

Workforce Development - A commentary based on a survey of trainees and trainers.

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Abstract

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2009) has stated in its medium term forecast to 2020 that *"Most jobs in 2020 will be those with high and medium level qualifications (32% and 50% respectively)."* Jobs needing low-level or no qualifications are expected to fall to about 18%. These are general trends and are broadly observed across Europe.

In addition to the traditional apprenticeship route to training and education, there is growing engagement in certain industrial sectors with the concept of sandwich-type courses, on-the-job training and internships. As far back as 2007 the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN, 2007) published a report which set out to identify the skills Ireland needed to become competitive, innovation driven and a knowledge based economy by 2020. In their report "Towards a National Skills Strategy", the group highlight, among other things, that a significant proportion of the older workforce population would require up-skilling as the technological base of the economy was rapidly changing.

The JANUS project (LLP/LdV/PA/2013/IRGPP17) attempts to understand the good practices which underpin this type of training and intergenerational learning. This paper seeks to explore both resources and supports which have been identified as key enablers in this learning domain. The aim is not to specifically address financial support incentives offered by either companies or governmental agencies. Rather, it focuses on the ancillary (i.e. non-financial/non-remunerative) supports and resources which appear to play a key enabling role that encourages engagement and facilitates learning both in the apprenticeship training and education model and in the sandwich model of education and training.

This study has provided results not inconsistent with Bednarz (2014) who examined reasons behind non-completion rates in apprentices in Australia. The reasons identified in this study for non-completion lie in the social, family and personal time management domains and not in the financial domain. Formal support structures such as scheduled meetings between trainer and trainee, the availability of key documentation, the management of expectations and conflict resolution mechanisms together with informal supports such as peer networks were identified as critical to success of programmes of learning and training which underpinned high completion rates.

The study did not reveal significant intergenerational tensions in the trainer-trainee relationship. It was not quoted as a potential reason for non-completion and did not put in place an insurmountable barrier between the trainer and trainee.

Keywords

Workforce Development, Sandwich Courses, JANUS Project, Continuous Professional Development.

1 Introduction

Many countries are adopting or adapting existing apprentice learning systems based on blended delivery modalities. Learning occurs in the classroom setting while being augmented with on-the-job training or experience in advance of, as an integral part of, or at the end of the academic learning engagement. It is recognised that such delivery systems benefit from the learner appreciating at an early stage of the student experience, that classroom learning is reinforced in practice in the enterprise setting (Dept Education Ireland 2013). The graduates of such programmes are job ready. The programmes of learning are *ad rem* and ensure dialogue between the academic education providers and the enterprise sector while furthering the goals of job creation at a national strategy level. Training and education can occur in small companies (employee number <10) or in larger companies (employee number >100). This paper seeks to explore both resources and supports which have been identified as key enablers in this learning domain.

Work is ongoing in many countries across the EU to update, modernise and reform the apprenticeship programmes of structured education and training. These reforms include harmonisation of entry criteria onto programmes, quality assurance oversight, alignment to the needs of enterprise and the national agenda, uniform assessment methodologies, programmes and systems that are responsive to the changing needs of industry and which take into account the pressures from the global marketplace, etc. A review of apprenticeships is currently in consultation mode in Northern Ireland and an interim report on the findings to date has been published (Dept of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland, 2014). The UK government has also published a consultation document on the Future of Apprenticeships in England: Next Steps from the Richard Review (Dept of Education UK, 2013) which sought to gain consensus on the way forward with apprenticeship training and education. This has resulted in “The Future of Apprenticeships in England: The Implementation Plan”, published in October 2013 (HM Government, 2013). Many of these reviews hold a common theme in respect of the reform required for apprenticeship training and education programmes. The reviews seek to modernise the approach to better equip the apprenticeship schemes in the respective countries to meet the needs of the global economy and the future skills needs of enterprises.

As far back as 2007 the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs published a report which set out to identify the skills Ireland needed to become competitive, innovation driven and a knowledge based economy by 2020 (EGFSN, 2007). This reports highlights that a significant proportion of the older workforce population would require upskilling as the technological base of the economy was rapidly changing. Furthermore, there was a high demand for skilled labour in the ICT, medical device, pharmaceutical/biopharmaceutical, food and beverage industry. Employees would also need to be flexible and continuously acquiring new knowledge and skills. So the incentivised development of bespoke training and education programmes with industry commenced in earnest. This workforce development model typically employed a blended learning approach of on-the-job training and classroom education, essentially earning while learning. These courses were generally shorter in duration than full-time apprenticeships and an educational qualification may or may not have ensued upon completion. Many courses were sandwich in nature targeting specific skills and educational requirements of a sector of industry.

