

Workplace change and skill needs: workers' perceptions

Darryl Dymock and Mark Tyler

Griffith University

Abstract

This paper reports on worker perceptions of workplace change and the determinants that drove the need to change workplace practices and skills for a particular cluster of Australian workers. It takes the position that in developed countries change in the workplace is inevitable and ubiquitous, and that whatever the forces, external or internal, the demand for different and varied sets of knowledges and skills is high and dynamic.

This paper contends that the impact of reported changes to a workforce's productivity — through globalisation of industry, introduction of new technology, and organisational restructuring — are not necessarily directly experienced by workers, but are more causal in their relationship to how they affect the enterprise level of operations in organisations. This position was deduced from an examination of the impact of change on workers in four different industries. These workers were asked about changes in the way they carried out their work practices, both current and anticipated. Using a qualitative methodology it was found that these workers considered change primarily as a factor of their work tasks, and that their responses to this change was to maintain their workplace competence and hence their employment. The implications from these findings highlight a position that the most appropriate setting for a worker's individual learning is the workplace itself, and that this alone necessitates a sharper focus on how learning in the workplace is supported.

Introduction

The continually changing economic and industrial environment in Australia has meant that organisations have had to find ways of responding to the various influences that affect their operations, in order to remain productive and competitive. Changes emanate from such factors as the globalisation of industry, introduction of new technology, and organisational restructuring. The extent and nature of the influences, and hence the type of response required, differs from industry to industry and is also dependent on the size and nature of the organisation. For example, globalisation may arguably have a greater impact on a manufacturer than on a service provider.

One way of responding to change is through upskilling the workforce. An employer may provide training in order to ensure that employees are equipped to cope with the changes imposed on them by external and internal influences. Not all changes require substantial training, however, and may be better met through the responses of individual workers. In fact, the significance of workers learning on the job has been highlighted in recent research on workplace learning (e.g. Billett 2001, 2010; Fuller & Unwin 2004, 2011). Learning on the job may therefore be a key element in how a worker responds to change.

In the study reported in this paper, part of a larger research project on continuing education and training (Billett et al. 2012), 86 Australian workers from four different industries were asked about

recent changes in their jobs and the changes they anticipated in the future. Some of them identified broader influences at the industry or enterprise level; others saw change in terms of their own careers, and a small number claimed their job had remained the same and that they foresaw that this would continue. However, the largest group nominated specific changes to their own workplace practice as having the greatest impact to date and in the future. This finding has implications for how such learning might be organised or facilitated and how the workers might best be engaged in that learning.

The interviewees' responses are discussed in this paper within conceptual frameworks established by the literature on workplace change and workplace learning. Examples include a report by the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2013), which identified the broad yet prominent workplace changes mentioned in the introduction above. At the intermediate level – the enterprises – the workplace changes are productivity, competition and new products and services, as a response to the broader changes given above (Watson et al. 2009). Misko (2010) offered a micro perspective in relation to the demands on worker skills and practices – she showed that advances in information communication technology (ICT), an increase in the number of regulatory frameworks concerned with how jobs are done, and the increasing demand on workplace cultural sensitivity, environmental sustainability and consumer demand had contributed to the demands on workers to upskill and tackle new tasks. Stern and Sommerlad (1999, cited in Lee et al. 2004) suggested that three broad approaches to workplace learning had developed: the workplace as a site for learning; the workplace as a learning environment; and learning and working as being inextricably linked. Such conclusions all highlight the increasing importance of the workplace as a context for learning.

This paper argues that workers mainly have their own workplace practice as their focus for learning in response to change, and that the implication arising from this focus is that the most appropriate setting for individual learning in response to change is likely to be the workplace itself. Those conclusions are based on an analysis of the findings from semi-structured interviews with 86 workers from four industry sectors: services; mining; health and community services; and financial services. The workers were asked about recent changes in their current jobs, and about changes they anticipated in the future. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and a thematic analysis (Liamputtong 2009) was employed to note patterns of meaning across worker responses on current and anticipated changes in their workplace.

Workers' responses

Current changes

Asked what changes they had experienced in their current work, 15% of those interviewed indicated that the nature of their jobs had remained the same over the years. For example, one mine worker said, 'my current job has not changed in the last six and a half years'. But interestingly, he did note that he was not selected for particular work tasks, due to his level of literacy. A cleaner stated, 'it's pretty much the same', when referring to his cleaning role, and another in the same occupation said, 'I was employed to do a specific job, and I'm still doing that specific job'.

The rest of the interviewees, however, identified 93 instances of change in their current workplaces, several nominating more than one. Those changes can be categorised as: variations in workplace-wide policy or procedures that affected what they did; being asked to perform a different role; and changes in the nature of the work performed.

