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WORKPLACE LEARNING APPROACHES AMONG SUPPORT STAFF IN UNIVERSTI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA

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INTRODUCTION

The workplace learning (WPL) is seen as a platform to improve and enhance the human resource intervention in upgrading and developing human resources at the workplace. According to Bierema (2002), organisations must be aware of various factors that can influence the learning environment and working system. A working environment that can stimulate learning such as how employees can be involved in learning activity and organisational support are literally the main factor on how an organisation can be categorised as a learning environment (Billet, 2001). Billet (2000) has also identified that skills, knowledge and learning capacity of human resources are the critical success factors for an organisation. Consequently, nowadays aspects of the WPL are seen as the main effort towards lifelong learning. Kirby et. al (2003) stress that there is a critical need for an organisation to realize and understand the importance of this learning aspect in their organisation. This includes on how important it is to understand how employees learn and think at their workplace. This could be influenced by the current changing factors in working environment which emphasise more on learning aspects such as lifelong learning, knowledge management and learning organisation.



However, learning at the workplace will only be accomplishment if there is a strong commitment from employers.

Previous researches on WPL include learning factor (Matthews, 1999) and organisational support (Hughes, 2004; Matthews, 1999; Karakowsky dan Mc Bey, 1999). However, detailed study on learning approaches at workplace such as working climate that could influence WPL process is still rare and limited (Kirby et. al., 2003). Billets (2000, 2001) truly support the notion that an individual participation in an organisational activity and further encouragement by employers are extremely significant towards building knowledge and skill development which are required in an individual's work and progress. Other than that, a working environment also contributes towards employees' action, thinking, learning, understanding and development process in an organisation.

WORKPLACE LEARNING

The workplace learning can be defined as below:

Learning approach	Definition
Deep approach	Integrative approach that leads to personal understanding. For example, tries to relate new ideas to situations where they might apply
Surface disorganised	Feeling overwhelmed by work. For example, being unsure what is needed to complete a task, finding it difficult to organise time effectively, reading things without really understanding them
Surface rational	Preference for order, detail, and routine. For example, likes to know precisely what is expected, puts a lot of effort into memorising important facts when learning something new

(source: Delva et al., 2002)

Table 1: Definition of term

Boud dan Solomon (2003) explain that in knowledge economy (k-economy) era, learning is not only restricted to classroom learning. This involved for example, the key concept of lifelong learning, learning organisation and task oriented shared learning such as e-learning. In addition, learning is believed to occur anywhere at any time not only in a traditional practice anymore, which is normally the classroom setting.

According to Illeris (2004), the WPL focuses more on working environment and learning process among their employees. Based on this learning environment, the learning content such as learning resources and social environment are examples of important elements that can foster or encourage conducive learning environment. An Individual life style is one type of continuous learning process which could develop from experience. In particular, part of a learning process is one's readiness to learn, where an individual or a group meet and explore the opportunities available in their environment.

Bottrup (2005) explains that the WPL is based on a practical, current, specific or non-formal training which is applied in our daily work. Similarly, learning at a workplace is learning that occurs during employee normal activity or routine job in their daily work.

Though previous research states that there is a common similarity between academic learning for example, at school and WPL, Kirby et al. (2003) argue that there is a difference between both learning methods. They believe that the WPL is more involved in procedural knowledge and depend a lot on organisational nature context to solve problems. This is seen more of an approach to encourage teamwork.

METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted among 197 support staffs at 10 different faculties in UTM, Skudai Johor. These support staff are those from various categories such as Group C (for example, technician,

administrative assistant and lab assistant) and D (for example, clerical clerk, office boy and machinery operator) only. The original total number of respondents from all 10 faculties are 598. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), 234 research samples are needed to represent a total population number of 600 people. Therefore, a total number of 250 questionnaire was distributed. However, after data collection and analyses only 197 respondents responses were selected.

Approaches to learning (Kirby et.al 2003) questionnaire is used as an instrument in this study. This questionnaire is divided into 2 sections. Section A represents the respondents' demography background and Section B consists of 30 item questions based on respondents learning approaches. Data collected is analysed using the SPSS version 10.0 for min, percentages and frequency.

