Practices of Lifelong Learning in a Local Government Authority

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Abstract

Lifelong learning is considered a critical component of the workplace. It includes various concepts such as organisational learning, learning organisations, training and development, human resource development and adult learning. This is a qualitative study that identifies and describes the practices of lifelong learning in a local government authority. It is based on in-depth interviews with the top management of the organisation. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed. The major question of this study is: What are the practices of lifelong learning in the organisation? Based on the data collected and analysed, the study identifies and describes various practices that relate to the learning culture, policies, programmes, support and barriers within the organisation. Following these findings, various recommendations are put forward to improve lifelong learning practices in the local government authority. Also various applications are implemented in the workplace.

Abstrak

Pembelajaran separuh hayat boleh dianggap sebagai komponen yang penting di tempat kerja. Ia merangkumi pelbagai konsep seperti pembelajaran organisasi, organisasi pembelajaran, latihan dan pembangunan, pembangunan sumber tenaga dan pembelajaran dewasa. Kajian ini adalah kajian kualitatif yang mengenal pasti dan menjelaskan praktis pembelajaran sepanjang hayat di sebuah badan kerajaan tempatan. Ia berasaskan temu duga yang mendalam dengan pengurusan atasan organisasi tersebut. Temu duga tersebut dirakamkan, ditulis semula ayat demi ayat dan dianalisis. Persoalan utama kajian ini ialah apakah praktis pembelajaran sepanjang hayat

dalam organisasi tersebut? Berasaskan data yang dikumpul dan dianalisis, kajian ini mengenal pasti dan menjelaskan pelbagai praktis yang berkaitan dengan budaya belajar, polisi, program, sokongan dan halangan dalam organisasi. Berasaskan dapatan ini, pelbagai cadangan diketengahkan untuk mempertingkatkan praktis pembelajaran sepanjang hayat dalam badan kerajaan tempatan. Di samping itu, beberapa aplikasi juga dilaksanakan di tempat kerja.

Introduction

Lifelong learning has been getting close attention by several authors since the seventies (Cropley, 1980; Peterson, 1979; Skager & Dave, 1977; Dave, 1976; Lengrand, 1975). They view lifelong learning as a comprehensive concept that includes formal, non-formal and informal learning, covering the lifespan of individuals. "When we speak of lifelong education, it is the unity and totality of the educational process which we have constantly in mind" (Lengrand, 1975: p. 20).

Peterson (1979) identifies several dimensions of lifelong learning that include coordinated educational opportunities for people of all ages, involvement of all organisations, schools and non-schools in providing learning and participation of communities in planning and conducting learning activities. On the other hand, Carelli (1979) pointed out several dimensions of lifelong learning and they include dimension of time; the various types of learning such as formal settings, non-formal arrangements and informal conditions; and finally it covers the various aspects of human characteristics affected by education such as attitudes, knowledge and skills and motivations.

Cropley (1980) describes lifelong learning as a comprehensive concept while UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) referred to lifelong learning as a master concept (Fraure, 1972). Fraure (1972) described some of these principles:

- Every person must be given a chance to learn throughout life
- Lifelong learning embraces all aspects of education
- Lifelong learning should be flexible
- Lifelong learning should be conducted through various means.

Although the concept has been widely discussed, but it has not received strong legislative and funding support (Linton, 1980).

Some authors differentiate between lifelong education and lifelong learning. Rivera and Dohmen (1985) argued,

> ...lifelong learning is the larger, and therefore, truly master concept while lifelong education is an instrumental concept aimed at primarily educational policy initiatives and the development of systems for education. Thus, lifelong learning is recognised as a transformative concept, one which speaks to the nature of individuals, while lifelong education represents the institutional means governments have before them to advance education as an instrument, usually targeted toward socioeconomic development but often enough with specific political purposes. (p. 135)

Thus, Rivera and Dohmen (1985) concluded that lifelong learning and lifelong education are two concepts but not one. On the other hand, UNESCO used the two terms synonymously and tends to mix the two concepts. They asserted that,

> ...lifelong learning is the true master concept, especially for adult educators who are concerned with questions of voluntary participation in adult education and see it in a more acceptable concept than that of lifelong education which implies organisation of adult learning opportunities, usually at the national (federal/central) level, through policy legislation. (p. 145)

Lifelong learning involves formal, non-formal and informal learning. Coombs et al. (1973) made the following distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal learning but he also noted that there is overlap and high degree of interaction between them.

> ...By informal education we mean the truly lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influence – from family and neighbours, from work and play, from the marketplace, the library and the mass media.

> By formal education we refer, of course, to the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded 'educational system', running from primary school through the university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialised programmes and institutions for full-time technical and professional training.

> We define non-formal education as any organised educational activity outside the established formal system – whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity – that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives. (p. 11)

Peterson (1979) also noted similar differences regarding formal, non-formal and informal learning.

