

**WORKPLACE LEARNING AND COMPETENCE
ACQUISITION: A SINGLE CASE STUDY OF GITN SDN
BERHAD SALES TEAM**

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BERHAD SALES TEAM**

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DEDICATION

“Without the support, encouragement and love from my parents, my husband and my children, this thesis and where I am in my career today would not have been possible. Your love, caring and pray are so great and precious”

“May Allah bless us all”

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ABSTRACTS

As the demands for competencies of salespeople are increasing under globalization, an effective competency management has been urged in need. However, regardless of the massive investment in learning and development, little is known about how GITN employees acquire competence at the workplace, especially in the informal learning aspect. Therefore, this study aims to focus on the competence acquisition of the sales team in GITN through the informal and incidental workplace learning. Qualitative triangulation method was adopted including focus group discussion, interview and document. Ten experienced respondents participated in the study. Atlas.ti 7 software was applied to analyze the qualitative data.

The derived results show that the sales team in GITN with a good understanding of the meanings of competence and competency highlighted presentation skills, selling skills and time management skills that may be ignored by authorities. Supportive supervisor, supportive colleagues and technology could be key facilitators for the process; while, heavy workload, limited time, difficulty to collaborate with others as well as limited decision making power were considered as barriers. Moreover, the practicing model of informal and incidental workplace learning of GITN salespeople was figured out. To encourage competence acquisition among sales team in GITN, it was recommended offering rewards or certificates or incentives to the employees.

ABSTRAK

Permintaan terhadap kompetensi di kalangan kakitangan bahagian jualan semakin meningkat disebabkan oleh perubahan globalisasi serta disaran oleh pihak pengurusan kompetensi supaya menjadi lebih berkesan. Walaubagaimanapun, dengan tidak mengambil kira pelaburan besar dalam pembelajaran dan pembangunan, tidak begitu diketahui bagaimana kakitangan GITN memperoleh kompetensi di tempat kerja, terutamanya dalam aspek pembelajaran tidak formal. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk memberi tumpuan terhadap bagaimana kakitangan di bahagian jualan memperoleh kompetensi di GITN melalui pembelajaran di tempat kerja tidak formal dan insidental. Metodologi yang digunakan dalam kajian ini ialah kaedah triangulasi kualitatif iaitu fokus perbincangan kumpulan, temubual dan dokumen. Responden yang terlibat ialah seramai sepuluh responden yang berpengalaman. Perisian Atlas.ti 7 telah digunakan untuk menganalisis data kualitatif.

Keputusan yang diperolehi menunjukkan bahawa kakitangan bahagian jualan di GITN mempunyai pemahaman yang baik terhadap maksud kompeten dan kompetensi yang ditekankan merangkumi kemahiran persembahan, kemahiran menjual dan kemahiran pengurusan masa yang perlu di ambil kira oleh pihak pengurusan. Sokongan daripada penyelia, sokongan daripada rakan sekerja dan teknologi merupakan fasilitator utama bagi proses itu; manakala, beban tugas, masa yang terhad, kesukaran untuk bekerjasama dengan orang lain dan juga mengehadkan kuasa membuat keputusan dianggap sebagai halangan. Selain itu, model pembelajaran tidak formal dan insidental tempat kerja GITN bagi kakitangan di bahagian jualan juga di kenalpasti dalam kajian ini. Bagi menggalakkan kakitangan di bahagian jualan GITN memperoleh kompetensi, organisasi disarankan menawarkan ganjaran atau sijil atau insentif kepada pekerja.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The vision of Malaysia to become a developed nation by 2020 needs a competent workforce capable of driving the nation's growth and development. Based on the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010), Malaysia had pledged to develop a world-class human capital. The quality of the nation's human capital will be the most critical element in the achievement of the National Mission, and thus human capital development will be a key element in the Ninth Plan period. Human capital development is holistic; encompassing the acquisition of knowledge and skills or intellectual capital including science and technology and entrepreneurial capabilities as well as the internalisation of positive and progressive attitudes, values and ethics through education, training and lifelong learning.

Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) was also formulated as part of Malaysia's National Programme with its goal to elevate the country to develop

nation status by 2020. The ETP was launched on 25 September 2010 and it targets Malaysia's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita at US\$15,000, which can be achieved by attracting US\$444 billion in investments which will, in turn, create 3.3 million new jobs. Therefore, the Government needs to ensure the workforces are competence, highly skilled and creative as well in order to achieve high income status by 2020. In line with that, Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC, 2010) had established Skills Competency Matrix for the ICT industry in Malaysia. The Skills Competency Matrix study was initiated in view of the critical role in the development of knowledge workers for the country within the next few years which covered all position in the ICT industry. Additionally, besides attracting investor into Malaysia, sales team is playing a major role in ensuring the Malaysia's national accomplishment.

The reality of competing under globalization has dramatically changed the nature of the sales position in the past decade (Ku Fan and Liang Cheng, 2006). As customers' demands are becoming more sophisticated in quality and service, salespeople are requested to be more knowledgeable, respond faster, and provide value-added, customized solutions to their problems (Rohm and Sultan, 2002; Jones *et.al*, 2005).

Given that the demands of the sales role have changed, the competency for salespeople is changing as well (Cron *et.al*, 2005). A need for competency management has grown strongly since David McClelland wrote an article in 1973 and the later Management Charter Initiative (MCI) was launched in the United Kingdom (Palan, 2003). McClelland (1973) initiated to classify competency variables that would be used to predict job performance but would not be influenced by factors such as socio-economic factors or race. He adopted criterion samples to compare successful people with the less successful people in order to identify the characteristics associated with success and those characteristics or competencies, when presented and demonstrated, consistently led to successful job outcomes

Palan (2003) in his book entitled “Competency Management” advocates that the success of a competency initiative can be justified by four factors including performance improvement initiative, talent acquisition exercise, effective training and development programme that is just-in-time and needs based, and ability of the organization to deploy human resources in an effective manner resulting with the best-person-position match not just for the present but also for the future.

As the increased emphasis on learning at the organizational and individual level is broadening and subsequently changing the role and positioning of learning over the past decade, this study aims to examine the environment of GITN (a subsidiary of Telekom Malaysia Berhad Group, TM)’s sales team who acquire the required competency through workplace learning to satisfy their customers.

1.2 Background of the Study

Paloniemi (2006) mentioned that competence was developed mainly through learning at work and related to the work community and to the job itself. It is the change that people undergo as they prepare to perform their work excellently, as they carry out their task and responsibilities, or as they reflect on their work experience (Streumer and Kho, 2006).

Research into professional competence has suggested that professionals may need up to six years to develop a perceived professional competence (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001). Cheetham and Chivers further posited that most of their learning occurs after formal training was over and was largely accomplished through informal, workplace activities. It also noted that individual professionals may exhibit varied

preferences in the activities used to develop professional competence through on-the-job experience. Likewise, informal workplace activities may take many forms. A major distinguishing feature delineating the line between formal workplace learning activities and informal workplace learning activities is the lack of an externally imposed curriculum for the latter (Livingstone, 2001; Marsick and Watkins, 1990). It appears most of what is learned regarding how one successfully performs one's work is learned on-the-job through such self-imposed, self-directed activities (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001; Livingstone, 2001; Marsick and Watkins, 1990).

Workplace learning is a subset of life learning (Streumer and Kho, 2006) which includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes people need to perform their work tasks; what they must know, do or feel to interact with others to achieve results; and what they come to learn about themselves and their own learning style and learning process. Workplace learning is a broad concept and includes group, individual, and organizational learning (Dunn, 2009). He also added that, workplace learning can be planned or unplanned and formal or informal. The most traditional forms of formal workplace learning constitute structured learning processes and events that are directed by an organization. Conversely, informal learning in the workplace asserts that each individual has control over what is learned. In informal learning central to the learning process is experience. The experience that learners bring to informal learning is important and can include formal learning in school as well as the experiences that are provided in daily work. Marsick and Volpe (2000) suggested that learning develops within the context of daily experience which includes “personal, social, business and cultural” which is central in how one makes meaning and applies that meaning. Thus, this study is focused on workplace learning (informal and incidental learning) and its relation to competence acquisition.

