COGNITIVE SCIENCES AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Learning at Work: Maximising the Potential of Lifelong Learners at the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learners are individuals who pursue learning as a voluntary and self-driven vocation. Given their commitment to continual improvement, an organisation's lifelong learners can potentially increase performance overall. This study aims to identify the factors that motivate lifelong learners to pursue lifelong learning and the challenges that they face in attaining this goal. In doing this, a group of employees across three organisations was selected based on their performance on three online learning platforms. They were then interviewed to gain an understanding of their specific motivations and challenges in pursuing self-directed learning. Three considerations were made for the organisations when planning and investing in the appropriate interventions to enable and support lifelong learning within their organisations based on the factors and barriers that were discovered from the interviews.

Keywords: lifelong learning, leadership development, talent development, human resource management

1   INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is defined as "on-going, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge - driven by personal or professional motivations" (Department of Education and Science Ireland, 2000). The Commission of the European Communities defines it as the all purposeful learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). Jarvis (2006) defines the term as "a combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically and integrated into the individual resulting in a continually changing person". The common trend from these descriptions is the observation of the term as a continuous pursuit of knowledge, education, and skill -- both for personal and professional development.

This study is interested in the context of lifelong learning within an organisation. The focus is on traits, characteristics, and behaviours of members of an organisation, or employees who demonstrate habits that reflect the definitions outlined. These are individuals who display strong will to obtain knowledge -- which can come from intrinsic motivations such as interest and job satisfaction. Further, it can also be driven by extrinsic motivations such as promotion and salary increase. In this context, it is hypothesised that lifelong learners hold the potential to improve productivity derived from their grit and resilience, enhance innovation from their desire to learn and re-learn, and increase likelihood of realisation of company targets.

In this regard, identifying lifelong learners is a useful exercise, given the potential in benefitting the organisation. Further, based on this hypothesis, creating a conducive workplace for them could also give advantage to the organisation, while driving the probability of developing more performance-driven employees towards harnessing a self-driven learning culture. It needs to be established, however, that creating a learning culture holds many perspectives - given its reliance on behavioural change.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a vast body of research on lifelong learning. These are in the context of acquiring life skills throughout life i.e., youth, adulthood, and as a form of empowerment as an adjacency to conventional education. This study focuses on lifelong learning in the workplace dimension, which relates to the performance of employees.

One report by the Economist (2017) highlighted the criticality of economies to invest in training and continuing education over the working life their citizens. This is also a measure in facilitating parity to the probability of success between low and high skilled labourers that attribute to economic development. Plant and Turnery (2005) align to this proposition in positing that availability of workplace direction through ample resources and suitable framework for employees are vital in realising the intent of nurturing learning. These observations point to the value of self-

development towards overall economic prosperity via employment security and capability development in society.

Kommers and Fischer (1999) elaborates on the perspectives of lifelong learning in the forms of self-directed education, learning by choice, collaborative endeavour, and organisational upskilling. The grouping of perspectives provides an insight that can be considered by governments and organisations towards providing focus and resources towards supporting their social or people development efforts in upskilling. Ahlgren and Engel (2011) argue that as companies have a vital role to invest in people development, the direction has been leaning towards 'job related' and 'internal' programmes. This observation is driven by the requirement of organisations to customise the outline and execution of training courses to the requirements of their business needs. Anton and Shikov (2018) have further expanded on this concept on company support for people development by contesting the need for organisation to chart personalised learning paths for their workforce. This mode is argued to be an effective measure in aligning organisational goals with specific competency strengths of employees.

Recently, the concept of 'learning in the flow of work' is obtaining popularity among both capability development practitioners. According to Bersin and Zao-Sanders (2019), this concept posits that for learning to happen, it needs to fit the working schedules of employees. Further, instead of seeing corporate learning as a goal, it is observed as a form that is 'accessible to the workers.' Dede and Richards (2020) further posited that the concept of lifelong learning is to be introduced to students, instead of waiting for it to happen once they secure employment. This suggestion is based on transitional changes that are expected to happen globally such as technological development and climate change, which require earlier preparation given their scale and impact. While this idea is new, it is not a radical shift from the traditional framework of organisational learning which suggests that 70% of learning is at work, while 20% is through supervisory coaching, with the remaining 10% happens in the classroom (Lombardo and Eichinger, 2000).

The literature on lifelong learning within the context of professional development cover a wide range of dimensions including the role of employers, the need for personalised curation, and the emerging need for lifelong learning to happen within higher learning, even before students secure employment. As the world of work and education shift to online distance learning, during COVID-19, it can be expected that the trend would displace in-person learning in the classroom sooner than expected (LinkedIn Learning, 2021). Advancement of technology has also made this shift faster - which changes the expectations for flexibility of learning on the move.

