

Topic 1:

Executive Summary *

*(The Executive Summary has been adapted from the original research report conducted by Dedosa Research)

How to design and harness the value of workplace learning in Wholesale and Retail

This report presents an independent research study on "How to design and harness the value of workplace learning in Wholesale and Retail". It starts with an examination of literature related to workplace learning. Most of the existing theories are examined to determine useful methods to design and harness the value of workplace learning in Wholesale and Retail. In building the literature review, we recognized that there were multiple research avenues required to make meaningful insights related to workplace learning in the context of retail. From an academic research perspective, we started with exploring definitions of retail, examining the current retail climate and employer/employee attitudes about the industry and looking at a designed workplace framework that offered a helpful definition of what effective looks like.

Although interest in non-institutionalised learning and learning through life is growing, studies on workplace learning in South Africa are few and far between. Globally, there are some qualitative studies of learner perspectives, focused on the industry training experience or on the development of worker- learner and vocational identities (Chan, 2010; Moses, 2010; Piercy, 2009; and Vaughan, 2010). There are also some studies looking at structural aspects of workplace learning as a system (Cochrane, Law, Piercy, 2007) or the way that industry-based teaching, assessment and learning is systematically organised and supported (Vaughan & Cameron, 2010a, 2010b). However, there is a general lack of South African-based research on workplace learning in comparison to forms of, and contexts for, tertiary education, mainly as that provided through universities and institutes of technology and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges.

One of the reasons for this is a relative lack of awareness about workplace learning. Another reason is the lesser esteem in which it is held. The latter is at least partly because workplace learning is focused on lower levels of qualifications on the South African Qualifications Framework. The former is at least partly because workplace learning is often seen as "just doing the job" rather than learning and because education and industry have been in an opposed relationship throughout much of the 20th century. The impact of that has been such a close association in people's minds between the word "learning" and formal classroom settings, that it is difficult for them to appreciate that learning might occur in other, often less formal, settings such as the workplace (Eraut, 2000). Even within the workplace learning domain, research has tended to focus on professional workers and how they acquire expertise (e.g. teachers, nurses, accountants) or on how work is organised in particular sectors (e.g. manufacturing, health) rather than focusing on how nonprofessional workers learn at work (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson & Unwin, 2009).

A good deal of adult learning in life occurs through work since the workplace is potentially a rich source of learning, just as educational institutions are (Ryan, 2008). Much of the learning that does happen on the job occurs through explicit activities that make use of a

range of pedagogical methods (Fuller and Unwin, 2002), although it is unlikely to occur against a background of professional teaching qualifications and knowledge. Learning on the job points to the importance of the context of the learning environment:

Rather than being simply a change in the properties of the learner ... the main outcome of learning is the creation of a new set of relations in an environment. This is why learning is inherently contextual, since what it does is to continually alter the context in which it occurs (Hager, 2004).

Actual “success” in workplace learning is a function of many interdependent factors to do with the learner, workplace conditions, business strategy and structure, training programme structure, trainer competence and teaching/ learning approaches and activities. And training on its own is limited in its ability to increase productivity unless combined with other interventions such as enhanced managerial capability, employee engagement, improved employee recognition and reward and innovative production practices (Harvey and Harris, 2008). Learning is only as good as the opportunities to actively apply and develop skills and competencies and participate in the organisation and culture of work/workers.

The research was a qualitative exploratory study. The study involved a desk review and focus group discussions. Twenty-one participants formed three focus groups comprised of wholesale and retail stakeholders from 3 provinces in South Africa.

Findings from the desk review revealed *three major themes* related to design and harnessing the value of workplace learning. At organisational level support and structured orientation is needed. Organisations should provide quality resources to employees. Organisations should ensure there are employee assessments and provide platforms to share experiences. For employees to progress in retail, there is a need to identify and promote employee's retail career pathway, ensuring mentorship and measure results. At the Industry level, there should be some industry valued credentials as well as appropriate teaching strategies to support structured learning activities. Stakeholder level, suggests the need to prioritise partnerships, collaborate with other stakeholders to develop workplace learning models.

Responses from the focus group reiterated the findings of the desk review. It was found that in-house training opportunities were available through grants for further learning but provided to exceptional employees only. For others, there was little structure provided and learning occurs on the job. Suggestions made were that employers should make provision through policies, time and money for workplace learning.

