Survey report November 2008

Who learns at work?
Employees’ experiences of workplace learning
Contents

Summary of key findings 2
Introduction 3
How much training do people receive? 4
How successful was the training? 6
Learner preference – the most appealing and least appealing method of delivery 7
The use of electronic equipment 9
Government support of training 10
Conclusions and implications 11
Appendix: Inequality of learning provision: summary of some key statistics 13
Background to the survey 14
References 15
Acknowledgements 15
Who Learns at Work? sought the views of 751 employed people on the training they had received at work in the 12 months before the survey. We asked whether they had received training, what they thought of the training they received and their preferred methods of learning.

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- Of the 751 respondents, 82% received some form of training in the previous 12 months.
- Ninety-two per cent of those who had undertaken training believe that the training they received was successful.
- Seventy-nine per cent of people say their employers provide them with enough training opportunities. Very few decline training.
- These ‘top-line’ figures have remained remarkably consistent since the previous survey in 2005 – and, indeed, the earlier 2002 survey.
- The most common forms of training received are training held in a meeting room or classroom, followed by on-the-job training at the desktop. However, ‘being shown how to do things and practising them’ is overwhelmingly seen as the best method of learning.
- There are no important differences in attitudes to learning by age. Younger workers have the same preferences as older workers.
- Sixty-nine per cent of those interviewed use a computer and are mainly self-taught.
- The role of the line manager is increasing in importance as responsibility is devolved from the HR/training department.

There remains inequality of learning provision. This is particularly so of those working in smaller organisations. (See the Appendix on page 13.)
Introduction

It is universally accepted that the acquisition of workplace skills is a major driver of national economic success. The current government has sought to redefine and promote a new national framework with the publication of the Leitch Report in December 2006 (HM Treasury 2006). This report points to a critical shortfall of skills and proposes action and solutions in the workplace. Employers, both individually and collectively, have expressed their views, which range from the supportive to the cautionary.

It would be easy, in following the skills at work debate, to conclude that there are just two constituencies involved: government and employers. However, there is a third group: the workers themselves. What do they think about learning at work? Are they generally positive about their experiences to date? What is their preferred method of learning? What are the barriers to their participation in training and learning? A moment’s reflection leads one to recognise that it is their attitude that will ultimately determine the success of any initiative, whether at national policy level or developed locally in organisations.

Moreover, one of the continuing themes of our CIPD research is the shift from training to learning. The 2004 CIPD research report Helping People Learn (Reynolds 2004) offered precise definitions of these terms: training was defined as ‘an instructor-led, content-based intervention, leading to desired changes in behaviour’, and learning as ‘a self-directed, work-based process, leading to increased adaptive capacity’. Training and learning are related but conceptually different activities. Critically, learning lies in the domain of the learner. Only learners can learn: they can be made to sit in the training room or in front of a screen, but they cannot be made to learn. Still less can they be made to transfer what they have learned back to the workplace or share their knowledge with their colleagues. Therefore, an effective strategy to promote learning must consider the wider context and issues of engagement, motivation and preparedness. Helping People Learn characterised the shifting focus of the training professional in the following terms: the progressive movement from the delivery of content to the development of learning capabilities as a people development strategy.

While one can debate the extent and implications of the shift in focus from training to learning, what is beyond doubt is that the prior receptiveness, engagement and attitude of the workforce is a key determinant of the success of any investment in their skills.

For this reason, the CIPD commissioned Plus Four Market Research Limited to undertake a quantitative survey of the attitudes and experiences of people in employment. The survey follows on from similar surveys undertaken in 2002 and 2005 (CIPD 2002, 2005). As will be seen, there is a remarkable stability in the views of the workforce. In designing interventions and building solutions both nationally and locally, we would be very foolish to ignore these views as we construct our policy initiatives.

One final comment concerns the use of the term ‘training’. This is the term that is understood by respondents and when we presented respondents with a list of interventions, we therefore favoured the more generally accepted term ‘training’ in framing questions – many of which embrace learning.
How much training do people receive?

Eighty-two per cent of those interviewed had received some form of training in the past 12 months.

The results present a positive picture of the extent of training undertaken in the workplace. Only 137 of the 751 people interviewed (18%) received no training in the previous year. If the data is broken down into its component sections, the highest percentage of non-recipients of training are: people aged 55 or over (27% of whom did not receive training) and those in the lowest socio-economic groups (C2D) (also, 27% of whom did not receive training). If we adopt a glass half-full rather than glass half-empty perspective, almost three-quarters of these categories receive training from their employers.

Those working for larger organisations (with 500+ employees) are most likely to receive training (only 13% are non-recipients), but the percentage of non-recipients increases as the size of the organisation is reduced. Indeed, one of the major causes for concern for policymakers should be the disturbingly high percentage of employees (43%) in organisations employing fewer than 20 people who did not receive training.

