

Introduction to Work-Based Learning

“It may be rather obvious that if people spend 98-99% of their work time on the job, and only 1-2% (at most) in formal training, then most learning must occur on the job.”

- J.P. Kotter, The Leadership Factor

Work-based learning is a powerful and effective approach to development that makes the most of the opportunities to learn available to individuals at, from and through their real-life work situations. As a consequence, payoffs in terms of organisational as well as individual development are maximised.

A work-based learning approach to development restores the responsibility for learning to learners. It trusts individuals to decide for themselves – within the context of their real-life jobs – what to learn, why, where and how.

With opportunities to learn at work present whether or not they are structured by trainers, the key to transforming “the natural state of affairs” into a powerful vehicle for development is to optimise the learning that already takes place in accidental, informal and often unconscious ways.

To be at its most successful, a work-based approach to development must explicitly emphasise the integration of learning with work, so that both are given the conscious attention they deserve. This serves to correct the impression that, in order to learn, it is necessary to stop doing work (for instance, by going on a course) and, by implication, to stop learning when doing work!

The central premise: successful development of work-related competence depends on individuals learning and, in so doing, improving their capacity to learn (which in turn ensures that further learning can take place). For each individual, therefore, development of proficiency becomes an iterative process.

In practical terms, work-based learning:

- Can be powerful vehicles for development. Carefully chosen, properly carried out, fully supported and monitored, work-based learning activities help both organisations and the people in them to learn how to learn for themselves.
- Can provide unique opportunities for **two-way** learning: Work-based learning allows an individual to learn from the organisational context in which he/she operates, while the organisation itself learns and changes as a result of the individual's project-related actions. The key is to put in place an effective work-based learning initiative!

Benefits of Work-Based Learning

Benefits to senior management

- Helps translate organisation-wide vision/Mission/goals into localised action.
- A non-threatening way to lead areas of an organisation through major change.
- A great empowering/work delegation strategy!
- Enables staff rather than external parties to address work-related priorities, solve problems, improve work practices and overcome challenges.
- Gives participating individuals the sense of contributing meaningfully to the future of their own workplaces.
- Explicitly links learning to the practicalities of real-life work.
- Higher staff retention and lower turnover in uncertain times, through sense of accomplishment and greater job satisfaction.
- Direct bottom-line impact from worthwhile work-based learning activities.

Benefits to participants

- Harnesses accumulated knowledge and experience of many years' service into new and challenging channels – greater sense of worth.
- Strengthens internal alliances, and enhances perception by colleagues as knowledgeable “tribal elders”.
- Provides renewed scope for job enrichment in the absence of formal opportunities for promotion.
- Maximises opportunities for involvement in positive activities, capable of producing meaningful outcomes.
- Reduces the menace of an uncertain/unknown future.
- Enables change to be communicated positively, and hence accepted more readily as “the new ways of doing things”.
- Minimises time away from the workplace for the purpose of formal training.