

Learning in Companies

Why people need to believe you when you say learning really matters

Executive summary

- Jobs for life no longer exist; learning a living is the "new" future.
- Learning a living requires shared interests and trust between individuals and managers. It recognises that support for learning is both valuable and needed.
- There are so many, irrefutable reasons to support and encourage individuals learning at work.
- Learning requires individuals to be active (this is "real world" practice), yet, the company reality is very often one of mere vague wish lists (the theoretical "policy").
- Learning in companies presents many challenges, key ones being having managers who will actually model, support and encourage learning.
- The only competitive advantage a company ever has; is how good its people are at learning.
- A company only ever develops and learns and changes through its people, there is no other way.
- The overall message is that learning works, but that it has to be practiced better.

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A changed world of "learning a living"

It is no longer valid to speak of "a job for life."

We now need to change "earning a living" to "learning a living".

The traditional view of earning a living is one of payments and rewards being the prime reason for coming to work. Certainly this is important and provides an encouragement to work for many.

But, it is becoming increasingly important for leaders and managers to ensure their people learn and develop in a partnership approach between the company, managers, and individuals. This then reflects shared interests and trust between people.

This can, represent more a "learning a living" approach.

This can take place within the "traditional" work environment and accepts that support from managers and others is valuable and is needed.

The company, whilst not "guaranteeing" continual employment, now assists with giving "employability" skills.

There can be many other reasons why companies might want to support and encourage learning; some of the reasons are:

- To stay in business
- To remain competitive
- To be a leader in the specific business area
- To better serve the needs of its customers
- To increase profitability
- To be a role model for its suppliers
- To prevent mistakes
- To avoid repeating mistakes
- To benefit from all the knowledge the employees have to contribute
- To raise the companies collective I.Q.
- To create a motivating work environment
- To attract and retain outstanding employees
- To build on the companies strengths
- To support the growth and development of its employees
- To become better at what they do
- To help its employees learn how to work together more effectively
- To change the culture of the company

Company sponsored learning: the reality?

Many companies will have mission or vision statements that say something like the following:

"We believe our people are our most important resource".

However, the gap between such a mission styles belief and the "on the ground" practice of developing people is so often, a very wide one. This is nothing new; for example, comments at the 1999 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Conference noted: *"senior managers promoted learning, but, engaged in no personal development themselves"*. (Source: David Lee, Director of the Professional Development Foundation),

Company statements that people are our most important resource and we develop them are just too often a vague wish list and therefore, over time, have no impact whatsoever.

Learning is an active and a varied process; therefore such passive wish-list statements from companies are just meaningless theory.

The gaps between people development theory and the actual practices remain large ones. For many companies, the theory and practice are at odds with each other.

The message then to any level of influencing management has to be:

- to model learning by being open to learn
- by demonstrating actual learning

The work environment and the company view of training/ development/ learning are therefore critical. They show how a company allows and supports its people to move forward.

Learning within companies

Learning will pay back to companies, far beyond the short-term profit/loss statements. Financials only thinking fails to look beneath the results. But, perhaps this is no surprise if the C.E.O. is from a finance background as the pre-conditioned thinking style is one of, profit; cash, balance sheet, and shareholder return type variables.

This type of one sided only thinking misses seeing behind all the people related variables that have the real impact on the "numbers" that goes beyond just the short term. For example, a graduate trainee applies a few focussed years of learning over a long period, and the pay back from this learning is over a much longer time scale.

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The following "challenges" need to be faced by companies:

- Why, do some companies expect only the quick fix from learning?
- Why, do some companies set a bad example from senior managers who have learnt nothing new for many years?
- Is it not true that the company that learns and adapts faster, will, ultimately achieve a better and more satisfying business success?
- Is not true that the only competitive advantage a company ever has: is how good its people are at learning?
- Do senior business managers want such a competitive advantage?

Individuals do the learning in Companies

In companies, the managerial elements of planning, organising, directing, and controlling are all overseen and managed by people; therefore it is clear that it is the people that need to learn. It is important to not forget that it is the individual who has to do the learning.

A Company only ever develops and learns and changes through its people.

Many people will prefer to work for a company that supports and encourages their learning. This is shown where, *"companies developing a strong coaching culture, demonstrate a strong commitment. These companies are rewarded with greater loyalty, involvement and commitment, with in increased motivation, effectiveness and professionalism of both individuals and groups"*

(Anna Britnor Guest, 1999, in Success Now July-Sept 1999 and on www.trainingzone.co.uk/toolkit).

Becoming a Learning Company

The following two exercises will help you to take a view of your company policy on learning and developing (and therefore to changing and improving "the way we do things around here").

(1) Which are true for your Company?

- Learning is integrated into everything people do in this company, as people are encouraged to learn at all times. Learning and development is built into jobs.
- Learning for learning's sake is encouraged and effort in learning is rewarded.
- Employees are trusted to choose the learning courses that they need and personal learning plans are reviewed and discussed regularly.

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- People with different job titles from different departments learn together and managers share their own learning experiences openly.
- We promote mentoring relationships to enhance learning, as we believe that our peoples learning will determine the company future.
- Learning is integrated into all meetings; all work groups and work processes, when people are encouraged to pass on information and openly give their views.
- All individuals in the company, regardless of position, have equal access to learning opportunities.
- We treat mistakes as learning opportunities.
- We have initiated cross-functional training with rewards for those employees who learn a wider range of job skills.

Were you able to say yes to each of these?

If so, were you able to provide real examples?

If not, then you have just discovered your company has areas that need developing.

(2) True/false quiz

The following true/false quiz will give you an understanding of how your company responds to the learning needs of employees.

Answer the following statements as being True (we do) or False (we do not) for your company

- We do/do not work to remove barriers to learning.
- We do/do not cultivate a "learner friendly" environment.
- We do/do not understand how adults learn.
- We do/do not use various tools to assess employees' learning progress.
- We do/do not plan in specific learning opportunities for our people.
- We do/do not acknowledge that people learn from experience.
- We do/do not recognise what type of learning is most appropriate for each situation.
- We do/do not encourage each employee to become a lifelong learner.
- We do/do not encourage employees to keep an open mind to learning.
- We do/do not understand the factors that inhibit learning.
- We do/do not know how to motivate people to learn.
- We do/do not spend a minimum of two hours a month on one to one people coaching/mentoring?

Were you able to say, "We do" to all of these?

Any "do not" statement represents an area that needs to be developed

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Learning and therefore Improving Companies

Companies supporting learning will move towards fostering a learning culture. Accepting the need to foster a learning culture means:

- understanding and accepting the importance of change
- being open to learning
- recognising the importance of continuous improvements

If this is to be achieved, managers must learn to encourage people to challenge the normal and traditional ways of thinking and doing things. A learning company can only ever be one, if it is comprised of individuals who are learning. This includes individuals at all levels throughout the company, from the C.E.O. down.

"Businesses must encourage and support all their employees continually to develop their skills and qualifications"

(Department of Trade & Industry)

"We are in a new age; the age of information and global competition. We have no choice but to prepare for this new age in which the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination"

(Department for Education & Employment)

Companies really have no choice but to foster a learning culture. This will mean the company allowing itself to become open to learn. Learning within companies must be encouraged and supported. Learning must not be discouraged and expected to happen "naturally".

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

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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.

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