

INTEGRATING KNOWLEDGE AT WORKPLACE VIA CONTINUOUS LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In the current world scenario of knowledge based economy, competitiveness had never been greater. Organisations and entities need to enhance their human capital capabilities to a level comprising of internal norms and external up-to-date practices. The major results of industry-academia collaboration are still blurred by risk and regulatory fog.

This paper draws its contents from the experience and practices of workplace programme initiatives leading to planning, designing and delivery of such programmes. It shares the challenges and strategies for effective initiatives leading to excellent ROI in human capital for recipient organisation and providers.

It is aimed to examine what practices/pedagogies/structures enhance the integration of work and learning and what discourage it? Change of policies incorporating assumptions about the integration of work and learning (such as lifelong learning, recognition of prior learning, etc) has made learning at work more conducive with the impact of globalization.

The new kinds of partnerships and networks that are increasingly prominent in work arrangements and structures would present the various challenges/opportunities for integrating work and learning.

Knowledge based economy, from the perspective of Malaysia had necessitated the nation's strive towards quality human resources. Quality human resource is the single most factors that would ultimately determine the success of this transition toward the K-based economy. To achieve this strive, three approaches have been identified. The first is the long term approach by upgrading the quality at primary, secondary and tertiary levels and embracing the concept of life-long learning. The second, which is the medium-term and a more flexible approach, is to adopt training and retraining of managers and worker. The objective here is the upgrading of the necessary knowledge and skills to manage changes at the workplace consistent with advancement of technology and systems. This would go through two phases. The first phase, which we would mention as '**external up-to-date practices**', would focus on the broad organizational changes brought in by the demands of the K-based economy. The second phase, which is a more enterprise level demand, would be focusing on specific industry and job related skills, that which we may refer to as '**internal norms**'. The third, an attempt to overcome the critical shortage of manpower is the rapid response approach of hiring foreign talents. Our focus here would be the second approach containing the two phases mentioned above.

At this juncture, it is worth to see what drives this second approach of training and retraining of managers and workers, in other words, what drives life-long learning. The key forces include the changing nature of jobs, changing work arrangements, global competition, and the growing focus on civil society and social cohesion. Learning is therefore seen as the enabler which prepares people for change, enhances opportunities for participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the community and promotes an environment of understanding, tolerance and compassion. Lifelong learning reduces exclusion, brings forth greater equality, and increases the opportunity of improving the standards of living.

Being registered as a university under the Private Higher Educational Institution Act 1996 in Malaysia, Open University Malaysia is also subjected to all rules and regulations applicable and enforced by the National Accreditation Board (*Lembaga Akreditasi Negara*). These rules actually prescribe the various requirements such as the title of the award, credits hours, number of modules or subjects and the academic qualifications of facilitators. This has made the industries to stay away from universities for the reason that the requirements of the industries could not be met by the university. The

requirements that we have encountered in the past normally relates to the number of modules or subjects (and their specifically crafted content to meet job requirements), the course duration (or credits hours) and sometimes even the mode of assessment practiced in that particular programme or course. These are the difficulties that we had faced. Much thought had been put to enable us to effectively contribute to the fervent objectives of building human capacity.

What we needed was a center or unit that would be able to embrace the needs of the industries and, at the same time does not break any legal provisions pertaining to the delivery of such programmes or courses. We needed an extension education unit, which would closely work with the industry to jointly design and deliver programmes or courses which have direct impact on the immediate and near competency needs of the industry. We had planned for a unit which would engage consultants (on required basis) to work with clients to design and deliver non-credit bearing programmes which meets the needs of the industry. And this, we started in the year 2000 under the unit called the Institute of Professional Development, Open University Malaysia.

The Institute of Professional Development (IPD) was officially founded in November, 2000 as one of the centers of excellence within the Open University Malaysia (OUM). In the past five years, the Institute of Professional Development (IPD) has established itself as a leading school for learning and training programmes within and outside OU Malaysia. IPD's vision is to be the leading life-long learning programmes provider for working adults in the region. Our mission is to work with a diverse network of leading local and international experts to provide the cutting edge and innovative professional and management development programmes for organisations that require solutions in people and organisational development.

