

Workplace Learning through Core Competencies

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Abstract

Workplace learning through the delivery of core competencies in Training Packages explores contextualised models for the development of generic competencies in the workplace and highlights the benefits to individuals, supervisors and the organisation.

This report overviews a range of issues faced by industry when providing training in generic skills or core competencies in Training Packages and reports on one industry's initiative in addressing this need.

It demonstrates how the forest products industry utilises critical incidents and capitalises on legislative requirements such as participatory and consultative practices arising from the OH&S Act 2000 as the basis for workplace learning. It shows how these critical needs are integrated into work-based projects, aligned to the core competencies in the relevant training package and delivered in a holistic manner. Participation and successful completion of these work related projects thus becomes the vehicle to achieving core competencies in Training Packages.

This report describes the personal and industry outcomes in terms of equity issues especially those relating to workplace language, literacy and numeracy requirements. By being contextual and purpose driven, these projects have helped establish a culture of workplace learning whereby the sponsors of the projects become learners themselves and outcomes are meeting both organisational and legislative requirements.

Introduction

This report describes the outcomes of a federally funded Workplace English Language and Literacy Program conducted in partnership with Highland Pine Products and TAFE NSW Western Institute.

This program developed strategies to enable employees to develop the language, literacy and numeracy strategies needed to cope with OH&S compliance, technological changes and ensuing changes to workplace learning and workplace practices which have recently been updated at Highland Pine. It also proposed to assist key personnel to develop language, literacy and numeracy skills to implement the core competencies in the Certificates in Sawmilling and Processing through integration with their induction and continuous improvement practices.

The outcome of this Program was the development of a strategic model for workplace learning utilising work-based projects as the mode of delivery for core competencies in Training Packages.

This report outlines the issues facing industry which led to the development of this model, the processes used and the benefits of the model to the organisation and the individual.

Literature review

With the advent of Training Packages and obligations for compliance with the OH&S Act 2000, greater demands are being placed on enterprises and their employees. Language, literacy, numeracy, teamwork, problem-solving, technology and learning-to learn are some of the skills considered essential to maintaining employability and viability of workplaces.

The report, *Frequently Asked Questions about Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Issues in the Australian Quality Training Framework (ANTA 2002 pp1-4)* outlines the “risks if ... learners do not achieve the language, literacy or numeracy skills they need to successfully participate in training, and perform competently in the workplace. These risks may not only be for the RTO and learner, but more broadly for society and create unnecessary barriers for learners that may undermine the effectiveness of their training. It further recognises the role between literacy proficiency and context for “the methods used to achieve certain literacy and numeracy tasks will differ according to the workplace requirements, technology and culture hence the knowledge and skills learnt in a training environment may not “necessarily be the same skills that are demanded in the workplace”.

The relationship between core competencies and employability skills is most recently highlighted in the report commissioned by the Department of Employment Science and Training (DEST) and the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), *Employability Skills for the Future* in 2002. This report outlines the skills Australian employers identify as being critical for ongoing employability and the importance of non-technical skills in supporting “increased competitiveness, innovation, flexibility and client focus.” (Australian Chamber of Commerce 2002 p1)

Enterprises are increasingly seeking a more highly skilled workforce where the generic and transferable skills are broadly distributed across the organisation. These skills are also referred to as employability skills and are often reflected in the core competencies in most training packages or are embedded in technical focused competency standards.

The term employability skills as used in the 'Employability Skills for the Future' project is defined as "skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions (Australian Chamber of Commerce 2002 p49).

These skills referred to as the Employability Skills Framework include :

- **communication** skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers;
- **team work** skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes;
- **problem-solving** skills that contribute to productive outcomes;
- **initiative and enterprise** skills that contribute to innovative outcomes;
- **planning and organising** skills that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning;
- **self-management** skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth;
- **learning** skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes; and
- **technology** skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks (ibid p.7)

These skills are often reflected in training packages and are central to the core competencies. Some examples of core competencies which address these skills, include

- ?? FPIOHS1A Follow OHS Policies/Procedures
- ?? FPIG16A Maintain Interactive Communication in the Workplace
- ?? FPIG29 A Work effectively with others
- ?? FPIG22 A Plan to undertake routine task
- ?? FPIG39A Implement quality control
- ?? FPIG30A Interpret and solve numerical problems -basic

Consequently a question often posed by industry is that if these personal attributes and skills are so important and if employees need to "see the link between information and enterprise performance" (Australian Chamber of Commerce 2002 p49), and once skills are learnt, how can enterprises provide opportunities for learners to transfer these skills and "apply their theoretical knowledge to relevant workplace processes or tasks" (ANTA 2002 P. 11) in innovative and cost-effective ways.

