

# **NSW DET Conference: Workplace Learning and the Role of VET Thursday, 3 May 2007**

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## **VET and Workplace Learning - Complementary or Parallel Universes?**

Thanks very much, I think in many ways my comments are going to echo the presentations that we had this morning so I hope that you'll see them as complimentary rather than repetitive.

What I'm going to talk about is mainly a project that a colleague, Elaine Jackson and I did – a couple of years ago in 2005 for NCVER. The project was focused on small workplaces, the workplaces that don't feature, generally, in industry consultations or in the case studies at best practice.

We went out and tried to find 40 small-to-medium sized workplaces that employed somewhere between 6, usually around 20, 25. There was one that had 110. In retail, pharmacy, and hardware, manufacturing, floor tiles, nuts and bolts, not the automotive global workplaces but the small one, the plastic components and the building and construction contractors who sometimes use sub-contractors, sometimes themselves were sub-contractors to bigger companies from across Australia.

Two of those workplaces could be described as what's been referred to as high performance workplaces that had expansive work organisations rather than restrictive. I think the others were sort of a different grades along the continuum so most of them, I think, were described probably as either, perhaps responsive to workplace learning and VET or open to persuasion rather than right and out restrictive. I think that's probably the nature of research that the most restrictive ones probably don't want to talk to anybody.

The sort of questions that we were trying to get some answers on are really what drive skills development, what is the kind of skills development that takes place, how adequate is it, who bears the responsibility in terms of costs both hidden costs and financial costs and how can the situation be improved, how can that connection between formal training and what happens in the workplace be improved.

What we found was that the companies that we talked to recognised that skills development was crucial to their business, as one of them said: 'you know, the staff are the business, if you have no skilled staff, you have no business, it's as simple as that'.

However, while the skills development was fundamental for business success, their view of training was much more like a maintenance issue; it was you know, if you bought good machinery you may expect not to have to maintain it much. If you bought something that was second-hand well then you might have an expectation that you might have to do some preventative and certainly some reactive or crisis management sort of maintenance if you bought something that was really old.

In their strategies to address the skills issue, their recruitment strategies focused very much on those already skilled, if they could get them. When they met already skilled, they were talking much more than just VET qualifications they also talked about work ethic, they talked about commitment to the company, they talked about somebody who was willing to invest time with them so that they wouldn't be walking out the door in 6 months.

Sometimes, they were quite upfront about what they told us were the selection criteria and they discussed that with the people that they recruited, 'are you willing to stay here for three years because if you are, this is what I'm prepared to do for you, this is the sort of company that we run, what's your view on that?'

There was that frank exchange and I think what Helen was talking to you about this morning, in terms of treating the pluralist, there was certainly evidence of that pluralist sort of framework at work. Not in all of them, but in some of them and certainly the smaller the business, the more they were focused about that, about the risk in taking on people and the sort of people that they wanted to work with and to have working for them.

The training that then they engaged in was very much on an individual needs basis, sometimes the work was organised to design out the need for specific training. I think as Richard was saying to us before, with automotives you can have a process line approach to training just like you do to production so that if you got very clear work instructions, there's minimal training beyond induction and some of the mandatory occupational, health and safety training.

There was a lot of attention put on experience and skills acquired on the job and what was a bit of a surprise to us was that, I don't think I've seen in a lot of other research, was the status given to supplier training, so the people that supplied them with machinery or in the case of retail, the people who supplied them with products. Whether that was Wattle, Dulux Paints, L'Oreal, Blackmoore Vitamins or in the manufacturing sector, the machinery that they worked with, the people that came with that machinery to install it in their company or to give them the product to sell.

The training that those people gave, those organisations gave, had a lot more credibility and a lot more authority, than training from an RTO that had the logo and some of that training wasn't specifically content. It was also more generic skills such as customer service, marketing skills, display, how to display shop displays and things like that because it was about facilitating the sale of the product so there was mutual benefit from both sides.

The extent to which they used accredited training was mainly to meet mandated requirements, the licenses, the occupational, health and safety or if in building and construction, if they needed to tick a particular box so they could tender for a particular government department or a company that required them to have a VET plan in place.

Invariably, we found that there wasn't much knowledge of the formal VET system, people were vaguely aware of something called training packages, they weren't quite sure whether that related to the latest training course that someone was trying to flog or whether it was actually about the industry training package that related to them.

