during different times throughout the survey process. Social learning theory also stresses the influence and importance of human interaction on the learning process. That interaction, in this study, included interaction with presenters, facilitators, and fellow new employees during the orientation sessions, and also interaction with peers and coworkers during the on-the-job phase of this study.

Senge’s (1990) concept of the learning organization, one in which employees continually learn, grow, and expand their ways of thinking and capacities to create, is an important organizational learning theoretical base for this study. Senge points to the importance of consistent messages through the organization regarding learning, and also to the importance of providing learning and development opportunities for all employees at all levels. Watkins and Marsick’s (1993) work on organizational learning was also used in the theoretical framework for this study. Their model was used in the development of the survey time periods, as their work deals with learning on several different levels, and stresses the importance of collaboration and team learning as a means for continuous learning and change.

Figure 1 illustrates a model for organizational learning (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). According to this model, organizational learning occurs at three different levels: individual, teams, and organization. At the individual level, it deals with creating an environment for continuous learning and promoting inquiry and dialogue; at the team level, it requires encouraging collaboration and team learning; and at the organization level, it aims to empower people toward a collective vision and establish systems to capture and share learning. All three levels contribute to continuous learning and change within the organization.

The theory in this realm recognizes that knowledge resides in both the individual organizational member and in the relations among organizational members at the social level (Krogh & Roos, 1995, p. 49). However, little is known about retaining past knowing in organizations to “edge the knowledge-based perspective in a new direction, towards understanding of knowledge generation and acquisition in firms as a weakly cognitive practice, or more accurately, as the product of habits of everyday interaction in which thinking and acting are combined in inseparable unity, as are different types of knowledge, tacit and codified, mental, manual, and technological” (Amin & Cohendet, 2004, p. 62).

Motivation for organizational learning has also been the subject of research. Weick (2002) observes that “while there is no shortage of goal statements in discussions of organizational learning, most of the goals discussed focus on efficiency, cost containment, adaptation, and speed” (p. S12). Just as a disorienting dilemma will act as an impetus for individual learning, organizational learning is often motivated by a perceived discrepancy between aspirations and performance (Vince, 2002). Vince (2002) does note other reasons for organizational learning that are not necessarily based on deficits. They include the enrichment of group efficacy, organizational norms, formal and informal incentives, and team composition.

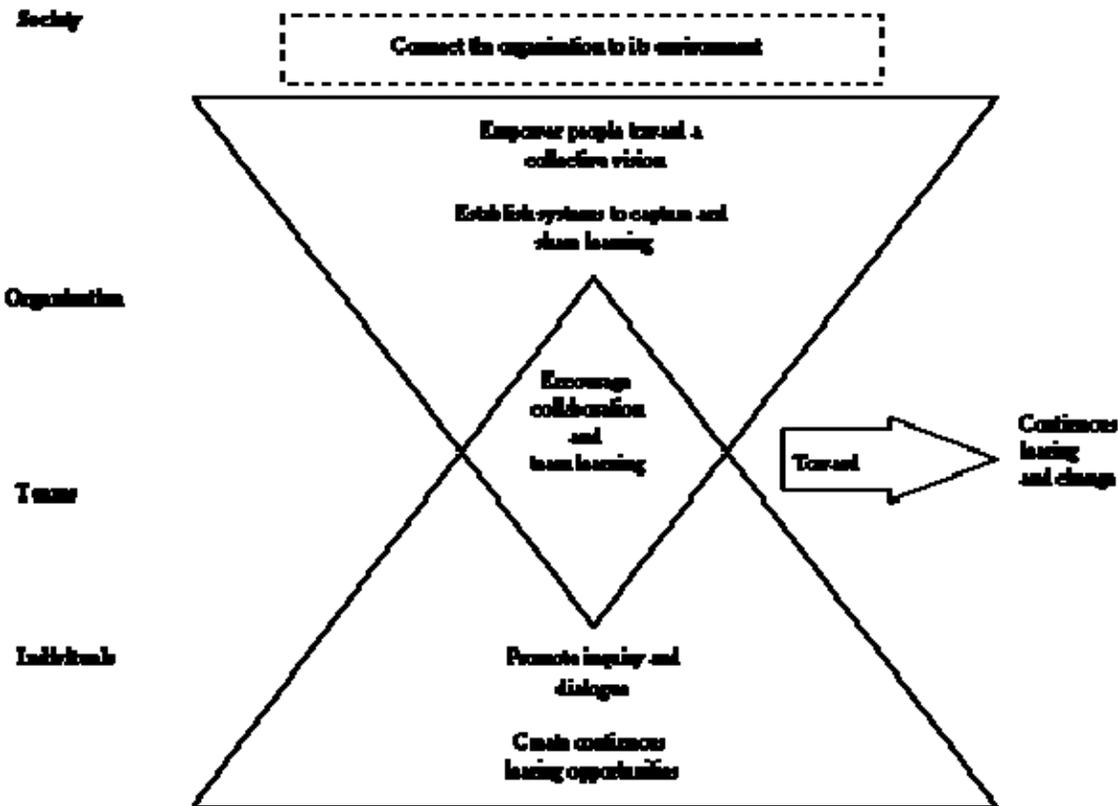


Figure 1. A model of organizational learning

Research Questions

This study investigates the following research questions:

- How does new employee orientation training affect employee perceptions of organizational learning?
- What is the effect of time spent back in the workplace when examining employee perception of organizational learning after the training?

