

# **EMPLOYER SPONSORED LEARNING: RE-READING THE TEXTS.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The literature addressing workplace learning indicates an increasing positive trend in the provision of learning opportunities by employers for their workers. This improving trend is most apparent in large enterprises (employing over 100 workers) where 99% of large Australian organizations are reported as providing some form of training and 93% of this group also stating that they provide structured training. As the size of the enterprises investigated reduces, it was found that the quantity, scope and structured nature of the learning opportunities provided by their employers also reduced. This indicates a strong correlation between enterprise size and the quality of employer-sponsored workplace learning. Recent studies identify additional predictors of workplace learning quality including workforce composition, position of the employee within the organization, industry sector and previous studies undertaken by the employee.

My research into a large Australian company's performance in employer sponsored learning (as part requirement for the Doctor of Education program at the University of South Australia) defies the picture constructed within the associated Australian and international literature. The company is an exemplar of the economic and organizational models that predict a strong enterprise learning culture. However, little in the way of structured, employer-sponsored learning is in evidence, suggesting a dichotomy between the company's practice and that reported in the literature.

This paper presents a summary of the literature on employer-sponsored workplace learning and uses the resulting predictors of learning quality to assess the performance of this Australian company. It is then argued that the significant divergence between the company and the reported studies identifies a gap in this literature. Finally, an alternative research perspective is offered for pursuing answers to the question: why does a company that conforms so well to predictors of economic performance fare so poorly when compared with the literature on employer-sponsored learning?

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Australian literature addressing workplace learning indicates an increasing positive trend in the provision of learning opportunities by employers for their workers. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 1994, 1997, 2003) shows that employer provided learning activities in Australian workplaces continues to expand, albeit with a reduction in the overall expenditure committed. Smith and Freeland (2002: 17) target the issue of employer sponsored training directly, concluding that:

[d]espite this apparent decrease in expenditure levels on industry training in recent years, there is considerable evidence to show that Australia is developing a culture of training and learning in its enterprises. 80% of Australian workers receive some form of training in their workplace, over a third of workers receive structured training from their employer and over 60% of enterprises provide structured training for their employees.

This improving trend is most apparent in large enterprises (employing over 100 workers), where Smith and Freeland (2002: 5) report that 99% of larger organizations provided some form of training during the previous year while 93% of this group also stated that they provided structured training. Although 'structured training' is defined by the ABS as incorporating less formal on-job-training, the picture painted, especially for larger organizations, is one of a rich, appropriately targeted learning culture.

This paper discusses the initial stage of a research project being undertaken as part requirement for the award of Doctor of Education of the University of South Australia. The specific aim of this initial stage of the research project is to identify the divergences between the literature on learning in large companies and the company being researched, and to build a case for the need to further investigate the cause(s) and implications of the divergences. The research site is a large Australian company (approximately 300 employees) which I refer to by the pseudonym "FTI". The overall aim of the project is to offer an alternative 'reading' of the apparent divergence between FTI and the literature on employer-sponsored learning in large companies by identifying how learning and learners are discursively constructed within the enterprise being researched.

Within FTI significant levels of formal learning should be undertaken. Smith and Hayton (1999), for

example, point to a strong relationship between company size and training provision, finding that “enterprise size was very strongly associated with both the volume and diversity of training” (p. 265). There is little documentary or observational evidence that sufficient structured learning is occurring within FTI. While ‘sufficient’ may be a relative term that is difficult to pin down, ‘insufficiency’ is more easily quantified. There are only four structured learning courses that FTI provides: a Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment and Training; six-monthly refresher lectures on Occupational Health and Safety in the Workplace; induction/orientation for new employees, and a software development application course. Except for the last course, these examples are all driven by the requirements of legislation or clauses in contracts that have been mandated by customers. Outside of these prescribed courses there appears to be little obvious organized learning (formal or non-formal) occurring within FTI. The absence of professional development, skill improvement or even the provision of an understanding of how FTI performs its core functions suggests an ‘insufficiency’ of structured learning opportunity.