Looking at sector rather than size, the greatest percentage of those who do not receive training are in the private sector (24%) with employees in the public sector and voluntary sector receiving 11% and 12% respectively.

Another question asked of respondents in our 2008 survey was ‘How many training activities have you participated in or received in the past 12 months?’ Fourteen per cent of respondents received training on a single occasion, 17% twice, 29% three to five times and 40% more frequently.

Respondents were also asked who initiated their most recent training activity. The results are shown in Figure 2. Again, the rank order is the same as the result in 2005. However, there has been a marked drop in the percentage of respondents stating that the training was initiated by the HR/training department (from 33% in 2005 to 21% in 2008), and consequent increases in ‘instigated by the line manager’ (45% to 49%) and self-initiated (17% to 21%). There is, as would be expected, a higher proportion of people in smaller organisations (1–19 employees) choosing the self-initiated option (33% in 2008).

Identical questions were asked in the 2005 Who Learns at Work? survey. In 2005, 78% of respondents had received training in the previous 12 months, compared with 82% recorded in 2008. The ranking of the forms of training received was very similar. However, there has been a gradual (rather than dramatic) increase in the percentage of employees receiving training or coaching from a line manager (from 21% in 2005 to 36% in 2008), training or coaching from someone else (20% to 23%) and training delivered electronically (18% to 26%).

Figure 1, (opposite), shows the type of training received by respondents. It can be seen that the most frequent form in which training is delivered is off the job – 64% of respondents report receiving training in a meeting room/classroom or employer’s premises or elsewhere. Training delivered on the job (whether from the employer’s or an external organisation) was received by 51% of respondents.
Fifty-eight per cent of respondents received a formal appraisal or development review in the previous month with a line manager; 5% report that they received a review with the HR/training department. However, 38% of respondents report that they received no review. Twenty per cent of the respondents had attended a training course in their own time. This question was a broad one and included personal interests and hobbies as well as work-related courses. Of those who attended a course in their own time, 23% said it was mainly work related, 47% said it was for purely personal reasons, while 30% said it was a mixture of both.

### Figure 1: The forms of training received in the past 12 months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Method</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training held in a meeting room or classroom (on or off premises)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training received on the job at the desk/workstation (external provider/own organisation)</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training/coaching one-to-one from a line manager</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training delivered electronically</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training at further or higher education institution</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training via correspondence courses or Open University</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training delivered in some other way</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic training skills</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequent forms in which training has been delivered are in a meeting room (64%), on the job (51%) and one-to-one from a line manager (36%).

### Figure 2: Who initiated your most recent training activity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiator</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Line manager</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR/training department</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost half (47%) had received their most recent training in a meeting room or classroom, 21% spoke of it being on the job and 10% from their line manager on a one-to-one basis.
How successful was the training?

Ninety-two per cent of respondents who have undertaken training in the past 12 months believe that the training they received has been successful in helping them do their job better.

There was a positive response to the question ‘Thinking of the training you have received in the past 12 months, overall how successful has it been in helping you to do your job better?’ Forty-seven per cent of respondents describe the training they received as very successful; 45% as quite successful. Only a small minority (7%) of those who received training describe it as not very successful or not successful at all.

The small group who describe the training as not very successful or not successful at all were asked why this is the case. Two reasons dominate their responses: 48% report that the training was not sufficiently relevant to their job and 33% report that they already knew most of what was covered. The results are virtually identical with the 2005 survey.

Respondents were also asked whether anyone explored with them how useful the training had been. Sixty per cent of those who received training in the population as a whole answered positively – again a similar percentage to 2005. In smaller organisations (1–19 employees), the figure for 2008 fell to 44%.

The role of the person who discussed the training is set out in Figure 3.

Here we have some differences to report from the survey conducted three years earlier. As in the case of the results from the earlier question: ‘Who initiated the training?’ the role of the line manager is increasing in importance and that of the HR/training manager diminishing. In 2008, 68% report that the person who discussed the usefulness of training was the line manager; the figure for line managers in 2005 was 51%. In 2008, 22% report that the person who discussed the usefulness of training was an HR/training role; the corresponding figure in 2005 was higher at 35%.

In the 2008 survey, respondents were asked if they had declined any training offered to them by their employer. Seventeen per cent of those interviewed say that they had not taken up training offered. Of those who declined, 40% attribute their decision to the fact that they were too busy, 27% thought it lacked relevance and 23% cite family or personal reasons.

Finally, we asked if respondents were satisfied with the training opportunities that were available to them. Here we included the full population – those who had not received training as well as those who had. The vast majority, 79%, answered yes to the question ‘Does your employer provide you with enough training opportunities?’

