

**Informal Training Practices and Informal Learning in Selected New
Zealand Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).**

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ABSTRACT

The seemingly persistent focus of SME researchers on formal approaches to employee learning, and their apparent strong preference towards 'snapshot' quantitative surveys of training practices as a research method, has meant that our understanding of informal employee learning processes in SMEs has been underdeveloped. To address this research gap, an exploratory descriptive study involving interviews with 50 owners/managers was conducted. The aim was to uncover people management practices employed by the owners/managers. The research found that employees acquired knowledge and skills primarily through informal interactions with workplace models and through 'natural' learning processes. Another finding was that employee recruitment and selection practices have unintended 'side' effects on employees' learning. Implications for policy development, management practice, and future research are discussed.

Key words: SME, employee development, training, New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

There is growing interest in making workplaces into effective learning environments (Billett, 2001, Eraut, 2004). The importance of learning is primarily because of the need for organisations to respond to rapid and continuous change in the organisation's external environment (Ellinger et al., 1999). The views that learning is important to the survival of organisations (Schein, 1993), and is a significant source of competitive advantage (De Geus, 1988), are prevalent in the workplace learning, organisational learning, and learning organisation literatures.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) represent a significant part of the workplace-learning context in New Zealand, and in other Asia-Pacific economies. For example, almost 99 percent of New Zealand enterprises employ 49 or fewer full time equivalent employees, and these firms account for approximately 54 percent of all people employed in enterprises (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) regards SMEs as both the vehicle that creates most of the employment in the Asia-Pacific and the backbone for regional economic growth (Asia-Pacific

Economic Cooperation, 2006). Accordingly, development of SMEs in the Asia-Pacific has a crucial role in both new employment creation and sustained economic growth in the region. This includes development of the human capital in these SMEs through learning processes.

Training is often viewed as the vehicle for fostering learning, disregarding many other approaches (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). Consistent with this view, interest in learning in smaller firms has focused on the provision or absence of 'training' as the measure of 'learning' (Field, 1998, Walton, 1999). In fact, most research into employee learning and development in SMEs has involved 'snapshot' quantitative surveys of employee participation in taught courses and structured on-the-job training (Billett et al., 2003). Thus, there has been considerable research into the nature and extent of training in smaller firms, and the literature suggests that, in general, formal training approaches do not appeal to this sector for a variety of reasons, including cost, time, and perceived lack of relevance (Abbott, 1995, Gibb, 1997, Vickerstaff, 1990).

There appears to be a growing awareness amongst commentators that the role and importance of informal training and learning practices in smaller firms needs to be recognised (Cardon and Stevens, 2004). For instance, Kitching and Blackburn (2002) promote the suitability and benefits of a more informal approach to the training process in smaller firms, and identify the limited relevance and disproportionate costs of formal training approaches to the small firm community. However, the seemingly persistent focus of small business researchers on formal approaches to learning, and their apparent strong preference towards 'snapshot' quantitative surveys of training practices as a research method, has meant that our understanding of informal training and learning practices in smaller firms has been underdeveloped. As Cardon and Stevens (2004) have noted, "we lack much of the theory and data necessary to understand how small and emerging firms train their employees" (p.295). In the same article these authors also state that, "perhaps additional insights on employee skill development and learning could be gained if a broader perspective on training is taken" (p.308).

Developing an understanding of informal training and learning practices in smaller firms is important because there is some evidence which would seem to indicate that the potential of smaller firms as sites for learning is not being fully realised. For instance, studies of problems faced by small businesses and future issues important to small businesses have highlighted the employee development concerns of managers of small businesses (Hornsby and Kuratko, 1990, Huang and Brown, 1999). Similarly, in New Zealand, the results of a large-scale study of business practices and performance (Knuckey et al., 2002) suggest that, on the whole, employee practices (including employee development) are underdeveloped. The results of this New Zealand study also show that there are differences between the employee practices of small and large firms; small firms (as defined in the study) are less likely to demonstrate best practice in relation to their employees.

