

# Assessing workplace training

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The World Competitive Survey, recently compiled by the International Institute for Management Development, in Switzerland, ranks Australia as seventeenth, lower on competitiveness than such countries as Malaysia and New Zealand. In recognising the need for international competitiveness and more effective productivity gains, Australian businesses and government agencies have been downsizing and outsourcing furiously on the one hand, and on the other, contracting consultants to take on jobs that, if well planned, could be used most effectively for staff growth and contribution. Such work would assist in uniting staff in working towards what management consultants call a 'transformation', or introducing techniques for productivity improvement.

In some workplaces, managers do recognise the value of the company's human resources, and the value of nurturing innovative and experienced staff. The success of such workplaces becomes closely linked to the commitment of its staff, who are encouraged, through staff development, project work and other internal reward mechanisms, to see the results of their work in terms of organisational outcomes and achievements, effectively leading to productivity gains.

The weighting given to the valuing of such human resources closely matches the level of professional development and training. As part of this activity, managers at all levels continually appraise their staff against a variety of benchmarks (for example, job performance, personal effectiveness, team work, ability to take on new projects). In the library sector, the Library Industry Competency Standards can be used as part of the process. The use of competency standards as part of a formal assessment process can benefit both the staff member and the company.

Under the 'New Training Reform Agenda', the Ministers of Vocational Education and Training recently endorsed in principle the major features of a National Training Framework. This is designed to simplify national training arrangements and make them more flexible. It also introduced the concept

of 'training packages', which will comprise a set of competency standards, national qualifications and assessment guidelines for an industry. Essentially, this brings many more training options into the workplace.

Training packages may include a range of additional materials, such as a learning strategy, assessment materials and professional development materials, although these will not be endorsed at a national level. Workplace training, and combinations of workplace and provider-based training will then be more feasible. Registered training organisations (such as TAFE or other private providers) will be able to develop training programs to suit the needs of individual enterprises or groups of enterprises, but libraries may also apply for registration themselves, either as trainers and assessors, or just as assessors. This will have the advantage of workplace assessment being recognised as meeting national assessment standards, and the outcomes of such assessment being on a par with the assessments issued by the traditional training organisations.

When completed, such a training package for the library and information sector offers considerable benefits for an organisation. With the increasing focus on the role of the workplace in training, human resource managers may seek to establish mechanisms whereby an individual training plan for each staff member will be developed and regularly monitored. Competencies would thus be used as the universal 'currency'. The nationally endorsed training package would specify the competencies needed to achieve a particular qualification, although the enterprise would probably be more concerned with staff acquiring those competencies relevant to its own goals and outcomes.

Joint training partnerships, which utilise the expertise of both librarians and library technicians in the workplace as accredited workplace assessors, and using accredited training providers for the issuing of qualifications would be possible.

Recognition of competence, using

the recognition of prior learning processes recently developed for Industry Competencies A-D (or ASF2-5), will assist in the initial identification of the skills base of an organisation. This will be the first step in preparing a human resource plan for the organisation.

The concept of training packages also gives rise to more options for work-based learning. Work-based learning is 'a practical approach to linking the training and development needs of Australian workers with the work performance requirements of employers. It does this by focussing on an extremely flexible and integrated mix of 'on-the-job' training with other internal and externally-sourced learning opportunities' [Carter, EMA and Gribble, IA (1991), *Work based learning: a discussion paper*, Office of the State Training Board, Melbourne].

This permits an employee to negotiate with both their workplace supervisor and the training provider about using the process and outcomes of workplace tasks (for example, investigation and reporting of a workplace issue) as part of their structured educational program. While many examples of this are currently taking place on an informal level in Australian TAFE and university programs, it is rarely formalised, to the extent that is taking place in such universities as in the University of Middlesex (England) programs. This requires employers and education providers to work together to recognise the nature and context of occupational skills, and to develop learning opportunities to benefit both employer and staff members.

When 'common knowledge' argues that most learning occurs outside educational institutions, it places a strong focus on the value of experiential learning and action learning (reflective learning). The challenge is to recognise the role of such workplace learning experiences in an education and training curriculum. But a further challenge is to raise the awareness of the individual staff member of their own skill development processes and their learning achievements, which can be recognised and assessed formally. ■