There are many complex and varied issues facing industry in delivering training regardless of whether they are core or technical competencies. Factors driving industry to explore other and more cost-effective modes of delivery are factors relating to

?? time

- ?? replacement of staff
- ?? cost of replacement of staff
- ?? training
- ?? assessment
- ?? personnel attitudes
- ?? cultural change

The National Centre for Vocational Education and Research explored these issues in their report *What Makes for Good Workplace Learning (2003)*. It supports the view that effective workplace learning should provide enterprises with the capacity to innovate (NCVER p.2). It discusses how changes in the workplace have meant that the skill level of employees must be continuously developed...with employers demanding generic skills such as communication and problem-solving skills, in addition to technical skills.

Enterprises which consider themselves learning organisations, encompass the concept of workplace learning and address and approach the development of employability skills of their staff in varied ways.

This report goes on to discuss one innovative and cost-effective method which is customised to individuals and the organisation, ensures inclusiveness and extends the work capability of employees.

The Research Method

The focus of our research and work has been Highland Pine Products, a newly established forest products industry in the central west employing around 200 people. With a \$30 million dollar upgrade of two manufacturing sites, came the introduction of technology, new procedures and new methods of working. Highland Pine Products embraced the delivery of training packages as a means of recognising the workplace learning that needed to be undertaken by staff. Whilst a large proportion of the technical training was on-the-job and had been completed, the company was in a quandary over

- ?? delivery of the core competencies within the training packages
- ?? the literacy and numeracy needs of a number of their employees
- ?? ways of enhancing employee's communication skills to reflect the combining of 2 inherited workplace cultures to allow a new workplace culture to emerge.

After a series of round-table meetings with management, supervisors, the OH&S Coordinator and the Training Systems Coordinator the enterprise sought Workplace English Language and Literacy funding to utilise the core competencies in training packages as a means of addressing a large number of issues impacting on HPP's business.

We

- ?? identified critical needs that relied on the employability skills of its employees

- ?? established their feasibility with all stakeholders ie the funding body, the enterprise's lead-team, the OH&S committee, Training Systems Coordinator and supervisors
- ?? prioritised the outcomes
- ?? developed the training programs – delivery and assessment
- ?? piloted the programs
- ?? evaluated and made changes
- ?? reviewed the process and the product

Consequently we developed a model that

- ?? Developed the literacy and employability skills of employees to contend with HPP's policies and procedures;
- ?? Explored which compliance issues associated with the OH&S Act 2000 could act as the catalyst for rethinking the delivery of core competencies;
- ?? Utilised critical incidents to provide the context for core competencies;
- ?? Used work-based projects as the mode of delivery of the core competencies and as a means to developing the literacy and employability skills of operator level employees;
- ?? caused minimum disruption to production

To ensure “good practice” in the delivery of the core competencies, we

- ?? developed 2 training program based on workplace needs
- ?? aligned the programs to the core competencies
- ?? integrated the 4 core competencies which best reflected the training programs
- ?? planned a holistic approach to delivery that was predominantly on-the-job training and used continuous assessment over a period of time against the assessment instruments developed by FAFPESC and ANTA
- ?? maximised the participation of all workers in each work area
- ?? ensured the delivery and assessment did not exceed the workplace requirements.

Work Based Projects

As work-based projects can be either task-based projects or people-process projects, the concept was ideally suited to addressing critical needs of the workplace and the delivery of the core competencies. At the time, the development and review of Safe Operating Procedures's (SOP's) and rewriting the Induction Program for new and existing employees were seen as critical to compliance with the OH&S Act 2000, experience has shown they are a potential source of contextualised training for many industries and enterprises.

In essence, work-based projects reflect the ‘built in not bolted on’ approach to the integration of language, literacy and numeracy into training. By utilising workplace issues such as development or review of SOP's or completion of the enterprise's induction program as the context for employees to use and respond to language, literacy and numeracy skills as well as problem-solving and critical thinking , it also allows opportunities for employees to develop attributes required for working as a team, for motivation and adaptability. They also demonstrated how workplace

documents may vary in their use of language and structure across industries or workplaces, and that learners may need to be specifically taught how to read and understand such workplace materials. As the work-based projects in this model involve learning-on-the-job with a literacy practitioner as facilitator, learners become familiar with both the subject and the context “When we know the context, written texts are easier to understand.”(ANTA p.11)

