Improving your organisation's workplace learning

This fact sheet has been produced by the Consortium Research Program's research activity 5: Learning through work. It aims to help RTOs explore ways in which they could make their workplace more learning conductive.

Why is this important?

Many organisations, including VET providers, are looking to find ways to achieve competitive advantage through the people they employ. Creating this advantage has a number of facets and most of these depend on training and developing people, and their ability to learn.

The VET sector also faces significant changes in the ways it does business. Its clients expect new and different teaching and learning practices to meet the challenges of contemporary work. At the same time a number of drivers of change, including technological developments, the rise of consumerism, staff shortages, the need to engage different learning groups and increased competition within the sector will have a major impact on the VET workforce, particularly in the area of learning and development (Chappell et al 2003, Mitchell et al 2006a). Problems of transfer, flattened organisational structures, financial and time constraints, commercial pressures and the changing nature of work itself have led to renewed interest in finding *learning solutions* rather than *training solutions* to workforce development; with learning conceptualised as a central, on-going and integral feature of contemporary work.

Why a more informal approach?

Using traditional formalised approaches to training to improve individual and organisational capability is no longer regarded by many organisations as sufficient in itself to satisfy the needs of the contemporary work environment. Financial and time constraints, commercial pressures and the changing nature of their work itself have led to renewed interest by VET providers in finding learning solutions rather than training solutions to workforce development. In this way learning is conceptualised as a central, on-going and integral feature of everyday work.

What promotes better workplace learning?

A number of researchers have furthered our understanding of learning at work by identifying factors in the work environment that either inhibit or encourage learning at work. One of the support documents produced by this research activity, *Investigating learning through work: What the literature says*, provides a theoretical framework, based on the literature, that identifies and explores key features required for good workplace learning.

What are these?

Factors such as having an understanding of the context in which the organisation operates together with an appreciation of the business objectives as well as experience in working in different areas of the business all influence the extent to which learning occurs at work.

Learning organisations are characterised by an environment in which learning is valued and planned into the work process, where there is a community of practice approach and the nature of the work requires the 'apprentice' staff member – or worker/learner - to draw on and use a wide variety of knowledge and experiences to become a rounded expert with a career in the organisation. It is also used as a way of aligning the goals of developing the individual and

improving organisational capability. The organisation has a culture of sharing knowledge and expertise.

Learning at work involves such processes as small group work, discussion, debate, practical problem solving, the presentation of alternative perspectives, sharing of information, reflective practice as well as effective mentoring and coaching. It can be facilitated by using problem- or inquiry-based approaches to learning where real issues the organisation or staff are facing are tackled by teams of staff. In addition, quite diverse factors such as the degree to which work has clear objectives, the degree of exposure to change and the extent and quality of feedback provided, contribute to ways in which staff experience work and enhance their ability to learn through it.

In a 'learning organisation' work is organised to help these approaches occur. In the right environment, with the right managers and with the right people and organisational culture learning just happens as a consequence of working.

Learning organisations have characteristics such as providing continuous learning opportunities, using learning to reach goals, fostering inquiry and dialogue, providing a safe environment for people to share openly and take risks, embracing creative tension as a source of energy and renewal and being continuously aware of and interacting with their environment.

Factors that promote learning through work include support and encouragement for learning from management; a high degree of exposure to customers, management and colleagues; a high degree of exposure to changes in technology, organisation and work methods; a lot of external professional contact and a high probability that skills are rewarded through interesting tasks, better career possibilities or other rewards.

What stops learning at work happening?

Factors inhibiting the ability to learn at work include the existence of any power-based hierarchy that controls access to knowledge, the uneven distribution of knowledge with some sections perceived as holding "privileged" or "confidential" information and the competition that derived from a rank-based promotion system which discourages sharing with those perceived to be potential competitors.

Another factor affecting the opportunity of individuals to practice skills required for learning includes poorly planned movement for junior or new staff which prevents them capitalising on - and coherently building - their skills and knowledge.

Organisational learning will also be inhibited if leaders and managers are poor at delegating and thus provide few opportunities to learn or practice new skills and they may lack the skills and knowledge to provide effective or useful feedback.

Key factors influencing workplace learning

The consortium's research identified two factors that influence learning at work: *Organisational environment* and *job complexity*.

An organisational environment that encourages learning at work involves effective management support, work in teams, ready access to both information and other people within the organisation. A clear sense of the organisation's mission, the intentional creation of learning opportunities and providing useful feedback on personal performance also support more effective organisational learning.

Job complexity involves work which has considerable variety and regular contact with a range of people and ideas both within and outside the organisation. Such contact can involve active participation in networks and maintaining contact with professional groups, peers in other

organisations and clients. Job complexity involves offering staff work which will challenge them and is out of the ordinary. This not only keeps the work interesting, but also helps them think about how things might be done differently and better. Good learning organisations involve their staff actively in change and seek their input. They do not impose change on them; they care about the effects changes have.