## **Employer Sponsored Learning**

Within this paper I use the terms ‘training’ and ‘learning’. Each has a defined meaning within the literature and is not used interchangeably with the other. This is an important distinction as training is, in most respects a subset of the larger, more inclusive concept of learning. Foley (2000) treats learning as an innate, human trait, one that is involved in all human activity. The pervasiveness of learning in our lives is captured well by Foley (2000: xiii):

[p]eople learn, continually, informally and formally, in many different settings: in workplaces, in families, through leisure activities, through community activities, and in political action.

Within the workplace, then, we find a plethora of activities that may have a dimension of ‘workplace learning’. Their activities may be characterized by the purpose for which they are undertaken and the degree of structure they possess. Boud and Garrick (in Boud and Garrick, 1999: 6) for example, list three major purposes as improving performance for the benefit of the organization, the learner, and society (*i.e.* a social benefit). Foley’s (2000) definitions for the types of learning that are found in the workplace address these characteristics well. Formal learning, for example is characterized by “a defined curriculum and often leads to a qualification” (Foley, 2000: p. xiv) and largely encompasses the idea of ‘training’ (Butler, in Boud and Garrick, 1999). Non-formal learning opportunities are those that require some form of systematic instruction but usually for a single instance (learning to operate a new machine) or infrequently. Informal learning occurs when employees attempt to learn from their experiences. “It involves individual or group reflection on experience, but does not involve formal instruction.” (Foley, 2000: p. xiv) Incidental learning is the final category used and concerns learning that occurs while performing other activities. The intention of the person is not to learn but to perform some other activity. The learning occurs within the context of the activity being undertaken.

What distinguishes these forms from each other is their “degree of *formalisation* – that is the degree to which learning activities are socially organized and controlled.” (Foley, 2000: xv. emphasis in original). This organization and control generally increases from incidental, through non-formal and informal learning and on to formal learning activities which exhibit the most tightly controlled and systematic of approaches.

In this paper the focus is on the provision of employer-sponsored learning; formal learning opportunities for which the employer is willing to commit time, personnel and capital as an investment in employees’ abilities to perform their jobs and provide a return on that investment in the form of innovation and quality. Consequently, although the informal and incidental learning addressed by Garrick (1998) is acknowledged as an important element of workplace learning, and one that is worthy of significant research effort, it is not included in this paper. This form of learning does not necessarily occur from a conscious act of the employer to commit resources that might otherwise be spent on plant or be accumulated as profit. It may not be considered as employer-sponsored learning and is thus not within the focus of my research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature addressing employer sponsored learning in large organizations is less expansive than might be expected. The implication made by many authors reporting on workplace learning is that the quality and quantity of learning opportunities in businesses are directly related to the size of the organization (DfEE, 2000; Johnston and Loader, 2003; Joyce *et al.*, 1995; Kearns, 2002; Lange *et al.*, 2000). Kearns (2002), for example, discusses the variation in training strategies between organizations.

Without qualification, he categorizes the data in terms of company size, showing how approaches other than on-job-training (e.g. seminars, workshops, conferences, job rotation) increase in quantity as the organization size increases. Although the data tend to support this assumption (Johnson, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2001), its acceptance as a general 'norm', and the associated assumption - that the issues surrounding employer-sponsored learning are more severe in small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) - is prevalent in the literature.

Training issues associated with SMEs seem to be the subject of a larger percentage of reports and articles. This may be due to the perceived importance of SMEs within many Western economies. In Scotland, for example, over 98% of all companies are SMEs and collectively they employ almost half of the workforce (Lange *et al.*, 2000). In Canada and the United States SMEs account for 67% and 61%, of the workforce respectively (Cheykowski and Slotsve, 2003) while in Europe this figure is over 90% (Nottingham Research Observatory, 2002). In Australia SMEs make up almost 97% of the private sector and employ 51% of the workforce (Gibb, 1997). Although it seems common sense to view SMEs as the "driving engine of growth, job creation and competitiveness in domestic and global markets" (Nottingham Research Observatory, 2002: 3), other research challenges this view. Whincop (2001, reported in Nottingham Research Observatory, 2002: 3) for example, finds that: "apart from a few growing businesses, most SMEs provide jobs that are unstable, poorly paid and offer relatively little training".

