Improving the connections between job development, off-the-job training and learning at the workplace

A pilot project in the Dutch transport sector

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1. Introduction

In the framework of the FORCE programme, a pilot project was carried out in the Dutch transport sector aimed at strengthening the links between the vocational training programmes at the level of the industry and the programmes for training and development within transport companies. In co-operation between the Stichting Vakopleiding Wegvervoer (SVW), the haulage industry's national institute for vocational training, and six Dutch transport companies united in the Transport Trading Group (TTG), a new, made-to-measure, training programme was developed for planners in the road transfer and haulage industry. The programme was based upon the existing supply in the field of vocational training, but it was geared to a high degree to the specific needs of the participating companies. In this article we will analyse the experience gathered in this pilot project in the light of the debate on how to implement the concept of the learning organization. The analysis will focus on the question of how the training system was connected with the system of work, more particularly how training activities off the job were combined with learning activities on the job and job development policies within the companies.

2. Short description of the project

The main activity in the project was the development of a tailor-made course for transport planners, in close collaboration between the SVW training institute and the companies united in the TTG. The course consisted of six modules of one day each, spread out over a period of four months; the meetings took place on saturdays. It was based on a longer course for planners which had already been developed by the SVW. Important elements included training in cost calculation techniques and in the handling of new computerized route planning systems. A total of 15 employees of the TTG companies - planning assistants, planners and planning chiefs - participated in the course. At the end of the course an exam was held. Participants who passed the exam were given an official certificate by the SVW.

The course was tailor-made for TTG in a threefold sense. Firstly, it was geared to the specific job tasks and work situations of the TTG planners. Secondly, it was adjusted to the plans for job development in the planning departments of TTG. And thirdly, it took account of on-the-job training and learning opportunities within the TTG companies. For TTG, the course was part of a wider process of organization development, in particular of the planning departments. Important elements of this process were the creation of a more professional planner function and more co-operative relationships between the planning departments of the different TTG companies. For the SVW, the course was a pilot project in the development of a new supply of programmes, tailor-made for planners in haulage companies, in particular for lower qualified employees. The project was prepared and coördinated by the Institute for Applied Social Sciences (ITS) of the University of
Nijmegen, the Netherlands. The ITS also provided consultancy and made an evaluation of the project.

3. Connecting off-the-job training and work

Two organizations have collaborated closely in the project: the SVW training institute and the company. Such close collaboration between a training institute and a company provides an excellent opportunity to create sound links between job development, off-the-job training and on-the-job learning activities. So how were these links actually realized in this project?

In the first place it is important to mention that the course at TTG was conducted in the context of a wider *job and organization development process*, aimed at further professionalization of the planner function. The aim was for the planners to develop from ‘practice planners’ into ‘professional planners’. Raising cost-consciousness among the planners was a main objective. Management of the planning departments was to be strengthened and to become more differentiated from day-to-day routine tasks. Co-operation between the planning departments of the different TTG companies was to be improved. Greater uniformity of work methods and planning procedures was sought, so that they could be more closely integrated at a later stage in a centralized planning department. This professionalized and centralized planning department of the future was expected to offer planners new career opportunities.

This embedding of the course in the development process of the organization facilitated a close connection between the off-the-job training and the work the planners were doing. Various measures have been taken during the course of the project to attune training and work to each other. They can be divided in measures taken in the preparation and development stage of the course and measures taken in the implementation of the course programme.

In the *preparation and development stage* of the course the following measures were especially significant:

- the TTG management made an explicit analysis of the development and staff complement targets for the planning departments in the companies;
- the TTG personnel manager met with each of the planners and department chiefs (prospective course participants) in order to analyse the actual content of their responsibilities, their qualification deficits in the light of the development targets set for their departments, their wishes in terms of schooling and their career opportunities;
consultation took place between ITS, TTG and SVW on the question of how to connect the needs and wishes within the companies with the opportunities the training institute could offer;

when the course programme was drafted, intensive consultation took place between the personnel manager and the SVW course developers. The subjects discussed included the curriculum, the educational tools and materials, the content of the modules, the practical assignments, the educational targets and the examination requirements;

the draft curriculum was discussed and sanctioned by a general TTG management meeting at which the SVW training executives were present;

the SVW teachers visited the TTG companies and consulted with the TTG management in order to clarify the TTG's expectations of the course.

