

Learn @ Work Day Forum

Melbourne 19 May 2004

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1. Overview

On 19 May, 2004, Adult Learning Australia (ALA) convened a forum to discuss aspects of learning and the workplace in Australia.

The aim of the forum was to understand better how Learn @ Work Day, an awareness raising campaign introduced to Australia by ALA in partnership with the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) the year before, might be developed as an effective tool to assist in the development of workplace learning cultures.

Participants in the Melbourne forum included representatives from:

- Centre for Adult Education (CAE), Melbourne
- Aspire Training and Consulting
- Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE), Victoria
- Incolink
- Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training
- Global Learning Centre, City of Hume
- Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce (VACC)
- Weron Automotive Group
- Royal Automotive Club of Victoria (RACV)
- Australian National Training Authority (ANTA)

Consultant Greg Shoemark worked with ALA to convene the forum, and ALA acknowledges his contribution to the success of the forum.

The forum discussion was structured by two key questions:

1. What are the greatest issues you face in creating a learning culture in the workplace?
2. What do you see as the potential for Learn @ Work Day to assist your organisation, or help you in your work?

The notes that are presented here seek to capture the discussions stimulated by these questions.

In summary, the issues of concern included:

- A lack of planning - time, strategy and budget – for workplace learning;
- A conflict between work culture (constant productivity) and the requirements of effective learning (longer timeframe to absorb and practice);
- Employer motivation is often shaped by short term productivity goals, rather than investment in long term preventative strategies;
- Employee motivation is often driven by personal interest goals, or else they have no motivation, both of which can be at odds with employer motivation;
- The credibility of the learning provider is often regarded more highly than demonstrated effectiveness;
- There is a reticence to move beyond comfort zones, to step beyond 'silos' or 'approved' work practices or relationships;
- A shrinking workforce is going to increase the importance of workplace learning as a strategy to attract and maintain workers.

Participants were asked to nominate some words to describe what workplace learning should be. This list of key words included:

- Inclusive
- Flexible
- Of value to both employer and employee
- Tailored to individuals and specific workplaces
- Relevant
- Recognised
- Supportive of multi-skilling and movement beyond present skill requirements
- Broad
- Invigorating

2. Challenges and solutions

The table that appears below was not presented or overtly discussed at the forum. However, the contents of the table reflect the contributions made by the participants. The table has been introduced here as a way for moving forwards with the information gathered.

The points raised in response to the first question appear in the first column. The points raised in response to the second question appear in the second column. ALA's own contributions developed after the forum have also been included here and appear in square brackets. It should be noted that the matching of the two columns was performed by ALA after the meeting.

| The Issues | How Learn @ Work Day may help |
|--|--|
| Planning | |
| Often there is no strategy for identifying or filling skill gaps. | ➤ An excuse to talk about skill gaps and strategies |
| Often there is no budget allocated to workplace learning | ➤ An opportunity for HR departments to promote the work they do and the value this work has to the bottom line. |
| Often no time is allocated for staff participation in learning | ➤ An opportunity to broaden the concept of workplace learning to involve strategies that do not require employees to stop work in order to learn (eg. mentoring programs, effective use of noticeboards and meetings). |
| Often learning is introduced reactively, that is, as a response to a crisis (a safety issue, a drop in sales, a new health problem). There is often not a long-term plan to use learning as a preventative strategy. | ➤ An opportunity to discuss the learning as 'prevention' not just a cure. |

| The Issues | How Learn @ Work Day may help |
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| Work 'verses' learning | |
| In many instances there has not be a smooth integration of learning activity into work activities and the workplace. | ➤ An opportunity to broaden the concept of workplace learning to involve methodologies that do not require employees to stop work in order to learn (eg. mentoring programs, effective use of noticeboards and meetings). |
| The timeframe on which workplaces operate is often at odds with the timeframe required of learning activity. For example, work productivity is often formulated around short time frames whereas learning activity operates over a much longer timeframe and often its results are not immediately apparent. | ➤ An opportunity to demonstrate the role that learning plays in increasing productivity over the long term. |
| Staff availability for off-the-job training – especially in shift work or geographically dispersed environments – can be difficult if the times and places at which the learning activity occurs is at odds with that of the workplace. | ➤ An excuse to talk to other businesses facing the same challenges to share or develop effective strategies. |
| Off-the-job training can often be far removed from the realities of the every day workplace meaning transferability of learning to the workplace is limited | ➤ An opportunity to raise the profile and credibility of on-the-job learning. |
| Employer motivation | |
| Because the benefits of preventative learning only becomes apparent in the long term or, because it is preventative, may not become obvious at all, preventative learning is more difficult to promote. | ➤ An opportunity to promote the preventative benefits of learning through case studies of other businesses and bottom line arguments. |
| Because learning is often brought in only as a 'desperate measure' to fix what has gone wrong, learning is often unable to achieve the miracles expected of it in the time frame provided – this 'failure' does not present a good image for learning activity. | ➤ An opportunity to foster learning about learning – create an understanding of the conditions in which learning will facilitate the greatest returns (as a preventative measure). |
| In organisations in which management themselves don't have formal qualifications or training requirement, the training needs of their employees are often neglected or dismissed as unimportant. | ➤ An opportunity to present the bottom line case for the development of generic skills ➤ An opportunity to broaden definitions of learning. |