These concerns need to be investigated from a perspective that is broader than training to further understand learning processes in SMEs, and to suggest practice that might, if addressed, improve the quantity and quality of workplace learning. This is important, particularly because of the strong contention that there is a connection between how firms manage their people and the economic results achieved (Pfeffer and Velga, 1999). The actions managers in SMEs do take to support and encourage employee learning are thus matters of major interest.

With the aim of contributing to an understanding of informal training practices and informal learning in SMEs, this paper reports and discusses selected findings of an exploratory qualitative study that examined a range of human resource management practices in a total of 50 New Zealand SMEs operating in the manufacturing and services sectors. Three questions focused our analysis of the data related to how employee training and learning proceeds in the SMEs studied. These were: (1) How do newcomers acquire work-related knowledge and skills? (2) How do employees maintain and develop their knowledge and skills? (3) Do other (non-training) human resource management practices influence employee knowledge and skill acquisition? Findings related to these three questions are reported here.

METHOD

Study context and sample

The interviews for this study were conducted during a period when New Zealand employers were facing difficult recruitment conditions. During the mid-2000s, the New Zealand labour market has been strong, relative to the past 20 years, and relative to most developed nations (Department of Labour, 2006). For example, the most comparable gauge of labour market strength, the unemployment rate, has been among the lowest in the OECD. Low unemployment has been accompanied by high skill shortages, particularly among trades workers. Trades workers constitute significant components of the workforces in both the services and manufacturing sectors. Such skill shortages are likely to have negative effects on the functioning of SMEs in general, and may hamper the expansion plans of some SMEs. The implications of such tight labour market conditions for managing human resources are far-reaching.

To explore the human resource management practices of SMEs within this challenging context for managing people, data were collected from owners/managers of 50 well-established SMEs in urban and rural locations of the North and South Islands. The sampling frame, from which the participants were recruited, consisted of a random sample of 500 manufacturing and service firms (sourced from a commercial database) that employed up to 50 full-time equivalent staff (FTEs). Forty-four (88%) of the participating firms employed fewer than 20 FTEs, and only one firm employed more than 30 FTEs. Forty-one (82%) of the interviewees were male. Most interview participants had no post-secondary school formal education qualifications, and just five of the participants (10%) had tertiary business/management education qualifications. However, the participants did have considerable firm-specific experience. Only seven participants (14%) had been with the firm for less than five years. On the other hand, thirty interviewees (60%) had been with their respective firms for ten or more years. Thus, the interviewees were a potentially good source of rich, nuanced and contextualised data on HRM practices in the sample firms.

Data collection and analysis

Five academic staff members of the Massey University New Zealand Centre for SME Research conducted the interviews. All 50 firms were visited by one of the members of the research team and the owners or managers were interviewed and taken through a semi-structured interview guide to ensure a uniform process for gathering the interview data. This asked them to describe practices that they employed to (1) attract an effective workforce to the organisation, (2) develop the workforce to its potential, and (3) maintain the workforce over the long term. Each interview lasted 45-90 minutes and was tape-recorded. Informed consent was gained via the provision of a project information sheet and subsequent completion of a written consent form. The verbatim transcripts were used as the basis for the analysis presented here.

Content analysis was used to aid in classification of the textual interview data into three broad categories. These were: (1) how newcomers acquire work-related knowledge and skills; (2) how employees maintain and develop their knowledge and skills; and (3) how other (non-training) human resource management practices may influence employee knowledge and skill acquisition. All phrases, sentences and paragraphs in the textual interview data were reviewed in relation to these three broad categories. The contents of the data were then classified in the category in which it most clearly belonged by colour coding the data strips using colour pens. Teasing out themes, or looking for 'recurring regularities' (Patton, 1990) in the data, was the main tactic for drawing meaning from data. This involved looking for both recurring phrases in the verbatim expressions of informants, and threads that tied together data. Findings of the content analysis of the verbatim expressions of the 50 participants in the semi-structured interviews are discussed in the next section.

FINDINGS

(1) How do newcomers acquire work-related knowledge and skills?

