Opinions to Adapt Workplace Learning in the Time of Coronavirus and After

Ileana Hamburg
IAT, Westfälische Hochschule Gelsenkirchen Germany

ABSTRACT
Workplace learning supports the acquisition of knowledge or skills by formal or informal methods and means that occurs in the workplace. It contributes to the learning of employees, employers and the organization as a whole. As a response to COVID-19 disease, workplace learning had to be changed and many usual activities in this context have been postponed or canceled. Digital learning solutions and alternative activities have to be found in order to continue the learning process. Workplace learning is often incorporated into workplace social interactions and everyday practices, but it can include also formal elements and be supported by mentors and tutors. In this presentation, first some forms, benefits and requirements of workplace learning are described as well as steps and approaches like learning scenarios which have to be developed to ensure social distancing and promote digital learning at the workplace as a solution. Second, some learning methods are proposed which can be applied within workplace learning and have been tested by the Study Group Lifelong Learning of the IAT within a European project.

Keywords: Workplace learning, Digital learning, Best practice actions, Scenario planning, Mentoring, Problem-Based Learning (PBL), e-Portfolio, Evaluation Map, Future Research Plan, Reflective Learning Journal.

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INTRODUCTION
Workplace is an important source of learning and workplace learning supports the acquisition of knowledge or skills by formal or informal methods and means that occurs in the workplace. With the rapid changes in companies, particularly in connection with new technologies and the need for reskilling people to achieve new knowledge and skills to cope with change, working should be increasingly interconnected with learning. Skills could be continuously upgraded through workplace learning.

Taking learning opportunities at work has become a business imperative in order to improve and minimize time for business operations. It is particularly important for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), because they have lack of resources and difficulties in recruitment, training and retention of employees.

Research shows that 80% of the learning occurs informally through self-directed learning, networking, coaching and mentoring (Yeo, 2008). It takes place also within in-house training sessions and within life-long learning processes.

As a response to SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 disease, workplace learning had to be changed and many usual activities in this context have been postponed or canceled. It was a hard process also taking into consideration the needs for employee's reskilling in order to cope with digital transformation.

To continue the workplace learning, leaders had to organize some activities they consider protecting employees, adapt programs and delivery, establish and expand digital learning and develop alternative solutions (https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-accelerate/our-insights/adapting-workplace-learning-in-the-time-of-coronavirus; Hamburg, 2020). Digital learning programs started before COVID-19 so that market increases in such learning programs, but they were not really applied within workplace learning particularly in small and medium sized companies.

In this presentation, first some forms, benefits and requirements of workplace learning are described as well as steps and approaches like learning scenarios which have to be developed to ensure social distancing and promote digital learning at the workplace as a solution.

Second, some learning methods are proposed which can be applied within workplace learning and have been tested by the Study Group Lifelong Learning of the IAT within a European project.

WORKPLACE LEARNING

Workplace learning takes place often within work-related interactions contributing to the learning of employees, employers and the organization as a whole (Collin *et al*, 2011).

