

Better learning, better performance

Evidence from the 2004 Learning At Work Survey

Alan Felstead, Alison Fuller, Lorna Unwin, David Ashton, Peter Butler and Tracey Lee

Learning at work has become a major feature of international and national policy debates. However, there is a preoccupation with measuring and tracking the supply of qualified individuals and their subsequent participation in training events. Far less attention is paid to the learning that arises naturally out of the demands and challenges of everyday work experience.

In response, a series of questions were added to the NIACE Survey on Adult Participation in Learning 2004. These were designed to reveal previously under-researched (and under-surveyed) sources of learning associated with everyday work activities. This report presents the main results to emerge from this innovative approach.

The results make interesting reading: advocates of training courses and the acquisition of qualifications will find much to ponder on, as will supporters of the Internet. Learning by doing, the workplace as classroom, workers organising and checking their own work, and, crucially, advice, understanding, coaching and counselling from line managers emerge as keys to the development of effective and productive staff.

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Executive summary

This report presents the main results to emerge from an innovative survey of how employees learn at work. It is based on a survey of 1,943 employees interviewed about their jobs in a three-week period in February 2004. Its key findings are as follows:

- Despite the emphasis placed on training course attendance and the acquisition of qualifications by policy-makers, both were lowly rated by our respondents in terms of their helpfulness for improved work performance. One in four employees reported that training courses were of little or no value in improving work performance and around one in three thought that studying for qualifications had not helped them at work.
- Activities more closely associated with the workplace – such as doing the job, being shown things, engaging in self-reflection and keeping one’s eyes and ears open – were reckoned to provide more helpful insights into how to do the job better. Over half the sample thought that learning by doing was the most effective means of improving work performance, with 90 per cent agreeing that they had picked up most of their skills through on-the-job experience. This applies to all types of worker, but it is of particular relevance to those lower down the occupational hierarchy.
- Working provides the most important source of learning once in a job. In other words, the most effective classroom is often the workplace itself. Almost nine out of ten respondents said that their job required them to learn new things and pass on tips to colleagues.
- Despite the hype surrounding the use of e-learning, half of those interviewed reported that the Internet had been of no use whatsoever in helping them to improve their work performance.

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- The survey found that employees learn more when they are involved in organising, planning and checking the quality of their own work.
- Good line management also enhances learning. Managers who offer better advice, are more understanding, spend more time coaching and provide more counselling to those in their charge are rewarded with more effective and productive staff.

The survey results should prompt policy-makers to look to the workplace as an importance site of learning and encourage researchers to focus on the usefulness of work activities themselves as effective sources of learning.