> ...formal generally refers to institution-based, structured learning relying on teachers' instruction; informal usually refers to non-school based, less structured learning not pursued for credit, including what we called unintentional learning. Non-formal refers to organised educational activities offered by non-school organisations; this concept has evolved chiefly among adult education leaders in developing nations. Non-formal education is characterised by flexibility, relevance to contemporary problems, and voluntary participation. (p. 15–16)

Recently, lifelong learning is receiving greater attention especially in the light of the new era of the information age. There is a call to make lifelong learning as a critical component of the education system (Government of Malaysia, 2001; Abu Daud, 2001). In fact, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad emphasised that every Malaysian of all ages should be given the chance to pursue lifelong learning (Government of Malaysia, 2001).

In the Malaysian context, lifelong learning is becoming more crucial in preparing a competitive workforce and an informed society. As Malaysia moves towards an era of the knowledge-based economy (k-economy), there is an increasing concern on the part of government as to the need to create an emerging workforce in the form of knowledge workers (k-workers). One of the strategic thrusts of the Third Outline Perspective Plan (OPP 3) is to develop quality human resources to provide a productive workforce and build a learning and knowledge rich society (Abu Daud, 2001). In this context, lifelong learning can be viewed as crucial for the transformation of the existing workforce into k-workers with information communication and technology (ICT) usage as a major catalyst of development (Government of Malaysia, 2001).

This presupposes that the training and development of workers in the traditional manner no longer suffices but a redefinition of approaches to training and re-education in the context of the workplace to incorporate lifelong learning is then required. However, lifelong learning in the workplace is a relatively new concept. It has received more attention in recent years (Rothwell, 2002). Over the years, it has been practiced in different forms such as training and development (T&D), human resource development (HRD), organisational learning, and learning organisation. Much of the learning theories have been anchored in adult education.

McGehee and Thayer (1961) defined training in industry as "the formal procedures which a company uses to facilitate learning so that their resultant behavior contributes to the attainment of company's goals and objectives" (p. 3). There are several aspects that may be pointed out in this definition.

First, the process of training should contribute to the attainment of organisational goals and objectives. Second, the cost effectiveness of training should be compared to other approaches in achieving organisational goals. Third, the question of contribution of the training activity should be considered and this involves the notion of programming. Finally, training should include many activities designed to develop many diverse behaviors.

A more recent definition by Tracey (1992) noted, "training and development include all the learning experiences provided to employees that promote the attainment of goals and objectives of the organisation" (p. 1). It includes "all enterprise-conducted, sponsored, and supported activities and programmes" (p. 1).

Based on that analysis, practices of training include various major phases:

- identifying training needs,
- determining training objectives,
- determining the content for training,
- developing the criteria and measurement of training effectiveness,
- designing training methodology and preparing training materials,
- monitoring and evaluating training, and
- following-up action and improving training activities.

However, more recent developments saw a shift in the relationship between training and the human resource function (Sloman, 1994). Hence, there is a tendency to focus on the term human resource development rather than training per se. Human resource development is considered to be a more comprehensive and integrative concept. Nadler first introduced it in 1970 to include three major activities of education, training and development. Human resource development includes major elements of T & D (Smith, 1998; McLagan, 1989; Watkins, 1989).

Thus, when workplace learning is practiced as a HRD function, it is seen as a more integrated concept than T & D. Swanson and Holton (2001) defined HRD as, "a process for developing and unleashing human expertise through organisational development and personnel T & D for the purpose of improving performance" (p. 4).

> HRD is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults' work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/ team gain, or for the benefit of an organisation, community, nation, or, ultimately, the whole of humanity. (Swanson & Holton, 2001: p. 4)

Other concepts that may explain lifelong learning in the workplace are organisational learning and learning organisations. For the purposes of this study, though organisational learning and learning organisations differ in terms of their contribution to lifelong learning, both concepts will be dealt in the way they affect each other. Organisational learning deals with processes through which individuals and organisations learn that are integral to building learning organisations. On the other hand, organisational learning is effected by the learning of its members and internal learning whereby information is transmitted from one organisational member to another (Simon, 1991) while individual learning in organisations is very much a social, not a solitary phenomenon.

The linkage with the learning organisation is apparent as the latter is seen as a knowledge-creating organisation. Nonaka (1994) characterises the knowledge creating organisation as a place where "new knowledge is not a specialised activity… it is a way of behaving, indeed a way of being, in which everyone is a knowledge worker". New knowledge begins with the individual, and making that knowledge available to others is the central activity of the knowledge creating organisation. According to Watkins (1996), a learning organisation is one in which learning and works are integrated in an ongoing and systematic fashion to support continuous improvement at the individual, group and organisational levels. So the culture of continuous learning or lifelong learning among members of the organisation is vital for the survival of the sustainable organisation. Senge's (1990) perspective of shared vision, conviction and commitment to learning; personal mastery which represents a personal commitment to expand one's personal capacity are important components of learning in organisations. The learning experiences that top management and employees undergo in the workplace will be examined in the context of lifelong learning in everyday life and its relation to online learning within a learning organisation.

