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## Learning - A company case study How companies can help employees to learn

### Executive Summary

A questionnaire was used to explore feelings and experiences of students undertaking a company management development qualification programme.

The questionnaire examined four areas:

- Why Learn?
- Learning experiences
- Reflections on learning
- Learning styles

The questionnaire results are detailed in this report (shown as the strengths and weaknesses)

The message for companies is they must:

- Build on the strengths found by individuals
- Recognise the reality of the weaknesses and proactively manage them into strengths

Companies must recognise the conditions for effective learning and building these into all leadership, management, learning and development practices and programmes.

### The Learning Programme

This was a company learning programme for management development; this involved students working to achieve a nationally recognised professional qualification at the current equivalent of a NQF level six in Supply Chain Management.

### The Questionnaire

In order to examine the learning processes used, a questionnaire was designed to explore a range of questions about the feelings and experiences of students. This questionnaire examined the following four areas: -

1. Questions on the reasons why students wanted to study for the qualification.

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2. Questions on students experiences whilst they were completing their studies.
3. Questions on reflection about their studies
4. Questions on students learning styles

## **(1) Results-Why learn?**

The results showed various reasons why they wanted to learn.

Many different responses were given, (this, however, maybe in part due to the open nature, of the questionnaire). It was very clear however, that the main reason for wanting to learn was to increase knowledge and understanding.

Other reasons given were to make life more interesting, to meet other people etc.

Similarly, the question about the students intended outcome had also mixed responses, but the majority however; indicated the prize was the gaining of a qualification.

Other responses indicated were, to make progress, to be able to apply and use the qualification.

## **(2) Results-Learning Experiences**

Whilst undertaking studies most students reported that they were able to use their existing experience and knowledge during the programme.

Half of the students felt they had learnt a lot, whilst the other half felt they had learnt something.

25 per cent of students felt they were given no guidance at all, on how to learn.

87 per cent of students reported receiving feedback during the programme.

75 per cent of students were very clear that no formal support had been given at work, despite, a formal mentoring programme being set up at the start by the company using senior and line managers. Clearly this had not been effective.

When asked further about their support network, around half of the students had received informal help/support at work. They also had a support network from other people; indeed all students said they were helped in this later way.

Finally, all students felt they had opportunity whilst learning, to think and reflect, and make conclusions about their learning. 75 per cent of students also felt they had opportunity, to use what they had learnt.

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## **(3) Results-"Reflections"**

In thinking back about the learning experience, the main problem students identified was finding the time. This is also reflected by a few students reporting the main time problem for them, was working shifts.

In answering the question about how students had overcome their study problems, students were, generally and remarkably, non-committal. Some of the ways however reported on overcoming problems were; for example, making time, having perseverance, and using holiday time.

When asked why some people might choose to drop out of the learning, mixed responses were found, but the responses made were mainly about lack of motivation, no support, no time, and finally, getting behind and then getting depressed.

The main reasons reported for keeping going were not to let down colleagues and others in the group. Clearly, a group-training format had also supported the individuals questioned.

Learning was felt to be important to students and their responses were: "develops" me, gives me a challenge, expanded the mind, allows me to see the bigger picture, and, keeps the mind fresh.

Students had clear views about what they needed to do to be better learners and responses mainly included having a more disciplined approach plus, concentrating more on the planning of study time and to listening without prejudice.

## **(4) Results-Learning Style**

On learning styles students were equally divided with their self-perceptions and fell between equally between being visual / seeing learners, and being experiencing / doing learners. Furthermore, the majority felt that they were activists and would try anything once.

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## Results-Summary

In putting together the strengths and weaknesses from the questionnaire results, the following is a summary:

**Strengths** were as follows:

- Students have clear reasons for doing the programme.
- Programme builds on existing knowledge.
- Provides feedback.
- Good informal support network.
- Able to use what has been the learnt.
- Group peer pressure/support.

**Weaknesses** were as follows:

- Lacking guidance on how to learn
- No formal support network at work
- Finding time to complete the assessments
- Lack of clarity on how to overcome the learning problems
- Many reasons for dropping out
- Undisciplined learning approach

## Messages for companies

It will be seen that individual students were motivated, had informal learning support and were able to use what they learnt; all these are good strengths for companies to build on.

Companies can however recognise the weaknesses reported by students and be pro-active to manage these.

Learning lessons here are for the provision of:

- Formal guidance on learning
- Formal support networks
- Time for assessments
- Encouraging a disciplined learning approach.

Support and guidance (both formal and informal) is critical in learning. The students above clearly had informal support, but no formal support. How therefore support is accounted for, planned for, and actually undertaken is a "must" to be considered by all companies who sponsor learning.

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## Effective Learning Conditions

For learning to be effective, the following learning conditions are needed:

- Gaining attention and motivating.
- Giving the expected outcome.
- Stimulating recall by using past knowledge.
- Developing new opportunities.
- Getting learners responses.
- Giving learning guidance.
- Giving feedback.
- Appraising performance.
- Providing for transferability.
- Ensuring retention and encourage practice.

There is much above that shows the importance of giving support and guidance to individuals who are practicing learning.

The following are some examples of how to do this:

- Motivating = encourage and support, continually
- Develop new opportunities = ask "how can I help"
- Learning guidance = provide how to learn courses/discussions/self help groups/ study buddies etc
- Feedback = say "well done"
- Appraising =ask "how can I help you to develop"
- Transferability = create opportunities to use and apply the learning

It should not be difficult to help and support employees learn.

When doing this, a company demonstrates that it believes that learning really matters.

### This report is based on:

"Improving Learning & for Individuals & Companies," 2002, ISBN 1-90429-831-1

"How to Mentor and Support Learning," 2003, ISBN 1-90429-865-6

"The Learning Toolkit" 2008, ISBN 978-1-852525-620

"The Developing People Toolkit", 2008, ISBN 978-1-852525-651

All written by Stuart Emmett

## REPORT

Stuart Emmett is a freelance independent trainer and consultant who trades under the name of Learn and Change - Stuart believes that in times of change, it is only those who consciously learn, that will inherit, a successful future

Stuart has operational and strategic experience in varied commercial service industries - gained in the UK and Nigeria - and is particularly interested in the "people issues" of management processes, as well as logistics and supply-chain management. He has worked on 6 continents, in over 30 countries and delivered to over 50 nationalities.

Stuart can be contacted at [stuart@learnandchange.com](mailto:stuart@learnandchange.com) or by visiting [www.learnandchange.com](http://www.learnandchange.com)