

***European Consortium
for the
Learning Organisation***

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Learning Organisations

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Preface

This brief introduction to the concept of the learning organisation offers an overview of a model developed following research and consultancy in the subject area since 1992. At that time, as an objective researcher, I found the concept offered a theoretical framework that helped explain the types of changes I had discovered in a small number of organisations. Secondly, further research into the subject confirmed that the principles of learning organisations reinforced my own values and beliefs as an individual. Organisations can, and should, create dynamic and effective places to work where human talent can be optimised and aligned with the goals of the organisation.

The model proposed here is designed to reflect a concern that organisations are complex systems and strategies for learning need to be applied within different domains in the organisation to maximise performance based on learning principles. The emphasis here is on environments that support and maximise long-term effective learning. I am not arguing that short-term technical or task related training should be abandoned. On the contrary, all organisations will continue to adapt to their changing circumstances and will inevitably require employees at all levels to undertake new tasks and responsibilities. However, if we are to enhance the adaptive capacity of our workforces there will be a need to underpin training with methods and techniques designed to improve the learning capacity of the individuals and teams involved. It is my firm belief that learning oriented organisations will more easily support the development of the skills and attitudes among their employees necessary to improve performance and competitiveness.

1. Introduction

The learning organisation concept can be seen as appropriate for our times. In the first 85 years of this century, the range of tasks and associated skills asked of employees were generally limited and often accompanied by high levels of supervision and control. From the early 1980s there has been an increasing recognition that higher levels of skills are required to cope with new technology, new forms of work organisation and the demands of quality and customer service that by the late 1990s have become commonplace. In the last decade, what began as a trickle of interest in the learning organisation concept has turned into a wave of theoretical research and practical implementation.

¹ This brief introductory article has been written from a personal perspective and does not necessarily represent the views of E.C.L.O.. Michael Kelleher is based in the UK and this paper attempts to place the learning organisation within the context of developments in that country although policy statements based on learning society aims can be found in most European countries.

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According to a growing body of literature, organisations' concerns for increasing competitiveness, innovating processes or products and enhancing employee commitment can be addressed through action designed to establish the organisation as a learning organisation. The concept has emerged from roots, which can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s and has gained in popularity from around the late 1980s.

Whereas organisational learning had been developed as a concept prior to that period, the use of the concept of 'learning organisation' certainly became more popular both in the US and in the UK at this time. British authors were involved in the articulation of the concept at this relatively early stage. Mike Pedler, John Burgoyne and Tom Boydell developed their ideas during the 1980s, which were heavily influenced by action learning theories and organisational learning theories.

As elsewhere in Europe and across the world, the UK Government is developing policies and initiatives to create a learning society. The consultancy document for a *Learning Age* has become an important milestone in the progress towards these policies and strategies and lifelong learning will inevitably become a central platform for national and European initiatives for social and economic regeneration. That document states quite clearly the benefits of learning for individuals, businesses, communities and the nation. For example, benefits to businesses can be seen as

adding value and keeping them up-to-date. Learning develops the intellectual capital which is now at the centre of a nation's competitive strength (*Learning Age*, page 10).

In Wales, where I am based, the first Government Paper on lifelong learning - *Learning is for Everyone* - sets out a National Learning Strategy for Wales that emphasises, amongst other issues, individuals controlling their own learning with appropriate support and guidance, informal learning, learning relevant to the needs of the economy and an expansion of learning opportunities in the workplace. Within this context Individual Learning Accounts and the University for Industry initiatives will place a heavy emphasis on learning in and for the workplace.

These UK Government published papers during 1998 are one part of a growing movement that recognises the contribution of learning to social and economic renewal. The UK Department for Education and Employment sponsors a network of 'learning cities' that is developing new ideas and practices for the promotion of learning, the participation of citizens in the governance of their communities and the enhanced performance of the community through learning. The ideas emerging from learning communities or learning cities are many of the same issues that prompted interest in the learning organisation concept several years earlier. The need to engage members of the community in learning and to enhance their own development linked with a broader regeneration of economic and social well-being are issues similar to the imperatives that drove large businesses to aspire to become learning organisations. If communities and cities establish similar aspirations, we believe that our model of the learning organisation has much to offer their programmes for change.

If lifelong learning is to become a reality, policies and practices are required to embed the concept into the fabric of schools, colleges, universities, workplaces, the voluntary sector and in the third age. Creating organisations that support the learning of their employees will be an important factor in a lifelong learning era. However, the concept of the learning organisation has generated a great deal of interest not simply because of its apparent focus on the individual. The key to the vast interest in the subject is that it provides a positive framework for organisational change and that change is designed to improve organisational performance

through learning. In addition, the pace of change in industry has become so rapid that individuals require an adaptive capacity that can only be satisfied through learning.