However, as has been noted, learners receive fewer opportunities if they work in smaller organisations. Those who are less well educated, or in a lower socio-economic group, receive fewer opportunities.

Figure 3: Usefulness of the training

- Sixty-eight per cent of those who received an enquiry concerning the usefulness of the training stated that this enquiry came from their line manager.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Line manager</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR/training department</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External provider</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone else</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 317
Learner preference – the most appealing and least appealing method of delivery

The preferred method of learning is to be shown how to do things and then to practise them.

In many respects the questions asked under this heading are the most important in the survey. If we are asking employees to be engaged in the learning process at work, it is important that we understand and recognise their preferences on the method of delivery. Figures 4 and 5 show their views on the best and least appealing methods of learning.

The results from these tables are very clear – learners prefer contact with others. Being shown how to do things and practise them is overwhelmingly preferred (46%). In second place comes one-to-one coaching (18%). The least preferred methods are the books and articles (25%). The classroom appears in the middle of both the most preferred and least preferred lists.

Figure 4: The best method of learning

- Clearly, the preferred method of learning is to be shown how do to things and then to practise them (46%).

Be shown and practise: 46%
One-to-one coaching: 18%
Meeting room/classroom: 15%
From colleagues: 13%
Other: 8%

Base: 751
Once again, this is a similar pattern to that uncovered in 2005 and, indeed, 2002. In the 2005 survey we did not, however, include one-to-one coaching as an option – the term coaching had not at that stage achieved its current prominence. In 2005, being shown how to do things and practise them was the clear preference, with 54% of respondents identifying this as their favourite method of learning – but the one-to-one coaching option was not available.

One of the current debates in learning and development nationally is the extent to which younger people in the workplace will have different attitudes to learning. There is seemingly a whole industry arguing that younger people’s experience of the Internet will mean that they are far more favourable to the use of technology.

When categorised by age sample numbers are small – so any conclusions should be treated with caution. However, there is nothing in our results to indicate differences by age. The most obvious place to look for a difference would be in answers to the question ‘How do you think you learn best?’ In the population as a whole ‘by being shown how to do things and practising them’ was the preference of 46% of respondents overall; for those aged 16–24 this was the preference of 50%. It is true that there was a slightly higher percentage of 16–24-year-olds favouring the Internet. ‘Accessing learning materials on the Internet’ was the most appealing method of learning by 3% of the population as a whole, and 9% of those aged 16–24. Access through the Internet was considered the least appealing by 21% of the population as a whole and 6% of those aged 16–24. However, the numbers here are small.

Generally, there is nothing here to suggest we need to adjust our training provision when dealing with younger members of the workforce. Neither is there any difference in answers to the question ‘Does your employer provide you with enough training opportunities?’ or the percentages receiving ‘training undertaken to follow personal interests or hobbies’. About the only observable difference is that the 16–24-year-olds were more positive about the training they received – a much higher proportion describing it as very successful rather than quite successful. Perhaps they have more to learn as they are likely to be in more junior positions in the organisation. Alternatively, their expectations may be lower or they have not yet become cynical!
The use of electronic equipment

Sixty-nine per cent of respondents use a computer and are mainly self-taught in its use.

The set of questions considered in this section have not been asked in previous CIPD surveys but were included for the first time to capture information on this aspect of the changing nature of work.

In 2007 a government-sponsored survey of work skills in Britain was published (Felstead et al) and reported a dramatic increase in the number of jobs that required the use of automated or computerised equipment. There was also a marked rise reported in the proportion of jobs in which computing is an essential component. Our 2008 CIPD survey echoed such findings: 69% of respondents use a PC, laptop or notebook and 17% report using hand-held equipment specific to their job. Some respondents use both a PC and hand-held equipment, and the number reporting that they use neither of these was just over a quarter.

How those three-quarters learned to use that equipment is a question of considerable interest for those in learning, training and development. The answers are set out in Figure 6.

All other options (for example, training at further or higher education institutions) received 3% or less and only one person in the 554 (not including those who were self-taught) benefited from ‘training delivered electronically’ (for example, via the Internet or by CD-ROMs). Among those who receive training, the overwhelming majority (95%) report the training as very or quite successful.

Figure 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-taught – no training received</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training delivered on the job</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in a meeting room/classroom</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training one-to-one from line manager</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: 554
Government support of training

Twenty-five per cent of respondents stated that they knew their employer had sought government funding for the training.

In the introduction to this survey report we highlighted the significance of the 2006 Leitch Report. This report has given rise to initiatives that are meant to encourage training in the workplace. One of these initiatives is the ‘Skills Pledge’ – a voluntary commitment by an organisation to support all its employees to develop their basic skills. Here we asked if the employer had made respondents aware of this initiative: 21% answered ‘yes’ and 79% ‘no’. We also asked respondents if their employer had signed the ‘Skills Pledge’. Ten per cent of respondents answered ‘yes’, 8% ‘no’, while 82% replied that they do not know whether this is the case.