In this research, the concept of lifelong learning will be used to explain workplace learning. It is considered as gaining more importance in the present context. The challenges presented by the changes brought about by globalisation and advancement in information technology present society with no other choice than to be engaged in a continuous upgrading of skills, knowledge and competencies in an effort to be relevant in all spheres of life. In other words, the lifelong pursuit of learning in order to be able to function as an individual for

purposes of securing increased economic growth and social inclusion cannot be avoided. With knowledge expanding at an unprecedented rate, it becomes crucial that everyone be given equal access to keep abreast of the latest developments in information technology. By keeping abreast and by being knowledgeable of these developments, one would be able to effectively use that knowledge to make important life-impacting decisions that contribute to the enhancement of the quality of life.

The term lifelong learning has gained immeasurable importance and credence in such a scenario. Society can ensure that it has the adequacy in meeting the challenges of a rapid and ever changing global environment by engaging in life-long learning. This not only requires the appropriate response in terms of the policies and strategic direction in promoting lifelong learning, but also by way of commitment towards the creation of the widest possible access to lifelong learning for all sectors of the population. The outcomes of these policies and strategies can only be realised if all sectors of the population, especially those of government, demonstrate sincere and earnest effort towards spearheading the relevant and required objectives towards lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The concept of lifelong learning includes adult education, retraining, and further education for those who are past the typical school learning age (Hatton, 1999). In Malaysia, lifelong learning is categorised into three forms: the formal education of schooling, the higher education and the non-formal education (Leong, 1999). According to the definition put forth by UNESCO,

> ...the term "lifelong education and learning", for its part, denotes an overall scheme aimed at both restructuring the existing education system and at developing the entire educational potential outside the education system.

Lifelong learning in the context of the workplace has not been fully understood. It requires a reformulation and reconceptualisation of the established notion that learning occurs only in school when the learning processes actually occur in the lifelong learning context. Learning new skills and acquiring new knowledge is no longer restricted to formal educational settings. By integrating working and learning (Sachs, 1995), people learn in the context of their work on actual task-related problems that require real solutions. The question of workplace learning comes into being as what is learnt at the workplace is used to construct solutions to work problems.

What is not clearly understood and entirely explained by existing literature is what constitutes the various dimensions of lifelong learning in the workplace and the mechanisms necessary to sustain it in terms of the response to the diverse changes taking place in these environments (Patrickson et al., 1995).

> The current concept of workplace learning will no longer be constrained by the long-held perception of the workplace but wherever it occurs…the way in which individuals and groups acquire, interpret, reorganise, change or assimilate a related cluster of information, skills and feelings. It is also primary to the way in which people construct meaning in their personal and organisational lives. (Marsick, 1987)

According to Holliday and Retallick (1995), workplace learning refers to the processes and outcomes of learning that individual employee and groups of employees undertake under the auspices of a particular workplace.

Little has been explained as to how organisations are able to create sustained workplace learning in terms of the development of employees in response to the rapid and diverse changes taking place within these organisations. The emphasis is therefore on sustained development of both the individual and the organisation. Thus, the pattern of workplace learning is a reflection of the increased commitment of employers, and a move towards the development of a culture of lifelong learning (Carnevale & Carnevale, 1994).

> The issue of workplace learning is surrounded by confusion and indecision. Workplace learning is externally complex, and involves more than simple training and development issues. (Matthews, 1999)

More recent writing by Rothwell (2002) noted that workplace training itself is inadequate. Workplace learning should be given more attention than workplace training. He considered that workplace learning to be a subset of life learning.

> It is the change that people undergo as they prepare to perform their work, as they carry out their work, or as they reflect on their work experience. It   includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes people need to perform their work tasks; what they must know, do, or feel to interact with others to achieve results; and what they come to learn about themselves and their own learning style and process. It also includes creative approaches to coming up with new ways to get the work done and delight customers or other stakeholders. (Rothwell, 2002: p. 8)

On the other hand, Rothwell (2002) stated life learning,

> ...is the change that people undergo as a direct consequence of learning how to get along in the world. Individuals face unique problems at different stage of their lives, and these problems create central life changes at each life stage. Often, these central life challenges motivate people to learn and take decisive action to address their central life challenges. Finding a mate is, for instance, an experience for life learning. So is finding and succeeding in one's first job.

