Conditions of Workplace Learning as Perceived by Employees in a Czech Company

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Introduction

Workplace learning and in-company training represent important elements of further education and lifelong learning. It is a topic often discussed in recent decades. Although learning and competence development in the workplace including its conditions are often explored abroad, there are little to no resources nor information about in-company learning in the Czech Republic. Our study has been inspired by extensive research of learning environments (e.g. Ellström in Antonacopoulou, 2006, Evans et al., 2006, Rainbird et al., 2004, etc.) and we've focused on a deep and thorough analysis of the environment (psychosocial, material) of a large enterprise in relation to workplace learning.

This report deals with the conditions of learning in the workplace as employees perceive them. It makes part of the author’s doctoral thesis and presents basic outcomes

1. Theoretical framework

Though the following essay is focused on the outcomes, it is necessary to mention – without extensive definitions as they are well known – the most important theoretical concepts.

The main concepts used in the research are:

- Workplace learning (learning in, for and through the workplace, Evans et al., 2006, Rainbird et al., 2004),
- Informal (during work, unsystematic, often unaware) and non-formal learning (courses organized by the company),
- Organizational culture as an important set of factors influencing learning (especially informal learning)

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Training system of the company.

According to the literature there are four main domains of conditions which play a role in the approach to learning of employees, which are personality, circumstances, organizational culture and climate, and an in-company training system. Personality, e.g. education, age, motivation, etc., and circumstances, e.g. financial situation, family, health, etc., are on the employees’ side and should not be omitted when speaking about learning and training in companies. But the company cannot change them. On the other hand, there is organizational culture and climate which is very important not only for learning and training in companies but also for work. The last domain, an in-company training system and its form, shows the importance that management attaches to training. We pay attention to the conditions on the company’s side (in-company training system, organisational culture and climate) because these conditions can be improved through measures taken by the management.

2. Methodology

We have chosen a qualitative methodology based on interviews with chosen employees in different positions of a large company located in a city in the Czech Republic. As the research is a work of one researcher – author of the doctoral thesis – there are about 25 interviewees. All interviews are recorded and analysed using a categorization from “grounded theory”. Additional information about the company, its employees and training system come from documentary analysis and observation during visits to the company.

The main research question is: What conditions influence learning in, for and through the workplace and in what way do they do so?

The objective of the research is to outline the following:

1) What conditions influence workplace learning,

2) How these conditions (in a positive or negative way) influence workplace learning,

3) What the specific features of the Czech environment are in comparison with findings from abroad.

This research was conducted in a large company and interviews were done with employees in different positions because our aim is also to uncover different points of view as well as different learning opportunities of employees at different levels in a hierarchy. For the purpose of this paper, seven interviews have been analysed. Among these interviewees, there was one from top management, three from middle and lower management and three employees.

This paper will try to find answers to two specific questions:

1) What conditions influence non-formal and informal learning?

2) What conditions influencing learning do the employees on different positions perceive?
3. Outcomes and findings

The outcomes come from the first analysis of the interviews. They are described, clearly summarized in two tables and illustrated by quotations from interviews. These preliminary findings will be analysed more deeply through the next months.

3.1 Conditions influencing non-formal and informal learning

The first table (Tab. 1) presents four sets of conditions influencing, either positively or negatively, non-formal and informal learning respectively.

**Tab. 1: Conditions influencing non-formal and informal learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-formal learning</th>
<th>Informal learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>positive influence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choice</td>
<td>creativity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacts (experience)</td>
<td>daily contact with colleagues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changes – new technologies etc.</td>
<td>available sources (documents, databases etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>negative influence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>duty</td>
<td>routine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information, often irrelevant</td>
<td>weak support in management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too much work and wrong timing of courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.1 Non-formal learning

Non-formal learning is influenced by “choice”, “contacts (experience)” and “changes” in a positive way. On the other hand, it is influenced by “duty”, “information, often irrelevant” and “too much work and bad timing of courses” in a negative way.

“Choice” means that people who can choose which courses they will attend can be more motivated (usually it is the management who can choose, see Tab. 2).

“I have a certain sum of money available and can attend any kind of course I am interested in ... I have English lessons every week, I can participate at any conference...” (Paul)

On the other hand, people who cannot choose the courses are just obliged to pass those chosen by their boss. These courses are almost always necessary for them to do their job; these are courses prescribed by legislation, e.g. for welders, electricians and employees working with some special appliances. So, for them, it is a “duty” to pass these courses regularly and it therefor makes them less motivated.

“The courses are repeated and they are many of them ... And the structures are I always the same...” (Robert)

They then perceive a difference between “contacts”, which are represented by people with similar problems who can describe their solution and help, and “information”, represented
by obligatory courses in which it is necessary to pass exam, often with information irrelevant to the job.