Ireland is a small, modern, open and trade dependent economy. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has played a significant role in advancing the country’s economic development in the past and will do so into the future. Ireland's economic growth depends on sustainable competitive enterprise centred on both indigenous and foreign owned firms (Dept of Jobs, Enterprise & Innovation, 2014). The recent AIB publication "Why Choose Ireland?" (AIB, 2014) and the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook 2013 (IMB, 2013) rank the flexibility and adaptability of Ireland’s workforce as a key competitive advantage for FDI. In addition, Ireland has one of the best educated workforce in the world ranking, sixth globally according to the IMD.

One of the main drivers in keeping a workforce current is the ongoing investment by the sector in continuous professional development of its staff. Allied to this is the requirement for continuous improvement in the quality and reproducibility of manufactured products. The importance of large multinational enterprise and also the local/national indigenous firms participating in the development of apprenticeship and sandwich type courses/programmes cannot be overemphasised in the Irish context.

2 Experimental Procedure

In attempting to get more information about sandwich-type courses across Europe, the JANUS project team developed an anonymous questionnaire to elicit information about the organisation, training programmes, staffing levels, support structures and resources. This paper recounts the Irish experience only. The majority of questions offered the respondent the choice of categorical answers. The questionnaire provided opportunities to respondents to make free text comments as well. The draft questionnaire was assessed by a small test group and revised according to the feedback received. The sampling methodology was not scientific but a stratified sampling approach was adopted. The response population was divided into trainers (or mentors) and trainees (including apprentices, interns and those on-the-job training on sandwich-type courses). The trainee cohort was further segmented into those participating in small enterprises (10 or less employees) and those in large multinational corporations of greater than 100 employees. The completed surveys were anonymised. Some respondents who chose to be identified provided some useful insights via a subsequent interview process and these observations are recorded here. It is recognised that the study cannot be considered scientific but the qualitative conclusions can help to inform the debate on the necessary resources/supports that need to be in place to enhance engagement in the programmes of education and training in question.

3 Results

The total number of trainees completed surveys numbered 37 with 12 trainers responding. While the number of trainers responding is low, their responses represent years of experience as trainers with significant experience of training either apprentices, interns or sandwich type course participants or all three types of learners.

Summary of trainee responses

57% of respondents were attending Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sandwich type courses, 10% were on internships and 16% were apprentices. 41% were aged between 15 to 25, 38% between 26 to 45 and 21% over 46 years of age. 76% were male and 24% female. The respondents came from the manufacturing sector (62%) with catering/hospitality and other service sectors making up the remainder (38%).

When asked to categorise the type of training being pursued the top three responses were: 30% on-the-job training; 24% CPD and internships at 14%. When probed further on these matters 32% stated that they expected to achieve a skill from on-the-job training that might be a formal qualification but was most likely to be an authorisation certification from the company indicating that the trainee has been trained to a suitable standard to operate a piece of plant or process or a protocol to the standards necessary for that employment (i.e. that could mean training on QC protocols, on specific machines or to GMP or GXP certification standards). 19% of respondents saw the outcome of their training as enhancing professional development while 14% saw the outcome of sandwich type courses resulting in formal educational qualifications that are globally recognised.

The trainees identified that qualifications (49%), professional experience (33%) and technical competence (10%) of their trainers were priorities. They placed teaching skills at 8%. In addition to a good grounding in their field of endeavour (34%) with good interpersonal skills (20%) and approachable and generous with their time (17%) were qualities of the trainers that were highly regarded by trainees. It could be considered surprising that, based on the broad age range of trainees, the primary motivator appears to be future employability (44%) followed by achieving an academic qualification (22%) and thirdly gaining a professional qualification (19%). 76% of trainees had two hours per week set aside for mentoring with 19% having a day per week and 5% having a full day per week.

41% of trainees had scheduled meetings with their trainers and 34% had high quality training documentation and materials and a further 13% had identifiable timetable slots for training. These were considered some of the key supports that an embedded training system in an organisation provided. However this is the area that saw the greatest difference between trainees from the larger multinational companies and the smaller indigenous companies. The multinational companies have systems in place that regularise trainee/trainer meetings, that provide documentation for both the trainee and the trainer and that have conflict resolution apparatus that can be availed of at an early stage to defuse potentially difficult situations from arising. In the larger companies there are many more trainees and they tend to give support and pastoral care to each other in an informal process. Such enterprise coping strategies are not generally available in the smaller companies.

Future qualifications (46%) and improved employability prospects (30%) outrank the financial benefits (12%) that accrue to the trainee. 84% of trainees have not considered dropping out of the programme while 16% have considered leaving the course. Interestingly when asked the reason behind their consideration to leave the programme, one third stated family commitments while two thirds stated that they had underestimated the time commitment involved. Financial considerations were not put forward as a reason for leaving a programme. 88% of trainees expected to keep their jobs or be employed by the company at the end of their training period either on a full-time or part-time basis.

