

# Soft Structures Hard Outcomes

Headline findings of the  
NIACE Survey on Learning at Work

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## **Introduction**

This survey carried out by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in association with researchers from the University of Leicester, has important messages for policy makers and workplace trainers alike. Its key finding is that for most people in the workplace study for qualifications is seen as preparatory to doing a job, not as a driver for learning on the job. The survey suggests that activities more closely associated with the workplace - such as doing the job, being shown techniques by colleagues, engaging in self-reflection and active observation - can be of more help to employees in raising their performance than attending training courses or acquiring qualifications. One in four employees (26%) reported that training courses were of little or no value in improving work performance and around one in three (32%) thought that studying for qualifications had not helped them at work.

In the workplace, learning needs to go with the grain of the work. It works well when peer groups are involved together. A major motivator is to do the job better. That suggests the Government has it right in putting emphasis on the role of Sector Skills Councils, able to design strategies fit for purpose in commercial and industrial Britain today. Right, too, in the increasingly significant role given to union learning representatives, fostering commitment to learning at work. The findings of the survey suggest, too, that the education and training system is right to focus on effective credit based qualifications, where modest passages of learning can accumulate to make a qualification. But for a transformed qualifications system to go with the grain of how people learn at work, we will need less cumbersome systems for assessing and accrediting learning and experience gained outside formal study.

There is no doubt that qualifications matter. They give people job mobility, and are the core passport to employability for life. That surely is the reason why Government focuses so intently on qualifications in its targets for a skilled society. However much such talk may motivate planners, and focus the decisions of funders, it is clear that it does not move learners at work. Overwhelmingly, their aspiration is to learn to improve skills through the work process itself. As the Employer Training Pilots suggest, too, qualifications are the icing on the cake, when skill, confidence and self-esteem are secured. That presents interesting challenges to the Skills Alliance charged with achieving its skills strategy. How best to strengthen skills, achievement, and a learning culture in the UK workforce? The answers will be complex, but the old adage of adult learning, that it is best to start from where the learners are, rather than where you wish they were will be part of the answer.

The government has put a great deal of investment in raising training and increasing the qualifications stock of the UK workforce in a bid to close the productivity gap with competitor nations. While this is necessary, the results of this survey suggest that the most effective route to enhanced performance lies in improving relations within the workplace.

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**Technical notes**

A team of researchers at the Centre for Labour Market Studies (CLMS), University of Leicester was invited by NIACE to devise a module of questions on learning at work for insertion into its 2004 Survey on Adult Participation in Learning and analyse the results. This collaboration forms a part of an ESRC research project set up to investigate the factors that facilitate learning at work ([www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org) and [www.clms.ac.uk](http://www.clms.ac.uk)).

The survey was carried out during a three-week period in February 2004 as part of an omnibus survey carried out by Research Surveys of Great Britain (RSGB). A total of 4,923 adults aged 17 and over were interviewed in their homes during this period.

Respondents were presented with a broad definition of learning and asked whether they had taken part in any learning activity, irrespective of where this may have taken place. These results are recorded separately (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2004) and will be published during Adult Learners' Week 2004.

The sample comprised 2,312 individuals who were employed at the time of the interview – 1,943 as employees and 369 as self-employed. The employee sample was asked an additional set of questions about their work and the activities they found helpful in learning to do their job better.

All tables in this briefing paper are weighted to reflect the adult population of the UK. All tables are rounded to the nearest whole percentage point.

This briefing contains a summary of some of the initial findings of the survey. Further information is available on request. More detailed analysis and commentary on the full range of questions will be published by NIACE later in the year.

## Effective Job Performance

The survey shows that over one half of employees (53%) thought that having relevant knowledge and skills were essential to doing their job well (See Table 1).

A similar proportion (49%) also thought that building up a good relationship with clients or customers was equally important to effective job performance.

Two-fifths thought that getting a good idea of what was expected was essential.

These results suggest that effective job performance not only rests on having the relevant technical knowledge and skills to carry out the job, but also upon good inter-personal relations within and beyond the workplace.