The experience shared by participants implied that employers might not prioritise workplace learning. For workplace learning to be successful, employers need to invest in the process. There was a call for retail work experience to be accredited with the National Qualifications Framework. According to participants the retail industry valued workplace learning, it was thought to improve job effectiveness, but few employees receive formal on-the-job training and promotions.

Participants provided the following strategies for designing the value of workplace learning:

- Enhance collaboration
- Equal access
- Situational and scenario based learning
- Homogenous work place learning
- Secure support from corporate leadership
- Mentorship

Participants made the following suggestions for workplace learning. There needs to be changes to workplace teaching strategies; learning structure should consider both the employer and employee. Workplace learning should be made accessible to all employees and the learning environments should suit the employees.

Suggestions for improvements included making workplace learning a continuous activity, when designing workplace learning programmes, there should be clear goals and objective, identify the purpose and objectives of workplace learning. Workplace learning needs to be considered an investment and thoughtful intervention. To ensure benefit and consistency results must be measured and performance should be rewarded.

Recommendations for designing and harnessing workplace learning in retail and wholesale emphasised the importance of:

- Developing industry binding curricula: Develop standardised and binding industry valued credentials for the sector to ensure consistency.
- Updating training needs: Update workplace learning needs regularly to ensure improvement.
- Involving employees: Involve employees in developing programmes to ensure relevancy.
- Partnering with industry stakeholders: Collaborate with relevant stakeholders such as TVET colleges and institutions to ensure alignment in skills development.
- Participants agreed that the future of workplace learning requires that the sector is in line with the current generation. Workplace learning needs to be flexible, practical and adaptable. Organisations should encourage their employees to take responsibilities for learning and mentorship becoming more central to the success of learning initiatives.

It became clear that employers may not recognize or define workplace learning in the same way as the researcher uses the term. Accordingly, we considered the common themes and outcomes of effective training, such as employee retention, promoting from within and other “best places to work” metrics surrounding employee growth and commitment to inform our work. These findings came in the form of news articles, reports and employer job pages, among other sources. We have used that approach to gather most of our data to date.

In summary, the retail industry is a vital force in any economy and provides many people with their first jobs. Salespeople, cashiers, stock clerks, and merchandisers workers make up more than half of the industry's millions of workers. They are also retail's public face—the first and often the only workers who interact with customers walking through a store. A lot rides on these interactions, as people on both sides of the cash register (physical or virtual) know well. However, these workers are unlikely to understand their value to the company and more importantly, their ability to build on their experience and skills to move ahead in retail careers.

Despite their importance to the industry's success, the amount of training for entry-level and frontline retail employees varies but is widely considered to be minimal. Insiders acknowledge the problematic cycle of disinterest and disinvestment. Employers build turnover costs into their business models and therefore limit investment in the largest segment of their workforce. And the cycle continues.

But today, many retail employers are ready to break this cycle and develop a more effective training strategy. To do so, there are three driving realities of today's retail industry that must be recognized. First, a substantial number of retail workers are less than 25 years old and consequently have little or no prior work experience. They view their jobs as temporary positions—a chance to earn some money while in school, or while they try to find that better job or one that will hire them with little or no experience. The frontline and entry-level positions these workers fill have one of the highest turnover rates in the economy, which was most recently thought to be 65 percent.

Second, frontline retail career pathways are different from frontline positions in other industries because of the large number of positions compared to supervisors and the lack of sector-endorsed credentials that identify a career progression. As a result, employers and employees both report that it is harder to see the career potential in the retail industry. Lastly, the future of retail is in flux. Impacted by both the need for brick-and-mortar retailers to place an ever-greater emphasis on customer experience—to differentiate themselves from and compete with online retailers—and the continuing automation innovations in all areas of retail, the numbers and types of employees will change.

Today, education is no longer limited to traditional schooling but is a process that continues throughout one's life course. This process has been aptly titled workplace learning and is a term often used synonymously with lifelong learning (Jenkins, 2006). In Europe, workplace learning is defined as "all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence.