In order to address these questions, the following hypotheses were tested:

1. H₁ There is a significant difference on the perceptions of trainees about organizational learning between Phase I and II.
2. H₂ There is a significant difference on the perceptions of trainees about organizational learning between Phase II and III.
3. H₃ There is a significant difference on the perceptions of trainees about organizational learning between Phase I and III.

Methodology

This quantitative study used a repeated measures design in which trainees were surveyed at three different time intervals about the effectiveness of new employee orientation training in helping them to understand and adapt to the organization's philosophy on learning. This study aims to measure the extent to which transfer of training occurred in an employee orientation training program in respect to the employee perceptions on organizational learning. The survey method used in this study utilized a survey instrument on organizational learning adopted from the self-assessment tool developed and validated by United Kingdom, the Department for Education and Skills (2006). The survey included 13 items on quality management.

Description of the Sample

This study employed the use of convenience sampling because the nature of the study involved measuring the effectiveness of new employee orientation training programs. The organization studied is a U.S. manufacturing

company based in a Midwestern state. Employees number approximately 9,000, and the organization’s facilities are located at nine states around the country, as well as in several international locations. The corporate employee orientation is required for all new employees at United States locations. It is held at the corporate headquarters. In addition to this orientation, individual facilities offer location-specific orientations.

Learning is extremely important in this organization; one of its values is the promotion of intellectual curiosity. The following is a quote from a recent annual report:

At (company), our greatest asset has always been our people – in fact, they represent our greatest sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace. So we’ve created an environment of lifelong learning in which employees can develop the skills, knowledge, and creativity that will allow them to grow as employees and as people.

The organization’s orientation program has grown and changed substantially in the past several years. Several years ago, it was determined that employee orientation would be consolidated at the corporate location, managed by the corporate human resource department, and offered at the corporate headquarters for employees at all locations. In the past, orientations were the responsibility of each individual location. Each orientation was different, and some locations did not provide employee orientation at all.

New employee orientations are held at the corporate headquarters. The orientation itself is a two-day session in which new employees are introduced to the organization’s products and services, as well as its mission, culture, history, values, philosophy, leadership, and vision. The organization’s philosophy on learning is discussed as a stand-alone topic, and is also noted in the context of several other topics during the orientation. Presenters are top executives at the organization, subject-matter experts, and employees in the human resource department.

Employees attending this training had some degree of tenure on the job, albeit small. Because the new employee orientation is offered once per quarter, and the organization hires employees on a daily basis, most employees attending new employee orientation training will have already been working at their jobs for a period of days, weeks, or even months. Furthermore, new employee orientation training is only offered to permanent employees of the organization. Interns, temporary, or contract employees who are then hired by the organization as permanent employees may have worked for longer periods of time within the organization before attending new employee orientation. The response rate for the survey was 111 of 125 (89%). A majority of respondents were between 30 and 49 years of age. One third of all respondents were between 30 and 39; 27% were between 40 and 49. The majority of the trainees (86%) were male, and most (80%) were Caucasian. With regard to the highest level of formal education achieved, 18% had completed high school, 23% held Associate degrees, 47% held Bachelor’s degrees, and 11% held Master’s degrees. Forty percent of respondents had worked at the company for less than three months, while 22% had worked at the company for more than six months.

Validity and Reliability

The study used a survey that was adopted from an instrument developed by the Department for Education and Skills in the U.K. (2006). For the overall organizational learning reliability, Cronbach’s coefficient alpha values for the 9 scales was +.85 for Phase I, +.89 for Phase II, and +.85 for Phase III. Cronbach’s coefficient alpha values for all scales of measure reported high inter-item correlations; as a result, it was considered substantial evidence that the items are reliably measuring the same underlying constructs (Santos, 1999). In addition, factor analysis was conducted to discover if the observed variables can be explained largely or entirely in terms of factors. Table 1 illustrates questionnaire items and factor loadings.

Table 1. *Questionnaire Items and Factor Loadings*

<i>Scale and Item</i>	<i>Factor</i>		
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
Systems thinking			
Has a supervision process	.51		
Has a system for evaluating the outcomes of development activities for our programs and services	.74		
Personal mastery			
Includes all our staff through a range of communication loops and processes		.55	
Defines the competencies required to deliver all aspects of our products and services		.68	
Has a competency-based performance appraisal, linked to product and service objectives for all our staff		.65	
Has a range of processes for recognizing achievements of our			

staff

.63

Shared Vision

Has a range of development opportunities for all our staff .64

Has a system for managing shortfalls in performance .52

Involves all staff in planning, review and evaluation processes .67

Data Collection

The trainees were given the surveys three times throughout the study. The first was completed the morning of the first day of new employee orientation training, but prior to the start of the orientation. The second was completed after the second day, or at the end of the training. The third was completed approximately one month after the last day of the training. The first and second surveys were distributed manually to participants by the researchers. Participants were asked to complete and return the survey immediately (respondents were given 15 minutes during the orientation to do so). The third survey was sent via interoffice mail to all participants in the training. Participants were asked to complete the survey and return it within a week of receipt to the researchers via a confidential return envelope. In order to be able to match the three surveys with each respondent yet keep respondents anonymous, a coding system was used. Participants were asked to mark each survey they completed with a pass code consisting of their date of birth and the first letters of their mother’s and father’s first names. The use of this pass code allowed the researchers to match the first, second, and third surveys by respondent without knowing who the respondent was.