This present study aims to understand employee motivation in undertaking self-driven learning, their preferred modes of learning, and hurdles that block their intent attain knowledge. The study was done on a group of employees who were considered lifelong learners. They were selected based on their performances on three online learning platforms which they had participated voluntarily.

3   METHODS

To understand lifelong learning motivations and traits, employees from three organisations were selected for interviews. They were selected based on their ranking as best employees across three online learning programmes that were invested in by their employers and provided for the workforce. Five top employees were chosen for each online platform, a total of 15 employees were interviewed. The employees are of the ages of 30 – 40 and mostly middle managers with 8 – 10 years of working experience. They mostly work in various roles within their respective organisations, including engineering, human resources management, business development, and corporate finance. This is intended to collect a more diverse range of input derived from different work requirements of these functions. Yet, it can be argued that each role has unique hurdles that would pose similar blockers to the workers.

The performance of the employees in online learning is taken as a metric of their self-driven desire to learn and upskill themselves. The online learning programmes focus on modules related to business (e.g., finance, marketing, HR (Human Resource)), leadership (e.g., communication, coaching) as well as innovation (e.g., digital, machine learning). By intent, the objectives of organisations in subscribing to the online learning is to facilitate their staff to be upskilled at times that are workable to their respective schedules. Further, it is also becoming more of a target among the workforce - given how most roles and functions are moving online, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The employees were interviewed across several areas to provide a wholesome discussion on their habits and preferences as consumers of the online learning programmes. The questions of the interviews ranged across the following areas:

1.   Motivation for their voluntary participation – Why do the interviewees engage in self-learning?
2.   Preferred timing of their learning exercises – When do the interviewees consume themselves in undertaking voluntary learning?
3.   Features of the programmes that attract them – What are the key aspects of their preferred learning methods and platforms that keep them engaged?
4.   Areas of improvement for better experience – How can the existing experience in learning can be improved?
5.   Emerging challenges in upskilling and potential mitigations – What are their outlook on self-learning and how might their wish list look like?

From the interviews, analyses were done to determine trends among the learners including preferences of time and format of learning, drivers in learning, and main challenges and hurdles that are blocking them. Several considerations are proposed for organisations to implement within their workforce. Nevertheless, context is crucial to guarantee appropriate application of the recommendations made to the differing organisational culture, business model, as well as wider societal and geographical structure of where the organisation is based.

4   FINDINGS

When enquired about their rationale for pursuing online learning voluntarily, 78.6% of the sampled interviewees provided feedback that are related to personal development, while the other 21.4% gave input related to their job requirement. None of the respondents answered accreditation as the motive to pursue learning, although the courses that they took part in did provide certifications of towards the end of the modules that they had undertaken.

In terms of preferred times of day, the answers received from the interviewees seem to be distributed equally across many durations or segments of the day (Figure 1.0). A higher portion of interviewees answered that they favour to learn in the morning, before commuting to the workplace. Among the other interviewees, the preferred learning times are almost equal between lunch hours, post work, Saturdays, or Sundays, and during the travel to and from the workplace.
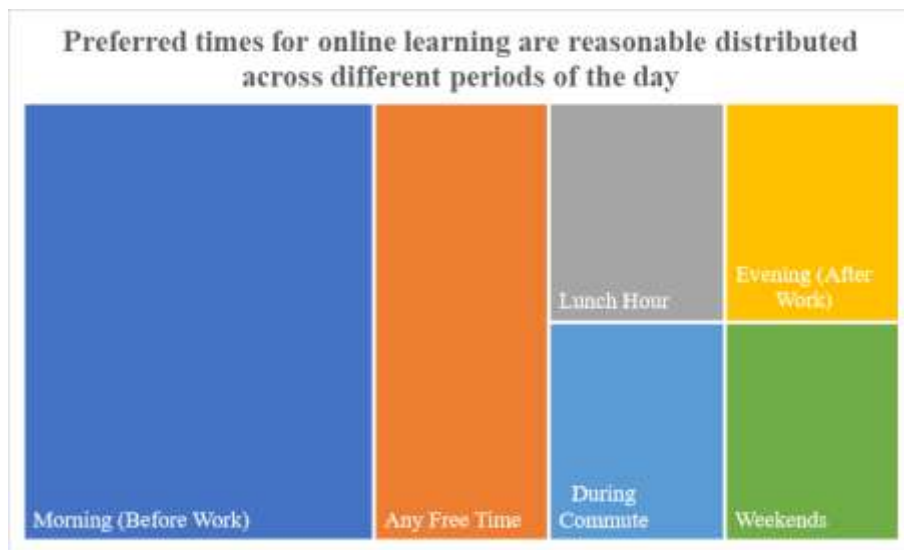

Figure 1. Preferred times for online learning.