RESULTS

In this section, the result on the level of learning approaches at work are presented accordingly.

a) Level of Learning Approaches – Deep Scale

Table 2 shows the result of the Deep Learning Approach. The result states that the respondents' deep learning approach at their workplace is at high level ($m=3.943$). This is because majority of the respondents (92.9%) agree that learning new tasks can give satisfaction and fulfilment to them ($m=4.37$). This indicates that this factor is one of the attraction for the workers to work ($m=4.34$). However, there are 60.4% respondents who believe that they do not use creativity while performing their task. The mean for this item is at 3.21 which is at low level.

Item		SD	2	3	4	SA	Total	Mean
The work I am doing in my present job will be good preparation for other jobs I may have in the future.	(f)	1	2	25	117	52	197	4.10
	(%)	0.5	1.0	12.7	59.4	26.4	100	
In trying to understand a puzzling idea, I let my imagination wander freely to begin with, even if I don't seem to be much nearer a solution.	(f)	10	21	64	83	19	197	3.41
	(%)	5.1	10.7	32.5	42.1	9.6	100	
In trying to understand new ideas, I often try to relate them to real life situations to which they might apply.	(f)	1	2	20	135	39	197	4.06
	(%)	0.5	1.0	10.2	68.5	19.8	100	
I like to play around with ideas of my own even if they don't get me very far.	(f)	13	25	81	64	14	197	3.21
	(%)	6.6	12.7	41.1	32.5	7.1	100	

If conditions aren't right for me at work, I generally manage to do something to change them.	(f)	2	1	12	126	56	197	4.18
	(%)	1.0	0.5	6.1	64.0	28.4	100	
In my job one of the main attractions for me is to learn new things.	(f)	2	2	9	99	85	197	4.34
	(%)	1.0	1.0	4.6	50.3	43.1	100	
I find that studying for new tasks can often be really exciting and gripping.	(f)	1	1	12	94	89	197	4.37
	(%)	0.5	0.5	6.1	47.7	45.2	100	
I spend a good deal of my spare time learning about things related to my work.	(f)	2	6	48	106	35	197	3.84
	(%)	1.0	3.0	24.4	53.8	17.8	100	
I find it helpful to 'map out' a new topic for myself by seeing how the ideas fit together.	(f)	3	1	13	131	49	197	4.13
	(%)	1.5	0.5	6.6	66.5	24.9	100	

Some of the issues that crop up at work are so interesting that I pursue them though they are not part of my job.	(f)	4	4	48	115	26	197	3.79
	(%)	2.0	2.0	24.4	58.4	13.2	100	
Overall Mean								3.943

Table 2: The Level of Deep Learning Approach

b) Level of Learning Approaches – Surface-Disorganized Scale

Table 3 below shows the respondents feedback towards each item in each surface-disorganized learning approach. The results show that the respondents practice the learning approach only at moderate level (3.2.71). Only a small number (28.5%) of the respondents love to delay while performing their job, while 33.5% respondents have time management problems in effectively using their time (m=2.96).

Item		SD	2	3	4	SA	Total	Mean
At work I find it difficult to organize my time effectively.	(f)	22	45	64	51	15	197	2.96
	(%)	11.2	22.8	32.5	25.9	7.6	100	
I prefer to have a good overview rather than focus on details.	(f)	9	16	63	94	15	197	3.46
	(%)	4.6	8.1	32.0	47.7	7.6	100	

The continual pressure of work—tasks to do, deadlines, and competition—often makes me tense and depressed.	(f)	7	22	69	71	26	197	3.76
	(%)	3.6	11.2	35.0	36.0	13.2	100	
My habit of putting off work leaves me with far too much catching up to do.	(f)	33	45	63	34	22	197	2.83
	(%)	16.8	22.8	32.0	17.3	11.2	100	
Managers seem to delight in making the simple truth unnecessarily complicated.	(f)	14	24	60	77	22	197	3.35
	(%)	7.1	12.2	30.5	39.1	11.2	100	
Often I find I have to read things without having a chance to really understand them	(f)	11	25	85	63	13	197	3.21
	(%)	5.6	12.7	43.1	32.0	6.6	100	
I certainly want to get a good performance appraisal, but it doesn't really matter if I only just scrape through.	(f)	17	16	53	91	20	197	3.41
	(%)	8.6	8.1	26.9	46.2	10.2	100	

Although I generally remember facts and details, I find it difficult to fit them together into an overall picture.	(f)	8	20	74	87	8	197	3.34
	(%)	4.1	10.2	37.6	44.2	4.1	100	
I seem to be a bit too ready to jump to conclusions without waiting for all the evidence.	(f)	14	33	91	50	8	197	3.18
	(%)	7.1	16.8	46.2	25.4	4.1	100	
When I look back, I sometimes wonder why I ever decided to work here.	(f)	17	32	61	67	20	197	3.21
	(%)	8.6	16.2	31.0	34.0	10.2	100	
Overall Mean								3.271