1.3 Organization Background

The Government Integrated Telecommunications Network (GITN), subsidiary of TM, is a network infrastructure company to facilitate electronic flow of information for intra and inter-Government agencies, thereby enhancing the delivery of public services. The GITN enables electronic transfer and sharing of information across Government agencies, thereby enhancing the efficiency of service to the citizens at large. GITN is also a major component of the Government vision to realise the Electronic Government project under the Multimedia Super Corridor initiative. Currently, GITN customers consist of 724 agencies inclusive of more than 10,600 circuits connected to a single network.

Realizing that each employee should be expert in their own area (TM Report, 2010), GITN as a subsidiary of TM, applies similar approach to investing human capital to ensure the employees are competent in carrying out their duties, thus meeting customer's needs and expectations. Over the years, it has rigorously been developing their employees who are directly in contact with the customers. This arrangement was made through proper training programmes organized by TM Training center in formal training (GITN Business Plan, 2012 – 2015).

With new project (1Gov*Net project) being awarded to GITN, there are still several issues put forward by the GITN Board of Directors Meeting (2011) such as competencies of GITN sales team in providing sales support upon deployment of the 1Gov*Net Project as well as the customer's support. The Board Members also are concerned on the sales team performance since the Sales Division 360 Degree Behavioral Assessment results for 3 years (2010, 2011 and 2012) shown that the division scored below average.

1.4 Problem statement

Theoretically, there is a dearth of research that looks into competency of sales personnel. Boyatzis (1982) determined empirically the characteristics of managers that enable them to be effective in various managerial positions. Spencer & Spencer (1993) discussed about competencies of superior performer. In short, the researchers discussed more on competence of generic managers but little on sales personnel. While, Barker (2001), even though targeting at sales people, did not explain how sales employees acquire competencies rather than activities of sales manager, characteristics of sales people and the appropriateness of the design of the sales organization.

In Malaysia context, there are also lacks of study into sales personnel. Mohd Salleh and Sulaiman (2013) in their research on Malaysia Leadership Competencies: established a model for effective performance focusing on how organization in Malaysia adopts the leadership competency. In addition, Nor Hafizah NH *et. al* (2012) discussed on the moral competencies among Malaysian youth but not related to sales people. Chiu *et. al* (2013) focused on the sales people but more for students in Malaysian Public Institution of Higher Learning.

The need to focus on employees' competence is very crucial as no proper studies were carried out before to analyze how sales personnel acquire competence, either at Telekom Malaysia or GITN level. In unpublished study on Telekom Malaysia employees' competency (Abu Zarim, 2004), it was revealed that each executive employee must fulfilled three types of competency; core competency, functional competency and behavioral competency. The study specified that each employee must complete 40 training hours through formal learning to acquire the required competencies (TM HCM Report, 2011).

Logama (2009) in her unpublished study on TM Sales Competency cited that each sales personnel possess the mandatory competencies; i.e. total commitments to customers, uncompromising integrity and respect and care, etc. She further suggested that each sales personnel must possess functional competencies such as customer-oriented, product knowledge, business savvy, negotiation skills, communication skills, technical skills and decision making, etc. Much of the effort done by TM and its subsidiary GITN before are on formal learning and the company stressed on classroom training (TMTC, 2010). However, little study was done on how the sales personnel acquire the competence; specifically in the workplace learning environment through informal learning mooted the author to further explore those gaps in order to assist GITN to strategically develop a plan for their employee's career advancement and self-development.

From a broader perspective, GITN had been awarded 1Gov*Net project under one of the 12 National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) which is part of the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP). In the report of Communication Content and Infrastructure (CCI, NKEA, 2013), all government agencies are needed to be available in online. Hence, sales people in GITN need to be more competent, highly skilled and knowledgeable in any areas to ensure the Malaysian vision are achievable by 2020. This study are considered necessary to help other companies that has been awarded under NKEAs project to implement the same findings in this research.

Practically, although the management of GITN continuously eager to investigate whether there is any improvement or change of behaviors post any training programmes organized for the sales employees (GITN Operation Committee Meeting, 2011), how these performers acquire competence is still left unattended (GITN Human Capital Management Report, December 2011). Moreover, during a surveillance audit on quality management system conducted by the third party auditor (SIRIM ISO 9001, 2010), in reviewing the training process and training

needs analysis of employees' development, there show no records or evidences that look into competency elements of the sales personnel as well as their understanding of competence (ISO Quality Management Council Meeting, December 2011). The evidence to support the training and development of employees solely relies on formal learning but lack on informal learning.