Being aware of the circumstances in which we operate IPD holds dear to the following core values.

- Excellence
- Collaborative Partnerships
- Innovativeness
- Responsiveness

At IPD, we are able to design and develop programmes that are specific to the needs of clients be it medium term or short term programmes. IPD is also able to provide consultancy services in areas of organisational wellness, information technology, management and human resource development.

In this paper, IPD's initiatives are illustrated by the collaboration that it has with two major clients, one representing the public sector, and the other, the private sector. We shall examine the operational approach in these collaborations from the perspectives of planning, designing and delivery of such collaborative programmes.

The public sector partner is the Royal Malaysian Air Force (*Tentera Udara DiRaja Malaysia*). One of the trades or service stream within the RMAF is the Administration trade (the others being Pilots, Engineering, Air Traffic Controllers, Logisticians, etc.). This trade basically lends the administrative and human resource management support to TUDM. IPD's first successful collaboration was with the Administrative & Management Training Center (*Pusat Latihan Pentadbiran & Pengurusan*) at the Subang Air Base.

Based on the job description of an administrative officer, the Commandant of the Training Center requested IPD to design and deliver a programme that would enhance the human resource management knowledge and skills of such officers. From the aspect of planning, we had wanted to run the programme concurrently with the career course that the officers would attend at the training centre. As the officers are from various locations in Malaysia, the training center is the meeting point or a location where the selected administrative officers are grouped together to attend a particular career course thus making them available for a reasonable period of time at a particular location. We took this opportunity to train this group so that upon completion, the officers would be able to contribute more effectively at their respective work units in those locations without the risk of concentrating a group of officers with such knowledge and skills at a single location. In terms of designing the programmes, we did not find any difficulties. The modules delivered were generic

modules relating to human resource management such as Principles of HRM, Organisational Behaviour, Recruitment & Selection, Occupational Safety & Health, Compensation & Benefits and Training & Development.

Within the period of their career course, the candidates are required to attend IPD classes at the same venue. These classes are held on days allocated for IPD classes based on the required contact hours as determined by IPD. The mode of assessment was determined by IPD. The award led to the Executive Diploma in Human Resource Management. We did not face much difficulty in this project as IPD had been delivering this programme to the general public with a fixed number of modules hours and mode of assessment. The adjustments made were only in terms of duration and location. The rest had remained the same.

The private sector partner of ours was Nestlé Manufacturing Malaysia. Nestlé's presence in Malaysia began in 1912, with the introduction of MILKMAID® Sweetened Condensed Milk. Under the name of Anglo-Swiss Condensed Milk, the operation grew steadily. From trading, the company established its first manufacturing operations in Petaling Jaya. In 1965, the company has deepened its ties with Malaysia by catering to local cuisine and palates through eight factories and a vast distribution network. Nestlé has evolved to be a household name, trusted for the safety and quality of its products. Being a company close to its consumer, Nestlé is officially recognized as a HALAL company in Malaysia.

The collaboration arose when Nestlé embarked on a programme to upgrade its Production Executives to First Line Managers. A move dictated by the corporate strategy to ensure they remain competitive in the industry they are in was led by their Executive Director (Production). In terms of planning, IPD jointly with Nestlé left the delivery aspects last as they had wanted to finalise on the scope and contents first. We jointly looked at the competency matrix which was prepared by Nestlé. We then jointly designed the curriculum and syllabus with the tremendous inputs from Nestlé's project director (a Nestlé factory manager himself) and Nestlé Talent Manager.

