Learning today, leading tomorrow
Skills and learning for the housing industry of the future
Edited by John Thornhill

New approaches to learning at and through work
Jane Kettle and Judy Smith
New approaches to learning at and through work

By Jane Kettle and Judy Smith, Jay Consulting

Summary

As well as education/formal qualifications, the current and prior experiences of employees can help them to respond efficiently and flexibly to organisational demands. Work-based learning accredits or extends the skills and abilities of employees, so from an employer perspective, this means workforce development, or the upskilling and reskilling of an organisation’s employees. An organisational learning strategy should include tailored work-based learning with appropriate scaffolding for participants to derive maximum learning from their work. Employers suggest the higher level learning experience is strongly valued; this can be achieved through working with higher education institutions developing bespoke learning. The approach is usually experiential in nature, centred on the application of learning in the workplace and evidence-based assessment of progress and achievement.

Introduction

This article explores how housing learning can innovate, recognise and respond to changing occupational needs and patterns in the sector over the next 5-10 years. In this contribution we define work-based learning as a way of developing higher level skills, and explore why it can be an innovative and responsive way to develop knowledge, capability and understanding in the rapidly changing housing industry. Our focus is on higher level learning (Level 4 and above on the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF)) and we consider the changing relationships between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and housing organisations to highlight new routes to work-based learning.

Work-based learning – the context

In an employment sector subject to such change and flux as we see in the housing industry, there is a requirement for people to have the skills, knowledge and understanding to respond efficiently and flexibly to the demands placed on them. Their current and prior experiences, education and qualifications become increasingly important. It is generally recognised that many people working in housing already hold qualifications and skills achieved in a broad range of subjects. How organisations use
and develop these skills is important in terms of achieving business outcomes as well as addressing individual employee aspirations. This is where a learning strategy can become so important for an organisation. Work-based learning can be an effective strategy to deploy.

Work-based learning has a long tradition in some sectors, for example health care and retail, and some major employers (Tesco, Morrison, and Rolls Royce) have developed their own qualifications, designed, studied for and assessed in the work place, in partnership with a university.

Work-based learning is just one of the ways of packaging learning that takes place outside of a traditional taught course, led by a tutor, in a classroom setting. The emphasis is on learning in and for the workplace. The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) (2005) defines this as learning that ‘may take many forms and be undertaken for a number of different purposes; it is not restricted to performance related learning in a narrow sense. Instead the emphasis is on identifying and demonstrating learning that has occurred through work-based activity wherever or however this may have been achieved’.¹

Work-based learning accredits or extends the workplace skills and abilities of employees, so from an employer perspective, this means workforce development, or the upskilling and reskilling of an organisation’s employees. ‘The learning is usually based on the needs of the individual’s career and employer, and can lead to nationally recognised qualifications’² but it also includes ‘learning that takes place at work as a normal part of development and problem-solving, in response to specific work issues, as a result of workplace training or coaching, or to further work-related aspirations and interests.’³

Learning gained in this way has several advantages for the business. For example, the learning is largely done in the work place, with content mainly work-related, and so requires minimal release during working hours. This type of learning is more tailored to the precise needs of the organisation. The modes and pace of the learning involved can be negotiated and altered to suit needs and circumstances. It can be used to promote reflection on past experience such as implementing learning from in-house training. It can involve reflection on personal learning and professional development to improve practice and therefore organisational effectiveness.

One of the significant features of work-based learning is that it takes place in a context outside of a traditional learning environment, where the primary purpose is not actually
learning. However many business organisations do call themselves ‘learning organisations’. According to Peter Senge (1990:3) learning organisations are ‘organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together’.4

The creation of such a learning organisation does however require a willingness to create a structure or framework for the support of work-based learning. This is where there is a need for organisations to reflect on the place and space required for supported learning.

A fundamental question for any learning organisation is how to derive the best outcome for the business from employees who are knowledgeable practitioners and to enable the employees themselves to derive optimum value from learning for work. The learning strategy therefore requires access to different types of learning for meeting different employee requirements and for recruiting and retaining staff. Learning needs to be associated with meaningful work and input into the job roles by the employee. There is evidence that learning becomes more effective when more employees take part in workplace decisions about the design of job roles. Brown (2009) summarises these as the key processes involved in higher skills development at work and includes:

- Engagement with challenging work.
- Interactions at work.
- Knowledge at work.
- Self-directed learning at work.
- Identities at work.
- Supporting the learning of others.5

These issues are pertinent in such a dynamic industry as housing when anticipating future changes in occupational needs and patterns in the industry.