“In seminars, the contacts are important, you meet important people, they have the same problems... and in courses, there are people who know the topic, and there is the “ evil” you have to undergo..., but information is also useful sometimes.” (John)

The last condition influencing non-formal learning in a positive way are “changes”. Especially as new technologies come, companies have to adapt in order to stay up to date. Moreover, employees have to learn how to use them. In this example it is implementation of a new information system and its different functions.

“There is no single year in which nothing new would be implemented, especially in this SAP...” (Jane)

The last condition influencing non-formal learning in a negative way is “too much work and wrong timing of courses”. It is often management who says they cannot attend courses because they are too busy. Or, they travel a lot therefore are often absent in the courses. Sometimes the problem lies in a bad communication with HR department which plans the courses.

“It is a problem of wrong timing... The course is held in September when we are the busiest, so I cannot go there and I do not send there anybody either...” (Paul)

3.1.2 Informal learning

Informal learning is influenced positively by “creativity”, “daily contact with colleagues” and “available sources” and negatively by “routine” and “weak support in management”. (Tab. 1).

“Creativity” and “routine” represent a dichotomy which is perceived differently, even inside one department. For some employees their work is not routine; they still have to think about the work. For others it is routine; they just check that they have done what is prescribed.

“It is not a routine, it cannot be... it is the first step towards troubles.” (George)

“It is still the same work. Here you are in a military service! There is no place for creativity... every month there is a certain item to be done, every week another one and you just tick off what you have managed and have not yet.” (Paul)

Very positive for informal learning is “daily contact with colleagues”. Even if employees are not too often organized for non-formal meetings (once a week a staff meeting) they can see or call a colleague for consultation of a problem.

“Once a week we have a meeting but we solve problems by phone almost every day.” (James)

The last positive factor is “available sources”. It is important to know where you can find help. And everybody knows... They have materials from courses and other documents, access to databases, phone contacts to experts, etc. But surprisingly, the boss is not a good “source”. People often say they have “weak support in management” because they do not understand
the details and so it is not the best person to ask for help. However, the boss does often come to his employees for help.

“The closest chief does not understand this very well.” (Jane)

“The director does not know the details.” (John)

3.2 Conditions of learning according to position

The following table (Tab. 2) presents six sets of learning conditions as they are perceived by employees in various positions – top management, middle and lower management and employees. They've again been divided into two groups of conditions – with positive and negative influence respectively.

Like in the previous table, presented are the most striking categories discovered thus far.

### Tab. 2: Conditions influencing learning as perceived by management and employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive influence</th>
<th>Top management</th>
<th>Middle and lower management</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own choice</td>
<td></td>
<td>Proficiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enough money for learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>Prospect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team work</td>
<td>Possibility to organize meetings, discussions etc.</td>
<td>Not at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative influence</th>
<th>Top management</th>
<th>Middle and lower management</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time</td>
<td>Wrong timing</td>
<td>Duty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Often irrelevant for work</td>
<td>Low interest in people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.1 Conditions perceived by management

As the differences between top management and middle and lower management are quite small, these two categories are described together. In a positive way, learning is influenced by “own choice”, “enough money for learning”, “team work” and “possibility to organize meetings, discussions, etc.” On the other hand, there are also negative factors: “not enough time”, “bad timing”, “often irrelevant for work”. Some of these factors are the same as in Tab. 1 described above but now they are discussed in another context.

“Own choice”, as mentioned above, is unique to management. They have a learning plan prepared together with the HR department for one year but can to a very significant extent choose the courses. And they can choose some extra courses, mainly conferences, also during the year.

Management admits the company is quite rich and it releases “enough money for learning”. So they try to profit from it now.

“It is true this company is quite rich and gives a lot of money for learning... I can choose a seminar or a conference and attend it...” (James)
“Team work” is also a positive factor perceived by management. It means the colleagues are not only able to give advice and help each other when solving a problem but also they can come ask for help.

“When I have a problem I discuss it with colleagues and we always try to find a solution together.” (Richie)

The last positive factor in this table is “possibility to organize meetings, discussions etc.” It is mainly in the competence of management to invite employees to solve a problem. They can also invite colleagues from other regions or they can go to their place and together discuss problems occurring at both places and learn the ways it has been solved.

“When I need, I can see my colleagues... but I can also go and see the colleagues from other regions. At my position, it is not a problem to invite them to our place or to go to their place. And we often call each other to discuss things...” (Richie)

But one of the factors influencing learning of management in a negative way is “lack of time”, which can be caused by a lot of work at the workplace or by frequent travels.

“I travel a lot and...well, then it has no sense... you are more often absent than present at your English lessons...” (James)

And this factor is linked to another one – “wrong timing of courses”, already mentioned above.

The fact that the courses and seminars are “often irrelevant for work” is the last factor mentioned by management with a negative influence on learning.