This reported (comparative) lack of employer sponsored learning within SMEs is, however, an important issue, which attracts research grants from governments and other bodies with interests in the economic welfare of the country. The significant number of workers that are employed by SMEs suggests that many employees may not be receiving as much training and development as their colleagues in larger enterprises. In today's globalized, competitive markets, employee knowledge and skills are continually being acknowledged as key components in the success of post-industrialized economies (Garrick, 1998, Walters *et al.* in Foley, 2004). Nations that do not invest in their people and, by extension, the nation's corporate knowledge base, will lag behind their competitors. If almost half of the nation's workforce is not involved in this pursuit because of a lack of learning opportunities within SMEs, then it becomes a cause for great concern (Marlow, 1997). The reaction is to commission research into why the situation exists and to develop strategies for overcoming this lack. This leads to a rich description of workplace learning issues in SMEs but also to an impoverished understanding of how learning is constructed and operationalized in larger organizations. Simply scaling the numbers up to accommodate the larger number of employees does not take into account the significant differences between SMEs and larger enterprises. There is often a significant degree of heterogeneity in enterprise characteristics between firms of differing sizes; even within the same industry (Cheykowski and Slotsve, 2003). These differences may also drive a requirement to further differentiate between small and medium size enterprises (Johnston, 2002). Lange *et al.* (2000) also identifies the widely differing cultural characteristics of large and small firms as a core reason why the two cannot be thought of as the same.

Investigating the literature addressing enterprises of all sizes reveals a number of studies that link provision of employer sponsored learning to specific variables (ABS, 2003; Casey, in Boud and Garrick, 1999; Considine, 2000; Dawe, 2003; Smith, 2003; Smith and Freeland, 2002; Smith and Hayton, 1999; Smith and Keating, 1997; Statistics Canada, 2001). Although this literature suggests that there are many workplace learning issues that are polarized around company size, other factors do exist that appear to transcend this aspect. In a major study of workplace learning and development across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2001), it was found that several other factors are at work, including workforce composition, the employee's position within the company, industry sector, time available and the amount of previous studies undertaken by employees. This study investigated workplace learning across all Canadian provinces and within companies of all sizes and industries. Similar large scale studies by Smith and Hayton (1999) investigated 1,760 enterprises, of differing size in five different Australian industries over the period 1994-96. The study provides a well-crafted description of the state of training provision within a significant sample of Australian industries, investigating the largely untapped demand side of the training equation. The resulting model of drivers and modifiers of workplace training offers a useful tool for assessing factors that cause a company to decide to instigate training programs and policies.

A significant value in the work by Smith and Hayton is the aggregation of factors, addressed by other researchers, into one, evidential model. The three key drivers for employers providing workplace learning identified in the research by Smith and Hayton are variously addressed by other researchers, including Dawe (2002), Edwards (1997), and Figgis *et al.* (2001) on Workplace Change; Laplange and Bensted (1999) and Mathews, *et al.* (in Watkins, 1991) on Technological Change; and the Fuller *et al.*

(2003) and Morgan (1997) discussions on the Impact of TQM. Smith and Hayton also uncovered six ‘modifiers’ that determine how an enterprise implemented learning programs in response to the training drivers. These modifiers are variously addressed by other researchers including Ridoutt *et al.* (2002), Figgis *et al.* (2001), Lange *et al.* (2000) and Smith and Freeland (2002).

Table 1 illustrates the coverage of variables achieved by Smith and Hayton (1999) in comparison with similar studies.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Ridoutt</b>	<b>Figgis <i>et al</i></b>	<b>Lange <i>et al</i></b>	<b>Smith &amp; Freeland</b>	<b>Smith &amp; Hayton</b>
Change (Drivers)	x	x			x
Regulation/legislation	x	x		x	x
Industrial relations/Unions	x	x			x
Workforce composition	x				x
Workforce permanency	x				x
Size of enterprise	x			x	x
Industry sector	x				x
Australian ownership	x				x
Skill shortage		x			x
Management practices		x			x
Cost of training		x	x		
Availability		x	x		
Government incentives		x			
Enterprise culture		x	x		
Quality of provision		x	x		x

**Table 1: Factors affecting the take-up of training**

Dawe (2003) also recognizes the summative utility of Smith and Hayton’s findings, using them as a reference point against which to compare other research on the factors influencing the scope and volume of workplace training. The central position occupied by this work in the Australian literature makes it a useful starting point for examining FTI’s performance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The research project, of which this paper reports the initial stage, is grounded firmly within a constructionist epistemology, positing reality as socially and historically constructed (Burr, 1995). Each of us is born into a culture and adopts and adapts to that culture, taking on its rules, mores and understandings as the proper, or common sense way of living, acting and understanding the world, or reality (Crotty, 1998). As Crotty (1998: 59) puts it “We tend to take the ‘sense we make of things’ to be ‘the way things are’.” The corollary to this view is that each culture or sub-culture can construct different realities.