Instances of recent changes in policy or procedures that affected workers' current jobs accounted for 35% of responses, by far the highest-scoring category. For example, a mining worker drew on an example associated with safety: 'a brand new permit-to-work system ... of checks and balances ... on machinery or well heads'. This worker also noted the sometimes confusing aspects in dealing with these changes, particularly when they are seen to be 'obstructive and almost contradictory'. This worker's aim in this circumstance was to 'settle and balance' new practices within the workflow. A services worker told of how her employer was seeking to 'better create a bond between [themselves] and community'. Staff were therefore expected to take on 'community engagement and community relations roles' because of the not-for-profit standing of the organisation. A finance worker explained how their employer enrolled workers in different courses 'to teach you about how to do certain things and how to use a certain system' and that this is augmented with a new buddy system for teaching new practices.

Twenty per cent of workers indicated that they had experienced recent changes to the role they performed within the enterprise. None actually spoke about promotion or demotion. However, all indicated that undertaking new roles was not associated with the role they originally occupied when starting with the organisation. For example, a person employed in the finance industry stated, 'I moved from corporate to litigation', and a colleague moved from economics and finance to tax. Both instances are indicative of a degree of mobility in the enterprise that was beneficial to them, in that they experienced a tighter fit between their skills and knowledge of particular work roles. An office worker in mining said, 'I started as a cleaner' and now this worker occupies the role of administration officer dealing with payrolls. A colleague in the same office reflected some positive sentiments relating to the experience of these kinds of changes: 'it's been different procedures ... so my job runs smoother and so everyone else's job runs smoother as well'. But this position of more fluent workflows is not necessarily experienced by all, as seen in the following category.

Fifteen per cent of participants indicated there had been changes in the nature of the work they undertook. For a few, the expansion of tasks was related to the aim of obtaining more efficiencies in work practices, while the majority of this group indicated that the change produced more work for them; that is, work intensified as a result of these changes. For example, a services industry worker in a tourist facility stated: 'I'm now working in four or five different fields', indicating that a broadening of expertise is necessary to carry out his responsibilities effectively. An animal trainer at the same facility said, 'I also do a lot of cleaning, preparation [and] commentary ... we do a big variety'. A fast food worker indicated how expanding work tasks, as a result of 'organisational changes happening — the structure and that kind of thing', have created work intensification: 'It took a long time for me to catch up on all that work'. An administrative support person reported that she moved from receptionist to personal assistant (PA) and with that move came changes to the number of managers for whom she became PA. She stated that 'temps' were employed but they were limited in their skills, so she had to deploy a particular attitude, 'just rolling your sleeves up and doing what you need to do and not be precious about that's your job or my job'. In the aged sector, a worker reported that a change in work tasks was a result of changes in resident capability. In recent times 'clients are coming in who are particularly vulnerable'. The level of care and attention was more intense for these less able clients, producing an increase in workload.

For a few of the participants, workplace change came as a result of changing their employment. For example, a financial services worker said, 'last year I finished my degree ... got this job which isn't in health for a change ... I love being in management'. A colleague in the same unit said, 'I was a systems facilitator; now I'm new to management', while a person in mining said 'I do the same thing,

but just a different company', and 'I don't mind it at all. It keeps your mind busy and that, but it's good'. These participants indicated a positive outcome in relation to their enterprise moves.

Among the interviewees, there was also a strong anticipation of future changes in work practices, as discussed in the next section.

Future changes

From the 86 interviews, 78 responded to the question about the future changes they foresaw in their jobs. A handful answered the question in the context of their own career goals, identifying their individual aspirations and intentions; for example, 'I want to be an operations manager one day' (mines worker); 'I'm hopefully going into management into the future, so looking forward to that' (hospitality worker); 'I've expressed interest in doing the accounts and [my boss] said he would probably let me do that in the future' (services worker); and 'I do have visions of where I want to go' (finance worker).

Almost a quarter thought there would be no change or very little change in their jobs, which suggests they were also not anticipating any changing skill composition; for example, 'I honestly don't know' (mines worker); 'It's fairly standard [work]' (hospitality worker); 'I'm not expecting my job to change in any way' (services worker); and 'I don't see much change in regards to my job' (aged care worker).

The balance of those interviewed predicted that more changes were coming, however. For example, 20% of the interviewees identified broader influences on future changes in their work, more in line with those generally discussed in research about workplace change. For example, a finance worker in a government institution anticipated that change might arise through a growth in grant income, which would lead to an increase in the amount of project activity, while another in the same field, but in a private company, said that the nature of their work depended on what was happening in the marketplace. A services industry worker replied that 'It depends who is in the government – which way the wind changes', and a professional in aged care was waiting to see if a new registration board might bring amendments to professional development requirements. In the mining industry, a worker anticipated changes to ways of working with the introduction of a company-wide policy of 'working leaner'.

The largest proportion of responses to the question about future change, almost two-thirds, identified examples of future work-related job changes, with some interviewees nominating more than one likely change specific to their own workplaces. The examples included changing personal work roles, the introduction of new systems, changed or uncertain personnel arrangements and internal policy. Most often mentioned was the introduction of new technology of various kinds, followed by instances of services for new clients or customers. In relation to aged care, new services requiring the learning of new skills reflected changing societal practices, such as people continuing to live in their homes for longer than in the past and therefore presenting at an older age for institutional care with potentially more advanced care needs. Only two interviewees mentioned the introduction of new products as elements of change, but only a few of the 86 interviewed for the project were from retail, so the number is likely to be low in any case.

