

# Workplace Learning for the Coming Century

## Training and Human Resource Development

Public and private discourse over the skills deficiency of both new and incumbent wage earners obscures a serious debate taking place within the ranks of American management. Although almost everyone agrees on the need for increased employee education, there is far less unanimity on the form, content, and appropriate delivery mechanisms for such training. Even the operative terms themselves—education, training, and learning—have different meanings to different people. Part of the debate is driven by scholars and educational professionals who are trying to develop academically sound approaches to preparing people for successful work experiences. At the same time, practitioners are scrambling to meet employer demands for new, cutting-edge approaches that will give them a decisive advantage over their competitors. Given the fact that tens of billions of dollars are spent each year educating hourly and salaried employees (Haskell 1998; Tobin 1998), attempts to develop effective means of providing work-based education and training are far from an esoteric exercise.

Any current evaluation of the state of workplace education must be viewed within the context of the evolution of human resource development (HRD). A relatively new field, HRD draws upon a wide variety of disciplines including economics, psychology, management theory, communications, the humanities, political science, and education (Rothwell and Sredl 1992, pp. 45-64). Nadler (1980) originally defined the term human resource development as—

- an organized *learning* experience
- within a given period of time
- with the objective of producing the *possibility of performance change*. (p. 66)

This was expanded a number of years later by McLagan (1989) to “the integrated use of training and development, Organizational Development, and career development to improve individual, group and organizational effectiveness” (p. 7). The redefinition of HRD marked a significant change in the field. Whereas Nadler’s primary focus was on the needs of individuals to gain new skills or knowledge in order to improve their performance on the job, the later definition emphasized the increasing importance of HRD practices to organizational success. Nadler himself recognized this change by making it clear that human resource development was primarily a management function (Rothwell and Sredl 1992, pp. 1-3).

The imprecise nature of HRD as a field may be a result of the fact that it was, at heart, a pragmatic response to the economic changes that began to sweep over the United States in the 1970s. Approaches to personnel management and training that were developed in the boom years after World War II, proved

totally inadequate to meet the challenges facing U.S. employers. Although systems thinking and human resource management, for example, had both been around since the late 1950s, neither was able to supplant the Taylorist-inspired lethargy that affected most companies during the period (Argyris 1957; Tilles 1963). The continued strength of hierarchical structures within organizations and the entrenchment of training staffs who focused primarily on the needs of managers, supervisors, and salespeople significantly restrained any movement toward innovative approaches to workplace education.

Only when the old systems failed to halt the continued free fall of major sectors of the U.S. economy did employers seek out help. Combining elements of systems thinking and human relations strategies, an eclectic mix of academics and practitioners developed the concept of human resource development. Since it draws upon many fields of inquiry, approaches to the subject reflect the varied disciplines from which its proponents emerge. Although university-based HRD advocates have attempted to instill some intellectual rigor into the discipline, its major appeal lies in its direct applicability to day-to-day employment issues.

At the heart of human resource development is the concept of learning which itself has become a topic of discussion. The original parameters of the debate had to do with the difference between education and training. Lawrie (1990) identified training as a “change in skills” whereas learning was defined as “a change in knowledge” (p. 44). Rothwell and Sredl (1992) believed that “training is a short-term learning intervention intended to establish—or improve—a match between present job requirements and individual knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 4). Education, in their view, “is an intermediate-term learning intervention intended to help individuals qualify for advancement and thus achieve their future career goals” (p. 5).

For Noe (1999) “training refers to a planned effort by a company to facilitate employees learning of job-related competencies. These competencies include knowledge, skills, or behaviors that are critical for successful job performance” (p. 5). A more explicit difference was drawn by Heisler and Benham (1992). For them, education connotes an academic approach geared toward thinking and conceptualization whereas training deals with “the job utility of knowledge” (p. 23). In their view, the cultural and philosophical gap between the academy and the real world accounts for these diverse conceptualizations. The education/training debate has been further complicated in recent years by the veritable explosion of interest in organizational learning

## **Organizational Learning/Learning Organizations**

The training vs. education dispute is little more than an argument over semantics for those scholars and practitioners who advocate the concept of workplace learning. Drawing upon Knowles’ (1980) theory of andragogy, Marsick (1987) identified education and training primarily as delivery systems. In her view “learning...involves reflection by individuals and working groups upon their own experience as part of the organizational whole. The emphasis is on enhancement

of variety of skills and perspectives in each individual” (p. 3). Formalized training, geared toward providing specific skills to solve immediate problems, will not produce much of long-term value to an organization; to succeed in the marketplace of the future it must create an environment that encourages every employee to reflect critically upon what they do and what it means for the entire firm.

Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) applied structure to the general concept of work-based learning by helping to popularize the idea of the learning organization, which he broadly defined as “an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (p. 14). Based largely on the work of Argyris and Schön (1978), Senge posited an evolutionary process comprised of four components:

1. Personal mastery
2. Mental models
3. The building of shared visions
4. Team learning

Cohesion was brought to these discrete elements by systems thinking, Senge’s fifth discipline. “Systems thinking is a discipline of seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’” (p. 375). Instead of functioning as managers, leaders must act as “designers, stewards and teachers,” creating shared visions and facilitating an organizational commitment to the ongoing accumulation of individual knowledge and skills (p. 340).