To sum up, in GITN, the sales team is regarded as the most important as they have direct involvement with customers. Out of 299 numbers of employees, 35 of them are from the sales division. However, regardless of the massive investment in learning and development, little is known as to how GITN employees acquire competence at the workplace, especially in the informal learning aspect. Therefore, to investigate issues surrounding competence acquisition of the sales team and understanding of their learning issues, researcher has determine four research question for this study.

The four key research questions are:

- i. What are the issues surrounding competence acquisition among sales team in GITN?
- ii. How is the workplace learning (informal learning and incidental learning) in relation to competence acquisition within the sales team in GITN?
- iii. What hampers or facilitates competence acquisition in workplace learning among sales team in GITN?
- iv. How to improve competence acquisition among sales team through the workplace learning in GITN?

1.5 Purpose of study

The purpose of this research was to focus in greater depth to inform an understanding of competence acquisition of sales team at the workplace (informal and incidental learning) and how the sales team acquired competencies in workplace learning (informal and incidental learning). Informal learning in this study was differentiated from formal learning activities and included incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

1.6 Research Objective

Research objectives have been established to examine the factors of competence acquisition in workplace learning among sales team in GITN.

The specific research objectives are as follows:

- i. To identify issues surrounding competence acquisition of the sales team in GITN;
- ii. To investigate the workplace learning (informal learning and incidental learning) in relation to acquire competence within the sales team in GITN;
- iii. To analyze what hampers or facilitates competence acquisition in workplace learning among sales team in GITN;
- iv. To propose feasible suggestions to improve competence acquisition among sales team through the workplace learning in GITN.

1.7 Significance of study

The findings from this study shall be useful for GITN in understanding the sales team's competence acquisition and to identify significant learning opportunities at the workplace. Findings from this study will contribute to the dearth of research on sales people on how informal learning contributes to the effectiveness of employee competencies. Finally, the findings of this study will be useful to employers in understanding employees' informal and incidental learning and to accommodate their learning at the workplace.

As GITN embraces customer centricity value and to position the company as a trusted partner to the Government and public, people brand and product brand must be strong enough to enable the company sustain in the business and stay competitive (TM Government, OCM, 2013). Thus, sales teams are needed to equip with the competency in managing the customers.

The GITN has now developed the nationwide network infrastructure and its services are currently being used by almost every government agencies. It is crucial for the company to have a set of competent sales team in order to meet customers' expectation as the customers' experience throughout the value chain of 1Gov*Net Project is seen as a game changer to the company (TM Government Report, 2012). Thus some recommendation shall assist the company to improve the competence acquisition of sales team through informal workplace learning.

1.8 Scope of study

This study is conducted in GITN located in Klang Valley as a single case setting. A number of sales staffs who have served the organization more than three years under the assumption that they would be able to elicit in-depth knowledge on their work. The methodology used in this study is qualitative and exploratory in nature and was intended to examine how sales people and workplace learning influence competence acquisition.

Furthermore, this study focuses on workplace learning which is also limited to informal and incidental learning. Watkins and Marsick (1992) cited Zemke (1985) in describing Campbell's early study on managers' learning at Honeywell shows that "only 20% occurs in the classroom whereas 80% occurs through job experiences and relationships with others". In addition, Cheetham and Chivers (2001) reported, based on findings reported in 2000 regarding how professionals operate in practice, when both formal and informal learning were considered, "the informal learning side appeared to be the more significant component over time". Marsick *et.al* (2006) also mentioned that the most learning in the workplace occurs through informal and incidental learning in the workplace. Thus this study looks into a workplace learning theory informal and incidental learning in order to examine how sales teams acquire their competency.

1.9 Research Framework

Billett (2008) defined workplace learning as the process in and through which professionals interact with the social experiences they encounter in the workplace.