| The Issues | How Learn @ Work Day may help |
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| An effective business case for learning needs to be developed that satisfactorily addresses issues of investment verses productivity, especially for small business or a sector such as retail. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An opportunity for workplaces with activate learning cultures to showcase these to other businesses, especially those who might ‘almost be there’ in terms of adopting a proactive approach to learning. ➤ [An opportunity to demonstrate the increasing importance of workplace learning in a world of shrinking workforce] |
| A business case for learning will not be successfully mounted until learning providers themselves walk the walk and become more proactive about their own worker learning. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ [An opportunity for learning providers to develop, pilot and or/promote innovative workplace learning practices among their own workers.] |
| Employee motivation | |
| Definitions of appropriate workplace/work-supported learning often focus on current employer outcomes only. Staff motivation is likely to be lessened if the learning is primarily driven by the employer’s outcomes and agenda – employees have to be convinced that the learning activity will have benefits for them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ [presents an opportunity – through a meeting or through a survey – for employers to nominate the skills development they would like to pursue. This will provide the basis for future planning and for developing strategies that may meet both the employee and employer needs.] |
| The focus is often on the employees current job rather than helping them develop skills for the next one. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Presents an opportunity for employees to discuss their career aspirations with their employers. |
| Often the employee’s perceived needs are overlooked or ignored. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An opportunity for staff to consider their own skill needs and to convey this to HR departments. |
| Rarely are the learning requirements that underpin potential career paths articulated or promoted – the focus is often exclusively on career progression with little or no thought given to a learning strategy that underpins or drives this. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An opportunity to explain the ‘mechanics’ of career progression using learning to drive progress. |
| Because in many workplaces productivity, not learning, is given status and rewarded, learning is not considered sacred or central but, rather, secondary and expendable – it fits around other work activities not the other way round. Staff participating in a learning activity will often leave part way through if pressing work commitments arise. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ [An opportunity to raise the status of learning through activities such as learner and mentor awards.] |

| The Issues | How Learn @ Work Day may help |
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| Many people hold negative attitudes to learning | ➤ [An opportunity to apply ANTA's research into different attitudes and strategies for how to address them in the workplace.] |
| Negative attitude of supervisors or colleagues – a sense that people who are undertaking workplace learning are 'getting out of work', 'slacking off', 'brown-nosing' or don't deserve the same pay because they are skills deficient – can be inhibiting. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ [An opportunity to raise the status of learning through activities such as learner and mentor awards.] ➤ [An opportunity to 'normalise' learning; promote it as a normal part of everybody's work life] |
| Many employees hold negative attitudes towards their work or employer, or do not have career aspirations, leaving them unmotivated to do anything but the absolute minimum. | ➤ An opportunity to offer employees a 'mini-holiday', a small break from the routine to undertake a fun and enriching activity to help employees feel better about their employer and to re-energise them. |
| Credibility | |
| Informal learning is overlooked and poorly valued because it is not seen as being as credible as more formalised learning | ➤ An opportunity to discuss and promote ways in which informal learning might be enhanced and valued through recognition processes. |
| The learning activity and learning provider must be seen by employer and employee alike as being credible, as carrying weight. Sometimes this focus on credibility comes at the cost of true effectiveness. | ➤ An opportunity to promote the effectiveness of less well know learning activities. |
| Concept of learning | |
| Many learning messages are irrelevant, unfocused, 'feel good' rhetoric – such things are not useful in the workplace and fail to have the 'cut through' required of them. | ➤ An opportunity to draw attention to learning and to offer succinct targeted messages about it |
| The message that learning does not always need to involve the teacher-student but can be conveyed through posters, noticeboards, informal conversations, mentors and supervisors, is often lost. | ➤ An opportunity to promote a wider understanding of what learning is. |
| Need to clearly identify and target what the 'problem' with learning is | ➤ An opportunity to identify barriers to a better learning culture within the organisation and collaboratively develop solutions |

