

Chapter 13

Leveraging the Power of Diversity in Workplace Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Just as adult learning strategies can be categorized into three major learning strategy preference groups (Conti & Kolody, 1998), workplace learning events can also be similarly categorized into a spectrum containing three major clusters: (a) the Navigation Cluster, containing those tasks that require planning, organizing, and structuring of content; (b) the Problem-Solving Cluster, containing those tasks that require innovative creativity or critical thinking skills; and (c) the Engagement Cluster, containing those tasks that require inter- and intra-personal skills required when working in situations that involve others. The purpose of this chapter is to propose an emerging 4-step framework that can be used to guide individuals, educators, and workplace trainers through a process to assist learners in identifying their learning strategies preferences and in leveraging these individual metacognitive processes in order to achieve specific workplace learning objectives.

INTRODUCTION

“As educators, we teach students the skills to become competent entry-level employees, but unfortunately, we often fail to teach them the one skill that will span their entire careers—that of learning how to learn.”

Although the rate of career advancement is often dependent upon one’s ability to learn and apply new concepts quickly and efficiently in the workplace, scant effort is spent within post-secondary programs or in the workplace to prepare individuals to manage the steep learning curve often experienced by employees in new roles. Awareness of one’s personal learning processes, and specifically

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1812-1.ch013

learning strategy preferences, improves one's learning performance and ultimately, workplace performance (Conti, Kolody, & Schneider, 1997).

Workplace learning traditionally occurs through activities such as lecture, observation, experience, or practice; however, learning tasks can be accomplished with greater efficiency when approached in a purposeful, analytical, and systematic fashion. This systematic approach requires metacognitive awareness – that of knowing one's strengths and shortcomings in learning processes. Metacognition is associated with reflective practice. The reflective practice serves to assist in people being able to draw from experiences to minimize a problematic situation by detracting the complexity, uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict found within this circumstance (Schön, 1983). As such, learners make use of this reflective practice, which is presented with new events from real-life experiences to develop a source of reference that can create a repertoire of responses, and theories that can be used in future dilemmas (Smith, 1983). Metacognition is a conscious reflective action implemented while analyzing, assessing, and managing the thought processes" (Conti & Kolody, 1999, p. 3). Moreover, "it has become evident that the learner who is conscious of his or her learning processes exercises more control over those processes and becomes a more effective learner" (Fellenz & Conti, 1993, p. 9). When learners are aware of their cognitive strengths, they can then more appropriately match these natural, innate, and comfortable learning processes to specific learning events that require strategies best suited to the learners' preferences.

Learning processes are less efficient, however, when one experiences shortcomings required for specific learning objectives. Learners often attempt to compensate for the shortcomings with less efficient processes or they avoid the learning task altogether. When this occurs, workplace performance efficiency is compromised.

It is encouraging to note that shortcomings in learning processes, and specifically learning

strategies, can be overcome. Metacognitive awareness can be increased by identifying and applying a variety of learning strategies (not only those that fall within their preferences)—in essence, by learning how to learn. Not only is individual performance increased through enhanced metacognitive awareness, the diversity that comes with learning strategy preference can be embraced for optimum organizational leveraged results.

Consequently, employees can master a spectrum of workplace learning strategies that they can select and apply appropriately, as required. The 4-step framework proposed in this chapter can be used to guide individuals, educators, and workplace trainers through processes to acquire the skills for learning how to learn in the workplace.

BACKGROUND

Diversity

Diversity too often is considered in workplace training only when the diversity is visible in dimensions such as race, gender, age, and lifestyle choice. Because individuals approach learning in a variety of cognitive styles that are not readily visible and are often difficult to identify, this dimension of diversity is often overlooked in the workplace. According to Thomas and Ely, (as cited by Stalinski, 2004, p. 14), diversity has most commonly become a compliance issue. Stalinski further suggests that the basic belief in a diverse workforce is simply not enough; diversity must become a source of organizational benefit (2004).

One way of addressing diversity in the workplace is to leverage individual differences in individual learner's cognitive styles. Sternberg and Grigorenko (1997) define cognitive styles as "people's characteristic and typically preferred modes of processing information," and often refer to concepts such as learning styles, learning modalities, thinking styles, personality styles, and learning strategy preference. While most cognitive

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