Adult education and the theories and mode of adult learning are also important to explain learning in the context of the workplace. These theories are important in explaining how "self-directed learning helped bring to the fore the importance of informal learning that occurs as we go about our daily lives" (Merriam, 2001). The experiences that an individual goes through in work life, family life and community life are punctuated with incidences of informal and unplanned learning. Organisations have to document this kind of learning as a way of developing the learning organisation.

Watkins and Marsick (1993, 1996) observed that learning in the context of the workplace as one where continuous learning opportunities are created; its members engage in continuous shared learning opportunities and the existence of a strategic leadership for learning. Creating continuous learning opportunities translates into individuals that are able to engage in learning through challenges and meeting the requirements of the job at hand. The systems approach is equally important in the learning organisation.

Thus, lifelong learning practices at the workplace covers major areas of training and development, then shifting to the broader concept of HRD, and also covering concepts related to learning organisation, organisational learning and workplace learning. However, recent developments indicate the significance of using lifelong learning as a concept to explain workplace learning. As such, there is a need for further understanding of the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace.

The Research Problem

Lifelong learning is a comprehensive concept that covers learning throughout the lifespan. Lifelong learning in the workplace is considered as a subset of that learning process. Initially, learning in the workplace is commonly related to the activities of training and development. Later, a more comprehensive and integrated function of HRD was used to denote the practices of learning at the workplace. Other related concepts include learning organisation and organisational learning. It is also strongly embedded in the practices of adult learning and adult education. More recent developments refer to practices of workplace learning and lifelong learning.

However, the practices of lifelong learning in the workplace presently are not very well understood. The emergence of the new economy, the advancement of ICT and the need for k-workers demands a new understanding of lifelong learning at the workplace.

Thus, the major question asked in this research is: What are the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace? It will examine the practices of lifelong learning

at a local government authority through the perception of top management. The research will answer the question in relation to the practices related to workplace learning. It will cover the practices related to training and development function, HRD function, learning organisations, organisational learning, and adult education.

Research Questions

What are the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace? This is the major question asked in this research. More specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. What is the understanding of lifelong learning at the workplace among top management of a Local Government Authority?
2. What are the experiences of top management of a Local Government Authority towards building a lifelong learning environment in the workplace?
3. What are the practices of lifelong learning manifested in the Local Government Authority?

Methodology

Based on the research questions, qualitative research methodology was selected, as it is most appropriate for the conduct of this research. This would provide the understanding of the phenomenon on lifelong learning at the workplace.

In order to enrich the findings of this study, purposive or purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select the top management of a Local Government Authority who could provide relevant information to the research questions. The participants selected were the five top management personnel from the organisation.

The selection of the participants was based on the criteria established by the researcher, which included they:

- represented the top echelon in the organisation;
- were responsible for policy formulation;
- were responsible for major decision-making in the organisation;
- formed the top-level committee in the organisation;
- can provide the overview of lifelong learning activities in the organisation;
- were accessible to the researcher; and
- were willing to participate in the research.

Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. In depth interview of key participants was the main form of data collection. The interviews lasted for about two to three hours each. Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with data collection. This involved reading over the data, making relevant notes and organising the data. Categories and sub-categories were generated and coded as part of the analysis process.

Findings

The findings of the research include aspects related to the understanding of lifelong learning, a culture of learning, policies, programmes, supports, utilisation of ICT and barriers to participation in lifelong learning at the workplace. They are described as follows.

Understanding of Lifelong Learning

Top management understands lifelong learning as activities, which constituted individual learning that involved formal, non-formal and informal learning. Their understanding of lifelong learning also included organisational learning. Individual learning focused more on knowledge gained through formal education, reading, sharing of ideas, formal and informal discussions, attending courses, study visits, attachment programmes, and accessing material through the Internet. Formal learning undertaken by top management included attending training programmes and activities conducted within and outside the workplace that lead to certification. Non-formal learning undertaken by top management included attending courses on the relevant skills and knowledge in areas that were able to enhance their job performance.

> What I understand with regards to understanding… is getting something new… new ideas, new technology that can be a tool towards your achieving or managing the environment that includes the organisation themselves.

> It's very important because continuous learning will make any organisation on par with other advanced organisation that we… if any organisation want to be successful there has to go through the process of learning and this involve updating the data… and improvement of the capability, manpower and get a more advanced management operation.

> So the creativity of a person, of a staff must be guided and must be developed… Sometimes the creativity of a person is not necessary from their own professional background. So learning is something

> that we the staff must develop to get new ideas, the way of doing things better, quicker and with more information.

> …my books will be more on management. But of course magazines…current magazines… Newsweek, the Age…I'm more concentrating on the economy… how does it affect the government sector.