The constructionist perspective is made visible in this paper through the importance placed upon the texts cited in the literature review. These research reports and journal articles collectively construct a reality in which companies like FTI are good providers of employer-sponsored learning. The supporting evidence for this makes sense; the bigger the company the more resources that are available to support the development of employees. This uncritical acceptance of the ‘common sense’ understanding tends to subjugate other possible realities or readings of the texts. The purpose of much constructionist research, and of this project, is to break out of this “tyranny of the familiar” (Crotty, 1998: 59) and seek alternative realities or readings that better explain the situation at FTI.

The methodology adopted for the project is based upon discourse theory, again reflecting the importance placed upon texts as mediators of social construction (Gee, 1999). Within this paper

discourse theory and the associated discourse analysis based methods make only a brief appearance, indicating more the intent for the subsequent research activities rather than the design adopted for this initial stage of the project.

The preparatory research reported in this paper necessarily adopts a design more closely related to that employed by the literature reviewed above. The comparisons between FTI and the literature, discussed in the next section, are based upon a post-positivistic understanding of an objective, knowable reality, and one that has no competitors. This is needed to show that by using the measures of this understanding of the world FTI does not conform and that there may be an alternative reading of this company as a provider of employer-sponsored learning.

## **Methods**

The main task in this preparatory phase of my research is the comparison of FTI to the literature. As such much of the data to be collected is resident in the existing literature on workplace learning as well as the company's documentation (quality policy, personnel records, organizational charts etc.). This second data field suggests the use of document analysis as the key collection method supplemented by informal interviews with company personnel regarding the company's background and history. The centrality of document analysis to this stage of my research is underscored by Mertens (1998) who locates a company's history and current way of doing business within its documents and records, and relates their value to the fact that "[t]he researcher cannot be in all places at all times; therefore, documents and records give the researcher access to information that would otherwise be unavailable." (p. 324).

Although document analysis is the core of this data collection activity there are some data that can only be collected by interviewing long term members of the company. This is particularly so when attempting to identify how the company began, its history and the industries it works within. For these situations informal interviews were conducted with people who have been employed with the company for much of its history.

This background information, in concert with the interrogated company documents allowed me to construct a sound picture of the company in terms of its formal and informal practices. This allowed me to compare these two pictures, seeking out the similarities and differences.

## **COMPARING FTI TO THE LITERATURE**

In this section I compare the extant literature on factors affecting learning in the workplace with the situation within FTI. The aim is to show that FTI diverges significantly from the outcomes of the study undertaken and reported by Smith and Hayton.

### **Training Drivers**

Smith and Hayton (1999) identify three chief drivers that 'immediately give rise to a demand for training within the enterprise' (p. 262); workplace change, new technology and quality initiatives. They found the three drivers appearing consistently in both phases of their study and across industries and organization size. All three may be seen as change related, affecting the way work is performed in the enterprise and the way the need for training is identified. These drivers act as warning signs, or indicators that training needs to be implemented to forestall any threat to the success of the changes being undertaken.

FTI is a relatively new company, being incorporated in 1981 and originally employing less than ten people. The company increased in size rapidly during the late 1980s at the same time that Flexible Specialization (FS) was emerging as an influential discourse in organizational design (Casey, 2002; Littler, 1991). During the expansion the company adopted most of the characteristics of this approach, providing differentiated product variety, exploiting Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) as a multiplier of human effort, decentralizing control geographically and encouraging (limited) participation in decision making. The one aspect of Flexible Specialization that does not appear to have been adopted is the continuous upgrading and multi-skilling of employees (Littler, 1991). In its place FTI has adopted a practice of hiring in skills whenever they are seen to be lacking for a specific project or contract. Associated with this approach is the recruitment of skilled labour when new technologies are needed. The accreditation of FTI to ISO Quality Standard 9001 has mandated certain training requirements, among them the need to understand and implement the QA system. This has given rise to the conduct of periodic QA lectures for all employees to ensure that the QA system is employed in accordance with the Quality Assurance manual. Few initiatives associated with quality,

and linking to workplace training have arisen.

