

# Learning *from* Experience Trust

## ACCREDITATION OF IN-COMPANY TRAINING

**Tom Whelan, Former Head of Finance Personnel and Training, British Telecom International**

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### INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Work-Based Learning’ embraces a phenomenally broad spectrum. It is not restricted to learning acquired in business or private industry, but embraces all forms of paid and unpaid work including areas such as charitable work and housework.

This paper, however, is going to restrict itself to what is often called ‘in-company training’ and to its accreditation. This is not to dismiss the others, nor to imply that learning only occurs through training. Within the management education field there are frequent discussions of the precise meaning of terms like ‘training’, ‘learning’ and ‘development’. Other discussions turn on whether what is taught is ‘management’ or ‘business studies’. For the purposes of this paper the word ‘training’ will refer to teaching someone to do their current job properly, and ‘development’ to preparing them for future jobs. Learning may take place as a result of, but not solely because of, training or development.

Furthermore, any reference to company practices should be taken to apply to those companies with good practices. It has to be admitted that attitudes to training and development in British industry vary considerably between companies.

## WHAT IS IN-COMPANY TRAINING?

In-company training embraces everything from one or two-day modules to courses extending over several months and from distance learning to on-the-job training. The types of training offered will vary with the size of the company, its training policies and resources, and the needs of the company and its staff. Some in-company training courses may be similar in content to traditional degrees, diplomas and certificates. Others may be highly specific to a particular company or even to a particular job or system within the company.

Except for the newest recruits, no-one in industry, be they managers, shop floor workers, clerks, secretaries or whatever, will have spent anything like the amount of time in formal training that they have spent in learning by experience: and industry rewards experience. Managers are promoted or headhunted to other companies on the basis of experience. This is not to say that experience simply comes with the years. Some people learn from experience, others do not. There is a saying in industry that one can tell the difference between a person with five years' experience and one with one year's experience repeated five times!

In-company learning is completely acceptable for credit towards academic awards, and should be - not "could be" or "may be" - given such credit, provided it can be assessed.

The CNAA statement should be prominently blazoned wherever and whenever credit accumulation and transfer, and particularly accreditation of experiential learning, are being considered and discussed. There is often suspicion of experiential learning, an unstated view that it is somehow second-rate. Certainly one factor contributing to this is doubt about how, and even whether, experiential learning can be assessed. However, even when the principle of experiential learning has been conceded, there still remains reluctance to accept it fully. This is clearly shown when discussion turns to how much of an award can be gained by experiential learning. Should it be fifty per cent? Forty? Sixty? It is rarely conceded that it could, in certain cases, be one hundred per cent.

## WHY DO COMPANIES WANT ACCREDITATION?

Why are companies like British Telecom, IBM, Sainsbury and many others interested in accreditation of in-company training? There are many reasons and the following list is by no means exhaustive.

Many medium-sized and large companies run their own internal courses on such topics as finance, computing, statistics, interpersonal skills, management techniques and so on. These courses are comparable in content to what is covered in the syllabi of degrees, diplomas and certificates. Staff who have already acquired these skills by experience do not attend the internal courses.

However, companies also sponsor members of their staff to attend external courses in management, engineering and other topics. This sponsorship means paying the course fees, the student's salary for the period of absence, extra travel and subsistence costs incurred by the student, books, stationery and other related items. Additionally, the student is absent for a considerable portion of the working time available, and the work must still be done. In the light of such expense it is reasonable for companies to ask why their students should have to repeat topics they have already covered in one way or another.

Those companies which run internal courses usually devote considerable resources to them. For example, on British Telecom computing courses staff are trained with the most recent releases of hardware and software. There will be a dedicated terminal for each student and the normal tutor-student ratio is 1 :8. On some specialised courses it may be 3:8. Companies are aware that most educational establishments do not have equivalent standards. How then can the in-company training not be given credit towards an award?

Examples could also be quoted of staff working on particular projects who have of necessity had to acquire learning by experience in order to make an effective contribution. The only evidence for this learning may be an internal report produced for management. Is this in any way inferior to a dissertation produced on a case study?

It is questions such as these which prompt companies to look for accreditation of their courses. Similar questions prompt company staff to seek accreditation of their learning.

## THE QUESTION OF ASSESSMENT

It must be said that very little formal assessment of learning takes place within companies, at least in a way which would be recognised in an academic context. However, this is not to say that there is no assessment.

The most obvious form takes place within the structure of the company appraisal procedures when an individual's performance is reviewed in some fashion to determine such things as their suitability for promotion, their future salary, their performance in the past assessment period, required performance standards or targets in the future period, etc. An assessment of job-related learning is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, made as part of this process. It is also part of this process to identify the individual's future development needs, and these are almost invariably expressed in terms of gaining further experience and undertaking further training, with the emphasis usually being on experience. In some companies this may be the only form of assessment of training or learning.