In exploring the generation gap between the traditional older trainer and the younger trainee, it was reported that the trainer learns to understand the needs of the younger generation (27%) and get exposure to new IT skills (25%) and is exposed to the advances in social media communication (21%). However the trainees from larger companies (many of whom are on CPD or sandwich type courses) take the view (27%) that the tutor learns about the up-and-coming trends in the sector in question and what ideas or innovations may be coming in the pipeline in future. Both cohorts of trainees stated that insufficient tutor-trainee contact time was a difficulty that could exacerbate any inherent age related issues. 83% of all trainees stated that the generation gap was not a serious problem, some explaining that the older trainer is more understanding of the pressures of modern society on young people. The young people seem to be happy to ignore the older persons lack/poorer level of familiarity with IT and the social media (Facebook, Skype, IMO, Tango, WhatsApp, etc). One trainee explained how he could not understand why the trainer would not allow him listen to his iPod throughout his shift!

Trainer/mentor responses

71% of trainers responded that they offer on-the-job training with internships, apprenticeships, external third-party courses (with or without on-the-job components) each at 7%. Trainers are chosen based on professional experience (50%) followed by qualification (42%). When asked to clarify professional qualifications this was taken to mean formal accredited qualifications whereas professional experience related to the person being a subject matter expert. Interestingly the trainers view is that the benefit to the trainee is the professional qualification (50%) followed by their future employability (40%). In contrast the trainees placed these two criteria in the reverse order. Both trainers and trainees placed the primary focus on the tutor having a thorough grounding in the field followed by good interpersonal skills. The trainers agree that articulating the behaviour of the younger generation (67%) followed by IT skills (22%) and engaging with social media (11%) are the competencies received from the trainees.

The trainers quoted lack of time (44%) and poor or no induction (22%) as causing difficulties in the trainer-trainee relationship with scheduled meetings (36%) and the availability of training documentation (27%) being seen as processes that help reduce potential conflict situations. In many responses from trainers the availability of documentation (i.e. Handbook) at induction helped the trainee better understand the expectations placed upon them. The trainers (some of whom were owner-managers) stated that these types of sandwich courses brought financial and productivity benefits to the company in the short term.

The generational gap which normally exists between trainers and trainees was explored with 75% of trainers stating that they had no difficulties whereas 25% stated that the casual attitude to rules and regulations displayed by the trainees and their difficulty in concentrating for prolonged periods of time were the cause of some difficulties.

4 Discussion

While many of the responses from both the trainers and trainees were anticipated, the survey helped to gain new insights into the motivation of trainees, the problems they encounter and the solution protocols that are available in the large global companies compared to the smaller indigenous enterprises.

There are ongoing discussions and consultations in Ireland at the moment about the future of apprenticeships and a continuous need for cross-skilling and up-skilling the national workforce to face the economic challenges of the future. The recommendations from the survey suggest:

- A national strategy should exist to promote, make affordable and create more opportunities for trainees nationally
- The training that trainers received should be formalised (especially in smaller companies)
- Trainees should be paid either by the company or by central government
- Align the providers of CPD courses more closely with the needs of enterprise and provide bespoke training that is industrially relevant
- Incentivise provision of sandwich type courses as a workforce development model
- Give academic credit for on-the-job training and CPD learning.

The stratification of the trainees in the sample proved especially enlightening. In Ireland, it is well recognised that a job is not for life, and to be made redundant in one's career is to be expected. Therefore CPD and sandwich type courses for the employed is seen by the trainee as a means of differentiating him/her self from others who may be in the employment market. In the larger companies a willingness to participate either as a trainer or trainee on a sandwich type programme is viewed by management (according to the employees) as the employee being flexible and willing to learn new skills which is viewed as a current and future asset to the firm in changing times. The larger companies enjoy the support structures that scheduled meetings between trainer and trainee, the availability of key documentation on the process, the informal support from those who are currently learning and those who have gone through a similar learning process. The experiences of trainees in the smaller firms have been mixed-some good, some bad. The availability of the human resource mechanisms for problem-solving and conflict resolution is also seen as a significant support mechanism available to the trainee in the larger firms.

This preliminary study has provided results not inconsistent with Bednarz (2014) who examined reasons behind non-completion rates in apprentices in Australia. The reasons identified in this study for considering non-completion lie in the social, family and personal time management domains and not in the financial domain. This study suggests that a larger cohort of trainers and trainees be surveyed in a

more structured manner to better understand the motivations, support mechanisms required, and the optimal blend of delivery methodologies. An inter-country comparison of results across Europe would also be a useful tool in better understanding these variables.

The study did not reveal significant intergenerational tensions in the trainer-trainee relationship. It was not quoted as a potential reason for non-completion and did not put in place an insurmountable barrier between the trainer and trainee.

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