<b>Table 1. Factors for Effective Job Performance</b>						
	<b>Essential</b>	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Fairly important</b>	<b>Not very important</b>	<b>Not at all important</b>	<b>Importance rating<sup>1</sup></b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	
<b>a. Individual self help</b>						
Having the relevant knowledge and skills	53	37	8	2	1	3.39
Developing your own ways of working	27	43	23	4	2	2.89
<b>b. Social relations in the workplace</b>						
Understanding what your supervisor or manager expects of you	40	43	13	2	2	3.17
Getting advice from your colleagues working in the same organisation	26	43	22	5	4	2.82
Watching how others carry out their work	18	35	27	13	8	2.41
<b>c. Social relations beyond the workplace</b>						
Establishing good relationships with clients or customers	49	35	7	3	6	3.18
Keeping in touch with people doing similar work in other organisations	15	28	26	17	13	2.15

Base: all employees (1,943)

<sup>1</sup> As a summary of the responses given, scores were allocated according to the importance rating attached to each factor. A score of 4 was given to respondents who reported a factor as 'essential', 3 to 'very important', 2 to 'fairly important', 1 to 'not very important' and 0 to factors considered as 'not at all important'.

## Improving Job Performance Through Learning

When asked to identify the extent to which particular activities had helped them learn to do their job better, over half of employees (52%) reported that simply doing the job had helped them learn most about how to improve (See Table 2).

Other activities, however, proved to be less helpful. The use of the Internet to, for example, download materials, participate in e-learning and seek out information was regarded as being of no help at all to half the sample (50%).

Despite the emphasis placed on training and qualifications by government, neither was highly rated by employees as being helpful in improving their work performance. One in four employees (26%) reported that training courses were of little or no value in improving work performance and around one in three (32%) thought that studying for qualifications had not helped them do their job better.

Activities more closely associated with the workplace – such as doing the job, being shown things, engaging in self-reflection and keeping one’s eyes and ears open – were reckoned to provide more helpful insights into how to work better.

<b>Table 2. Sources of Learning to Improve Job Performance</b>						
	<b>Essential</b>	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Fairly important</b>	<b>Not very important</b>	<b>Not at all important</b>	<b>Importance rating<sup>2</sup></b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	
<b>Learning as acquisition</b>						
Training courses paid for by your employer or yourself	31	27	16	67	19	2.45
Drawing on the skills you picked up while studying for a qualification	26	26	16	10	22	2.24
Using skills and abilities acquired outside of work	19	29	24	10	18	2.22
Reading books, manuals and work-related magazines	21	25	19	11	24	2.10
Using the Internet	11	13	16	11	50	1.24
<b>Learning as participation</b>						
Doing your job on a regular basis	52	33	11	3	2	3.30
Being shown by others how to do certain activities or tasks	31	34	22	6	7	2.75
Reflecting on your performance	26	37	23	7	7	2.70
Watching and listening to others while they carry out their work	23	35	25	8	9	2.55
Using trial and error on the job	16	26	24	12	23	2.00

Base: all employees (1,943)

<sup>2</sup> As a summary of the responses given, scores were allocated according to the helpfulness rating attached to each activity. A score of 4 was given to respondents who reported a factor as ‘a great deal of help’, 3 to ‘quite a lot of help’, 2 to ‘of some help’, 1 to ‘a little help’ and 0 to activities considered as ‘of no help at all’.

It is well known that employees in higher occupational groups receive more opportunities for training at work. For these individuals, not only is the incidence of training higher, but also it is more frequent and the intensity of the experience is often longer. It is therefore not surprising that this survey shows that training courses and skills acquired while studying were rated more highly by ‘Managers’ than those in ‘Sales’, ‘Operative’ or ‘Elementary’ occupations (See Table 3). However the survey also suggests that this pattern is also replicated for sources of everyday learning at work. For example, ‘Managers’ also rated ‘doing your job on a regular basis’ more highly than those in the lower occupational categories.