When a company runs internal courses there will generally be some assessment. With practical subjects or when dealing with procedures this assessment will usually be made by either a practical test or by tutor observation. If the planned outcome of the course was that by the end of it the student should be able to wire a switchboard, then they will be asked to do so. If it was that they should be able to manipulate a computer spreadsheet to achieve certain functions, then they will carry out those functions during the course while being observed by the tutor.

Other courses present different problems. Examples are the personal skills areas such as recruitment interviewing or team building, in both of which BT runs both classroom and distance learning courses. Classroom courses present less of a difficulty since again one can rely on tutor assessment, peer group assessment, and in some cases, with the use of video camera, recordings of the students' self-assessment. Distance learning, as ever, presents greater problems but in-built questions and progression bars have been used to some effect. Nevertheless, it remains true that the chief form of assessment of learning in most organisations has been until recently the judgment of the student's supervisor or manager.

## NEW APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT

Training is seen by the majority of British companies as a cost, an expense rather than an investment. In times such as these, when it is important to reduce costs, training is one of the first areas to be examined. Even those companies who do regard training as an investment want to know what the return is on their investment. Since the early 1980s, alert in-company trainers have been endeavouring to find ways to demonstrate the value of training. Assessment of training and, to a lesser extent, learning was quickly seen as one such way.

There are several areas of interest to the assessor of training. The first is, of course, the training event itself. Here assessment must concentrate on the quality of the event, on feedback to the students on their learning progress, on feedback to the trainers on learning methods and training design, and on some assessment of competence at the end of the event.

Next is assessment in the workplace. From the company viewpoint, this is the most important area and this may cause a degree of conflict when considering the relationship to academic awards. Here the in-company assessor will examine how well the learning outcome from the training event matched the original needs of the trainee and their manager: if the learning acquired has in fact been used in the work: and what factors have affected the use of the learning in work.

A third way may be assessment in the context of the organisation as a whole, and may involve such aspects as cost-effectiveness of training, and to what degree training reflects the organisation's strategies and mission statement.

This approach demands more than simply asking course attendees to complete a 'happiness sheet' and then wait until their next appraisal to find out if any learning has been seen to have taken place.

An approach used within some parts of British Telecom International has the training event beginning with a briefing session between the prospective student and their manager about the course, why the student is attending it and what he or she is expected to gain from it. Where the course is one for which such preparation would be useful there may be pre-course reading or even pre-tests to be completed before attending the course.

During the course itself any available and appropriate methods to facilitate learning are employed, ranging from practical tests to presentations, group discussions and tutor observation. Back at the job there will be a debriefing, and this may result in the formulation of an action plan based on applying learning gained to the actual job. While this approach is effective for traditional types of courses, it cannot be said to be inexpensive in the short term and it requires considerable commitment from management. It also concentrates on the area where the least learning actually takes place. The current view in many companies is that training and learning should take place as close to the job as possible, thereby ensuring increased management involvement.

In British Telecom, as elsewhere in industry, the greatest part of learning takes place

on the job. This has been recognised by the company and acted upon by reducing formal classroom teaching wherever possible by increasing the amount of distance learning and also by improving the standard of on-the-job training by introducing local trainers and workplace trainers. A local trainer is a member of the training function. His or her task is to identify local training needs, in association with management, and to arrange for necessary training to be delivered locally. This may be done in a variety of ways, such as by using external trainers, by bringing in-company specialists to deliver courses, by distance learning, by the local trainer personally, or by a workplace trainer. The means will vary with the type of training required.

A distinguishing feature of the local trainer is that they must themselves be accredited. The British Telecom Central Training Unit insists that all local trainers are not only trained as trainers but are accredited to deliver individual courses. There is a clearly defined process for becoming accredited to deliver, for example, a course on team building skills. Once accredited, local trainers are subsequently monitored regularly to ensure that they are continuing to deliver the course to the required standards.

The commonest form of training in industry is the 'sitting with Nellie' method of on-the-job training. For those who may be unfamiliar with the term, it means learning the job by watching and working with a more experienced worker. A weakness of this method has always been the fact that ability to perform a task is not the same as the ability to teach another person how to do it. The idea of workplace trainers is that they will be experienced workers, but will also be trained in instructional techniques and will be responsible for training new staff with the support of the local trainers and management if required. The intention is that every unit should have one or more workplace trainers.

In parallel with this 'localisation' of training, all managers are receiving training in identifying training needs so that they will be better able to determine the training their staff require. This training will be given by means of distance learning. Additionally, a further distance learning package on personal development planning has been prepared for use by all staff, and this includes personal identification of training needs.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that experiential learning does occur in the industrial environment and that it can count towards academic awards. The problem, if there is one, is with accreditation or assessment of the learning. However, the methods which industry can, and should, use to monitor and control the quality and effectiveness of in-company training can also be used to satisfy the education sector that in-company experiential learning is valid.