| The Issues | How Learn @ Work Day may help |
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| Getting ACE to go beyond their own doors to promote and support a learning culture in the wider community, not just the disengaged, is proving difficult. ACE is often reticent to leave its own venues or to engage with industry. (Often, but not always, because the sector is under-resourced). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An excuse for ACE providers to speak with local businesses in an effort to better understand local business needs and issues. ➤ An opportunity for learning providers to talk with up-and-coming management about learning strategies |
| Other | |
| Multi-cultural and intergenerational workplace can create difficulties when trying foster understanding of what learning is and why it is important. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An opportunity to profile stories of how learning has helped workers from specific demographics progress through work. |
| There is a need to promote the importance of a trained workforce among consumers that is to encourage consumers to support businesses that have a good learning culture. (Just as there is consumer pressure on business to engage in environmentally friendly practices, avoid treating animals cruelly, or handle food hygienically). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An opportunity to brand companies as striving towards excellence through the development of a learning culture ➤ [An opportunity to engage consumer organisations, such as Choice or automotive associations, on board with encouraging consumers to support learning enterprises.] |
| The workforce is going to get smaller – in many industries it already is getting smaller. Learning will become more important both a strategy for increasing productivity from fewer people, for keeping older workers employed and for attracting employees in a competitive environment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An Opportunity to ‘re-professionalise’ industries (such as retail) by promoting opportunities for learning and career pathways. |
| Innovation is sometimes frowned upon by both management and staff. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ An opportunity to develop networks from across the business world to support isolated innovators. |

3. Some possible Learn @ Work Day activities:

Among some participants in the Melbourne forum there appeared to be some uncertainty about how their organisations may participate in the Learn @ Work Day initiative.

While the following list of possible Learn @ Work Day activities was not discussed at the forum – except for those that appear on the rear of the 2004 promotional poster – they have been informed and stimulated by the forum discussions.

| Learn @ Work Day activity | Outcomes |
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|---------------------------|----------|

Co-ordinated by Managers:

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| <p>A Mini-Holiday</p> <p>A two-hour break from work to allow staff to participate in off-beat learning activity provided in the workplace by a local learning provider (eg. community college, health centre or TAFE). Activities may include yoga, Tai Chi, nutrition, circus skills, music, cooking, craft etc.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Re-invigorated staff = increased productivity ➤ Positive attitudes towards employer = loyalty ➤ Positive attitudes towards learning = better able to cope with change ➤ Happy staff = increased productivity |
| <p>Festival of Hidden Talents</p> <p>A lunch time 'Festival of Hidden Talents' in which staff are encouraged to demonstrate skills they have may not have the opportunity to demonstrate in everyday work.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Re-invigorated staff = increased productivity ➤ Increased sense of pride = loyalty ➤ Opportunities to identify hidden skills = reduced recruitment costs ➤ Identification of mentoring expertise among staff = development of cost-effective in-house learning programs |

Coordinated by HR managers:

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| <p>Job shadowing</p> <p>Half day or two-hour sessions where people from one part of the business observe and/or participate in the work of people from another part of the business, preferably as different from their everyday work as possible.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A better understanding of operations = greater teamwork ➤ Increased sense of pride in work = loyalty ➤ Increase motivation for employers to stay with and develop careers within the organisation = reduction of recruitment costs |
| <p>Skill need survey</p> <p>Conduct a survey of staff to identify the skills they feel they need to or would like to develop. The results of the survey may assist in structuring a corporate learning strategy that addresses both staff and organisational needs</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Helps to develop an organizational learning plan = facilitate a win-win learning strategy |

| Learn @ Work Day activity | Outcomes |
|---|---|
| <p>Creation/unveiling of a learning noticeboard</p> <p>Which can be used to display useful statistics about the business case for learning, news of staff learning achievements, weekly quizzes or challenges, tips about how to learn effectively, local learning provider promotional materials, and opportunities for learners to communicate with other work place learners.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Creates a focus on learning = puts learning on the same ranking as OH&S ➤ Provides a forum through which learning about learning can occur = helps make formal learning activity more effective ➤ Fosters broader understanding about learning = encourages staff to feel more comfortable with learning processes and thereby more able to cope with change. |
| <p>Learner & mentor of the year award</p> <p>Presents awards for best workplace learner and best workplace mentor, additional awards can be given to highlight achievement among specific worker cohorts</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Confers status on learning = making it easier to get staff involved ➤ Raises morale = increases loyalty & productivity ➤ Profiles different types of learning = reduces negativity about learning |

