

Chapter 4

The Acquisition of Skills and Expertise: Work–Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Today's workforce faces a rapidly changing environment. During the last 12 months alone, workers have faced being displaced by collapses in sectors based on changing consumer habits, not to mention those whose roles became redundant overnight by the closure of many companies due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A more fragile working environment, the increase in the age of retirement, and rapid changes in economy and consumer habits indicate that it is more important than ever for individuals need to be equipped with skills that enable them to move from one sector to another without necessitating the need for lengthy retraining or upskilling. Moreover, the recent government agenda and growing demand for the integration of learning in a working environment also signals that less time will be spent in classrooms and lecture rooms. This chapter gives insight into which this conundrum can be unpicked and approached through skillful curriculum design and practices needed for the 21st century workforce.

BACKGROUND

This chapter explores work-based learning in three comparative case studies. The idea of learning through work is not new. However, since the 1950s successive governments have sought to educate the workforce ready for employment through a number of initiatives (Ainley & Corney, 1990; DfES, DWP, 2004; National Archives, 2013; Payne, 2007). Prior to the 21st century the remit for work-based learning remained firmly with colleges and training providers. Changes in economic attitudes coined as 'The Global Race' (BIS - Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011) became a focus for the UK Government and with this came the need for individuals to be properly skilled for work (HM Government, 2008; Leitch, 2006) in order for the UK economy to keep up with 'comparator countries'

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(Leitch 2006, 2). This ‘Race’ and government focus would, in time, affect both Generations Y and Z. Many individuals, some from Generation Y, would be identified with no formal qualifications (Ainley, 1999) and required to study in order to raise the number of qualified employees (Allen & Ainley, 2013). Generation Z are more likely to be offered a programme of study that includes work-based aspects and a promise of graduating with skills and expertise that would equip them for the rapidly changing and challenging economic environment (Gosling, 2020). Either way, with the fragile working environment being faced by both generations, driven by the rapid changes in economy or displacement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a job may no longer be for life.

As a result of a change in the Government’s attitude universities, which had previously remained outside Government agendas, found themselves facing the challenge to merge theoretical and lecture-based study with work-based aspects. A government report from 2012 reported that universities were still facing challenges in providing qualifications that “merge” the original theoretical based study together with the work-based aspects (The Department for Business, 2012). Gosling observed (2020) the work-based aspects were often overlooked in Business Schools, either due to the pressure to meet other priorities or to a lack of understanding within a faculty itself.

It is clearly more important than ever that individuals are equipped with the skills that will enable them to move from one sector to another without necessitating the need for lengthy retraining or upskilling (Holmes, 2013). Moreover, the recent government agenda and the growing demand for the integration of learning in a working environment also signals that less time will be spent in classrooms and lecture rooms (UCAS, 2019). This chapter gives insight into the conundrum of successfully juggling the need to equip generations Y and Z with skills and expertise to respond to the challenges of the working environment, whilst grappling with the decreasing amount of time spent in the lecture room or classroom. The inclusion of a new model for doing so within this chapter offers individuals charged with curriculum design and delivery an insight into how this can be achieved.

WHAT IS WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL)?

Work-Based Learning allows students to learn through work (Helyer, 2015). However, because workplaces are so diverse, the methods in which learning activities and learning are implemented are equally so. Students of WBL may attend college or university, be located entirely in work, or experience a mixture of the two. It also encompasses learning that specifically centres on occupations designed to meet the needs and expectations of a specific industry or profession (QAA, 2018). The Quality Assurance Agency for higher education (QAA) asserts that each method has a common ground that pivots around the acquisition of knowledge skills and competences through actions based on reflective learning in a vocational or occupational context. Whereas more traditional programmes focus on more theoretical aspects of work that might occur in a working environment, WBL focusses on practice first and then aligns these with theory (QAA, 2010). Because the nature of WBL can cover any institution or industry, the way that it is understood and practiced can present issues. Some of these are explained in the Literature Review.

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