Analysis of the interviews suggests that the arrival of a new employee was an important 'learning trigger' in the firms studied. The newcomers' learning was tailored precisely to individual and firm

needs, and the workplace's culture and practices structured the learners' activities and shaped their learning.

“And it's just our own ways that we've sorted out that we feel sets us aside from another company. And they pick that up just by us training them to do it that way. I say, ‘Well I'm sorry, this is one procedure you might have to forget and this here will take the place of that’. So he does it our way.”

The learning of new employees was primarily job-specific and organisation-specific, as opposed to general work-related learning. (Such specific training has important implications for employee turnover in SMEs, since generally trained employees may exhibit more turnover.) ‘Learn by doing’ was the dominant process of job-specific knowledge and skills acquisition. Owner/manager descriptions of this process typically approximated the four processes of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977): attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivational processes.

“Watch me, see how it's done. Let them have a go at it. Monitor it. Explain whether they're getting it right, or what they can do to make it easier for them. That's just ongoing.”

Owners/managers, or other experienced employees, established pathways of learning activities for new employees that provided engagement in tasks of increasing accountability and complexity (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This usually involved having a procedure demonstrated by a workplace model and the newcomer repeating the procedure until they became proficient at it. Thereafter, this process of interaction with more experienced co-workers continued, and in this way the novice employee was guided through the complexities of the firm's practice.

“Hands-on! We'd show them everything over and over again. They would probably be left to do a particular job they've just been shown. We'd say to them, ‘Right, as soon as you've done that come and see us and we'll show you the next step’. They might do that same job over and

over again for good couple of weeks until they've mastered it, and then they'll be on to the next stage."

Learning safe work practices is obviously especially important in manufacturing firms. In some of the SMEs studied, the new employees' workplace learning agenda clearly reflected the owner's/manager's responsibility to comply with health and safety regulatory requirements. In fact, health and safety regulatory requirements appeared to be a key 'learning trigger' in the sample firms:

"Actually health and safety is the very first thing we teach."

Thus, overall, owners/managers had a strong preference towards informal training practices. Such training was primarily directed at helping newcomers acquire job-specific knowledge and skills and safe work practices. However, once new employees were proficient at their tasks, and some responsibility for health and safety had been transferred to the new employee, the emphasis on learning seemed to diminish.

(2) How do employees maintain and develop their knowledge and skills?

We found little evidence of encouragement of learning beyond the learning needed to do one's basic job. Thus, learning was typically regarded as merely being a mechanism for 'doing the job properly'. Any new and further employee learning appeared to be instigated and shaped by problem posing work situations. Employee learning associated with addressing such problems and priorities of the firm was supported primarily by capacities residing within the firms. There was only limited reliance on learning support from sources of expertise external to the firm.

For example, SMEs in this study seemed reluctant to engage in formal off-the-job training. Combining work and learning was the preferred mode of knowledge and skill acquisition.

“You have to weigh up whether the course they go on is actually going to benefit them here, or are they going to be of more benefit to have stayed here and be working and learning.”

Only a few owners/managers reported significant engagement in such formal off-the-job training. Their firms typically had strong affiliations to industry associations that provided no or low cost training, employed apprentices who were required to undertake formal off-the-job training as part of their apprenticeships, or worked closely with larger firms, as a suppliers to the larger firms, and the larger firms communicated higher expectations to the SMEs regarding their HRM practices. In contrast, most owners/managers emphasised the suitability and benefits of a more informal approach to the training process, and identified limited relevance and disproportionate costs of formal training approaches.

*“Would they gain a skill by going to that specific offsite training and would we benefit by it?
Or are you better to put the money into a tool?”*

Thus, the relatively low take up of formal training seemed to be an informed decision on the part of the SME owner/manager, based on his or her assessment of the perceived costs and benefits associated with the training. Formal off-the-job training was typically perceived by owners/managers as having limited benefits, because it is typically de-contextualised from the specific problems and priorities of the firm.

(3) Do other (non-training) human resource management practices influence employee knowledge and skill acquisition?