Coordinated by Publicity departments:

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| <p>Internal news</p> <p>Place an article in an internal newsletter about learning and career pathways, preferably profiling real workers who have moved through the pathways and showing how learning has underpinned this.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Demonstrates career pathways = increases motivation |
| <p>A press release</p> <p>A press release or story for external media profiling the company's commitment to its staff through the development of workplace learning culture. Profiling older workers is likely to be particularly attractive to the media and effective with consumers</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increases positive public profile |

Coordinated by learning providers:

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| <p>A learning forum:</p> <p>Conduct among local businesses a forum to identify the greatest challenges around the creating of workplace learning culture.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Helps learning providers develop relevant programs for local community = potential increase in income ➤ Helps introduce the services of learning providers to business = potential increase in income. |
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| Learn @ Work Day activity | Outcomes |
|---|---|
| <p>A local learning survey:</p> <p>Conduct, among small businesses in a locality, a survey of their skill shortages and barriers facing them participating in learning. Use the survey as a way to plan innovative programs including helping small businesses to club together to develop learning solutions.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Helps learning providers develop relevant programs for local community = potential increase in income ➤ Helps introduce the services of learning providers to business = potential increase in income ➤ Positions the learning provider as a useful resources and a local learning broker |
| <p>Promotional campaign (1)</p> <p>Seek news items in the paper about innovative ways in which the learning providers' own staff participate in learning activities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Achieves credibility for learning providers by learning providers as small businesses and through this demonstrates an empathy with issues faced by business ➤ Leads by example = increased credibility |
| <p>Promotional campaign (2)</p> <p>Develop a campaign – in the local paper and on local radio – to encourage consumers to favour businesses who provides good learning opportunities for their staff an/or who promote their involvement in Learn @ Work Day</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develops consumer demand for good learning practices among employers = increased demand for learning ➤ Helps put access to learning in the same league as environmental friendliness, minimum wages and health and safety issues businesses and consumers alike = increased demand for learning about learning |

4. Potential barriers to adoption of Learn @ Work Day in Australia

As is evidenced by success in the United Kingdom, Learn @ Work Day has enormous potential. However there are some possible barriers to successfully introduction of Learn @ Work Day in Australia.

While not explicitly discussed in the Melbourne forum, the following list of potential barriers have been informed by the Melbourne discussions. The proposed solutions have been developed by ALA.

| Possible Barrier | Possible solution |
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| <p>Failure to reach critical mass while the idea is fresh and new</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increase ANTA's involvement in the crucial initial years, especially in engaging their corporate partners. |
| <p>Not being able to promote the campaign sufficiently in the crucial initial years</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increased seed money to develop core campaign materials and critical exposure the crucial initial years. |

| Possible Barrier | Possible solution |
|---|--|
| Hesitation to step beyond the comfort zone and try something new | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Need to develop an active support network around Learn @ Work Day ➤ Promote case study profiles of previous successful Learn @ Work Day activities |
| An assumption that participation requires a large or labour intensive effort | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop and distribute a Learn @ Work Day handbook. ➤ Develop a Learn @ Work website. |
| A lack of a widely understood business case for learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increased circulation of Campaign for Learning and NCVER material, especially among up-and-coming management and HR departments. ➤ The development of ‘scripts’ to overcome possible objections. ➤ Conduct meetings and focus groups among HR managers, attend HR conferences. |
| A lack of ownership from key stakeholders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Conducting a series of forums in which participants are able to share issues and ideas. ➤ Development on a web-based Learn @ Work network community. ➤ Development of promotional kit for Learn @ Work Day participants to use to gain exposure in local media. |
| Lack of readily accessible resources to assist HR manager implement innovative learning solutions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fund the development and distribution of a Learn @ Work handbook. ➤ Research project to identify and evaluate potential innovative learning methodologies for use in the workplace. |