Table 3: The Level of Surface-Disorganised Learning Approach

c) Level of Learning Approaches – Surface-Rational Scale

Table 4 shows that the respondents feedback on the Surface-Rational Scale. The overall results show that the respondents use the Surface-Rational Scale approach at their workplace with the min at high level (overall min: 4.084). Majority of the respondents practive Surface-rational Scale at their workplace with high level result (overall min: 4.084). Almost all of the respondents agree (92.9%) that they love to receive well organised and a clear structured task (min: 4.28).

Respondents also perform their task systematically according to the lists, and at the same time try hard to remember important information when learning something new. Min for both items are at 4.16.

Item		SD	2	3	4	SA	Total	Mean
When I am given a job to do at work I like to be told precisely what is expected.	(f)	3	6	27	107	54	197	4.03
	(%)	1.5	3.0	13.7	54.3	27.4	100	
I generally prefer to tackle each part of a task or problem in order, working out one at a time.	(f)	1	5	16	115	60	197	4.16
	(%)	0.5	2.5	8.1	58.4	30.5	100	
When I'm doing a piece of work I try to follow instructions exactly, even if they conflict with my own ideas.	(f)	3	3	35	117	38	197	4.14
	(%)	1.5	1.5	17.8	59.4	19.3	100	
I prefer the work I am given to be clearly structured and highly organised	(f)	0	2	12	112	71	197	4.28
	(%)	0	1.0	6.1	56.9	36	100	

I prefer to follow well tried approaches to problems rather than anything too adventurous.	(f)	0	2	33	115	47	197	4.05
	(%)	0	1.0	16.8	58.4	23.9	100	
When I learn something new at work I put a lot of effort into memorising important facts.	(f)	2	4	9	128	54	197	4.16
	(%)	1.0	2.0	4.6	65.0	27.4	100	
I find it better to start straight away with the details of a new task and build up an overall picture in that way.	(f)	2	3	16	122	54	197	4.13
	(%)	1.0	1.5	8.1	61.9	27.4	100	
The best way for me to understand what technical terms mean is to remember the textbook definitions.	(f)	3	11	55	103	25	197	3.69
	(%)	1.5	5.6	27.9	52.3	12.7	100	
I think it is important to look at problems rationally and logically without making intuitive leaps.	(f)	0	11	21	112	53	197	4.05
	(%)	0	5.6	10.7	56.9	26.9	100	

I find I tend to remember things best if I concentrate on the order in which they are presented.	(f)	1	2	19	120	55	197	4.15
	(%)	0.5	1.0	9.6	60.9	27.9	100	
Overall Mean								4.084

Table 4: The Level of Surface-Rational Learning Approach

Based on the above description for every single item of the learning approaches, the summary of the three approaches are shown in the table below.

	Min-Deep Learning	Min-Surface Disorganised Learning	Min-Surface Rational Learning
Min	3.943	3.271	4.084
Level	High	Moderate	High

Summary of the Three Learning Approaches

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the deep learning or surface disorganized learning could happen in all conditions of WPL. This is due to the reason that both learning approaches are the foundation of individual learning process either in the working or academic setting (Kirby et al., 2003). The result shows that the deep learning approach is at

high level, while surface disorganized learning is at moderate level. Geertshuis and Fazey (2006) believe that learning approach not only occur during classroom or internal training but also at a wider opportunity. The results of this study indicate that the respondents with high level of surface disorganized learning are those who have less influence towards training experience and those who need more training. They are also categorized as those who do not report their training needs and are less experienced in education. On the other hand, those with high levels of deep learning and surface rational learning are those who are exposed to multi-training and those who have more experience in formal education, therefore able to identify their training needs.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that the level of deep learning approach is at a high level and the level of surface disorganized learning is at a moderate level. This result shows that most of the respondents practice either deep learning or surface disorganized learning at their workplace. In conclusion, this study suggests that the authority at UTM, Skudai adopt the learning approaches strategies at their workplace as a one of their immediate policy in human resource management particularly for the benefits of their staff development programs. This is to ensure that the university can provide guidelines to the Human Resource Development (HRD) in order to design a better training program that is suitable to suit the purpose of their staff needs.

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