<b>Table 3. Sources of Learning to Improve Job Performance – Managers, Sales, Operative and Elementary occupations compared</b>				
	<b>Managers and Senior Officials</b>	<b>Sales and Customer Service</b>	<b>Machine Operatives</b>	<b>Elementary</b>
	Helpfulness rating <sup>3</sup>			
<b>Learning as acquisition</b>				
Training courses paid for by your employer or yourself	2.89	2.05	1.72	1.71
Drawing on the skills you picked up while studying for a qualification	2.62	1.72	1.34	1.28
Using skills and abilities acquired outside of work	2.69	1.90	1.63	1.67
Reading books, manuals and work-related magazines	2.45	1.80	1.34	1.18
Using the Internet	1.79	0.92	0.42	0.41
<b>Learning as participation</b>				
Doing your job on a regular basis	3.49	3.21	3.15	2.96
Being shown by others how to do certain activities or tasks	2.53	2.91	2.51	2.52
Reflecting on your performance	2.97	2.58	2.29	2.20
Watching and listening to others while they carry out their work	2.73	2.59	2.20	2.09
Using trial and error on the job	1.94	2.04	1.99	1.92
Base: all employees	148	208	205	301

<sup>3</sup> See Note 2 in Table 2

## Learning and Skills Requirements

Almost one half of respondents (47%) agreed strongly that they had picked up most of the skills needed to do their current job through on the job experience (See Table 4). Only one in ten disagreed.

Around 85% of respondents indicated that their job involved them learning new things and helping their colleagues to do the same.

Respondents appeared relatively well suited to their jobs with less than one in ten (9%) reporting that they do not have enough opportunity to use their existing knowledge and skills at work.

There was less agreement regarding their line manager's (if they had one) ability to do their job if they were away. Around one third (33%) thought that this would not be possible.

Analysis by occupational group shows that the importance of learning through 'on the job experience' is relatively invariant to the type of job occupied, with most groups agreeing on average to gaining most of their skills in situ. However, the learning demands of jobs vary markedly. While a large proportion of 'Professional' and 'Associate Technical' jobholders agreed strongly that their job required them to keep learning new things, those in 'Elementary' occupations were more equivocal.

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
I have picked up most of my skills through on-the-job experience	47	43	8	2
My job requires that I keep learning new things	41	45	9	5
My job requires that I help my colleagues learn new things	34	50	11	6
My supervisor or manager could do my job if I were away	28	39	18	16
In my current job I have enough opportunity to use the knowledge and skills that I have already	38	53	7	2

Base: all employees (1,943)

## Satisfaction with Learning and Development Opportunities

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their jobs. Moderate levels of satisfaction were recorded across a range of indicators (See Table 5).

Respondents were most satisfied with the level of personal responsibility they have for their own work (+1.48) and the opportunities they have to use existing skills and abilities (+1.30), and were least satisfied with the opportunities they have to develop new skills and abilities (+0.95).

While satisfaction with the support provided by peers or managers at work varied little by occupation group, satisfaction ratings given to others aspects of a job – the degree of responsibility exercised, the variety of the work, the use of existing skills and abilities and the opportunity to help all other people learn – were all influenced by occupational rank. For all of these factors, those in the top occupations were more satisfied with the latitude their jobs allowed, while those lower down the scale were less satisfied with the restrictions their jobs imposed.

	Completely satisfied	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied no dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Completely Dissatisfied	Satisfaction Rating <sup>4</sup>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Level of personal responsibility you have for your work	18	24	43	7	3	1	1	+1.48
Variety of your work	15	24	41	10	7	1	2	+1.18
Help and support you get from other people you work with	12	27	45	10	5	1	1	+1.24
Help and support you get from your supervisor or manager	13	23	40	12	8	3	2	+1.04
Opportunity to use your existing skills and abilities	14	26	45	8	6	1	1	+1.30
Opportunities you have to develop new skills and abilities	10	30	42	15	10	2	1	+0.95
Opportunities you have to help other people learn	12	23	43	17	3	1	1	+1.19

Base: all employees (1,943)

<sup>4</sup> As a summary measure, scores were allocated according to the strength of satisfaction/dissatisfaction. A score of +3 was reserved for 'strongly satisfied' and a score of -3 was allocated to respondents who chose the 'strongly dissatisfied' category. Levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction in between were allocated scores of +2, +1, 0, -1 and -2 respectively.