Recent recruitment information for a Director for Policy Studies and Management Development on behalf of the UK Government, stated quite clearly that the Government seeks to become a learning organisation. This high level, Cabinet Office post, suggests an endorsement of the concept as the most appropriate organisational model for the future. It can be anticipated that support may be forthcoming for all organisations in the UK to adopt the concept. KENT Learning, a practical framework for enhancing social and economic improvements in the County, has ambitious goals to develop ALL organisations as learning organisations. Scottish Enterprise has similar ambitions and the Glasgow Development Agency also seeks to match learning organisation initiatives among schools, colleges and businesses within a policy aimed towards lifelong learning for all Glasgow citizens.

With several Training and Enterprise Councils and Local Enterprise Companies, their Scottish counterparts, concerned to support the development of learning organisations in their areas, the concept will become increasingly more important and relevant to economic development strategies as well as to educational institutions.

2. Learning organisations

In this introductory paper, I have adopted a three dimensional approach. This approach suggests that learning organisations are established through the continuous inter-action between the three key dimensions of individual, team and organisational learning. A holistic and integrated approach to creating environments in which effective learning is maximised is, I believe, the key to developing learning organisations.

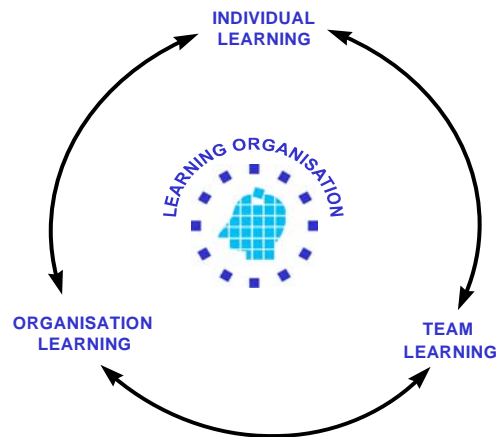
Although many authors, and I am no exception, offer some criteria for defining learning organisations, it is the process of learning which is the key ingredient and by definition it may not be possible to establish a point of arrival. Learning organisation development and implementation is a journey and not a destination. As such it is difficult to compare with initiatives such as Investors in People in the UK or Excellence Through People in Ireland which are similar. IiP has externally set indices against which organisations are measured for accreditation. The principles of such initiatives have much in common with the approach to learning organisations set out here. My only concern is that organisations aspiring to develop the principles and practices of learning organisations need to do so in their own context and for their own reasons. This is not meant as a criticism of IiP. Investors in People is designed to support action plans for organisational development though maximising human resources. This complies with my beliefs that organisations can improve through maximising human talent and potential. My concern is that deep levels of learning are maximised when learning is seen as intrinsically rewarding. Any externally accredited award, however well meaning, should only act as a vehicle for further development and not an end in itself. The learning organisation concept can be seen, then, as a continuation of progress for performance improvement once IiP accreditation has been awarded.

3. A three dimensional approach

Whilst recognising that the pursuit of a universal definition may be a futile exercise, a trawl of the literature does suggest that there are key dimensions in learning organisations which are used to illustrate the concept. The model is based on the integration of strategies in the domains of individual, team and organisational learning.

The emphasis here is on learning and not training. The primary focus is on the key ingredients of the learning process and how it is facilitated.

Figure 1. A three dimensional model of a learning organisation



◆ **Individual Learning**

This may be obvious. In fact, initial reaction to the learning organisation concept was often couched in terms of the belief that people learn and `not organisations`. It is essential that all organisations aspiring to become learning organisations must support and sustain the learning of all its employees. Personal development plans, such as those employed by many organisations in the UK, serve as excellent platforms for creating environments in which all members of staff consider their own growth through learning. Such initiatives should also involve an increased responsibility for managing individual's own learning and, in my opinion, this is a key success criterion for aspiring learning organisations.

Traditional education and training programmes, where organisations use them, often play an important part in the individual learning dimension. It is important to stress that informal learning, especially learning integrated into work tasks and responsibilities is probably just as, if not more, significant. Whilst the control of formal learning lies with the professionals responsible for teaching and training, individuals will obviously experience less control and quite possibly less ownership over their learning. A shift in the locus of control over learning will place demands on vocational training providers to develop new roles and skills in facilitating effective and long-term learning.