According to the 70:20:10 model of learning proposed by Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger, 70% of own learning comes from working on-the-job or from own experiences at the workplace, 20% of learning comes from observing, being coached and mentored by others, while 10% of learning comes from attending classes or formal learning programmers (https://trainingindustry.com/wiki/content-development/the-702010-model-for-learning-and-development/).
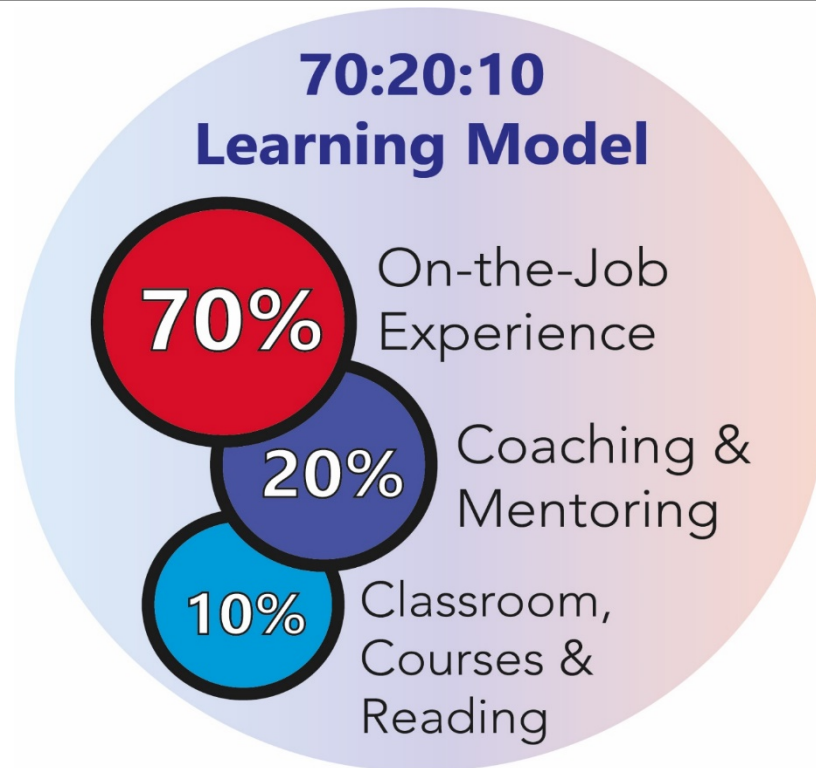
Figure 1:
Source: https://trainingindustry.com/wiki/content-development/the-702010-model-for-learning-and-development/

Workplace learning is predominantly informal in nature and is often incorporated into workplace social interactions and everyday practices, but it can include also formal elements (Muhamad & Idris, 2005).

Formally qualifications can be acquired within learning structure organized for employees, in educational and training institutions and various communities within organizations. Both formal and informal learning may benefit either the organization or the individual or both (Crouse *et al*, 2011; Lancaster, 2009).

According to some authors, workplace learning has also a 'culturally bound', meaning that the skills that an employee learns represent the requirements of tasks within the organization (Muhammad & Idris, 2005). Particularly within SMEs, people learn from each other and through finding solutions for their day-to-day problems at the workplace (Felsted *et al*, 2005; Hager & Johnsson, 2009; Silverman, 2003).

In-house training involves planned learning activities that take place near the job or outside work. Short training courses are organized at the workplace or information and communication approaches that have a learning element. Trainers are usually from the organization itself or from external entities.

Experience-based learning helps employees to learn at workplace informally through discussions with customers, suppliers and other external stakeholders of the organization. Employees are able to learn from their participation in the everyday activities of a community (Fenwick, 2008). Communities of practice help people to learn and consequently to perform better at the workplace (Chang *et al*, 2009, Hamburg et al., 2018).

According to Silverman (2003), experience-based learning is an on the-job learning activity that is supported intensively through coaching and mentoring.

Mentoring supports usually a long-term professional development and is associated with a specific goal in learning or working context aimed at improving performance in a task in a short-term framework (Delaney, 2012). Kram (1985) gives a theoretical foundation for understanding developmental of relationships at work. Mentoring could be initiated formally or informally. Baugh and Fagenson-Eland (Baugh & Fagenson, 2007) underlines that due to the characteristics of formal programs long term relationships are occur in such programs than in informal mentoring relationships. According to Scandura and Pellegrini (2010) e-mentoring "is the process of mentoring a protégé (mentee) over the Internet by a mentor usually not physically present at the protégés site or location". This is particularly important during and after the Covid-16. Mentoring relationships are dynamic and complex; they can be different during different phases of the relationship and evolve through phases that reflect different experiences and patterns of interactions. Both mentor and mentee feel safe to express their thoughts and feelings, and to take risks and fulfill some requirements.

Mentoring offers a number of benefits for workplace learning in SMEs. Research has shown a positive influence on mentee performance (Hamburg et al., 2018; Ragins, B. & Kram, K.E., 2007). Mentoring can address i.e. SMEs needs for timely, relevant training content, does not require significant personal and cost resources. The most important benefits for companies are a quick introduction of new employees and support of integration of staff with special needs.

Mentors can help to carry out an analysis including existing knowledge gaps and staff reskills needs. Often SMEs need to strengthen their current market position before entering international markets with new products or strategies and need help in this transition. Mentors can help companies to prepare a new workplace learning plan and guide them in implementing this.

