Reducing stress with organizational learning and development

Globalized competition and rapid technological development combine to create change in the nature of work. As a consequence, workplace skills development is essential. An integral part of this new workplace environment consists of growing demands on employees to develop new knowledge and skills.

Reorganization and organizational development, together with rapid developments in technology, require employees to develop their competences so that they can cope with workplace changes. At the same time, these changes have increased exposure to workplace stress and have impacted on the health and safety of workers. The more rapid and widespread the changes, the greater the need for organizations to switch to forms of organizational learning, by which is meant the “ability to gain insight and understanding from experience through experimentation, observation, analysis, and a willingness to examine both successes and failures”.

However, the links between workplace stress and employee learning are relatively unexplored. As a consequence, it is important to examine the impact of these changes on workers’ health and the role of workplace learning in the relationship between increasing demands and well-being.

A model widely used to explore occupational stress is the “job demand-control” model. This states that the most adverse job-related strain reactions are to be expected in jobs characterized by high job demands and low control. By contrast, some maintain that, on equal terms, high control increases workers’ levels of motivation and learning development, with positive effects on well-being.

The job demands-control model

The job demands-control model (JD-C model) assumes that a psychological work environment can be characterized by a combination of two important characteristics that determine health and well-being:

1. Job demand – referring to pace, amount of work and work complexity.
2. Control – comprising two elements; decision authority (autonomy) and skill discretion (range of skills used).

Two basic premises are formulated in the JD-C model. The strain (main effect) premise predicts that workers in “high strain” jobs will experience less wellbeing compared with workers in “low strain” jobs. When employees’ work has high demands and employees have little or no influence on their own control/decision making, this has adverse effects on the employees’ health both physically and psychologically (“high strain” jobs). In contrast, optimal employee motivation occurs in a situation when there is a high correspondence between demands and the level of control/decision making (active state and high learning motivation).

The buffer (interaction effect) premise predicts that control has an interactive effect because it is able to moderate the effects of job demands on well-being. In fact, control
over one's work can buffer the potentially negative effects of excessive job demands on health and well-being because it provides workers with an opportunity to adjust their work demands according to their needs, abilities and circumstances.

The demands of the job are usually considered to be a key source of stress for workers. Conversely, control is considered as a resource for coping with demands that promotes motivation, satisfaction and performance. The two variables in different configurations bring different outcomes for an employee: from passive state to a high learning motivation.

The JD-C model has often been disputed. One important topic of debate concerns the concept of job control, which includes two sub-concepts:

1. decision authority; and
2. skill discretion.

Decision authority is considered as the social authority over making decisions, whereas skill discretion refers to the breadth of skills usable on the job. Where decision authority is conceptually equivalent to job control, skill discretion represents a different concept. Consequently, there has been a lack of agreement between the way job control is generally conceived and used in the field of occupational stress research.

However, the control over the work is not the only available resource for employees to cope with job demands. The 'opportunity for learning and development' could be considered an organizational resource that supports and values training and learning, and increases the innovative capacity of workers and enterprises, allowing them to face continuous changes and growing demands. In fact, today, work life can assume different configurations and new career paths are characterized by continuous choices and decision-making processes.

Opportunities to learn and wellbeing

The change in the nature of workplaces entails that the skill level of employees must be continuously developed. Organizations require worker abilities such as communication and problem-solving skills in addition to technical skills. These skills, particularly those concerned with employability, are critical in today's workplaces, and workplace cultures should assist individuals in effectively developing or using these skills. Hence, workplace learning, both formal and informal, is acquiring increasing importance in the education and training of workforces. Workplace learning enables individuals, employers and organizations to respond to the changing nature of economic activity. It helps improve efficiency and productivity, and it meets the personal and career development needs of individuals.

Opportunities for learning are usually associated with skills training designed to improve productivity. When organizations have created a learning environment and practice a learning approach, they also provide the basis for the integration of personal and organizational development. By enhancing workers' capability, workplace learning increases innovative capacity in enterprises.

With regard to the possibility of achieving personal development via work, jobs that are conducive to learning opportunities may result in employees being intrinsically involved in their jobs. Personal development is also expected in jobs with high procedural and temporal degrees of freedom, requirements for skill enhancement, decision-making, and responsibility.

Counteracting burnout

Opportunities to learn within the organizational setting exert positive effects on the quality of work life by enhancing positive outcomes. Opportunities to develop abilities and learn something new from work activities enable people to avoid negative load effects, and they prevent exhaustion and a lack of satisfaction.
Employees with high possibilities to learn are able to cope with high demands. These individuals may also be more likely to “take advantage” of competitive work and high demand, with positive consequences on their health. By contrast, individuals who do not have opportunities to learn seem to suffer the consequence of workload and are less resilient.

There are three needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness – which, when satisfied, enhances self-motivation and mental health, and, when thwarted, lead to diminished motivation and well-being. In this sense, workplace learning could allow workers to be self-determined and, consequently, more able to deal with an increased workload and to utilize control opportunities available in the environment as an antidote to stressors.

The active learning of individuals can have also an impact on organization learning. Although the organizational learning process does not exactly match the individual learning process, the two processes are closely related. In particular, one can argue that jobs rich in learning and development opportunities are a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for the development of an organizational learning process.

Supporting and valuing a culture of learning in the workplace is important because ongoing learning is needed to survive at a time of increasing competition, with positive consequences for workers' well-being. Moreover, with the aim of skilling and upskilling employees for continued employability, organizations can play a vital role in promoting the quality of work life.

Extending the JD-C model and looking at other perspectives, the opportunity of learning is a resource that has a role in the evaluation of the imbalance between environmental requests and personal abilities to cope with these requests. This factor could activate workers' coping strategies and diminish the negative impact of demands preventing the psychological experience of strain.

Burnout (as worker de-motivation) and disengagement are major problems in modern organizations. Among the most powerful factors inducing de-motivation and disengagement there are meaningless jobs or jobs which reduce worker autonomy and control. Opportunities for learning and development appear to furnish HR managers with very useful means to counteract this tendency, especially at a time of such rapid changes: job and organizational redesign could be undertaken on considering that personal learning and development may make the difference for both worker satisfaction and organizational performance.

May 2010.

This is a shortened version of “Can an opportunity to learn at work reduce stress? A revisitation of the job demand-control model”, which originally appeared in Journal of Workplace Learning, Volume 22 Number 3, 2010.

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