Data Analysis

To test the research hypotheses, the study used several methods of data analysis, including descriptive statistics, paired-samples t-test, independent-samples t-test, and ANOVA. The frequency of responses was conducted to assess the distribution of the participant demographics. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each item and scale to assess potential central tendencies. Cronbach’s alpha was used to conduct reliability analysis to determine the reliability of all scales adopted in the study. The obtained alpha scores were then compared to the reliability estimates existing in the literature. The level of significance was set at $p < .01$ and $.05$ respectively.

Results and Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of new employee orientation training to help employees understand and adopt the notion of organization learning existing within their organization. The results of the study indicate that the training program has been effective overall, yielding significant results especially after Phase II. Nevertheless, this trend of increase did not continue until Phase III, although the results of Phase III are still considered significant. The ANOVA test, however, did not yield any significant results between groups.

When we measured the trainees’ perception on organizational learning at Phases I, II, and III respectively, we found that the mean differences were significant for all cases except the difference between Phases II and III. The significant difference is that the perceived learning about the organization’s philosophy positively increases between Phases I and II and between Phases I and III, while the perceived learning retention about that philosophy between Phases II and III was not positive. Table 2 shows the trainees’ perceptions about their organization’s learning culture throughout the phases of the study.

Table 2. *Organizational Learning Mean Scores and t-Test Results*

<i>Phases</i>	<i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Difference (SD), p-value</i>		
			<i>2-1</i>	<i>3-2</i>	<i>3-1</i>
Phase I	24.17 (7.19)	81	2.07 (.003), $p < .001$	-1.84 (.10), $p < .001$	1.67 (.87), $p < .05$
Phase II	26.03 (7.00)	77			
Phase II	25.16 (6.93)	63			

Conclusions

Based upon the results and findings, we concluded that the trainees were experiencing an increase in their learning about their organization’s philosophy on learning between Phases I and II and between Phases I and III. The

trainees, however, indicated a decrease in their perceived learning between Phases II and III. It was during this time period that the new employee was working on the job. The positive increases in employee learning about their organization's philosophy on learning that occurred during the time of new employee orientation did not continue once that employee returned back to the workplace. In other words, it is possible to conclude that what the top management envisions and believes about an aspect of the organization does not necessarily get translated the same way in other levels within the organization.

Argyris (1995) notes that "the individual is key to organizational learning" (p. 26). If individual employees do not understand the company's philosophy on organizational learning, that philosophy will be impeded. It appears that there may be some differences in perception about the concept of the organization's philosophy on learning that may have arisen during the time the employee was on the job. This could be problematic for the individual employee and the organization.

Implications for Training and Development

Learning does not end after orientation training. A learning organization is one in which employees continually learn and grow (Senge, 1990). An organization's philosophy on learning should permeate all aspects of work in that organization, and messages from all sources should be consistent. This is only possible with an organizational strategy that considers organizational learning as a core business function. HRD practitioners should understand the impact of both formal and informal learning situations on employees' beliefs, and should work to ensure consistent messages are sent regarding core issues like organizational learning.

This study showed that new employees' perceptions of their organization's philosophy on learning decreased in the month that immediately followed the orientation training. New employee orientation training is an important venue for new employees to learn about their organizations. HRD practitioners should build on that learning by fostering a continuous learning environment in the organization. Learning in organizations requires a multidimensional approach in that all involved stakeholders contribute to the process. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick suggest that transfer of learning to behavior utilizes a balance of both accountability and support (2005). In order to facilitate that accountability and support, HRD practitioners should work with management and employees to ensure that the organization's philosophy on organizational learning is clearly understood and shared at all levels, and by all employees.

Implications for Human Resource Development

This study showed that employee orientation training was effective in helping new employees learn about an organization's philosophy on organizational learning. That learning did not continue, however, when the employee concluded orientation and was on the job. It is important that HRD practitioners understand the effects of employee orientation on learning, as well as the effects that being in the workplace have on learning. Social learning theory states that employees learn by interacting with others, through mentoring and coaching, and in a variety of other ways, not all of which involve formal classroom situations.

This study is important in providing empirical evidence for organizational support for training programs not only with conducting the programs, but also with fostering an organizational culture that encourages and allows employees at all levels to practice what is learned. Otherwise, such efforts are always subject to remain top-management buzzwords and will never achieve their true goals in helping new employees learn, understand, and develop a culture aimed at what is valuable to the organization. It is important that HRD practitioners are aware of the methods and venues in which new employees learn about the organization.

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