



Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal

Soft skills and time-spaced learning: A quantitative study of work performance in Malaysian organizations

Article information:

To cite this document:

(2018) "Soft skills and time-spaced learning: A quantitative study of work performance in Malaysian organizations", *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*, Vol. 32 Issue: 1, pp.19-21, <https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-10-2017-0087>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-10-2017-0087>

Downloaded on: 12 February 2018, At: 22:59 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 1 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 10 times since 2018*

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:305060 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Soft skills and time-spaced learning

A quantitative study of work performance in Malaysian organizations

Traditionally, employers look to hire staff based on “hard skills”: academic and formal qualifications, or technical and vocational competence in knowledge areas related to the specific job and its daily functions and activities. However, increasingly, for organizations to succeed in a competitive market, they need to also appreciate “soft skills”. These are the personal qualities of employees that increase employability, make them good employees, and create successful and compatible team players, skills that are also necessary for life in general – human relationship skills.

Soft and hard skills

Although there are no precise definitions of these terms, they can be thought of in the following ways, detailed in the following sections.

Hard skills

These are skills which are relatively easy to quantify and measure. They are skills which can be observed and easily taught and learned, for example, technical, formal, administrative, vocational skills, degree-specific knowledge and qualifications that are directly related to the job.

Soft skills

These are personal skills, qualities, attitudes, traits, and habits that all people have in varying degrees. Such skills are important for everyday life in maintaining social relationships. These skills are difficult to observe, quantify, and measure. For example, communication skills, self-confidence, listening skills, working under pressure, sharing information, working with different cultures, making friends easily, problem solving, taking risks, recognizing opportunity, change management, handling criticism, setting goals, leadership, conflict resolution and human relationship management.

Studies have shown that hard skills are of declining importance, while managers recognize that soft skills can contribute directly to success. Prior research has shown that financially 15 per cent of a person’s success can be attributed to hard skills and formal knowledge and 85 per cent to soft skills.

Work performance

Today’s business world is more global and competitive than ever and so managers strive to monitor and assess their work performance to improve outcomes and achieve success. To increase work performance, they provide training and development programs. There is a tendency to focus on training programs for “hard skills” – professional certification programs directly related and relevant to the job function. However, this can cause a company to be task-oriented and rule-driven at the expense of soft skills, relationships, and initiative.

Effective teamwork skills can lead to success and change for an organization. Project managers need to have good soft skills to affect the performance and success of a project. Thus, it is important to focus on, and provide training for, soft skills and more traditional ones. Employees need to demonstrate both hard and soft skills for increased work performance.

Time-spaced learning

If soft skills and training are both important contributing factors to a company's success, it is necessary to focus on specific soft skills that are significant factors and, therefore, what kind of training and development a company needs. Many managers do not fully recognize the value of soft skills and are loathed to spend money on it, given the fact that it is an area which is difficult to measure and see return for investment. More than \$30bn is spent every year on training and development, with the typical approach being a consecutive-days classroom or a lecture hall approach.

In fact, time-spaced learning is a far more effective style of learning, for both hard and soft skills. This is when learning takes place over time, rather than being crammed into a few days. Learning occurs and then trainees are given an amount of time (days, weeks, months) to practice and experiment with learning in the workplace, internalizing the knowledge and transferring the skills to their job. They then return to the classroom to reinforce the learning, and they then build on it with new learning. This cycle can repeat as much as is necessary. This style of learning, with the opportunity to experiment in the workplace, helps to change old habits and create new attitudes and behaviors. Although it is not a new style of learning, and is a trustworthy method, it is one of the least used training and development styles.

Research methodology and results

Ibrahim *et al.* (2017) investigated the hypotheses that increasing soft skills leads to improved work performance and that a suitable training style will also increase work performance.

They performed a quantitative survey with participants who had been through soft skills training via time-spaced learning. There were 260 participants based in nine private companies in Malaysia. The survey contained 55 questions which assessed soft skills, work performance, and training methodology. They also included demographic variables. The survey was piloted, reviewed, and revised for validity. After two months, the participants were tested to see the effect of the learning and if the soft skills acquired had been transferred to the workplace. To predict the employees' work performance, multiple regression analysis was used.

The results showed a 17.8 per cent variation that can be attributed to soft skills and training methodology. A single unit increase in soft skills and training methodology led to a 15.9 per cent increase in work performance.

The survey strongly showed that increasing soft skills led to an increase in work performance. Similarly, there was a strong suggestion that the training methodology (time-spaced learning) led to increased work performance. The training methodology had more influence on work performance than soft skills – 27.9 per cent increase compared to 14.7 per cent increase.

It is often said that hard skills get one a job but soft skills keep one in the job.

[...] we can describe or define “time-spaced learning” as the time and opportunity given for the participants to apply, practice and internalise what is learnt in the classroom into their real-workplace environment.

It is important to note that the success of the learning depends on the employee's willingness to apply the training and information to the job. They must have a willingness to adapt and change, and this change must be supported by the workplace and managers.

Conclusion

Although in the past work, performance and training methodologies have focused on hard skills, there is increasing evidence that developing soft skills such as communication, leadership, problem-solving, and relationship skills also leads to increased work performance and project and company success. For organizational success, the focus needs to move from simple knowledge acquisition to attitude and behavior change – for employees to use the training they receive and apply it in their daily job. For this to occur, the best style of training methodology would be time-spaced learning. A good training program and increased soft skills training will lead to increased work performance and ultimately organizational success.

Comment

The review is based on “The effect of soft skills and training methodology on employee performance” by Rosli Ibrahim, Ali Boerhannoeddin, and Kazeem Kayode Bakare published in the *European Journal of Training and Development*.

Keywords:
Work performance,
Learning,
Soft skills,
Hard skills,
Training methodology

Reference

Ibrahim, R., Boerhannoeddin, A. and Kayode Bakare, K. (2017), “The effect of soft skills and training methodology on employee performance”, *European Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 41 No. 4, pp. 388-406.

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com