Recruitment and selection practices

Analysis of the interview data suggests the informal employee recruitment and selection practices used by managers in most of the SMEs studied, seem to have unintended ‘side’ effects on employees’

informal workplace learning. In regard to recruitment, as seems to be the case with smaller firms, 'word-of-mouth' was the preferred method of recruitment.

"It's word of mouth; that's how we recruit people. Because we've lived in the town for twenty years we've got to know lots of people. We may approach someone and ask them if they are looking for work. But we definitely do not advertise in the newspaper."

"Word of mouth is probably the only recruitment method I would ever use. It would be unusual to use advertising to find staff, because Invercargill is so small, everybody knows everybody."

'Word of mouth' recruitment frequently involved managers encouraging their staff to ask family and friends to come to work for them. Someone within the firm, who was knowledgeable of both the vacancy and an individual with characteristics that match the requirements of the job, would then prompt the individual to apply. This made it more likely that new recruits would be from the current employees' familial and social milieu.

"A lot of the actual production line work, that's pretty well all done by ladies. There's a good mixture out there of different Island groups and Maori. A lot of the Island ones come from within a church group and there are about three members of one family out there."

Staff that help recruit a new employee from their familial or social milieu are likely to take the initiative in both the socialisation and the initial on-the-job training of the newcomer. In the opinion of respondents, newcomers often started the process of being acculturated into the organisation, and developing an understanding of requirements of the owner-manager, before commencing employment.

"We've tended to hire family members in many cases. So, in our company of 20 staff, there are four families. There is obviously a bit of pre-employment training that goes

on within the family. That has its challenges, but probably makes things a bit easier as well.”

In regard to employee selection, technical skills were seldom mentioned by owners/managers as an important employee selection decision criterion, especially where skills could be easily taught. In fact, owners/managers seemed more interested in the potential new employees' impact on the existing workforce. In other words, person-organisation fit seemed to carry more weight than person-job fit in the employee selection decision. Thus the selection interview was used primarily to assess the applicant's cultural fit, and ability to work in a team and with others.

“At the time of the interview I spend a lot of time thinking how the person will gel into the organisation, not necessarily their technical abilities but will they fit? We have a staff of 11 people and very, very low staff turnover and I consider my staff to be friends as well. In an organisation this size personal disputes can be quite damaging and very hard to manage.”

Employee selection methods used by some managers also seem to have important implications for employee learning. Data captured during fieldwork suggests that in manufacturing firms it may be common to use employee selection methods that also help diagnose the learner's current skill level through assessing potential new employees on the job using work sample tests.

“If we had a welder come through here, I'd just say , ‘Well, you go down there, and weld a pipe up.’ And I could tell within two minutes whether he's a welder or not.”

In addition to providing managers with information to select an employee, such employee selection methods could also help diagnose the recruit's current skill level, and provide managers and other staff with information about the learning needs of the new recruit.

Performance appraisal

Performance appraisal, the process of observing and evaluating an employees' performance and providing feedback to the employee, is a potentially important method for developing an effective workforce. Findings of this study in regard to performance appraisal appear to be consistent with findings of other research (Cardon and Stevens, 2004), which suggests that formal performance appraisal is uncommon in smaller firms. However, smaller firms offer frequent opportunities for interaction between owners/managers and employees, and therefore numerous opportunities for owners/managers to observe employee performance.

“Craig is out there working with them to see how their performance is going. Probably in large firms some people would rarely speak to the manager. They wouldn't even see them. Craig is out there with them, with the overalls on.”

Feedback is a key element of performance appraisal. Although formal performance appraisal was uncommon in the SMEs, owners/managers did provide informal performance feedback to employees on an impromptu basis.

“It would probably be over a coffee or over a beer on a Friday night or something like that you know.”

The findings in regard to performance appraisal thus underline the notion that informal processes characterise smaller business organisations (Marlow and Patton, 2002).