But due to Covid-19 some workplace learning activities have been cancelled, postponed or moved to digital ones. In the following best-practice actions are presented, ranging from the immediate and tactical to the strategic ones, which can help to benefit of workplace learning programs also during and after the pandemic (https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-accelerate/our-insights/adapting-workplace-learning-in-the-time-of-coronavirus) and help build a new approach for effective digital learning.

BEST PRACTICE ACTIONS AND SCENARIO PLANNING

A cross-functional response team composed of members from all relevant stakeholder groups from company should be build. These include people from management, learning-delivery personnel, IT and platform technologists, and vendors. The work should be coordinated with the company's COVID-19- measures. Clear decision points and criteria for canceling or deferring a

workplace learning program should be developed, including how these decisions will be communicated.

The entire new program of workplace learning facilities should be discussed and priorities have been set about what is necessary to be adapted to a virtual environment or digital-only format. A calendar and milestones, the affected participants, programs for redesigning, progress, key indicators, and difficulties have to be continuous updated.

The plan for workplace activities should be consistent with the guidelines available from local and global health authorities. Employees should know criteria when programs will be modified or canceled. It will be ensured that learning participants have—and are familiar with—digital used tools i.e., virtual collaboration tools, including videoconferencing and cloud-based document sharing.

Limits to what learning should be addressed when using digital tools and sessions are important. It should be considered what has to be done before, during, and after the session to maximize its impact.

Organizations are already using digital learning to increase collaboration among teams that are working either remotely or across different time zones, as they take courses together and collaborate in virtual formats. Digital learning will be a catalyst as the number of people working remotely because of COVID-19 increases.

Scenario-planning techniques should be part of any approach to choose between different decisions. The COVID-19 learning-response team should make and communicate decisions under a variety of potential scenarios.

It is known that traditional approaches to strategic planning have largely been unsuited to COVID-19 times and companies had difficulties also referring to their workplace learning.

Scenario planning, is a form of planning that make visible what it is not known to bring multiple hypothetical futures into view (https://www.newmarketsadvisors.com/blog/learning-from-covid-how-to-use-scenario-planning-to-prepare-for-future-uncertainty4933909). It allows to:
1. Gain insight into the key drivers of a situation
2. Embrace and control uncertainty
3. Recognize the assumptions organization has been making
4. Expose own false sense of security.

Scenario planning isn't new, but it is very important particularly in the age of coronavirus and beyond.
Five steps within scenario planning in workplace learning are:
 1. Identify the trends affecting the learning process.
    What are the major factors affecting learning functions and how decisions are taking?
2. Separate what is known from what it is not.
    Interviewing key responsible and employees to uncover how they envision the future of the workplace learning might help.

3. Map it out.

At this step there exists a list of trends, assumptions, and unknowns to be prioritized. The trends that are highly uncertain and most impactful should be identified and the most straightforward workplace learning scenario should be considered.

EXAMPLE

Within a European Erasmus+ project, a hybrid-training program for workplace learning within SMEs particularly to achieve work necessary research skills has been developed supported by a digital platform. Discussions have been held in Germany on how to adapt it for a special course within VET. The proposed model involved an interplay between inter organizational, organizational and individual learning at each stage of the inquiry-based learning model.

It involves employees working with their peers and external business partners to actively seek business opportunities, actively plan and implement solutions, actively investigate these and actively reflect on the impact of these in professional, social, cultural and economic contexts. It involves a systematic approach where each phase is concerned with developing ideas and making decisions on robust data.

Interactive demonstration carried out by tutors with active participation of students, guided, bounded and open inquiry have been planned.

A short time after starting the program, some companies and VET institutions have been closed closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and later the program had to be continued exclusively digitally and planned methods and cooperation established at the beginning had to be cancelled.

To create a comprehensive picture of how to adapt the training to this new environment, a cross-functional response team composed of members of the partners responsible for the project, managers of some interested companies and VET institutions has been formed. Because some people with cognitive disabilities and migrants wanted to undertake the training, we invited two persons with knowledge in this context. Therefore, the COVID-19-response effort was coordinated within the project. Two e-mentors and one tutor supported the training program in each country.