The learning programmes that the workers take part in cover a diverse range of topics such as leadership, business, and innovation. When asked about the rationale for employees to return and keep on using online learning, the following answers were among the most popularly given:

1. Relevance to job function
2. Curation of the content i.e., bite-sized video, simple language
3. Flexible learning on-the-go

The interviewees were largely satisfied with their online learning encounter and gave minimal constructive input. One interviewee highlighted the need to align content to geographical or industrial context, as the content was developed for audiences in North America or Europe. Another interviewee expressed that the content could be too broad i.e., as an overview. Most

interviewees highlighted that their primary challenge is time. The identified challenge is related to the demands of their job functions, especially those related to operations. It must be recorded that while time is limited, most of the interviewees try to be available to dedicate themselves for learning.

5   DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper lead to three considerations, as follows:

Lifelong learners don't have time, they make time.

One finding highlighted how interviewees dedicate various parts of the day to learning. While there is a larger sample who prefer to study in the morning before work, the other portions of the day are approximately equally distributed across the sample. There is also a group of respondents who highlighted that they prefer filling their available spare time in the day with educational activities such as online learning.

Almost all of the interviewees noted time as the main hurdle in participating in voluntary learning. This observation is similar to the input commonly given by those given are not actively taking part in self-learning. This illustrates how the main challenge faced by lifelong learners are similar to those who are not. Nonetheless, they dedicate specific time or nurture a behaviour of slotting any available time with education as much as possible - as a measure of maximising productivity.

The suggestion of learners making time to dedicate to their learning correlate to the 'learning in the flow of work' concept (Bersin and Zao-Sanders, 2019) which investigates how learning can happen within the schedules of the employees. One question that arises is if companies can facilitate this need better by making learning a more deliberate part of their workforce's day-to-day activities.

It's all about relevance.

The main factor that attracts employees to sustain online learning is the content's relevance to their workplace requirements. This is an intriguing situation as most interviewees refer to 'personal development as the primary reason to undertake lifelong learning, with 'work requirements' ranking second. This indicates that the employees were also indicating the convergence of personal and professional development as a reason to undertake online learning.

This prevailing indicator on the significance of 'relevance in learning content' highlights the need for organisations to meticulously curate the curriculum that they invest in or disseminate to the workforce. This indicate that employees look for purpose and meaning in the learning that they engage in, towards delivering their tasks and achieving their professional targets.

The case for relevance is also aligned with the suggestion of Anton and Shikov (2018) for personalised learning paths to be shaped within the workforce. It indicates the need for learning to be tailored and curated as close as possible to the focus area or job scope of an employee.

Keep it short and sweet.

While content relevance ranked highly among the interviewees, it is also noted that the curation and delivery of modules are vital factors that could sustain the group of learners to be kept engaged, while attracting new employees to undertake to learn. 'Bite-sized' modules were cited by interviewees as tempting for them to sustainably ingest the offered knowledge, in addition to the flexibility of online learning, which allows employees to get educated whenever and wherever possible.

The preference for micro-size learning illustrates a transformation in terms of employee preference which could also be motivated by the level of attention. As 'time' is highlighted a main challenge for them to pursue learning, packaging the modules in a manner where they could be consumed gradually is a possible mitigation.

6   CONCLUSION

The discussions presented in this study are aimed to provide considerations for employers in their investment and design of learning solutions for their workforce. In a post COVID-19 era, where workplace learning has moved online, it needs to be noted how the budgeting allocated in funding learning needs to be managed in a meticulous and careful manner, to ensure optimised returns on investment on expensive programmes and courses.

While lifelong learners can push the case for organisation goals, it must be observed that they are relatively the minority within the wider workforce. Therefore, it is crucial for the size of the lifelong learner demography within an organisation needs to be enlarged, towards creating a stronger 'learning culture.' This objective, however, remains a primary hurdle for most companies as it is related changes in mindset and behaviour.

As the interviewees of this study is considerably narrow, it is interesting to note if similar trends are observed when a wider sample size are studied. The assumption of this study is that the top performers across the online learning programmes are true lifelong learners. It could be argued that the next five across the platforms are just as motivated in their aspiration to pursue new skills and knowledge.

One implication of this study is on emerging trends and opportunities that can be leveraged on from the COVID-19 distance learning and remote working experience. The considerations provided as part of this study are for organisations to implement in cohesion with developments arising from recent experiences such as hybrid learning, mass upskilling, and transferable skills across industries.

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