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings suggest the owners/managers had a strong preference towards informal training practices. Such training was primarily directed at helping newcomers acquire job-specific knowledge

and skills and safe work practices. The training process typically involved an experienced co-worker demonstrating key behaviours to replicate and providing the newcomer with opportunities to practise and feedback. Once new employees were proficient at their tasks, the emphasis on learning diminished. New and further learning was almost exclusively triggered by work-related problems and the employee's learning efforts were directed solely at the solution of such problems. Workplace supervisors and co-workers were important resources for learning.

In general, the owners/managers appeared to hold a rather limited view on learning. They seemed to view learning as the acquisition of job-specific knowledge and skills. Analysis of the interviews suggests that broader notions of learning, such as personal development, learning about organisational culture, and the learning associated with creativity and innovation, were not recognised by owners/managers. Similarly, the potential effects of other (non-training) human resource management practices on employee learning were unnoticed. Consistent with the findings of other studies of HRM practices in smaller firms (Cardon and Stevens, 2004), the owners/managers in the sample SMEs indicated a strong preference towards informal ongoing communication and feedback, as opposed to formalised performance appraisal procedures.

Findings of this study have implications for management practice and SME policy. There appears to be considerable scope for improvement in the informal training and learning practices in the SMEs studied. However, managers who wish to improve the quantity and quality of learning may need practical advice and behavioural guidelines. One obvious policy implication for providers of programmes designed to build management capability amongst SMEs is that their management development programmes should embody elements that reflect the importance of the manager's people development role, and specifically the manager's role in fostering informal learning. For example, principles of adult learning and the skills of facilitating learning could be built into such management development programmes.

However, the provision of such enterprise assistance appears to be inherently problematic (Massey et al., 2004). For instance, after reviewing the evidence from research in the United Kingdom, Patton (2005) concludes that engaging owners/managers of smaller firms in the training agenda has proven difficult for successive governments. He argues that even though owners/managers of smaller firms may require special assistance, there has been a limited take-up of formal training interventions, especially those offered by government. While SMEs in general may appear reluctant to use the available enterprise assistance services, enterprise assistance that is customised (through mentoring and coaching, for example) seems to be particularly well received by SMEs (Patton, 2005).

Some limitations of this study have implications for future research. One limitation is that the findings may be prone to social desirability bias (Zikmund, 2000), because the phenomenon of interest is potentially sensitive. Consequently, some research participants may have given a socially desirable response. In other words, responded in a way intended to create a favourable impression of HRM practices in the firm.

The use of a single-source (the owner/manager) in this study is another limitation (Donaldson and Grant-Vallone, 2002). Devins, Johnson and Sutherland (2004) assert that, “one factor that links the vast majority of studies of training in small firms is that they tend to focus primarily or exclusively on the perspective of the owner-manager and/or other managers of the business” (p.449). In fact, very few small firm studies take into account the employee perspective (Marlow and Patton, 2002). In the firms studied, employees and managers may have different perceptions of the HRM practices employed. Obtaining an employee perspective on HRM practices is important for several reasons. For instance, in regard to service sector SMEs, research shows that employee perceptions of HRM practices (e.g. providing adequate training) are positively related to customer evaluation of service quality (Gelade and Young, 2005). Thus, future research should also provide an employee perspective on HRM practices in SMEs.

Limitations aside, this exploratory study does cast some light on informal training and learning practices in SMEs. Overall, the findings suggest that the contributions of formal training approaches to processes of knowledge and skills acquisition are minimal in relation to the contributions made by informal interactions with workplace supervisors and workmates, and ‘natural’ learning processes, such as learning through observation. Clearly, more empirical studies are needed to further enhance understanding of employee learning processes in smaller firms. In such future work, insights from situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), informal and incidental learning (Watkins and Marsick, 1992) and social learning (Bandura, 1977) may be especially helpful in arriving at a better understanding of the research topic. The findings of this study also suggest that there is a need to explore the interaction of ‘training’ and other HRM practices in the SME context. The study found that informal employee recruitment and selection practices used by owners/managers in some of the SMEs studied may have unintended ‘side’ effects on employees’ work-related learning. Obviously, much work remains to be done.

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