To ensure their success the work-based projects needed to be

- ?? meaningful to both the employees and their work areas
- ?? relate to the performance of the work section
- ?? supported by all stakeholders
- ?? Resourced appropriately. For example,
 - o the project needed to be achievable within 4-10 weeks
 - o team members were to be available to participate in workshops
 - o supervisors and specialists needed to be available to provide background and underpinning knowledge and support when required
 - o supervisors needed to be willing to participate proactively in the presentation and debriefing stages of the projects

To complete the work-based project employees needed to commit to

1. participating in project meetings
2. working collaboratively over a period of time to complete a work area hazard identification pack and Safe Operating Procedure
3. using effective communication skills to provide constructive feedback
4. creating / reviewing Hazard ID or SOP for work area
5. gathering and sharing information at Toolbox meetings
6. demonstrating the SOP outlining quality and safety factors to their Supervisor and OH&S coordinator
7. completing a Learner guide

Delivery and assessment of Work-Based project model at HPP

Stage	Competency	Key Points	Activities	Assessment
Planning	FPIG29 A Work effectively with others	Underpinning Knowledge to work effectively together	Plan team goals Establish roles & responsibilities Participate active communication	Observation -participation -over time Quizzes
Planning	FPIG22 A Plan to undertake routine task	Identify task requirement Plan steps to complete task Review plan	Develop action plan	Participate in team project On-the-job observation of work practices and adherence to work practices and procedures
Implementation	FPIOHS1A Follow OHS Policies/Procedures	Recognise, report hazards Follow workplace procedures - control hazards & risks	Create /Review /Modify SOP 1. hazard identification 2. sop	Practical / theory On the job/ off the job 3 rd party report

		Communicate about hazards Employer/Employee responsibility Safe, clean healthy workplace Work safely Safe manual handling Apply emergency / accident		
Implementation and Presentation	FPIG16A Maintain Interactive Communication	Communicate information about work processes Participate in work discussion Identify & communicate issues arising from work area	Learner Guide Quizzes Observation of discussions to developing SOP Identify & communicate issues arising from SOP	Learner guide Participate in meeting Provide feedback at Toolbox Handover project and debrief with supervisors

Findings and Discussion

Key findings in the evaluation stage of the program included the following qualitative data:

“Identifying hazards, following isolation procedures, writing SOP’s and inductions have been identified as critical needs and are very much part of our compliance with the OH&S Act ” says General Manager Nigel Wilshier. “We want the employees to be involved and to contribute. This doesn’t just happen automatically. We needed to make it happen and WELL (Workplace English Language and Literacy) funding opened that door.”

Craig Grady, Highland Pine’s Training Systems Coordinator said that compliance with the OHS Act 2000 became a major focus of training over the past 18 months. We worked closely with Access staff at TAFE’s Bathurst campus to develop a series of work-based projects which we aligned against the core-competencies in the Certificate II in Forest and Forest Products. Employees then met regularly in their work-areas to identify hazards and write or review SOP’s over a period of 5 weeks; Employees are assessed holistically, over the period of the projects and against the assessment instruments developed by FAFPESC and ANTA.”

“The whole process of consultation and participation can be time-consuming and if employees don’t have the skills or the confidence, they’re not going to get involved” explains Ben Gawehn the Quality Systems Manager. “We’ve completed 35 SOP’s across 7 work-areas, 7 hazard identification packs and employees have made recommendations for control measures for over a hundred hazards. This whole process has given them some ownership over their work-areas and what happens in them and they better understand their responsibilities under ‘duty of care’”.

“What we’ve done is work with each work area for one hour a week for about 5 weeks. During these sessions we facilitate the process of identifying hazards and developing SOPs with employees. At the same time we are reinforcing appropriate

communication skills required to do these tasks: namely working together as a group, planning routine activities and following OH&S policies and procedures” says Kerry Windsor, WELL’s Contact person for the Western Institute. “The work is then presented to the Supervisor’s and Quality Assurance for review prior to being entered into HPP’s systems.

Kinga Macpherson, Workplace Education Coordinator at Bathurst Campus says “employees are being asked to participate more often and at many different levels. It can be very intimidating to sit in on a meeting with senior management and even more stressful to give feedback on issues or concerns. By building their skills and confidence in familiar territory such as their work areas and in relation to the work they do, employees develop skills in the key competencies and enhance their ‘employability’ which is essential to workplace learning and continuous improvement.”

