

SYMPOSIUM:

***WORKPLACE MENTORS IN BUSINESS ENVIRONMENTS:  
WHAT DO THEY DO?***

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Abstract:

One of the most significant outcomes of training reform that has taken place over the past decade has been the (re)claiming of workplaces as legitimate learning environments. With the move to de-institutionalise training, the role of the workplace mentor falls under the spotlight. Critical issues are the quality and diversity of learning occurring in such environments and the extent to which workplace mentors are ready, willing and able to fulfil what appears to be demanded of them.

Since the mid-1990s, Australian research has contributed to a growing body of literature on workplace learning. Yet there is precious little attention paid to the conceptualisation of the role of mentor as it might apply in an enterprise setting or how this role might vary, and the degree to which learning is formalised, in differently sized enterprises.

Our previous research has demonstrated that the single most important factor in the quality of the workplace learning is the workplace mentor. The learning environment and processes ("learning culture"?) within an enterprise provide a powerful framework which shapes how a person who helps others learn might operate.

A number of authors have identified functions/skills that characterise the mentoring relationship. Insights from examining apprentices' learning on-the-job also suggest that the workplace mentor may alter the "anatomy" of work to help the learner grasp its component parts and their interrelatedness. The extent to which these functions/skills are evident and different from those embedded in the workplace trainer standards is one of the prime foci of this research.

The paper will examine this issue in the light of research data gathered within a National Research and Evaluation Committee funded project during 1998-99. Data will be analysed from a range of mentors across three states (SA, NSW, Victoria) and three industries (real estate, building and construction, information technology).