We had workshops to identify and determine the terminal objectives of the course and its training and learning objectives for each of the modules. The finalized curriculum ran into hundreds of teaching hours, which meant that no two modules were alike. Our designing of the modules covered all aspects that Nestlé had wanted in their manager. The areas that were included were Personal Effectiveness, Communications, Quality, Business & Finance, Production and Manufacturing to name a few. In terms of teaching, we divided each module with OUM and Nestlé components, taught by their respective subject matter experts. IPD/OUM taught the generic knowledge with Nestlé delivering their specific workplace practices. Each party provided the learning materials based on their responsibilities. In terms of assessment, the candidates were required to be continually assessed with a final examination at the end of the period of study. Over and above this, a mentor was appointed by Nestlé to lead the participants at the workplace. Each mentor had about four or five candidates to 'supervise' especially on the workplace assignments (which were workplace case studies and problem solving exercises). These mentors are also required to act as counselors to the candidates.

The challenges that we had faced were many. Among the most critical ones are resource person and student preparedness.

Although Malaysia can be said to have enough academicians to help the country achieve the developed nation status, suitable resources to facilitate in this type of collaboration is difficult to identify. Many academicians had little experience with the industry. If at all they had been involved with the industry, it was in the delivery of a standard training programme. We had faced this challenge. We had a number of candidates as resource person, only to be turned down by Nestlé on the basis of unsuitability. The number of resource persons from the industry getting back into the academia is too few to tap. We had further faced the fact that, after having successfully located such suitable resource person, their availability in terms of time is to be seriously looked into. They are busily involved with on-campus teaching and time allocated for involvement in this type of collaboration is made available only during semester breaks. This may not meet the schedule and time frame set by the collaborating partners.

The student preparedness also posed a difficult challenge to us. In Nestlé's case, the students or participants comprised of their current staff whose average experience span over ten years and the new recruits. Obviously, we had also faced the different levels of qualification possessed by the participants. The extent of difference was from a basic year 11 qualification (SPM which is equivalent to O-level) to a bachelor degree.

Many facilitators faced the difficulty in pitching their delivery of the subject matter at the right level in carefully trying to attract the attention of the slow learners while maintaining the momentum for the fast ones. In assisting the facilitators, we decided to cover the basic subjects at the initial stage before proceeding to more difficult ones later. In addition to this, the role of the coaches or mentors was important to ensure that the participants are not left behind.

The strategies that we adopted to overcome these challenges, is based on the above two challenges or shortcomings. For the issue on the suitable resource person, we had managed to locate and appoint very few academicians who were formerly from the industry. The second category comprised of academics who we had appointed to teach the basic theoretical modules. The industry specific knowledge was delivered by industry practitioners from both within and outside Nestlé. To prepare them for effective delivery of the subject matter, they were required to attend a basic facilitation skills workshop, which we had called the '*Train the Trainer*' programme.

For the issue on student preparedness, we are in midst of evaluating the performance of the first module of the programme. If the need arises, we are prepared to deliver additional classes for the slow learners to bring them on par with the rest of the group, source or develop more simplified learning materials, appoint personal counselors and conduct learning skills workshops.

Examining the return on investment (ROI) of this collaboration, it is still premature to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the collaboration. At this moment the respective training objectives are being met for the initial modules that were being delivered.

Many would argue that the integration of work and learning is slowly taking place in Malaysia. However, this is true to a certain extent only. Although the '*Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010*' and the government's paper titled '*Developing The K-Based Human Resources*' provides the justifications and the pressing need to enhance the quality of the workforce, the number of organizations or companies embarking on such initiatives are few. This can reasonably be seen from the utilization of the *Human Resource Development Fund* which is meant to be used for training.

The second opinion on integration of work and learning is the participation of the academia in such collaboration. Knowledge delivered at academic institutions does not necessarily fulfill the knowledge requirements that a worker needs to apply at the workplace. Many workforce development projects are bid successfully by consulting companies. The flexibility of such companies and their ability to pool resources from both the academia and the industry clearly provides an advantage. Integration of work and learning in Malaysia can also be seen from the government's blueprint titled '*Developing the K-Based Human Resources*'. It mentioned that:

"Rapid changes imply that workers cannot rely totally on one skill or one job for life. To remain employable, they must be prepared for life-long learning, retraining and job-flexibility. This will require the fostering of a culture of life-long learning, training and retraining. This is particularly urgent task since restructuring imposed by the new economy is likely to displace untrained and un-trainable workers, especially the young, the old, the poor and the disadvantaged who lack skills, qualifications and adaptability."