When assessing FTI for its compatibility with Smith and Hayton's (1999) training drivers, it appears that a 'pick and choose' approach has been adopted. Most aspects of FS and the introduction of new technologies that accord with FTI's owner's views have been embraced while those that do not have been abandoned for other, less costly options. Similarly the workplace training related requirements of ISO 9001 seem to have been implemented at their barest minimum level.

### **Training Modifiers**

Although explaining why companies initially decide to implement change-related training programs, the training drivers do not adequately identify the enormous diversity of training arrangements that seem to result from the same three initiators. Smith and Hayton found a broad spectrum of training practices employed in the data, suggesting that there are additional factors contributing to the variability of training provision in the workplace. Close analysis of the data revealed six additional variables that modified the effects of the initiating training drivers, "influencing the nature and extent of training activity." (Smith and Hayton, 1999: 258). The six moderators identified are presented below, with the way in which they relate to FTI addressed.

#### **Company Size**

FTI appears to defy the literature when looking at the connections between company size and the amount and types of training and learning that occur within the workplace. Smith and Hayton (1999) establish a strong link between enterprise size and both volume and diversity of training: the larger the company, the greater is the volume and diversity of training provided. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) classifies FTI as a "large" enterprise, employing over 100 employees. In the ABS report on Employer Expenditure and Practices in Australia (ABS, 2003), a positive correlation also is made between company size and expenditure on training, stating "Larger employers were more likely than smaller employers to provide structured training to their employees" (p. 2). Similar findings are evident in other reports of Australian employer training expenditure (Considine, 2000; Hall *et al.*, 2002; Kearns, 2000, Lange *et al.*, 2000) suggesting that FTI, with over 300 employees, should be providing significantly more structured learning opportunities than it presently appears to.

#### **Industry Traditions of Training**

Smith and Hayton (1999) found a strong correlation between training provided by enterprises and the traditions associated with learning in the enterprises' industry sector. FTI is situated within two industry sectors, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the Defence Industry. Both industries display traditions which value learning highly. The VET literature is replete with examples addressing the importance, form and approach to workplace training. Indeed, the *raison d'etre* of VET is adult learning, suggesting a range of strong traditions that embrace learning and its importance in the workplace. Maglen (cited in Chappell *et al.*, 2002) defines the scope of Australian VET industry as all-encompassing, threading through all aspects of work-related learning by stating that VET addresses:

all educational and instructional experiences be they formal or informal, pre-employment or employment related, off-the-job or on-the-job that are designed to directly enhance the skills, knowledge, competencies and capabilities of individuals, required in undertaking gainful employment, and irrespective of whether these experiences are designed and provided by schools, TAFE or higher education institutions, by private training providers or by employers in industry and commerce. (p. 4)

The Defence Industry is a conglomeration of other industries whose focus is the Australian Defence Organization (ADO), encompassing the military services and their support organizations. Many companies serving the ADO employ a significant percentage of ex-military personnel. There are 48 people at the research site and twenty-nine of these are either ex-military personnel or have worked within the ADO as public servants. Similarly, the senior managers of FTI are exclusively ex-ADO employees. The ADO commits a significant portion of its annual budget to learning. The Defence Force, for example, has approximately one-third of its entire strength involved in training (administering, teaching or learning) at any one point in time.

As a member of both VET and Defence industries, FTI should embody a strong ethic and commitment to training, resting upon a solid tradition of identification and satisfaction of learning needs for workers. Again, FTI does not seem to reflect this finding by Smith and Hayton. FTI's training policy, for example, is fully expressed on two pages of the company's Quality Manual, suggesting that learning is not a valued aspect of the company's culture. In similar vein only four structured learning programs appear in the company's internal training catalogue.