Culture of Lifelong Learning

Results from the qualitative study indicated that an individual learning culture existed in the organisation. All the participants interviewed were engaged in some kind of individual learning and encouraged their officers and staff to attend training courses as well as to participate in seminars, study visits or attachment programmes to world-class organisations. They also encouraged more reading so as to be exposed to current issues and to actually 'go on the ground' to network and interact with the public at large. These training courses were deemed important to enhance knowledge and skills so as to be equipped to carry out tasks effectively to meet challenges brought about by changes in the environment. There was also an attempt to promote the use of the library as a major resource centre. In terms of opportunities for attending courses and study visits, personal initiative was often the rule of the day for officers and staff to apply for relevant courses apart from those who were identified by top management as potential candidates. There was an increasing awareness among top management and staff as to the importance of ICT as a source of knowledge for enhancing learning as its flexibility has been recognised. However, access to ICT usage across the board was still limited.

> I have always believed that learning is a very personal thing and it would relate to what you want to be. A person who learns, who has vision, who one day wants to be somebody… they must prepare themselves on what are the things that you must equip. In doing so, they must learn. It's very simple.

> …if you are talking about current news, of course we have our own associates, our own peer groups consist of… developers or consultant engineers, consultant architects… or even contractors.

Organisational Learning Culture: There existed various systems and structures within the organisation, such as through committees and on-site discussions to allow for employee participation in learning. Top management also recognised the importance of sending staff for training and development in areas of ICT, training in areas related to the organisation's core business as well as mandatory training as scheduled at the staff training institute.

Sharing of Ideas: There also existed the sharing of ideas between top management and officers of all categories, between officers of the same rank as well as between officers and subordinates in meetings, discussions and site visits as well as between staff of different departments and within an individual department. These sharing of ideas were both formal in nature such as those occurring in meetings and discussions or informal such as during casual conversations on the phone or when meeting informally. The sharing of information was also carried out through e-mail and the Internet.

> …but definitely they learn on their own with their peers and what not but the other process which information are being transmitted through meetings... are held either departmentally or intra-departmentally... and information are being transmitted… I think they are very free to share or to get information from various departments and various officers. I think there are various modes. And most of them know each other and alongside there may be a sharing of information among themselves on a very unofficial basis and they can even use the phones or the e-mail to get certain information… The other level is of course through meetings… whenever we have meetings or committees, discussions… various departments will definitely give their views or information... So, I think on that level information flow is very good because we are a closed service and we know each other very long… we just need to use the phone and ask about certain things, certain policies with regard to certain sector of the services.

Support for Lifelong Learning

Various types of support were identified in this research. They included work support, infrastructure support, financial support and management encouragement.

Work Support: Under this category, it was found that support existed in terms of work support required to enhance job performance. Working itself formed a major component of learning involving processing and thinking. This form of learning provided for self-development through the enhancement of knowledge about the performance of the tasks at hand.

Infrastructure Support: In terms of infrastructure, the organisation had its own training centre, which was primarily responsible for planning and conducting mandatory courses throughout the year for all employees of various categories.

> We have but this is more towards the local staff… the clerical staff… how to understand what organisation is all about and maybe along the line, to teach some computers and what not.

In terms of ICT infrastructure, there was adequate awareness of the importance of ICT usage in terms of lifelong learning though information technology (IT) hardware has been allocated mainly for technical departments for use by the management and professional group. Other non-technical departments, such as the administrative departments have to share IT equipment.

> So thereby towards the future, I feel that because of the k-economy, we have to update, we have to be at par, to have knowledge and capability of using ICT as a tool…failing which the decision process will be delayed…to give the best decision we have to have various information and through ICT specially going through the web, going through the Net will definitely be exposed to the other variables which will definitely at times we may not know.

> As for the local authorities, ICT is definitely very important, because to me through this process it will definitely reduce the number of hours taken over by staff to make decision. So to me, every staff, especially on the younger staff and those people who may serve for another many more years they must have the spirit of learning…to improve their learning, what they have, there are new things to learn in order for them to manage the environment and I think we all aware the future environment will definitely be different from the present environment whereby they must equip themselves with new things that they learn and of course, side by side with them, there must be ICT as a tool for them to manage the decision.

> We have laid all the infrastructure. I think we have got the infrastructure…we have also established the multimedia department.

Computers with Internet facilities were also available though not quite adequate in terms of access for all employees. The distribution of personal computers and IT hardware varied from department to department with the technical departments given top priority due to the nature of their task. Efforts are being made to purchase more IT facilities for distribution to the management and professional group.

> Now what we have now is, for the technical departments we have PCs being used. I think there are some ratios to it depends on the usage…in terms of numbers we are still a very…in pool because the numbers is still lagging behind because we haven't set up the main system yet but for those certain departments who are using systems, which are already been implemented like HRMIS and Personnel, I think the numbers are much more… At the moment not one to one yet.

Financial Support: An allocation of RM8 million has been provided for training and development but the quantum varied from year to year. Loans were also given for the purchase of computers. Scholarships were also provided for deserving employees to pursue further education at Masters and Ph.D. level though the award has been suspended in lieu of the emphasis given to study visits and attachments to various organisations.