The integration of work and learning can also be seen from the Ministry of Higher Education's acceptance of admission to pursue tertiary education on the basis of open entry for applicants who does not meet the current academic entry requirements. Further, the concept of *Recognition of Prior Learning*, used in many other countries for years, finally has arrived here.

The above mentioned collaborations clearly show the development of OUM as being the number one adult learner focused institution of higher learning in Malaysia. OUM's collaboration with industry started with Aeon Bhd (formerly known as Jaya Jusco Stores Bhd.) in 2001. Last year, OUM had established the School of Lifelong Learning which currently boasts the ardent task of being the national assessment center for prior learning. This, added by the fact that OUM had been allowed to practice Open Entry for those intending to pursue education at Bachelor and Masters level reflects OUM's on going commitment to assist industries and the government's initiatives via lifelong learning.

All these development has transformed the way we deliver our programmes. Dumex, another internationally renowned food company had started discussing on a Dumex specific training programme to be called Executive Diploma in Dumex Business Management. Maybank, Malaysia's largest bank had identified us to assist in the development (from designing to delivering) of a leadership programme for their more than six thousand executives and senior executives. Both these prospective clients are expecting a programme designed to meet the requirements of their respective business or industry.

In '*Developing the K-Based Human Resources*', it was mentioned that "...the important feature is not the acquisition of 'how much?' knowledge but the imparting of core personal skills to individuals." When this is in place, we hope to achieve a better return on investment (ROI) and the knowledge that the participants may acquire in a particular course or programme would then not be restricted by time, space and other resources. These core personal skills, an important step towards diminishing the challenges highlighted above, are commonly referred to as the *Eight Key 'Enabling' Skills*. These skills and their description are mentioned in Annex 1-A.

| SKILL | DESCRIPTION |
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| 1. LEARNING SKILLS | To raise proficiency, acquire and apply new knowledge, awareness and skills required for meeting changing needs. |
| 2. LITERACY (Reading, Writing and Computation) | To raise proficiency in reading, writing and computation for interpreting, analyzing and using more complex information and data. |
| 3. COMMUNICATION | To learn from co-workers, customers and community understand their needs and explore new opportunities. |
| 4. CREATIVE THINKING | To go beyond conventional approaches, offer creative solutions and make the leap to innovation. |
| 5. LIFE PLANNING | To take personal responsibility for self development. |
| 6. TEAMWORK (Emotional intelligence (EQ), Interpersonal Skills, Teamwork and Negotiations) | To achieve synergy among team members for achieving higher performance. |
| 7. LEADERSHIP | To inspire confidence, direct activities, lead co-workers, customers and community. |
| 8. ETHICS AND VALUES | To understand, imbibe and practice core ethical and universal values. |

Annex 1-A Eight Key 'Enabling' Skills

With a daunting task ahead, coupled with more varied collaborations cutting across industries, we expect more challenges ahead. Our experience have shown that the various models are only to be used as examples, the right approach to be applied at that particular case or the 'wish-list' can only be finalized upon discussion between the parties recognizing the limitations both internal and external. These two case studies have shown the possible models that can be applied in designing workplace learning programmes. The first model, similar to the one used in the first case study with TUDM, i.e. delivering ready made modules. The second as in the case with Nestle would be the integration model, made to accommodate Nestle's requirements in all the modules delivered. And the final model

is presumably, a combination of both the above scenarios. Ready made modules and a totally integrated modules (perhaps totally client's modules) on a basis of an agreed apportionment to the programme. In conclusion, it is hoped that such industry-academia collaborative efforts will benefit all industries in Malaysia. In line with our nation's quest to place high importance on human capital development in preparation of the K-economy, this direction is the path for a more effective and relevant education for all.

REFERENCES

1. Government of Malaysia, *Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010*
2. Government of Malaysia, *Developing the K-Based Human Resources*