### **Occupational Structure**

The mix of occupational groups within the enterprise was also seen to influence training practices. Smith and Hayton cite Australian evidence that indicates a positive correlation between employees holding post-compulsory educational qualifications and the likelihood of further training. Thus,

[t]hose enterprises with higher numbers of managers and professionals in their workforces will tend to provide more training and often this training will be formal and off-job in nature. The survey data confirm this analysis.” (Smith and Hayton, 1999: 266)

Of the 300 employees within FTI over 73% hold post-secondary qualifications. The majority are technical, trade and post-trade qualifications, with a small cadre of professional software and electronics engineers – and an even smaller group of professional educators. Based upon this demographic FTI should be providing significant levels of additional formal training to these cohorts. As mentioned above, FTI conducts only four structured courses within the workplace. Formal, off-job training is rarely provided, other than equipment supplier training for systems that FTI is contracted to develop training courses for. This finding is mitigated to an extent by the company’s agreement to support employees undertaking external formal learning programs that directly improve their current job skill sets. However, the undertaking of education and training programs by employees is usually at their own instigation, and not as an objective identification of the need by the company, suggesting that the company’s strategy for corporate knowledge building adopts a *laissez-faire* approach.

### **Industrial Relations**

Reflections of the machinery of Australian Industrial Relations are seen in this variable. It was award restructuring and enterprise bargaining that emerged as important processes in the provision of training within organizations surveyed. The authors indicate that “industrial relations has a strong influence on the climate for training” (Smith and Hayton, 1999: 266) but could not find strong links to specific, consistent examples across industries or enterprises. The weak linking in the study, and the authors’ assertion that industrial relations was an *influence* on the *climate* for training suggests that it is a general factor without definable impact on any specific characteristics of workplace training.

This is one of the few areas in which FTI appears to correlate with the findings of Smith and Hayton. It is stressed, though, that this is a variable that is only weakly correlated to specific impacts on workplace learning. The company has no unionized labour structures in place. Although some employees may be members of trade unions or equivalent professional associations, there are no mechanisms for them to intervene with the company’s management on their members’ behalf. Most employees are hired on annually renewable contracts – a measure possibly designed to provide flexibility in staffing within the confines of federal or state unfair dismissal legislation. The absence of an advocate for employees may contribute to the lack of training, as no opportunity is available for workers to collectively bargain for such features of employment contracts. Why employees do not lobby management on the lack of training is an aspect of my proposed research that aims (in part) to investigate this apparent passivity.

### **Management Attitudes**

Smith and Hayton found a fragmented approach to training within the respondents’ organizations. It was found that senior management commitment to the principles of training is not always reflected in action by the middle managers. This aspect is largely an unknown factor in FTI and represents a key focus for research. It is intended to interview the Managing Director and both General Managers, as well as a cross section of the operational management staff with the aim of discerning the discourses that drive their thinking and action in relation to workplace learning.

### **Company Organization**

Although Smith and Hayton do not explicitly address the impact of enterprise organizational structure on the provision of learning opportunities, it is suggested in their research that there is a link. This may be seen primarily in their discussions on workplace change and the introduction of new technology. Both of these training drivers are addressed by Watkins (1991) who encapsulates their impact into a discussion focusing on flexible organizational structure, flexible technology and flexible labour, and “educating the flexible worker” (p. 40). The thesis is that a smaller, more highly skilled workforce, able to turn its collective hand to differing production methods and technologies is required to staff the equally flexible firm. Burns (1995) coordinates these links between the flatter organizational structure, flexible labour, and the need for training:

[t]he reality is that fewer employees are covering all the jobs and therefore doing more types of work. The flatter organization does not mean doing more with less but doing more differently. Tasks are approached in a much smarter way, and this is facilitated

because *education and training has enabled employees' perspectives to change*. (p. 71, emphasis added)

The way FTI is organized is a good example of Prior and Sabel's Flexible Specialization model as discussed by Burns (1995), Littler (1991) and Valentin (1999), or as McIntyre and Solomon (1999: 8) characterize it "the new workplace [where] work is organized around fluid teams...organizational decisions are made in cross-functional meetings...[and] flexibility is central to all operations, processes and employee understandings of their work." Within FTI a highly skilled core workforce is supplemented by employees on part-time or contract labour agreements, or work is sub-contracted to companies who can provide the necessary specialist labour for a specific period. This allows FTI to retain its core competencies while expanding and contracting as the need for labour dictates.

Flexibility is also required of employees within the core labour group of a flexible company. They are required to continually develop or renew their skills to meet the demands of economic competitiveness (Garrick, 1998: 42). It is in this area that the comparisons between FTI and the Flexible Specialization model break down. Although organizationally FTI exhibits the flexibility to adapt to new products and service requirements by consumers, it does not appear to be committed to employer-sponsored learning.