Management Encouragement: There was a unanimous effort at encouraging employees to engage in further education and learning activities in order to enhance knowledge and skills in order to gain more exposure and maturity. However, this was done more for self-development rather than any guarantee of an automatic promotion. There was also equal support for both genders to attend courses as selection was based on merit and seniority rather than gender.

Programmes for Lifelong Learning

The organisation's training institute conducted programmes in terms of training courses, as certain courses were compulsory in nature according to the requirements set by the organisation. These included courses on the familiarisation of the organisation, induction courses, computer courses, communication skills, and human resource training programmes, office management, leadership skills, and, safety and health.

Other programmes in specialised areas were carried out either in-house or by private consultants. Employees were also sent for courses to public institutions such as the National Public Administration Institute (more commonly known as INTAN) and those organised by private organisations.

> there are a lot of courses, there are short courses, there are long courses…and there are many people who go for courses, even for Masters.

> …for the lower staff…it is kind of compulsory for them to go for refresher course…for example, we have courses on computer for them to update themselves for ICT. Now for mid-level, besides improving their skills, they are also allowed to go for higher level courses, maybe a degree level…. for the higher level, of course to me Masters is a must…. they should go now for more of the courses that involve in a crash programme courses...

Policies Related to Lifelong Learning

The policies related to lifelong learning in the organisation tended to be non-existent or ad-hoc in nature. As such, lifelong learning activities were

conducted in such a way that lacked proper planning and therefore led to ineffective implementation. There was also no formal committee responsible for the planning and implementation of lifelong learning programmes and activities in the organisation.

> I'm sure there is no committee, there is no committee but the responsibility lies on the heads of department. If they want their staff to attend courses they have to apply.

> Lacking… from my observation the last twenty years ni I didn't see any… whoever reach the rank of TKP (Timbalan Ketua Pengarah) they never go for courseslah. So this is one of the behaviour daripada dulu sampai sekarang kita bawa which the top management tak pernah dihantar… tak pernah diwajibkan… to attend any of the soft skill punya course. We need it and then we need a break also.

Barriers to Participation in Lifelong Learning Activities

There were various instances of barriers to participation in lifelong learning activities that included a tight work schedule and a heavy workload that did not allow employees to attend courses for more than a week at any one time, as the nature of the job required them to be constantly at their workstations. Courses attended were short in duration and therefore lacked impact and value.

> …because if one month he is not around, who's going to take over his work? The deputy of course can take over but usually the Director is supposed to handle the whole department because every department is critical... the head of department have full responsibility on the decision making, the planning, and the operation side. He must bear full responsibility.

Budget constraint has been cited as another barrier to participation in lifelong learning activities as priorities within organisation shifted according to the exigencies that arose out of policy directives from higher authorities. This resulted in the reduction of the allocation for training. Application to utilise budget set aside for training was also seen as being mire in too much bureaucracy.

Lack of incentives in terms of promotion was seen as one of the biggest barriers in terms of inculcating a positive attitude among staff to engage in lifelong learning activities. Learning for the individual was seen as necessary to be undertaken more often as an avenue for promotion rather than being appreciated for its intrinsic value such as for self-development. Unattractive incentives, such as unclear career path and career advancement, hindered interest in pursuing further education and learning.

> They must go …there are because of the opportunity for promotion in …, is lacking…closed service. There are not many higher posts…so there are also officers with more than twenty years still on grade three. …they don't want to go for… they know they going to either pencen at grade three or the most they can go at grade two. So for them there is no use for them to further study or to …not motivated… the sad thing is there is no promotion opportunity here…

Selection of participants for courses was also seen to be arbitrary at times and not based on job requirement but rather implemented on the basis of favouritism.

> If there are courses, what is happening now is…if there are visits, if there are courses here and there we have to wait…we have to bring to the City Mayor to decide….This matters also…brought up by our senior officers that opportunities for courses, for career development is very lacking.

Insufficient number of personnel was also a barrier to allowing more employees to attend courses, as management was reluctant to allow for too long an absence from the office.

Negative individual attitude and a complacent mentality among employees were also identified as barriers to participation in lifelong learning activities. This resulted in their unwillingness to take responsibility for their own learning. The feeling of adequacy in terms of implementing their tasks and duties was borne out by the fact that they had been long in the service and therefore sufficiently experienced and knowledgeable in performing the tasks at hand. Employees were often seen as resistant and slow in changing their mindset and therefore hesitant to learn and adopt new approaches towards job enhancement.