Scenario-planning techniques has been used to choose between different decisions which should be taken. The COVID-19 learning-response team identified which parts of programs are affected and should been cancelled or put in a digital form. The learners who already decided to follow the learning program have been contacted in order to know their digital knowledge and if they have the corresponding technology. It has been decided that e-mentors organize two supplementary sessions to explain which digital tools and how they will be used. Virtual small groups of learners have been organized.

The tutor particularly supported the learners with special needs, i.e., with registration, simplification of some activities and exercises, and e-mails to communicate more often with these learners.

To stimulate and engage students in the enquiry planned process YouTube and Text2Mindmap have been used.

The main used method for learning was Problem-Based Learning (PBL) (Yeo, 2008; O´Brien & Hamburg, 2014; O´Brien et al., 2019). Within PBL, the students followed eight steps, by working in groups. At the beginning a problem has been presented. By using a digital platform developed within the project the eight steps have been demonstrated. Then each group formulated own research problem and developed a small research project.

Within one of the learning modules the students learned how to evaluate the impact of their own small research projects, reflect on the findings and learn from these by identifying future opportunities for their own workplace.

Finally, they have to develop an e-portfolio of work to allow them to progress own individual careers based on the learnings identified in the Evaluation Map and the Future Research Plan. The Evaluation Map included a detailed assessment of the issue, the drivers for change, input from internal and external stakeholders, key implementation steps taken, and outcomes achieved. In addition, the key competencies and skills that the students have learned from the research process can be identified. This Evaluation Map will form part of own evidence of learning within the skills e-portfolio. Included in this portfolio is a Reflective Learning Journal that is an account of the learning journey through the program. Reflective learning journals provide a place for learners to record observations of occurrences that happen to and around them, as well as the surroundings in which these events occur. Journals enable learners to identify key aspects of their current situation that are important to them, and help learners to scaffold, or build on, previous learning (Bolton, 2018). The final stage of reflective cycle, the Action plan, examines anything need to be known and to improve for next time. Some questions can be: Perhaps you feel that you need to learn about something or attend some training. Is there a work colleague or mentor that you could ask for advice? What can you do which means you will be better equipped to cope with a similar event? From this stage of reflection, a personal action plan or continuing professional development plan can be developed, which will outline own future objectives, activities, indicators of success and target dates.

The e-portfolio, which students had to develop, is an on-line compilation of materials that exemplifies beliefs, skills, qualifications, education, training and experiences. Portfolios are important tools in the collection and presentation of evidence and data to support achievement.

This e-portfolio is not a stand-alone assessment but a reflective summary of what and how the participants have learned and how they will use this learning to 'action' own future research plans. It should take into account the skills acquired and competencies achieved as identified in own Evaluation Maps and Future Research Plans. The purpose of a portfolio is to demonstrate key learnings and provide evidence-based research of activities which have impacted on the workplace learning. The proposed portfolio should contain Reflective Learning Journal, Continuing Professional Development Plan of the learner, Screenshots/photos/report, Evaluation Map, Future Research Plan, Evidence of impact in workplace (e.g., adoption of new practice).

The students appreciated the importance of reflection on research impact and of portfolio development.

CONCLUSIONS

Many people think particularly about learning within schools and universities, or of career training with a focus on job requirements and professional advancement. Some employers considered learning as disruption to workplace productivity Learning which happens through work and for work is often more effective than learning outside of work. Studies shown that the workplace can be an efficient place to learn and learning which happens through work is very important.

Many organizations support their staff to grow into the job, and to be more successful at retaining talent. This is especially critical for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as they face more challenges in terms of recruitment, training and retention.

Workplace learning is conventionally seen as a mean of improving the skills of employees and enhancing their knowledge formal or informal. Informal learning at the workplace is becoming an increasingly important tool for training employees. A great part of the learning occurs informally through self-directed learning, networking, coaching and mentoring. However, there may be obstacles like the Covid-19 that can hinder usual learning programs at the place of work. Managers, project coordinators can't push the pause button on capability building, so they should consider the pandemic as a catalyst for the use of digital learning and employee's reskilling in order to cope with digital transformation in this context. Some tactics and strategies can help to realize it as well as the use of suitable learning methods. Digital technologies change workplace learning but still research in digital workplace learning and how digital technologies can support the use of both informal and formal learning at the workplace is necessary.

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