Creating this culture within an organization, however, is not an easy thing. Learning is a catalyst for change in organizations. While individual learning in organizations has long been seen as critical to ensuring its survival, collective learning has more recently become just as important. Because of this, companies are now seeing the importance of implementing workplace learning processes to succeed in today's competitive market.

Workplaces will not be successful if they remain static and studies have found workplace learning to be effective only if it happened in a learning-conducive work environment.

Therefore, encouraging employees to learn and providing positive support for learning in the workplace is the most effective way of guaranteeing organisational change. In order to learn at work, employees should have possibilities for “rich” work experiences as well as possibilities for collaboration and autonomy in order to engage in both collective and individual learning.

A successful workplace learning program should include a flexible and accessible learning model; therefore, employees have also cited the need for more time to participate in learning programs. Workplace learning programs are more effective when they are designed to meet the needs of both the organisation and workers.

The qualitative nature of the study means that the results cannot be generalised. Only a small number of respondents formed part of the focus group sessions were surveyed. The participants were surveyed through questions in order to solicit their responses. Thus, the study was prudent in the final claims made as they were tied to a specific context.

References:

Chan, S. 2010. *Belonging, becoming and being: First year apprentices' experiences in the workplace*. Paper presented at Ako Aotearoa Tertiary Research in Progress Colloquium 15 - 16 July. Palmerston North. [Online] Available at: <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/systems/files/successful-workplace-learning-2011.pdf> [Accessed: 07/01/2019]

Moses, K. 2010. *Key factors affecting learner motivation to successfully complete qualifications through workplace learning* (Industry Training Federation (ITF) Occasional Paper. Wellington: Industry Training Federation. [Online] Available at: <http://www.mischewski.co.nz/documents/literaturereview.pdf> [Accessed: 11/01/2019]

Piercy, G. 2009. *Learning in the service sector: How baristas acquire their workplace identity*. Paper presented at 6th international conference on Researching Work and Learning, 28 June - 1 July. Roskilde, Denmark. [Online] Available at: <http://www.rwlconferences.org> [Accessed: 11/01/2019]

Vaughan, K., and Cameron, M. 2010a. *A guide to good practice in industry training organisation structures and systems for on-job assessment*. Wellington: Industry Training Federation. [Online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242730759_A_guide_to_good_practice_in_industry_training_organisation_structures_and_systems_for_on-job_assessment [Accessed: 07/01/2019]

Vaughan, K., and Cameron, M. 2010b. *ITO Assessment structures and systems: Survey and focus group findings*. Wellington: Industry Training Federation. [Online] Available at:

https://www.academia.edu/14799107/ITO_WORKPLACE_ASSESSMENT_STRUCTURES_AND_SYSTEMS_SURVEY_AND_FOCUS_GROUP_FINDINGS [Accessed: 07/01/2019]

Eraut, M. 2000. *Non-formal learning and tacit knowledge in professional work*. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 70(1), 113–136. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10765570> [Accessed: 07/01/2019]

Felstead, A., Fuller, A., Jewson, N., and Unwin, L. 2009. *Improving working as learning*. New York: Routledge. [Online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/590493/skills-lifelong-learning-workplace.pdf [Accessed: 20/12/2018]

Ryan, R. 2008. *Why workplaces matter. The role of workplace practices in economic transformation*. Wellington: Department of Labour. [Online] Available at: <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/successful-workplace-learning-2011.pdf> [Accessed: 07/01/2019]

Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. 2002. *Developing Pedagogies for the contemporary learning workplace*. In K. Evans, P. Hodkinson, & L. Unwin (Eds.), *Working to learn: Transforming learning in the workplace* (pp. 92-111). London: Kogan Page. [Online] Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.2304/erj.2003.2.1.9> [Accessed: 20/12/2018]

Hager, P. 2004. *The conceptualisation and measurement of learning at work*. In H. Rainbird, A. Fuller, & A. Munro (Eds.), *Workplace learning in context* (pp. 242-258). London: Routledge. [Online] Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-1-4020-8962-6_2 [Accessed: 13/01/2019]

Harris, S. 2012. *Replacing your Learning Management System?* Research Brief. Delray Beach FL: Brandon Hall Group. [Online] Available at: <http://wrlc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-16-Towards-effective-Work-Integrated-learning-in-the-South-African-Retail-SMME-Sector.pdf> [Accessed: 11/01/2019]