> …of course in order to change our mindset….at the moment we have been telling them that we must change the mindset towards this, towards that on so many things but I have a little bit of reservation whether they really understand on changing their mindset. They may have a different look of…certain issues but in terms of mindset, I think they are still as they were before. I think the main reason why I say this is because you can see at best that they are not consistent in making their decision… reason being, I think this is the problem of the difficulty to unlearn certain things which I feel is not necessary, it is not relevant…

A lack of a strategic and integrated training plan was seen as a barrier in terms of organisational training commitment. Training was implemented more on an ad-hoc basis.

> No…no…it's not existing. It is a fact.
>
> I think this matter it is not addressed properly in the management and as you are aware that we are also an operational organisation and we are so busy on so many things that we forget that training must be there.
>
> As I said just now from the beginning…in…the strategic planning on training of staff is never done. This is more ad-hoc. To me training should be studied properly…
>
> …but as I said, that unfortunately the planning of the staff going for courses was never there.
>
> …what we have in terms of training at the moment…I have to accept the fact that the training we have is more towards training the lower group in attending certain courses which are actually relevant …

Courses attended were more often too general in nature and not streamlined to meet job requirements.

More serious was the fact that top management perceived those who were responsible for training, lacked the expertise to conduct a proper training needs analysis.

> As a person who is in a personnel department. Now if they are in charge of training, they must really understand what training is and what the benefit that a person can get through training and in this role, they must also understand what are the relevant things that they must train in order for them to benefit from… in a later date.

Unequal distribution of IT infrastructure was also seen as a major barrier to learning as access to personal computers was limited to the technical departments. This gave rise to a correspondingly low emphasis on learning through ICT and due to budget constraints.

> …It depends on the department but engineers everyone has got a computer but other than that at least with the administration give one computer, one notebook to one department… The staff are sharing…
>
> It should pick up and I think in the future the usage of computer will be wider. At the moment it's most probably around fifty percent.

A lack of suitable courses offered and a poor dissemination of information on the types of courses available also gave rise to ignorance among employees as to the training opportunities available within and outside of the organisation.

Discussion

The major questions asked in this study were: What are the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace? Practices refer to policies, strategies, programmes, activities, processes, administrative support, workplace environment and outputs related to lifelong learning at the workplace. On the other hand, lifelong learning refers to all learning activities either through formal, non-formal and informal means, which help to improve the knowledge and skills of individuals throughout his or her lifespan. Workplace in this study refers to the work situation or work environment at the Local Government Authority.

The data in this study were obtained through interviews of four top management of the Local Government Authority. Since they were involved in top decision-making functions, possessed long working experience, and were well educated, the data obtained were very informative and rich. They seemed to be very comfortable with the questions posed during the interviews, which lasted for a period of between two to three hours per participant.

Based on the data collected, several categories of practices of lifelong learning were observed. The main category was related to the understanding of the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace itself. The study found that the participants were relatively aware and knowledgeable of practices of lifelong learning at the workplace, which involved individual and organisational learning. Most of these practices were related to functions of training and development and HRD. Non-formal learning seems to be the main activity of the organisation. Informal learning was also observed among employees. On the other hand, formal learning was more limited to officers of higher rank.

A conducive work environment, administrative support, programmes, policies and learning utilising ICT supported the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace. In terms of a conducive work environment, there were evidences of individual and organisational learning culture and sharing of ideas among employees. In relation to administrative support, the data indicated that there were adequate infrastructure, financial allocation and encouragement from management. However, further improvement of this support can promote the practices of lifelong learning within the organisation.

In terms of programmes for lifelong learning at the workplace, the organisation provided training courses at the organisation's training institute. The courses included induction courses, computer courses, communication skills, human resource programmes, office management and safety and health courses. The employees were also given opportunities to attend courses by external providers such as INTAN.

The lifelong learning practices at the Local Government Authority were supported by policies. However, these policies were more ad-hoc in nature. There were no comprehensive policies and strategies in place for the promotion of lifelong learning at the workplace.

The findings of the study concurred with the review of literature in supporting the contention that practices of lifelong learning at the workplace were derived from various concepts. The review indicated that the foundation of the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace came from the T & D function, the HRD function, organisational learning, learning organisation, adult education and self-directed learning. The findings and the review emphasised that training was still the critical component of workplace learning. At the Local Government Authority involved in this study, it was found that the main activities of learning were related to the T & D function.

The findings also supported the literature in terms of the types of learning that occurred at the workplace. All forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning were observed at the organisation concerned. It involved individuals, groups and the organisation itself. The workplace learning was also very much related to the HRD function in that, the outcomes of learning should relate to increased performance at the individual, group and organisational level. To some extent, organisational learning and learning organisation did occur in the organisation.

Though there was no specific mention about adult education and self-directed learning, however, it can be implied that the two concepts were being practiced in the organisation.

The other findings such as the provision of a conducive work environment for lifelong learning, administrative support, policies, programmes and utilisation of ICT also promote practices of lifelong learning at the workplace. They could be the pillars for the practice of lifelong learning at the workplace.