These factors were used to develop a survey instrument to assess an organisation's learning environment called the Provider Learning Environment Scale. Another support document, *Investigating learning through work: Learning environment scale and user guide to the provider*, includes a copy of the questionnaire and information about how to use the scale, administer it and interpret the results. The main report, *Investigating learning through work: The development of the Provider Learning Environment Scale,* also provides further information on how the scale was developed.

Here we are using it to propose a series of questions that smaller providers and work groups unable to use the survey can use to explore the extent to which they have a work environment that promotes learning.

Assessing your organisational environment

The level of organisational support for developing and maintaining a learning environment in your provider can be examined by addressing a series of questions:

➢ Do managers involve themselves in negotiating work objectives, reviewing work plans, and the delegation of responsibilities?

➢ Do managers provide learning opportunities for their staff and actively encourage learning at work?

➢ Do managers offer learning opportunities and organize interesting work tasks for staff?

➢ Does the provider recognize and reward high performing staff?

➢ Does the provider regularly use project-based work involving teams across the organisation to develop new approaches to its core activities?

➢ Does the provider support and encourage routine provision of helpful feedback to all staff on their performance?

➢ Does the provider clearly communicate its mission/purpose to all staff in the organisation and keep staff informed on changes in the external environment that influence its work?

➢ Does the provider allow ready access to the knowledge and information required by staff to perform their work?

➢ Does the provider create an environment that encourages collaboration and where knowledge is shared?

➢ Does the provider encourage all staff to support the learning of other employees?

➢ Does the provider have opportunities where staff are able to discuss work related issues problems and solutions?

Looking at job complexity

➢ Does the provider develop job descriptions that embed a wide range of different types of work activity?

➢ Does the work environment have opportunities for individual staff to have contact with a variety of the provider's clients and external contacts in similar providers?

- ➢ Does the provider encourage staff to attend professional meetings and conferences to network with peers?

- ➢ Does the provider organise work that requires staff to network and collaborate with a range of different people within it?

- ➢ Does the provider involve staff in any change process and investigate the impact of the change on the job of individual staff?

- ➢ Does the provider create work opportunities that are challenging, involving some complexity, non-routine and demanding work?

What other useful information can be accessed?

Products from this research activity focusing on learning at work include the main report, *Investigating learning through work: The development of the Provider Learning Environment Scale* and two support documents: *Investigating learning through work: What the literature says* and *Investigating learning through work: Learning environment scale and user guide to the provider.* In addition to these reports, users of this facts sheet might also find it useful to access other products of the consortium's work. These include those related to leadership by Callan et al. (2007): *Approaches for sustaining and building management and leadership capability*; organisational structures and culture: *A study in difference: Structures and cultures in Australian training organisations* (Clayton et al. forthcoming); human resource management: *Human resource management in Australian registered training organisations* (Smith & Hawke forthcoming); and Hawke's research (2008) on workforce development: *Making decisions about workforce development in registered training organisations.* In addition, Mitchell et al (2006b) have produced the paper *VET networked for quality: A description of a selection of VET networks and how they contribute to building and promoting good practice in teaching, learning and assessment.*

Key references and useful reading

Callan, V., Mitchell, J., Clayton, B. & Smith, L (2007), *Approaches for Sustaining and Building Management and Leadership Capacity in Vocational Education*, NCVER, Adelaide

Chappell, C., Hawke, G., Rhodes, C. & Solomon, N. (2003), *High Level Review of Training Packages Phase 1 Report*, ANTA, Brisbane

Chappell, C. & Hawke, G. forthcoming *Factors affecting learning at work: What the literature says*, NCVER, Adelaide

Chappell, C. & Hawke, G. (2008) *Investigating Learning through Work: The development of the Provider Learning Environment Scale*, NCVER, Adelaide

Chappell, C. & Hawke, G. forthcoming *Investigating Learning through Work: User Guide to the Provider Learning Environment Scale*, NCVER, Adelaide

Clayton, B., Fisher, T., Harris, R., Bateman, A. & Brown, M, forthcoming, *A study in difference: Structures and cultures in Registered Training Organisations*, NCVER, Adelaide, South Australia

Hawke, G. forthcoming, *Making decisions about workforce development in registered training organisations*, NCVER, Adelaide, South Australia

Mitchell, J., Chappell, C., Bateman, A. & Roy, S (2006a) *Quality is the key: Critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational education and training*, NCVER., Adelaide

Mitchell, J., Chappell, C., Bateman, A. & Roy, S (2006b) *VET networked for quality: A description of a selection of VET networks and how they contribute to building and promoting good practice in teaching, learning and assessment*, NCVER, Adelaide

Smith, A & Hawke, G, forthcoming, *Human resource management in Australian Registered Training Organisations,* NCVER, Adelaide, South Australia