Sometimes they were aware of AQF qualifications but not a lot, where they're aware of them was where there had been a lot of strategic marketing by employer organisations such as for example, The Pharmacy Guild who covered about 85% of pharmacies. They had developed a course in conjunction, in consultation with the industry, that was an accredited course for dispensary assistance, pharmacy assistance, there was traineeships in place. The course was a distance, a mixed mode form of learning so that there was distance, there was one-to-one, there was on the job, there was phone support and the pharmacists themselves were very much involved in that. They were very much aware of that and that, in turn was also linked to the new, pay structure as it was then that was just coming in so that people could get some points or it became a prerequisite for employment.

We found it interesting actually that the feedback that we got, was that not only did employers not see AQF qualifications and VET qualifications as particularly crucial to employment. That was also a view that was shared by the employees who sort of said, well I understand there's a course in whatever, but I'm not sure that that will be as useful for me as a good reference and the fact that I've worked for X or that I've been to these series of short course by a brand – whether the brand was a product supplier, or equipment supplier or an employer organisation that was highly valued by the employer because it was recognised.

The report we sort of divided up into four different sections, I'm just going to talk briefly about the findings related to each one. In terms of the training infrastructure of those workplaces, as with most things, leadership is key so the attitude of the senior manager or the senior management if there was more than one and their experience of VET both of those things are absolutely crucial to what training took place, both formal and informal.

For example, on the high performance end of the continuum of those 12 companies, one was a person who'd had a VET background. He was Technical TAFE teacher dissatisfied with the system and set up his own building and construction company. He sought other people who would be his key managers in the company who were also teachers, he made sure that if they weren't, if they were good technical people, builders or whatever, that they got training and assessment skills and he tried to do what Richard and Helen I think was talking about before about that dual role of being a mentor as well as a supervisor.

In a way, that was very much focused on the needs of the business but also the needs of the individual and developing them as part of a team. He didn't use those terms, but you could see that he was setting himself up to be a leading edge sort of provider which he was in terms of quality - quality products – but also in terms of being an employer of choice, where he wanted to grow the business with key people that he was willing to invest in.

On the other end of the continuum, one of the largest company that we dealt with was really what training, took place there was very much because of Union intervention, when the company looked like it was going under a few years ago. They went out and they sourced industry funding, they got a well programme set up and it was a bottom-up, well external – in the sense that it was Union headquarters rather than Union representative in the company – helping that company to get back on the road through skills development as well as a whole lot of other restructuring initiatives that took place.

Five of those twelve had undertaken some kind of business improvement strategy, whether that was getting a business coach or a management consultant to come in and do skills analysis or to help them to just look over their operations and how to improve them. That influenced what training took place because that identified some gaps for them but not necessarily formal training, a lot of informal as well.

In general, in terms of their understanding, even though they had people, all of the companies I think had somebody who, from the high performance end of the continuum where you had the Senior Manager who also had training qualifications and ensured that all his supervisors and managers had some. There was the smallest company had somebody who was now undertaking – at the time we took the study – undertaking a training qualification.

We had the spectrum in terms of somebody in the organisation knew something about VET about training from an instructional point of view but invariably, they found the VET world very confusing, the alphabet soup of acronyms that we use incredibly frustrating. Very difficult to know how to source credible advice about the best course that would be most appropriate for them, negotiation of any kind of delivery, RPL - a lot of people didn't know about. They relied heavily on professional associations and employer associations to help them navigate their way through that. To some extents, also Unions who're RTOs if they were friendly relationships but most of the places that we talked to weren't unionised.

Those organisations were absolutely key in unravelling the VET system for them and the NACS if the NAC person, they had somebody who was proactive in knocking on their door and trying to explain things to them.

In terms of what happened, the approaches that they had, there was a considerable amount of unaccredited informal training for multi skilling. I think as Richard said, it was often around the flexibility, the functional flexibility of just making sure that people could stand in for one another if there was somebody away.

Generally, at the time that we were doing the course, I think the national statistics were that 35% of employers offered some form of training which averaged out at around \$185 per annum, per employee, except for construction which was \$100, they were the stats at the time.

When we asked them about costs, how much they invested in their training, it tended to be around somewhere between 1% and 5% but those estimates are really a bit plastic, they're not quite sure what they're looking at there because you've got to make sure you're comparing cherries with cherries whether it was about the actual costs of the training programme, they're taking into account release hours, replacement hours, indirect costs so but that's just an indicator.