“You cannot guess it according to the title and then you realize that you will probably not use it.” (James)

3.2.2 Conditions perceived by employees

The second part of the table (Tab. 2) deals with employees and their perception of learning conditions in the workplace. It is clear that they perceive different factors than management as influencing their learning or at least perceive them differently. In a positive way, they perceive “proficiency”, “prospect”, “not at work”. On the other hand, in a negative way, they see “duty”, “low interest in people” and “weak support in management”.

The first positive condition is “proficiency”. This means the possibility to become a real expert in the field with all necessary examinations, certificates, including experience.

“But on the other hand it is good that you are an expert after... in the region, there are only few of such.” (Robert)

Another important factor is “prospect” which is, to a certain extent, linked to “proficiency” stated above. Employees know that after having passed the courses, they do not need to be much worried about their job in the company or anywhere else.
“It is sure that the work, activity must be done. There is no prospect that it will be done here, this way.” (Paul)

In a positive way, even if with humour, the opportunity “not to be at work” for a day or half a day is often mentioned in connection with learning and training at work. Courses present a change from the normal working day.

“...and I do not have to be present at work, it is a nice change.” (Robert)

On the other hand, employees perceive “duty” negatively, meaning that they have to pass some courses, as discussed above.

Another negative factor is “low interest in people”. Nobody cares about the people nor their lives and interests. What counts is school or qualifications and the work they do.

“A man is not interesting for anybody. You are educated, with language skills, experienced, and this, and that, fine…” (Jane)

The last negatively perceived condition of learning and training according to employees is “weak support in management”, already discussed above in the previous table.

3.3 Groups of conditions influencing learning

All above mentioned conditions of learning were regrouped according to their interrelations.

3.3.1 Groups of conditions influencing non-formal and informal learning

The conditions from the first table (Tab. 1) concerning non-formal and informal learning were divided into three groups, clearly presented here in Tab. 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tab. 3 Groups of conditions influencing non-formal and informal learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-company training system</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-formal learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first group consists of “own choice”, “duty”, “too much work”, “wrong timing of courses”, “often irrelevant information”, “contacts (experiences)”. According to the theoretic part and theoretic concepts, all these conditions can be subordinated to “in-company training system”, its setting and ways of functioning.

The second group consists of “creativity”, “everyday contacts with colleagues”, “available sources”, “routine”, “weak support in management”. These conditions are connected to learning environment in the company and, generally speaking, they make up part of organizational culture and climate.

The third group consists of only one category – changes, e.g. new technologies, etc. This group can be referred to, according to the theoretic framework, as external factors.

Although the groups do not have strict boundaries, it is obvious that non-formal learning is influenced mainly by the setting of in-company training system and informal learning is linked strongly to the culture and climate of the organization.

3.3.2 Groups of conditions influencing learning according to position

In the same way, the conditions of learning mentioned by management and employees (Tab. 2) were regrouped into the same three groups. However, there was not any condition which would fit into the third group – external factors. Therefore, there remains only two groups – in-company training system and organizational culture and climate (Tab. 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tab. 4 Groups of conditions perceived by management and employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-company training system</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enough money for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong timing of courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevant seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

The group called “in-company training system” consists of the following conditions: “own choice”, “enough money for learning”, “wrong timing of courses”, “irrelevant seminars” and “duty”.

The organizational culture and climate group consists of “teamwork”, “possibility to organize meetings, discussions etc.”, “lack of time”, “proficiency”, “prospect”, “not at work”, “low interest in people”, “weak support in management”.

These conditions perceived by management and employees and their division seem to be more important than the previous conditions of non-formal and informal learning. It is obvious that management is influenced by the in-company training system setting as well as by the organizational culture and climate. On the other hand, employees are much more influenced by organizational culture and climate than by training systems.

**Conclusions**

There are different conditions influencing informal and non-formal learning, respectively, and different conditions perceived by employees at different levels.

Conditions influencing informal learning are linked to organisational culture and climate as the interpersonal contact and atmosphere in the company is important.

Conditions influencing non-formal learning are linked to the in-company training system and its characteristics as the possibility to choose courses, etc.

Conditions perceived by employees are similar for top management and middle and lower management because they can both, for example, choose the courses and have enough money for learning but not enough time. Management perceives as important conditions of their learning factors linked to training system as well as those linked to organizational culture and climate.

But the point of view of employees is different. They are motivated by proficiency and perspective but they are lacking support in management. From the point of view of employees, it is the culture and climate of the organization that plays the most important role. Its factors are mentioned much more often than other ones.

Although these outcomes are not analysed in depth, there are several interesting topics for companies which can be developed. Further data analysis will show other and more exact conditions.

**References:**


[http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/166479.doc](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/166479.doc)

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