We also asked ‘To the best of your knowledge, did your employer seek government funding for any of the training activities you participated in or received?’ (This was only asked of those who had received training.) The answers were 25% ‘yes’, 46% ‘no’ and 29% ‘don’t know’.
Conclusions and implications

One of our recent CIPD-sponsored publications was titled *The Changing World of the Trainer*. This publication could be called *The Unchanging World of the Learner*.

Table 1 compares some of the main responses from the 2005 and 2008 surveys.

What is striking is the similarity of the results. The proportion of respondents reporting that they received classroom and/or on-the-job training has increased slightly. The decline in the preference for on-the-job training may be more apparent than real since coaching was included in the 2008 survey, but not the 2005 survey. Otherwise, the figures are virtually identical. The 2002 results also showed a similar pattern.

Because things have changed little, it does not mean that there is little that we can conclude. In fact, there is much rich information here both for policy considerations and for planning and delivering training in the workplace.

First, our learners are a pretty happy and positive group. Generally, they feel the training they receive is beneficial and that their employers offer them enough training opportunities. Many of them undertake training and learning in their own time. There is no evidence of negativity and, without reading too much into the data, one can conclude that learning and developing work-related skills are now seen as part of the job.

However, individual preferences are for social rather than solitary learning. The unequivocal preferred method of learning is for being shown how to do things and then being given the opportunity to practise. In our concluding section of the 2005 survey, we commented:

‘Learners prefer active to passive methods of learning. On-the-job training is the favoured method of learning for all categories of employee. This could be seen as a mismatch to the amount of classroom-based learning that is taking place.’

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005 Base</th>
<th>2008 Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Received some form of training in the past 12 months</td>
<td>78% (750)</td>
<td>82% (751)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enough training provided</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The training helps them to do their job better</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The usefulness of training has been explored</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most common forms of training:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– in a meeting room/classroom</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– on the job</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred method of training:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– on the job</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined an offer of training</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received training outside work</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We can repeat this comment now, in 2008, without qualification.

Learner preferences also raise important questions about the potential contribution of e-learning at a time when Web 2.0/social networking is receiving much attention. Although many learners receive new training through this route, it has still to find favour with them.

One other firm conclusion is that the widely predicted growth in the role of the line manager is now happening. Indeed, this is the main change that has taken place over the last three years. Half of the respondents surveyed indicated that their most recent activity was initiated by their line manager. If the usefulness of the training had been explored after the event, it was overwhelmingly likely to be the line managers who undertook that discussion. The role of the HR department/training managers as intermediaries in the process is decreasing. We are devolving responsibility to the line managers. This is good news in the sense that the line manager is closest to the individual and best placed to assess their needs. The major issue, fully discussed in the 2007 CIPD publication *Learning and the Line*, is to ensure that line managers have the skills and the time to discharge their responsibilities. This challenge is one of the biggest for the HR profession today.

Looking to the wider policy implications, there remain two significant areas for policy concern. Learners receive fewer opportunities if they work in smaller organisations. Those who are less well educated, or in a lower socio-economic group, receive fewer opportunities.
Appendix

Inequality of provision: summary of some key statistics

Although sample numbers are small in some segments, employees working for smaller organisations, who are less well educated or in lower socio-economic groups, are likely to receive fewer learning opportunities. Age does not appear to be a factor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s in it for my business?</th>
<th>Total sample</th>
<th>Company size</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Socio-economic group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1–19</td>
<td>500+</td>
<td>None/ CSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of respondents who had not received training from employer in the last six months</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your employer provide you with enough training opportunities?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of respondents who had no formal appraisal or development review in the past 12 months</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To gather information, 751 telephone interviews with people in employment were carried out across the UK. Those not in jobs and those who were self-employed were excluded. The sample breakdown was representative of employees in the public and private sectors and of full- and part-time employees. Size of organisation was categorised as 1–19, 20–99, 100–499 and 500+ employees. The sample was almost equally split between male and female respondents.

The interviews took place between the end of August and the second week of September 2008 and were conducted by Plus Four Market Research Limited. This survey report was written by Martyn Sloman, CIPD Adviser, Learning, Training and Development.
References

CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF PERSONNEL AND DEVELOPMENT. (2007) Learning and the line: the role of line managers in training, learning and development. London: CIPD. Available at: www.cipd.co.uk/researchinsights


Acknowledgements

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We explore leading-edge people management and development issues through our research. Our aim is to share knowledge, to increase learning and understanding, and help our members make informed decisions about improving practice in their organisations.

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