Based on Abdul Wahat *et. al* (2013), there are three important highlights that have been discussed in the broader perspective of workplace learning. First, workplace learning includes both learning activities in the workplace and learner-oriented activities. Second, organization is both a working and a learning place and lastly, workplace learning experiences emerge from both interpersonal and contextual factors that focus on social context. In summary, learning begins at workplace and based on Cheetham and Chivers (2001), informal learning is more significant compared to formal learning. Informal learning can encourage organizational learning environment conducive to growth, while informal learning is incidental learning occurs in people unconsciously (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). Thus, researcher focuses on workplace learning on how sales team acquires competency in informal learning and incidental learning. The research framework of this study is shown in Figure 1.1.

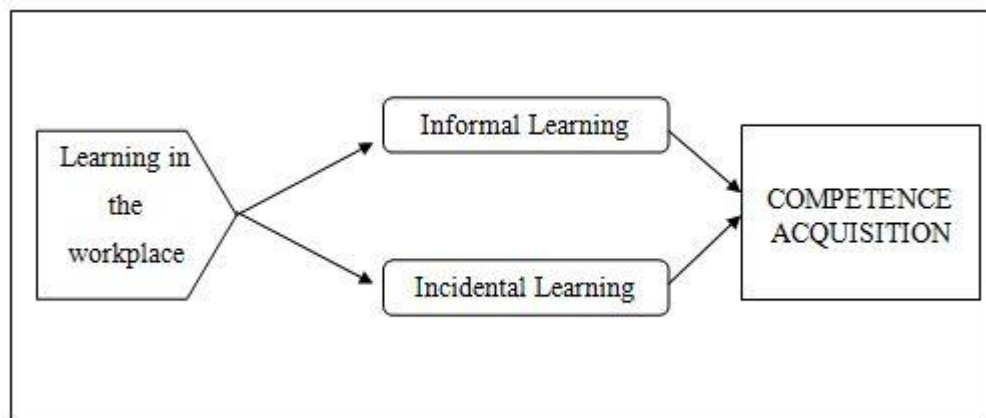


Figure 1.1: Research Framework for Competency Acquisition

1.10 Operational Definition

To facilitate understanding of the research, terms specific to this study were defined as follows:

1. Competence / Competencies

Competence and competencies will be used synonymously in this study and was defined as a determination of an individual's capability to perform up to defined expectations in an employment setting utilizing the knowledge, skills, ability and behaviors that the individual possesses (Dubois and Rothwell, 2004).

2. Competence acquisition

It refers to the processes by which individual acquired job competencies (Barth *et. al*, 2007).

3. Informal Learning

In this study, the term, informal learning, refers to any situation other than designed programs (such as school-based or organization-based) where learning can take place. For an example, self directed learning, networking, coaching, mentoring, reflexive learning and performance planning that includes opportunities to review learning needs which take place without much external facilitation or structure (Marsick and Watkins, 2001).

4. Incidental Learning

Unintentional, substantially a byproduct of other activities and includes tacit knowledge, learning from mistakes, internalized meaning of others' actions, implicit learning as part of assumptions and actions, and takes place without much conscious reflection (Marsick & Watkins, 1990).

5. Workplace Learning

Workplace learning is a process whereby people, as a function of completing their organizational tasks and roles, acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enhance individual and organizational performance. This learning often occurs as a function of interacting with other people and can result from participation in informal activities at the actual work site or at other locations (Doyle and Young, 2008).

1.11 Limitations of Study

The scope of the study is limited in several ways. This study shall only involve GITN sales staff located in Klang Valley who have served the organization more than three years. Those who are working less than three (3) years shall not be included in the study due to the assumption that they would not be able to elicit in-depth knowledge on their work due to their relatively smaller number of their servicing years. Since the overall approach is qualitative thus relatively small purposive sample size shall be anticipated. Because the sample for this study is limited, results may not be generalizable to all sales people across all industries.

1.12 Summary

This chapter serves an explanation of the purpose of the study, research questions, research framework and limitations of the study. The remainder of this study includes Chapter 2 through 5. Chapter 2 is a literature review consists of competence, competency, learning, workplace learning and issues surrounding it. Chapter 3 describes the research methods that will be used qualitative approaches. A presentation and analysis of the data accompanied by the results of this study are presented in Chapter 4. The summary, conclusions, and recommendations for future research are presented in Chapter 5.

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