*The Fifth Discipline* represents the touchstone for almost all current discussions on skills development in the workplace (Garvin 1993; Mai 1996; Nevis, DiBella, and Gould 1995; Watkins and Marsick 1993). Marquardt (1996) and Brinkerhoff and Gill (1994) share Senge’s emphasis on the importance of systems thinking whereas Handy (1995) identifies curiosity, forgiveness, trust and togetherness as being fundamental character traits of learning organizations. Bentley (1990) believes that employers must create a working environment where people can challenge and experiment without strict time constraints. Hoffman and Withers (1995) make specific comparisons between the learning organization and traditional training (p. 472):

**Traditional Training**

Teaching content  
Classroom focused  
Teacher centered  
“Belongs to” training department  
Activity centered  
Training specialist

**Learning Organization**

Learning processes  
Workplace focused  
Learner centered  
“Belongs to” each associate  
Outcome based  
Learning consultants

This comparison underscores the dominant theme underlying all of the organizational learning literature: the primacy of the individual as both recipient and actor. Ravid (1987) sees each worker as being responsible for their own learning experience. "Self-directed learning...is interpreted as an approach to learning, training and upgrading based on the individual's ability to sense what is relevant and important, and use them; to be flexible in viewing things, and independent in thinking, curious, initiating and persistent" (p. 103). Individual responsibility for workplace learning is further extended in the discussion of the need for employees to manage their own careers. Each worker is expected to take the initiative in obtaining additional knowledge so that he or she can contribute to the ongoing development of the firm as well as to improve their own job prospects (Byrd 1995).

In order for self-directed learning and development to take place, organizations have to modify their structure and function so as to encourage employees to operate in a "learning mode" (Morris 1995, p. 328). Firms must design ways to encourage employees to test out assumptions that arise out of their daily work experiences, an important aspect of the ongoing process of learning (Marsick and Watkins 1987). Tobin's "knowledge-enabled organization" (1998) shifts workplace learning to the very heart of the corporation. "When a company learns to utilize and foster the growth of the knowledge and skills of all employees across all functions and levels, integrate learning activities into every employee's work, encourage and reinforce all modes of learning, and align all of this learning with the company's strategic business directions, it becomes a knowledge-enabled organization" (p. 39).

Individual learning contracts, jointly developed by the supervisor and the employee, align the person's existing competencies with the needs of the firm. The worker is then responsible for developing and implementing a program to upgrade his or her skills with the assistance of training or human resource personnel. In order to support the individual learning goals of its employees, the organization should set up a centralized "knowledge network" that makes critical internal and external information accessible to all employees.

Leonard-Barton (1992) identifies the Chaparral Steel company as a "learning laboratory," which she defines as "an organization dedicated to knowledge creation, collection and control" (p. 23). All employees, from company president to security guard, are expected to upgrade their skills constantly in order to add maximum value to the enterprise. According to Leonard-Barton, the ability to have "continuous learning depends upon the sense of ownership derived from the incentive systems, upon the pride of accomplishment derived from special educational systems, upon values embedded in policies and managerial practices as well as upon specific technical skills (p. 35). Almost every employee spends the first 3½ years at the firm in an internal apprenticeship program that combines formal schooling with on-the-job training. Classroom instruction is carried out by shop-floor supervisors rather by professional trainers. Clear career paths and monetary incentives reinforce the need for experimentation and continuous learning.

Leonard-Barton's Chaparral Steel case study inadvertently raises a crucial issue in any critical examination of organizational learning. As she makes clear, "respect for the individual does not mean equality of responsibility, lack of discipline or even consensual decision making. Chaparral managers believe that a supervisor should be a leader, trained to make good decisions—including hiring and firing" (p. 27). At the heart of this observation is the dichotomy between individual empowerment and organizational power.

Popularists like Senge attach an almost mystical quality to the ability of organizational learning to fundamentally transform people and the places where they work. "A learning organization is a place where, through learning, people are continually re-perceiving their world and their relationship to it, discovering how they create their reality and their future" (Rolls 1995, p. 103). Taking the positive impact of self-directed learning one step further, Ravid (1987) suggests that it could lead to a change in power relationships at work. "Putting the control in workers' hands means a shift not only in the training systems, but also in the hierarchical perceptions of the traditional structure of the organization" (p. 106).

Marsick (1987), in the same collection of essays, presents a more nuanced view of the transformative powers of organizational learning. She recognizes three distinct limitations:

1. Workplace learning will always be governed to some extent by an instrumental focus because the primary purpose for such organizations is productivity.
2. Not all individuals are ready to participate more fully in decision making and self-directed learning.
3. Organizations cannot always change conditions such as hierarchy and centralized decision making even when they wish to do so. (p. 25)

Chaparral Steel embodies the last of Marsick's three points. Even as the firm maximizes employee input by creating a total learning environment, it is not prepared to relinquish any measure of control over how the corporation operates on a daily basis. Employees may be empowered to alter the way they perform specific job tasks or to help redesign broader productive processes, but they have no power to determine the conditions under which they work. Management continues to run the company without any pretense of shared decision making.

This same disconnection exists in all almost efforts at workplace restructuring. The language of involvement and personal empowerment necessarily runs up against the realities of economic survival in a global, capitalist economy. Even organizations that are truly committed to moving beyond the confines of Taylorism often find themselves ensnared, to a lesser or greater extent, by the past. The next chapter examines this inherent contradiction, in the context of actual real-world experience, from three vantage points: (1) What is the actual extent of all forms of workplace reorganization in the United States today? (2) What is the current scope of private sector training, education, or organizational learning efforts? and (3) When some form of training does occur, is there any congruence between its stated purpose and its actual implementation?

Taken as a whole, the answers to these three questions will tell us quite a bit about how we, as a nation, are preparing working men and women to deal with the challenges posed by an uncertain future.