The preparation of the course, then, was a matter of intensive collaboration between SVW and TTG. Collaboration on the drafting of the programme, the formulation of the educational targets as well as the specifics of course contents. Partners argued that the joint implementation of these activities would offer additional assurance of the effectiveness of the course in company practice.

In the implementation of the course itself, too, every attempt was made to attune training to practice in the TTG companies and have the course link up as closely as possible with specific work situations and practical problems encountered by the participants. In this respect the following elements were especially important:

- frequent use was made of practical cases in the course; it was attempted to present cases which related to specific aspects of the situation in which the participants worked;
- the participants were given homework assignments which they carried out using TTG's own computer equipment and planning systems;
- the participants were given ample opportunity at course meetings to reflect on their own practice and exchange experiences of the methods used in their own company, discuss the differences between them and those used in other companies, possible improvements, etc.
- a didactic method was used - activity based learning - in which theory fragments were introduced in the discussion of practical problems tabled by the planners themselves;
- the teachers had been given explicit instructions beforehand to focus as much as possible on the participants' specific work practice in presenting the subject matter of the course; this was another reason why they visited the TTG companies;
- for some parts of the course practical instruction was given by experienced people working in the field, people who know the planning trade inside out.
The aim of all these measures was to fine-tune the course to the participants' work situations. It was demonstrated in the evaluation at the end of the course that the measures were highly successful. Almost all participants were very satisfied with the way their practical problems were dealt with in the course. Most participants thought that what they had learned would become very useful in their actual practice.

4. Stimulating learning activities on the job

Apart from these measures aimed at gearing the course to the actual work situation in the TTG companies, a number of other measures were taken to stimulate additional, non-formal, learning activities on the job, in which the planners could elaborate on issues that had been raised in the course. These can be distinguished into measures taken during the course itself and measures aimed at application in practice of the knowledge gained in the course.

The following measures were taken during the course:

- the participants were given homework assignments which they could carry out using the company computer equipment. These assignments could be used for practice purposes on the job; experience gained in practice was discussed at subsequent course meetings;
- the six course meetings were deliberately spread out over a longer period of time (about five months). This offered participants the opportunity to 'toy' with the newly acquired knowledge and skills in between meetings;
- the planners took part in the course together with the planning chiefs. This was done in order to better equip and motivate the planning chiefs for their task in supervising and coaching the planners in the workplace after the course;
- an explicit evaluation stage was built in at the end of the course, involving not only the course participants but the TTG management and SVW training executives as well. The aim of this evaluation was to once more raise the awareness on the part of both managers and participants of the importance of connecting the training course with further learning and development opportunities on the job.

The evaluation indicated that these measures were indeed conducive to the application of the newly acquired knowledge and skills in the work situation and to encouraging the participants to continue learning on the job. Additionally, it demonstrated that especially three factors or circumstances within the companies themselves contributed to further learning activities at the workplace:

- in the first place, communication between the planners about the daily practical problems which they encounter at work is continuous; they work in the same room
and they have all followed the same course. So when a difficult problem arises it is easy for them to stimulate each other to 'look things up' in the course material;
- in the second place there is continuous feedback from the planning chief to the planners. Some chiefs have participated in the course themselves and all chiefs have been explicitly instructed by management to provide adequate supervision, an issue on which they themselves are in turn supervised in management consultations;
- in the third place, a number of occasions for explicit reflection on the planners' actual performance have been introduced. Periodic work discussions take place in all planning departments, at which urgent problems can be worked out.
- fourth, one department has been given some time to 'experiment' with a new cost calculation method, trained in the course, the results of which will subsequently be evaluated with management and disseminated to the other departments.