5. Useful resources

- ANTA, *A National Marketing Strategy for VET: Meeting Client Needs* (ANTA, 2000)
Available as a PDF from: <http://www.anta.gov.au/publication.asp?qsID=228>
- Campaign for Learning (co-ordinates Learning @ Work Day in the united kingdom):
<http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/campaigns/learningatwork/lawindex.htm>
- Alan Clarke, *Learning Organisations: What they are and how to become one* (NIACE, 2001)
Available to order from <http://www.niace.org.uk/Publications/Default.htm>
- Jane Figgis, Anna Blackwell, Anna Alderson, Anne Butarac, Keith Mitchell, Ann Zubrick, *What convinces enterprises to value training and learning and what does not?* (NCVER, 2001)
Available as a PDF from: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/707.html>
- NCVER, *What Makes for Good Workplace Learning?* (NCVER, 2003)
Available as a PDF from: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1004.html>
- Lorna Unwin and Alison Fuller, *Expanding Learning in the Workplace: Making more of individual and organisational potential*, NIACE, 2003
Available to order from <http://www.niace.org.uk/Publications/Default.htm>

APPENDIX 1: Survey responses

At the start of the forum participants were invited to write answers to two questions plus document any additional comments. These sheets were used by participants as prompts throughout the discussion. Many of the sheets were collected at the end of the sessions and the unsorted responses are recorded here.

1. What are the three greatest issues you face in creating a learning culture in the workplace?

Getting trainees to take training seriously

Gaining senior management support to get time for trainees, budget and commitment

Gaining support and understanding from supervisors to coach trainees

Co-ordinating trainees, trainers and workplace assessors

Promoting the value of informal learning and quantifying and defining it

Overcoming resistance from employers (usually financially based)

Creating genuine interest amongst workers (usually union initiated)

Delivering the right message

Credibility

Support formal learning through informal measures (such as t-shirts, stickers, posters etc)

Recognition of the benefits of learning or training

Reactive rather than proactive

Getting people to place the same value on workplace learning as “external training” programs

Matching learning desires of staff to organisational goals

Allocating/dedicating time to plan and implement learning strategies to create a learning culture.

Relevance to work role

Time – to inform, enthuse, carry out training

Resources – training time is not productive time, means a drop in immediate revenue

Attitude – most staff will embrace short, immediately relevant training but will not line up for ‘more study’.

Staff availability (off-site and casualised)

Limited resources allocated to a quality learning and development

Work priorities/nature of work

Workloads – inability to take ‘extra’ tasks

Getting management commitment (making it part of performance indicators)

Funds to support participation

Defining ‘learning’ that can support personal goals and workplace objectives

Encourage staff to participate – making it a positive experience not a ‘have to’

Engaging employers

Time commitment from them

What’s in it for me

Resources to get project off the ground

Link between [a location and a transient workforce]

Diversity of workers (language)

Unemployed – Learn @ & for Work

Trying to break down the barrier to find out why learning is a dirty word or ‘that’s not about me’

Creating the effective business case

2. What do you see as the potential for Learn @ Work Day to assist your organisation, or help you in your work?

A promotional tool to raise the awareness of the training available and its importance

Promote this years; courses

An opportunity to bring together learning professionals across [our organisation] and share ideas

An opportunity to make trainees feel supported and reward their efforts

Involved and inspire staff who haven’t been on a course recently

Re-defined learning

Potential access to other industries through exposure

Present strategies to assist development of a workplace learning culture

Our organisation could participate or sponsor an activity for Learn @ Work Day

Promotion of ALA through o[ur] networks and link to the [Learn @ Work Day] website through our own.

Learn @ Work Day, if publicised widely enough, can encourage employers and employees to ‘try something’, ‘give it a go’ – especially if fun.

As consultants/ trainers we can use this as a hook to encourage other workplace learning activities.

Opportunity for direct care staff [in aged care?] to highlight learning outcomes/ to reflect on benefits of workplace learning

Showcase informal learning approaches to [our organisation] for [our frontline staff]

Encouraging other staff from within the organisation to attend and become inspired.

It may provide a ‘focus’ for broader commitment to learning – to highlight existing practices

National focus and press [coverage]

Credibility of partnerships

Opportunities to partner with others

Engagement of individuals and whole organisations in possible potential of adult learning

Using the ‘flow on’ effect wisely

Other

If Learn @ Work Day was in March it would coincide with graduation and enrolment

Keep it simple – start with encouraging shadowing, mentoring, guests speakers, volunteers (retired staff, unemployed), specialist area trainers (OHS, Health/wellbeing).

Make the argument that Learn @ Work Day can be for anyone and that there is no ‘right’ way to do it. No ‘one size fits all’ pattern for running it.