Workplace Learning on the Internet

Gary A. Berg
California State University Channel Islands, USA

In most white-collar workplaces today, it is common for employees to have their own computer at their desk. Employees complete much of their work on the computer, and usually also have access to fast connections to the Internet for internal and external communication. This remarkable change in the tools of the workplace represents an important opportunity for the integration of learning with work. While the technology of the workplace has advanced at extraordinary speed, new theoretical approaches to work have led to notions of knowledge workers and learning organizations. The convergence of an increased emphasis on learning in organizations and the evolution of computer/telecommunications technology are leading to important changes in workplace learning.

How do conceptions of the knowledge worker and the learning organization fit with research on adult learning? In the last 30 years a great deal has been written on the subject of adult learning: Knowles, Cross, and Brookfield are three of the major theorists in the field. Knowles (1979) uses the term andragogy as opposed to pedagogy to argue that adults learn in ways different from children. He claims that adults have different motivations, goals, and expectations in regard to education. Adults are more self-directed, can be a rich resource for learning because of their life experiences, can immediately apply what they learn, and are more problem centered. Consequently, the teaching methods need to be different. His andragogy emphasizes guiding and facilitating over teaching. Borrowing from the work of Rogers, Maslow, and Dewey, Knowles promotes learner-centered education and the importance of personal inquiry. Cross (1981) looks at the growth of the learning society and its characteristics in terms of motivation and learning theory. She criticizes Knowles for his theory of andragogy as being difficult to implement, and points to the primary differences between adult and child learners as being the part-time and voluntary nature of adult learning.

Brookfield (1986) analyzes the current literature and practices of adult education and andragogy, which he argues is more of a group of assumptions about adult learners than a proven theory of adult learning. He points out that adult learners as a group have proven to be a very complex set and that they are consequently difficult to generalize about. In looking at self-directed learning theories, Brookfield argues that experience has shown that many adult learners do not respond to self-directed learning courses. In fact, in contradiction to the positions of both Knowles and Cross, most adult learners do not want self-directed learning and function poorly in such courses. Brookfield points out that some of the theorists of adult education have gone too far in allowing students to dictate the direction of the learning process. Furthermore, Brookfield denies the common perception that adult learning should be skill oriented and practical. His research shows that adults are often interested in studies that are impractical and more focused on personal development. Consequently, one can see from these three theorists that we have a long way to go in terms of understanding the complex characteristics of the adult learner.

Turning to adult learning in the workplace, Argyris and Schon (1974) describe the way in which professional education has been shunned by universities in terms of practical application, and thus a theory of practice has not been properly addressed. In another study, Schon (1987) looks at educational practices in professional schools and argues that design studios offer a model for education based on reflective practicum. Reflective practicum is a process in which students reflect on action while doing, and it also involves an ongoing dialogue with a coach. He argues that real life presents problems that are much more complex and ill defined than problems in traditional educational environments. Schon holds that the practice of professionals involves a type of artistry that includes problem framing, implementa-

tion, and improvisation, none of which can be taught in traditional fashions.

Confessore (1996) maintains that learning must be integrated into all aspects of the job because of the need for increasingly skilled workers, which traditional education cannot supply in rapid-enough fashion, and because of the inability of companies to afford downtime while the worker is training. What has evolved is a need for workplace environments that integrate learning with every aspect of daily activity. Confessore sees reflective practice, action learning, self-directed learning, and learning organizations as becoming increasingly important in the workplace. Reflective practice requires the individual to consider the effectiveness and consequences of actions taken during work. Confessore argues that pervasive, natural, and informal learning atmospheres are the most effective. Montgomery and Lau (1996) also found that learning in the workplace is most effective when it is informal and when it takes place in the real workplace environment. Furthermore, research shows that artificial settings and formal training is a barrier to workplace learning. The authors examine the notion of integrative learning, which they characterize as used to build knowledge and skills in a safe environment, using coaching techniques when appropriate, teams, and trust in the process.

Baskett (1993) notes that the majority of workplace learning occurs informally and that it is difficult to separate such learning experiences because they are embedded in the work. Examples of such learning include interactions in teams and committees with individuals both internal and external, which involve problem solving and overcoming various human problems.

Covey (1995) emphasizes that lifelong learning is most effective as short, daily study sessions and small doses of relevant on-the-job training. He estimates that 20% of the workforce is obsolete because of a lack of the updating of skills. Corporations cannot compete without creating a culture of continuous learning, with knowledge workers who are continually enhancing skills and updating technology.

On the business-philosophy side, Drucker (1993) outlines the change from a capitalist to a knowledge society in which the most important resource for an organization is the collective knowledge of its work-

ers. Consequently, the challenge of organizations becomes how to make knowledge workers more productive. Drucker (1995) argues that the knowledge society is one of organizations networked in a way that integrates specialized knowledges into a common task.

Senge (1990) applies a systems approach to organizations in proposing a notion of organizational learning and a set of disciplines for learning organizations, which include systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building of shared vision, and team learning. Finally, Senge sees personal computers as making possible the integration of learning about complex team interactions with learning about complex business interactions, which allows groups to reflect, test, and improve mental models.

Learning and work are increasingly tied by an organizational focus on knowledge as a primary resource. Learning organizations must be concerned with the individual development of each worker because it directly impacts their productivity. The question that remains to be answered is, how specifically do organizations encourage adult learning and development in a systematic manner? Peter Drucker (1995) predicts that universities will change greatly because of the need for lifelong learning that will be accomplished through new technology and new approaches to human learning. One of these technologies is the Internet. Skill acquisition and adult development through self-directed learning and the use of coaches or mentors via the Internet make sense for learning organizations. Furthermore, the research above indicates that informal learning integrated with work tends to be more effective. The tool on every desk in the workplace provides the opportunity to bring about both the informality and the integration necessary for the kind of workplace learning future organizations must have.

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