To restate the research problem, the preceding discussion presents a puzzling picture of a company that appears to fit well with the literature on contemporary organizational understanding with the exception of one, significant characteristic: structured employee learning seems to be poorly addressed. FTI is a model of the Flexible Specialization thesis, operating in diverse markets, altering its form and product lines to suit customer needs and employing innovative technologies in support of a (relatively) small, flexible workforce. The major divergence from this model is seen in the paucity of employer-sponsored learning opportunities provided to employees to ensure their continued skill flexibility. This divergence is revealed in Smith and Hayton's (1999) findings and is supported by the other studies cited earlier.

## **Blank Spots**

Analysis of the literature discussed above suggests the existence of a "blank spot" (Wagner, 1993) in the research addressing employer sponsored learning in the workplace. Blank spots are holes in the body of knowledge that have yet to be adequately addressed – "What [researchers] know well enough to question but not answer are their blank spots" (Wagner, 1993: 17). Although the field of workplace learning research has been well trodden by investigators, little evidence is present as to why a company the size of FTI seems to defy the research findings. Wagner (1993) believes that the disciplinary perspective from which the researcher conducts investigations may be responsible for the emergence of blank spots in the knowledge landscape. Different disciplines employ their own collection of methodologies and methods to conduct research within their own fields of interest. Wagner (1993: 16) provides a matrix of "analysis themes" versus "phenomena under investigation" to illustrate how different researchers develop knowledge patterns made up of areas of research (phenomena) and methodologies (analysis themes). Where a cell in this matrix does not form part of a standard pattern, a blank spot in the knowledge landscape may exist.

It is apparent that the research approaches employed in the literature discussed above form a knowledge pattern derived from a post-positive analysis theme, investigating the phenomena of workplace learning that is constructed through an economic rationalist discourse (Casey, 2002). The researchers in this field characteristically employ large scale surveys of companies to search out definable patterns of behaviour to explain why enterprises provide training for their employees, of what types and how much. They consistently adopt a post-positivist position, seeking out an objective truth that will explain, without significant reservations, the how and why questions of workplace learning. The methodology used is consistently quantitative, relying on statistical patterns of behaviour to explain findings. Survey responses, for example, are quantified and evaluated against a set of criteria to determine which categories the companies surveyed fit into. Where interviews are conducted an objective perspective is adopted, accepting that interviewees' responses are 'reality' and that the researcher has little impact on the responses given (Alvesson, 2002).

The blank spot identified focuses on the inability of much of the literature to explain the way workplace training is implemented within FTI. It has been shown that the existing rationalist perspectives do not explain the paucity of structured learning at FTI and possibly, by extension, the situation existing in the 40% of companies that do not provide adequate structured training for their employees (Smith and Freeland, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has compared the company at the focus of my research specifically against the work of Smith and Hayton (1999) and more generally against several other sources, each of which supports and correlates with Smith and Hayton. The analysis indicates that FTI, although an exemplar of the flexible specialization model of organization design, appears to diverge from the picture painted in the literature when assessed as a provider of structured learning opportunities for employees. If FTI was not such a good example of the flexible specialization form of enterprise (noting the importance this model places on development of employee skill flexibility) its approach to employer sponsored learning might be seen as part of a larger organizational design issue. However, when this single divergence from flexible specialization is coupled with FTI's comparison with the literature on workplace learning in Australian industries, there are indications that a gap in this literature exists, one that may require an alternative reading to explain what appears to be a genuine dichotomy.

It is proposed that a more appropriate understanding of FTI might be arrived at by adopting a discourse analytic methodology, interrogating the written texts (company policy, web site, job advertisements *etc.*) and verbal texts derived from interviews in pursuit of the discourses that construct learning and learners within the company. By naming these discourses it is expected that a better understanding of why FTI appears to provide inadequate learning opportunities will be arrived at, providing the company's owner with options for improving this situation.

This, however, is in the future. It is hoped that the comparisons made between the existing literature and FTI will provide a tool against which other practitioners might compare their own workplaces, deciding whether the literature adequately describes their enterprises or, as in my case, an alternative reading is necessary.

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