Implementing a new Induction Program has been another training focus at HPP. Craig explains that “Through WELL funding we rewrote our Induction program and aligned the content against our core competencies. To support the personnel and supervisor’s delivering the Induction we developed a Training Guide to ensure consistency in delivery and a Learner’s Guide to enable new employee’s to participate proactively. Completion of the induction is over 6 months and involves not only the new employee, but also their supervisor’s, buddies and workplace assessors and formally recognizes the learning that occurs in the initial 6 months.

Qualitative and quantitative outcomes were measured in terms of benefits of utilising work-based projects to the organisation and individual`

Benefits of work-based projects

1. Facilitates team-working skills by bringing employees from specific work areas together to work on common personal and workplace goals
2. allows time to reflect on processes and procedures and how they could be improved
3. utilises supervises and other key workplace personnel to share their knowledge as needed
4. helps management to meet their performance indicators and for the organisation to meet compliance requirements
5. helps employees become aware of reasons why things happen or why certain processes are followed in the workplace
6. encourages employees to take greater responsibility over workplace issues which impact on them and their peers
7. promotes a continuous improvement or lifelong learning mindset across the enterprise
8. enables a language, literacy and numeracy specialist to work within the training environment thereby helping learners to apply the formal literacy or numeracy processes to industry tasks.

Benefits to the organisation

Improved accuracy in completing documentation: All employees undertaking the work-based projects and the new Induction Program are now able to accurately identify hazards and make recommendations for corrective procedures. They can also

develop Safe Operating Procedures and complete Incident Reports. Written communication has been improved through the Plain Englishing and reviewing the hazard identification packs and single hazard id's by the employees. Employees are more confident in completing required documentation thereby allowing HPP's achievement of compliance.

Improved productivity: Through increased confidence in making recommendations on safer and more efficient work practices, several employees have been able to improve productivity in their specific work areas and those areas associated with their tasks.

More effective consultation with employees: By encouraging employees to participate in the work-based projects in a non-threatening environment, they were able to have input into identifying hazards, making recommendations for corrective action and have a say in their Safe Operating Procedures. Supervisors have also been assisted in the way they conduct their Toolbox Meetings which is another format for consultation at HPP.

More effective communication:

Work-based projects have facilitated communication flows at both cross-sectional and vertically throughout the organisation. Through the presentations to management, it has promoted interactive communication, awareness and helped build workplace relations. Supervisors and middle management gained a clearer understanding of the workplace issues effecting/impacting on employees and production and were often able to make practical and immediate decisions on safety issues.

Increased participation in training:

By increasing the generic/employability skills of employees through delivery of core competencies, HPP has been able to harness the skills of personnel which was historically under-utilised.

All employees now have an equal opportunity to undertake and complete formal training with 49 employees completing 4 core competencies.

OH&S measures are more effective:

By working on work-based projects developed by WELL and addressing HPP's critical needs, HPP now has a systematic approach to hazard identification, control and assessment and documentation. It has also completed 33 new SOP's which has enabled employees a forum by which to better identify with safety policies and procedures at HPP .

Benefits to the individual

Individuals pursuing further training opportunities:

By developing positive working relationships with employees through on-the-job training, we have been able to mentor 5 employees in nominating for various expressions-of-interest for positions of leading-hands and traineeships and a further 11 to work on projects with the new safety officer.

Greater participation in teams and meetings: Through the Work-Based projects, employees developed the oral literacy skills and gained experience by participating in teams to write SOP's for their specific work-areas. As a team, they also worked together to present their findings and recommendations to their supervisors, safety and QA. They gained a better knowledge of OH&S policies and procedures and a sense of ownership of what happens in their workareas.

More effective communication:

One of the major benefits of the WELL Program was that employees developed the oral communication skills and confidence to raise issues directly with management through the presentation of their work-base projects to their supervisors and management representatives. The presentations provided a neutral forum whereby both parties could share concerns and issues and develop action plans in a non-threatening facilitated environment. Employees gained a better understanding of HPP's policies and processes and the needs of and implications for supervisors.

Conclusion

This report has described a model for workplace learning that encourages employee's to "achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions" (Australian Chamber of Commerce p) through the delivery of core competencies.

It demonstrates how one forest products industry utilises critical incidents and capitalises on legislative requirements such as participatory and consultative practices arising from the OH&S Act 2000 as the basis for workplace learning. It shows how these critical needs are integrated into work-based projects, aligned to the core competencies in the relevant training package and delivered in a holistic manner. Participation and successful completion of these work related projects thus becomes the vehicle to achieving core competencies in Training Packages.

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