Chapter 86
Workplace Learning:
A Paradigm Shift to Improve the 21st Century Workforce

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to address a paradigm shift from training to workplace learning in the 21st century as a means of improving the workforce. For any country or organizations to remain highly competitive, it is workplace learning, not organized training, in which adult employees should seek to engage. This chapter addresses how workplace learning has evolved as the most critical stage in boosting employees' skill sets among all other training mechanisms. Various theorists' views and principles have been discussed. It is hoped that the chapter can serve as the basis for teaching, learning, and research regarding this important area called workplace learning. A central theme has emerged from this chapter; that is, the success of a country or organization should be sufficiently gauged by workplace learning. A country's gross domestic product (GDP) can be misleading given multiple factors such as an emerging aging population.

INTRODUCTION

As societies continue to make progress from the Stone Age to modern civilization, they focused on various mechanisms to improve the workforce. Such mechanisms include "learning by watching an elder perform on the job," "learning by trial and error," "apprenticeship," "job shadowing," "organized training," and many other different methods such as "training Egyptian scribes." These methods were developed as a matter of course when administrations looked for ways to improve their workforce. Later, Fredrick Taylor popularized the scientific method, which is geared to search for the best method to perform a job. This method proves to be the most effective/efficient for workers to perform their jobs.

These aforementioned methods have been employed by various organizations in different countries to improve their workforce. Today, most countries have realized that a highly skillful/ resourceful workforce is the key to any organization success, and larger organizations do not mind spending millions of dollars, or even billions of dollars, on training their employees to have an advantage over other organizations. Little research has been conducted to determine whether the money spent on training has met the goal of improving the workforce and achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. Corruption related to spending organizations' dollars on training has been rampant. As a result of competition among various organizations, grant writers have emerged, with their job being to seek internal and external funding to further train employees by using the various methods discussed above. The question remains the same: To what extent has funding helped improve the workforce in an organization or even in a country? An additional question may be should training be kept as a means of improving the workforce? Although the scientific method has been popular, few organizations use this method to train employees. In recent years, a new term has emerged – workplace learning. How is this term different from all other training mechanisms? Has this term replaced all other training mechanisms? As globalization has become a reality, why have organizations discarded other training methods and embraced workplace learning as a means toward improving the workforce? Decades of scholarship in learning have demonstrated that learners are diverse, changing, and adaptable (Allen, Bracey, & Gavrilova, 2010). Organizational practices must be flexible and adaptive to meet the wide variation of learning needs of the 21st century learner. Research indicates that that self-regulated and self-directed learning skills are the basis of lifelong learning (Dyan, Cate, & Rhee, 2008). This research opposes most of the organizational and educational practices of the last century that have developed around directing a learning through formal training and education in a traditional classroom or training environment that utilize a 'sage-on-stage' directing an development of an individual's knowledge and skills.

Researchers and scholars have written articles and books regarding new trends in the 21st century. However, they have not addressed many of the factors that have driven workplace learning as a key to training. These factors may include the fundamental characteristics of adult employees who are capable of self-direction in learning and who enjoy the rectification of the mind once a task has been performed (Wang & King, 2006). These factors may also include organizational leaders, and a nation's leaders' farsightedness in advocating workplace learning to replace other outmoded training methods. No longer is it sufficient to use GDP to measure how advanced a country is or how advanced an organization may be when compared to others. Today, as workplace learning has become critical in boosting the economic engine of a country, and/or organizations, it is appropriate to claim that the success of a country or an organization can be effectively gauged by its workplace learning. For example, China reached $3.2 trillion in September, 2011 (Chinability, 2011), a figure that shocked the rest of the world. People have begun to talk about Chinability, or the China miracle. However, few have realized that China's workplace learning (learnability) will quickly be undermined by the nation's aging population due to the one-child policy implemented 30 years ago. While there is no need to discuss the brutality or inhuman nature of this policy, the result of policy has damaged China's workforce, let alone the use workplace learning to measure its future success. This chapter promises to be eye opening – which will lead our readers to some under-researched areas, which in turn, will provide a new perspective to examine workplace learning as a means of improving the workforce in the 21st century.

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