The relationship between the understanding of the concept of lifelong learning and the other findings can be summarised as, "The Framework of the Practices of Lifelong Learning at the Workplace" (Figure 1). The concepts provided the foundation for the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace while a conducive work environment for lifelong learning, administrative support, policies, programmes and utilisation of ICT served as the pillars of the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace.
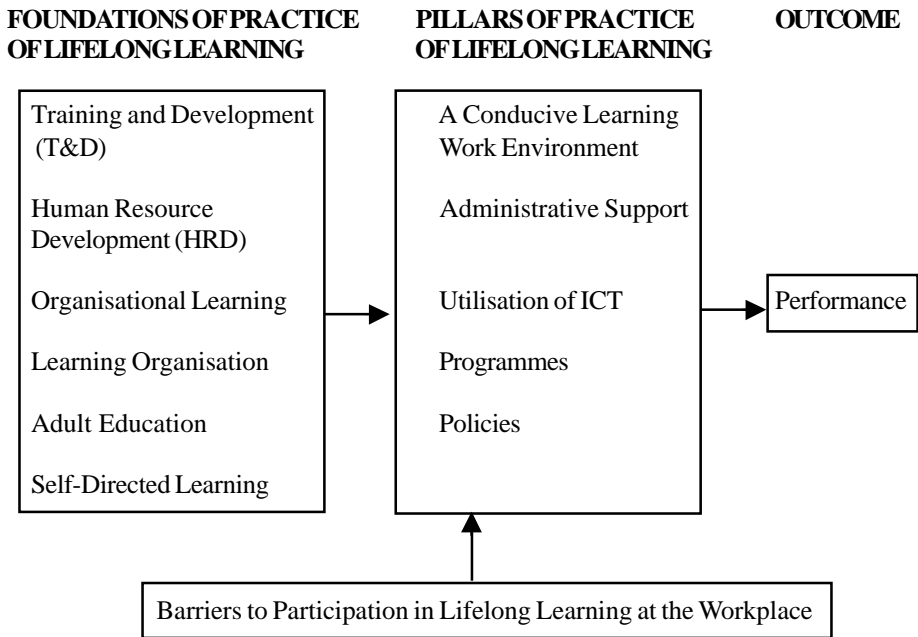
FOUNDATIONS OF PRACTICE   PILLARS OF PRACTICE   OUTCOME
OF LIFELONG LEARNING   OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Training and Development (T&D)	A Conducive Learning Work Environment	
Human Resource Development (HRD)	Administrative Support	
Organisational Learning	Utilisation of ICT	Performance
Learning Organisation	Programmes	
Adult Education	Policies	
Self-Directed Learning		

Barriers to Participation in Lifelong Learning at the Workplace

Figure 1 Framework of the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace

Conclusion

The study concluded that there were various practices related to lifelong learning at the Local Government Authority. Based on the findings and discussions, some of the practices observed were as follows:

1. The practices of lifelong learning at the workplace were related to the T&D function, HRD and organisational learning. The lifelong learning occurred in the forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

2. There was a conducive work environment that supported the practices of lifelong learning within the organisation. The existence of a learning culture among individual employees in the organisation and also formal and informal sharing of ideas among employees reflected this.

3. There were evidences of administrative support to promote the practices of lifelong learning in the organisation. This administrative support came in the form of infrastructure, financial allocation and encouragement from the management.

4. There were learning programmes made available to employees that encouraged the practices of lifelong learning at the workplace. These programmes were mainly courses conducted in-house as well as outsourced to external training providers.

5. There were policies in place to support the practices of lifelong learning within the organisation. However, these policies were more ad-hoc in nature rather than being concrete and comprehensive.

6. There were also barriers to participation in lifelong learning at the workplace. These included a heavy workload schedule, the nature of the job that required them to be constantly at their work stations, courses that were offered were too short and therefore lacked impact and value, budget constraints, bureaucratic procedures, lack of incentives in terms of promotion and unattractive incentives.

The Need for Open and Flexible Lifelong Learning Model at the Workplace

The research findings emphasised the importance of lifelong learning at the workplace. It existed in all forms that include formal, non-formal and informal learning. Self-directed is an important element of the learning process. The findings of the study indicated that are various barriers to participation in organised learning activity due to work and family commitments and other constraints such as distance and the scheduling of the courses.

The implementation of an open and flexible learning model that can accommodate the needs of the staff at the workplace is necessary. Through this model, workers can learn on their own, 'where' and 'when' they like. Reading and learning materials can also be made available online since computers and Internet connections are available at the workplace.

Lifelong learning at the workplace in Malaysia is moving from the traditional way of learning to the self-directed learning practiced through the distance mode of learning. This is to accommodate the needs and constraints of the working adult population.

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