

Skills for Life – challenges and opportunities

Robert Nurden gives an upbeat view of the future for workplace learning

The workplace has changed hugely in recent years. Virtually every worker now needs a portfolio of skills to function effectively. The growth in the number of health and safety regulations, greater emphasis on more accurate paperwork, invoices and orders, currency conversions and universal use of computers are all making greater demands on employees.

In the past employers often failed to appreciate the link between poor performance and low skills. These changes have prompted them to respond to government initiatives such as Skills for Life. There are signs that real progress is now being made. Since 2001, the number of adults in the workforce without a Level 2 qualification has dropped from 7.1 million to 6.8 million, broadly in line to meet the government target of a 40 per cent reduction in adults in the workforce without a Level 2 qualification by 2010.

The 'whole organisation' approach

Part of the reason for optimism is that managers are engaging with Skills for Life through a 'whole organisation' approach. Rather than seeing low levels of literacy and numeracy as an individual's problem which they must solve by themselves, some employers are starting to treat the issue as an organisational one, in some cases putting time and resources behind a training programme in which all members of staff take part.

"There is now overwhelming evidence that you get better results, both for individuals and for the whole organisation, by taking this comprehensive approach," says Sue Batt, Regional Director of The Network. "Staff morale invariably improves, as does performance, and individuals see an improvement in their lives."

In this scenario learning embraces the whole workplace, and context is everything. Progress is measured not by qualifications or individual gains in skill but by changes in collective practice and ultimately by organisational performance. As Alex Braddell of Oxfordshire Skills for Health puts it: "It has more to do with appraisal than apostrophes ... It's about [developing] the inclusive learning cultures

within workplaces that generate improvements in English and maths from work practices themselves."

The concept of embedded learning is also a vital ingredient in the greater professionalism now evident in workplace Skills for Life. This approach combines the development of literacy, language and numeracy with vocational and other skills. A survey conducted by the National Research and Development Centre shows that the results can be startling – 93 percent of literacy learners gained key skills qualifications on fully embedded courses, compared with only 50 per cent where literacy was taught in a separate and unconnected way.

Challenges

But advances are only being achieved in this highly complex field because stakeholders – providers, tutors, employers, brokers, staff, and union learning reps – are forging good relationships. For example, a broker, provider or tutor must learn about a company's unique style and discrete culture before launching in with a needs analysis.

Workplace Skills for Life still faces many challenges. More trained and qualified tutors are needed to deliver the government's exacting targets. Despite the successes outlined above, there still needs to be better dissemination of good practice, case studies and an improved sharing of materials. And success brings its own risks, as Eddie Little, Operations Director of The Network, explains: "If the future landscape is employer-led and demand-driven then we must be careful that we don't end up with a series of fragmented and regional initiatives with no coherent national strategy. I hope, too, that the skills and vocational elements of skills do not take precedence – at employer insistence – over Skills for Life. Above all we must avoid a cut-and-run to NVQs and similar qualifications."

But one thing is certain – the workplace, and the type of training it requires, will continue to develop rapidly. Without doubt, the workplace language, literacy and numeracy community, which has achieved so much in recent years, will face even greater challenges in the future. **T**

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