◆ **Team Learning**

Teams are a collection of individuals and also an entity in their own right. As more and more working situations are organised through teams of varying sizes and durations, team learning has become an important factor in organisational development. The transfer of learning experiences between the team members and also between other teams is a key ingredient here. It is important to stress that it is `team learning` and not simply `team working` that is

important. Creating the ideal environment for effective learning in groups and teams is as important as ensuring that individual learning takes place.

Team, or group, learning has different components to individual learning that, naturally, involve the social aspects of learning with others. Pooling knowledge, understanding the limits to the team's knowledge of any given situation and the sharing of possible solutions to any given problems are all key components in team learning environments. Do not underestimate the importance of minority views where they exist as these help the team to view alternative perspectives and options. As with individual learning, unconscious behaviours need to be recognised and understood if team learning is to be successful. Research over many years at the Tavistock Institute shows that the ideal group size for maximising learning is 5-7 members.

◆ **Organisational Learning**

I offer four components here:

New systems and structures:

It is at this level that the learning of individuals and teams becomes embedded into the fabric of the organisation. Systemic thinking allows analysis of organisational blockages to learning. Communication systems need to be implemented which allow for free and lateral communication flows in order to enhance learning at all levels in the organisation. Information technology systems can be appropriate but will probably depend on the size of the organisation and the extent to which the interface between humans and the technology lends itself to good internal communications.

Building an organisational memory is useful in order not to lose the learning of individuals and teams. After so many years of 'downsizing', how much learning has been lost to the organisation through initiatives such as early retirements? Organisational memory can be facilitated through the use of information technology systems but can also be captured in traditional paper formats, books, reports, etc. The key to this is to create effective storage and retrieval systems so that material can be accessed at the right time, by those who need it and in a format that enables easy understanding. This generates the need to consider the processes of knowledge management alongside those of organisational learning.

New processes:

The establishment of environments in which learning is maximised and made most effective is a vital ingredient. Learning how learning has taken place and supporting individuals and teams to understand how they have learned new tasks and responsibilities will be vital.

Organisations do not exist in a vacuum. It is important to learn how best to scan the boundaries of the organisation. This involves the examination of good practice elsewhere, becoming alert to market and other economic factors that may impact on the organisation and understanding more fully the impact that existing practices may have on customers and suppliers. Changes desired by organisations may also have implications on relationships between those organisations and external agencies and institutions upon which they may be dependent in the future. The involvement of suppliers, customers and other agencies in collaborative organisational learning and knowledge creating processes is a desirable extension of this increased environmental awareness.

New values:

All of the above require individuals to commit themselves to behaving in an honest way and to build levels of trust in order to maximise learning opportunities. If we cannot trust what we are hearing or cannot trust that people will act in a professional manner following periods of mutual understanding how can learning be profitable and positive?

Mistakes do occur. What happens to the lessons learnt from those errors? How are they used to create improvements? These are important issues in learning organisations. Seeing mistakes as key learning experiences will enable organisations to end or prevent blame cultures and to create environments in which risk taking and experimentation are seen as healthy and necessary for organisational growth.

New roles:

There also needs to be shift from control mechanisms to empowerment and this will require managers and team leaders to develop leadership skills. This is not to claim that managing should be completely abandoned in favour of leading but that the whole balance of the role of senior people should be re-focused in favour of the latter. In fact, The Benefits Agency in the UK, for example, has established that far from being the exclusive domain of senior people, leadership skills are essential to all of its employees.

Coaching skills are also now recognised as essential part of the manager's toolkit and the same skills are needed by trainers and others responsible for ensuring learning opportunities have a long-term effect on performance. In fact change management may become a specific skill and role in itself. I have recently met with a manager in a large automotive company whose business card read 'Manager for Change'.

4. Conclusions

If lifelong learning is to become a reality, it will become increasingly important to ensure that strategies and actions support the development of learning organisations. If overlooked, the world of work could well be that area of people's lives where learning is not explicit, supported and developed. The model of the learning organisation, with its three dimensional approach, proposes strategies within the domains of individual, team and organisational learning. I believe that such a model will enhance the improved performances necessary for competitiveness and enhanced performance but also offer individuals the capacity to adapt to change more readily and perhaps grow independently of the work situation.. As we approach the new millennium, the opportunities to support new and dynamic models of organisational behaviour will give rise to developments of the learning organisation concept among educational institutions, small businesses and public sector bodies responsible for economic development.

The next phases of development will probably focus increasingly on the tools needed for collaborative learning between organisations. Inter-organisational learning will, I believe, become a model for regional economic re-generation that will build on the notion of networks. By adopting the principles and practices of the learning organisation concept networks and partnerships will generate activities for mutual gain.