Discussion

Most of the small number of respondents who thought there had been no change in their current job or anticipated there would be no change in the future were in low-skilled jobs: several were cleaners, who believed, perhaps not unreasonably, that cleaning methods had not changed and were unlikely to

change, while others were in jobs in mining such as sand-blasting and general maintenance. Several people in administrative positions initially indicated that their jobs had not changed until the researchers asked probe questions; the interviewees then realised they could cite instances of change, for example, of new technology. In these cases, it seems likely that the new learning was so much part of their work that they simply absorbed it into their work practices without recognising the upskilling that had taken place. This is very much in line with the third of the approaches to workplace learning identified by Stern and Sommerlad (1999), in which learning and working are inextricably linked.

Of the broader influences affecting jobs, those directly nominated fell mainly into the categories of economic, social and regulatory developments, and are among those identified by the Australian Workplace Productivity Agency (2013), Burke and Ng (2006) and Misko (2010). Wider influences noted in the research literature but not evident in the interviewees' responses include environment and population sustainability (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013), offshoring (Burke & Ng 2006) and an increased need for cultural sensitivity (Misko 2010).

In considering the sources of the changes identified by the interviewees in relation to the suggestion by Skills Australia (2010, p.18) that 'new skill demands may flow from the changing skill composition of existing occupations, resulting from new technology, services or products', the majority of the examples did not lie within these three areas: respondents claimed that both current and future change had emerged from within the organisation itself. Some of the examples of change were concerned with their changing role within the enterprise – workers indicating changes that came about as a result of them taking on new roles; for example, moving from receptionist to office clerk. Others related to expanded work tasks: instances where workers were in their same work role, but the scope of work had increased and included additional tasks. There were also instances of change resulting from moving to a new job within the organisation. Another key area of change was associated with internal policies and systems, which required employees to learn new skills.

This analysis of responses indicates that, of the three potential influences on change in the workplace, the workers interviewed perceived only the introduction of new technology as a major driver of changing work skills. However, it is noteworthy that the examples given, even when organisation-wide, were related to how that new technology would affect their work practices, such as in recording patient data in aged care. That emphasis on how changes would impact on work practices is pervasive throughout the transcripts of interviews, as is the perception that the main pressures for change arose from within their own organisations. These findings have major implications for how new learning might best be organised.

The first key factor that needs to be considered is the context-specific nature of the way that change influences work practices. Interviewees overwhelmingly saw their own job as the focus of any change, which suggests that forms of workplace learning are likely to be the most effective in fostering the development of new skills and knowledge. This is in line with Lave and Wenger's (1991) concern with situated cognition, and confirms Watson et al.'s (2009) observation about workers seeing organisational practices in terms of those that affect their own work.

The examples provided also tend to substantiate the conclusions of Hetzner et al. (2009), who propose a link between learning (in response to change) and both the nature of the work and the working environment. The second key factor that emerges from the analysis of the data is therefore the role of the workplace in supporting learning. This brings into play Fuller and Unwin's (2004) notion of the expansive workplace, where a diversity of experiences encourages workplace learning. It also

supports Billett's (2001) argument for the 'co-participation' of individual engagement and workplace affordances; that is, that learning in the workplace occurs through the interaction of a worker's effort and the support provided by the employer and the working environment. Lee et al. (2004) argued that it is difficult to distinguish between those two concepts, and there is evidence from the interviews that workers respond to the change happening around them as part of their everyday work role, without necessarily consciously 'engaging' in new learning. Nevertheless, it can be argued, as Fuller and Unwin (2011, p.13) do, that each worker will 'exert their individual agency in terms of how far they decide to participate in (and help to shape) the opportunities that the workplace offers to them'.

There is also clearly a key role for the workplace in this process. If workers see the need to update their skill sets in order to carry out their job more effectively in response to change and are apparently willing to undertake new learning of their own accord, an expansive workplace (Fuller & Unwin 2004) seems a desirable attribute. There is also a case for a workplace curriculum, as Billett proposes (2001), which can help 'structure' new learning to make it more effective through such strategies as coaching, mentoring and guiding.

Conclusion

On the basis of the interview responses reported in this paper, the most effective learning for the sorts of changes the workers perceived in their current jobs and in the future appears to be through a focus on individual work practices. The ideal scenario seems therefore to be one where the individual motivation of the learners is enhanced by support from their organisation. Although this concept of situated learning in the workplace is not new, this paper has shown that such learning appears to be particularly appropriate for the changing skill composition that workers require in order to remain competent in the face of constant change. This is not to say that more significant enterprise- or industry-wide reformations will not require more structured approaches, possibly including accredited training. Further research is needed to explore the extent of differentiation between the sorts of changes that engender individual learning in the workplace and those that require a more substantial whole-of-workforce development response.

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