Often the most formalised training was induction and then, as I said before – sometimes the work was organised so that there was minimal needs for training in terms of very clear instructions: SOPs, JSAs or the other acronyms.

Casuals tended to be involved in that training as much as permanents because it was necessary, where it became a bit of a blurred line was where people were hired through labour hire companies, so there was a third party there and there was a bit of confusion really in the sense that the employer didn't see this person as really belonging to them because there could be a different person there tomorrow. There wasn't as much investment and I think they relied on the labour hire form to also train those people up.

There was a few who were involved in business improvement initiatives which took the form of the whole of business approach to training and learning, such as for example in the pharmacy field there was a quality accreditation programme which had quite a lot of commonwealth money behind it to enable that to happen. It was a little bit like the ISO scaled down but it required quite a lot of training for the whole organisation and some teamwork and some group interactions.

As was mentioned earlier this morning, I think mentoring meetings with guest speakers, projects; very much a focus on group learning rather than individual learning and community practice. In our adult learning theories we'd call it action learning, reflective learning, learning that was also interesting and exciting, where you get prizes for attending or movie tickets or meal tickets. They were the things that were put on by professional associations and the supplier associations; licenses where that was mandated. One company had a well programme that mixed the generic as well as the technical skills.

Most of the training was either free of cost or subsidised. On the one hand, people said that cost was not such an issue, on the other they were very appreciative of whatever subsidies there were, whether it was for traineeships or it was for well programmes or the quality accreditation.

The modes of learning were key: people were not interested in doing what we're doing now, sitting and listening to things that they may have heard before. Sometimes if it was a refresher and a confirmation of things that they did not understand the transferability of things that they already had. Earlier this morning we heard from Helen about the tacit skills, to have that put into a framework that was theoretically grounded was appreciated by people at a higher level whether it was team leadership or project management or estimation skills or pharmacy dispensing skills.

More often than not, people really focused very much on training that joined the dots for them in terms of its application, in terms of something they could use, not tomorrow but today, that came through very, very strongly.

It was interesting for us that the responsibility for training was seen as being primarily as an employer/employee issue; however, they saw governments as having a role in providing good infrastructure that was relevant. In areas such as building and construction with increasingly contractual arrangements, a lot of the feedback was that industry training funds which apply in some states and not in others were a useful way of ensuring there was a minimal level of training. It kept the cowboys out of the industry as one of our respondents said, but there are issues there about fund allocation and management because typically those industry funds were managed either by employers or as unions and so they were politicised.

The barriers I think are probably ones that you're already familiar with but if I can just highlight the relevance issue. TAFE courses were often seen as good for entry level but not so much for people who are struggling with new roles or new technology. Sometimes there was a credibility issue and they wanted to be taught by someone who'd been there and done that and that was really key, rather than fact that it didn't cost a lot of money. They weren't quite sure that if they were out to source it whether it was from a public RTO such as TAFE or a private RTO that they would be getting the skills that they really need, that's why sometimes they went to a very expensive consultant who was able to do the necessary spin doctoring.

As somebody said to me, 'training providers often market what they have available and what was easiest for them to deliver rather than what we need. Where a lot of training was happening was when the provider had taken the time to do a needs analysis, there was a whole of business needs analysis, not just an individual one focusing on some clearly identified scapegoat whether that was the operators or the supervisors but the whole of business, what was the needs of the business and how can we help. Whether the provider was able to help or not, at least they were able to identify what the gaps were and refer them to somewhere else that could help.

The other points I think are just self evident so I won't go there. I'll just finish off with possible points of connection which is a way of trying to bring together the parallel universes or the complimentary universes.

To us the whole issue of RPL was up there in lights, because the issue wasn't so much about under skilling, sometimes it was under credentialing and people weren't aware that they could get recognition for the skills that they had, you know through the hard school of knocks or through the lot of short courses that they had attended.

They didn't know, a lot of suppliers of equipment for example hadn't bothered to enter into RTO land and VET land because for them it wasn't an issue, you know they were supplying the equipment, they trained, they got paid, there was no incentive for them, the incentive was really for the learners.

The other was some key liaison people to unravel the VET field for people and to guide them through and finally, some mandating training in some industries where there was that cowboy mentality especially prosperous industries such as building and construction which were high risk industries, I think the industry generally recognised the need for that.