With respect to the opportunities for learning on the job, it is important to mention that for the TTG management the SVW course is an element of a much longer trajectory toward planner professionalization, in which raising cost-consciousness is a central element. Prior to the course, training in cost control was done informally, by means of informal planner-chief discussions of (mis)calculations. The SVW course now has contributed a measure of formal training, teaching planners a number of new concepts and procedures. In the eyes of TTG-management, the main objective in the time to come will be to ensure the course is followed-up on the job by actual implementation of the new procedures and collective consultation about their application. Mutual support among colleagues and adequate feedback from the planning chiefs will play a major role in this on the job learning process. In the course of time then, if necessary, renewed formal training may be initiated in order to add additional formal qualifications. Moreover, some planners will need to embark on new, more advanced forms of education if in time they wish to move on to the new, more fully-fledged planning functions.

5. Conclusions with respect to the learning organization

Now, what can we learn from this case with respect to the implementation of the learning organization? We would like to formulate our lessons in the form of three main conclusions. We do this against the background of a network perspective on learning in organizations, a perspective we have developed during the past few years in a number of other research projects. In a network perspective both training and work are seen as networks of interactions between different actors, who occupy different hierarchical positions, have different interests and apply different theories of action to rationalize their activities. Within these networks actors have divergent, individual goals as well as common, collective goals. A major question in this perspective is how co-ordination between activities in the field of learning and in the field of work takes shape.
Our first conclusion is that the learners themselves are important actors when it comes to the co-ordination of training and work or, more specifically, the network of learning and the network of work:

- the learners themselves are members of both networks, that of learning and that of work; the other actors are for the most part involved in only one of the networks, either that of training (teachers) or that of work (company managers). Therefore the learners are ideally placed to co-ordinate activities in the two networks;
- the learners are the main actors in the primary process of the network of learning, i.e. the implementation of the learning programme. In this process they are the most powerful actors - learning processes simply do not take place if they do not learn;
- the learners (workers) have knowledge and information about the work processes which is crucial for adequate course programming. They also supply crucial information about learning opportunities at the workplace.

There is little doubt, therefore, that adequate participation of learners in both course development and job development is a prerequisite if training and learning are to be successfully integrated in the context of changing work and organization networks. To stimulate this participation, a company should provide adequate material facilities and social provisions from the start of a learning trajectory.

A second conclusion is that adequate organization of the co-ordination processes between the networks of work and training is vital in the development of learning programmes. Learning programmes generally (and in this case also) consist of several different learning situations:

- formal and non-formal learning situations: learning situations are not only created by teachers and course developers, but also by learners/workers themselves and by company managers;
- learning situations off and on the job: learning does not only take place during courses and training, but also during the preparation, execution, evaluation and development of work tasks and jobs.

The strength of a learning programme lies chiefly in its combination of these different learning situations. Therefore, the question of co-ordination of learning situations is crucial. The development and the implementation of learning programmes are usually organized as separate processes and limited to the formal elements of the programme. The training institute executives prepare the formal parts of the programme, the course modules, and the teachers then carry out the courses. The non-formal parts of the programme, the on-the-job activities, are usually not prepared or planned and no adequate connection is made with the formal parts. On the whole, this is also the picture in our transport project, even though some measures were taken to create a closer connection between the formal off-the-job activities and non-formal on-the-job learning
in the planning departments. Since such non-formal activities had not been prepared or planned by the course developers and company managers, co-ordination and integration of learning activities off and on the job were largely left up to the learners themselves. On the one hand this ‘liberty’ of learners can stimulate the inception of a learning organization. On the other hand, it can place a heavy burden on it, and particularly on its main actors, the workers/learners themselves.

Our third conclusion is that the organization of adequate co-operation between enterprises and training institutes is an important element in the establishment of learning organizations. Such co-operation offers greater opportunities for the development and implementation of complex learning programmes, i.e. learning programmes built up of different types of learning situations: formal and non-formal, inside and outside the company. In our view, the organization of this co-operation between enterprises and training institutes should not only be a task of the training institute managers, developers and teachers and the company and personnel managers at the enterprises. Co-operation should also be organized on the level of the workers/learners themselves, since they are often the crucial actors in the preparation, planning and implementation of changes in work and in learning opportunities at work.