**Planning and managing work-based learning – practical considerations**

Establishing a work-based programme of learning, needs careful planning and management with systems, processes and academic support providing the scaffolding for participants to derive maximum learning from their work. The examples below provide some information about the range of tools and techniques available.
This does require the learner or employee to be able to reflect robustly on their work. The approach is usually experiential in nature, centred on the application of learning in the workplace and evidence-based assessment of progress and achievement. It can involve problem solving, carrying out specific projects, group or team working, and action learning sets. It has been suggested that the learning outcome to be desired from every learner, regardless of the programme they are following, is that of the reflective practitioner, equipped with the skills for life-long learning. The outcomes of rigorous reflective practice for professionals are considered to include the abilities to critique their practice, to identify their own learning needs and to take responsibility for continuing their professional development.

An effective work-based learning strategy for the development of higher level skills requires employers to work closely with education providers/professional organisations. We note that developments in work-based learning for housing are happening at the same time as the delivery of more traditional housing education in universities is undergoing a rapid change, indeed decline. This can partly be accounted for by the changing fee regime and the removal of grant funding for courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The combination of much higher tuition fees in higher education and major challenges such as welfare reform and the affordable rents regime for housing organisations, makes funding and supporting higher education for housing professionals as challenging as it has ever been.

Developing work-based learning is one way of harnessing the knowledge, skills and understanding that can be derived from a higher level programme of study. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned research and supported a workshop at Leeds Metropolitan University on 7th April 2012 to explore employer demand and curriculum development in housing at HE level. Discussions with employers suggested the higher level learning experience is strongly valued. Employers want to capture in a structured way how services and polices might be developed and improved as a result of the challenge of learning at this level. It was also asserted that there is a need to develop people with the vision needed to respond to changing contexts and markets and the changing role of housing managers. Developing higher level skills is essential to grow a critical mass of change agents that can ‘turn big ships around’.

The focus on work-related learning lends itself to the creation of learning ‘programmes’ and pathways that are developed in a flexible manner including content that can be created by the individual housing practitioner in partnership with the learning provider. Continuing Professional Development can also be achieved through accredited and
non-accredited work-based learning and training. One development in recent years has been the foundation degree, a vocationally orientated award characterised by employer involvement in its design and delivery. There is a sustained interest in these qualifications as some other skills sectors look to develop higher level apprenticeships that meet sector demand for technician roles and higher level skills at sub-graduate level.

**Work-based learning – learning from practice**

We now present three examples of housing-related work-based learning initiatives.

**Foundation Degree in the Management of Social and Affordable Housing**

Anglia Ruskin University runs this course which is accredited by CIH. It has been designed in consultation with employers with no assumptions made about content, delivery or location within the university disciplines. The learning themes include personal effectiveness, management skills, legislative and organisational change and managing customers and clients. Learners have access to the university’s virtual learning environment. There are two optional workshops per year, but the course is delivered entirely online. The intention is that organisations will benefit by being able to build on existing skills and knowledge in order to deliver their own vision. The learning will enhance workforce flexibility, and increase any organisation’s ability to respond to change. Such learning will also contribute to talent management programmes and succession planning initiatives. Individual learners will build on their skills and knowledge to improve their own personal performance.7

**Learning Pathways for Housing Practitioners, University of Chester**

The Learning Pathways for Housing Practice programme is located within the larger Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) framework. At the University of Chester this enables the delivery of self-paced and negotiable learning which can be tailored to the needs of individual learners and organisations. The project received funding from the North West Universities Association’s Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Project, to develop employer demand-led education and it allows people in the sector to access a range of flexible self paced modules which are directly linked to their work-based practice.

The stakeholder partners come from a variety of organisations from across the North West including the, Dane Group, Chester & District Housing Trust, Meres & Mosses Housing Association, Weavervale Housing Trust, Wulvern Housing Ltd and Whiteheads Solicitors. The Professional Certificate in Housing Management Law has been developed jointly by the University of Chester and Whiteheads Solicitors. A coaching module, the Principles, Processes and Skills of Coaching, has been designed to improve
business/organisational performance, and individual learners’ competence and team performances in the workplace. Leading and Managing People is intended for professional practitioners who find themselves assuming greater management and leadership responsibilities without having received any formal management training and education.

Learners can access taught elements at workshops or online and at distance but it is possible that programmes could primarily (and almost exclusively) entail work-based projects, allowing organisations to negotiate their own pathways of learning related to their area(s) of working practice.8

Both the examples described above lead to an academic qualification. Below is an example of a route to the CIH Chartered Membership.

**CIH Work-Based Learning Programme**
Successful completion of the CIH Work Based Learning programme is different in that it leads to eligibility for Chartered Membership. This experiential route is a new, higher level qualification that is significantly different from traditional provision for housing learning and development. Its main feature is that learners will produce evidence of knowledge, skills and understanding that are directly related to their own professional context. It is focused specifically on learning derived in the workplace. In response to the changing framework for the provision of homes and the delivery of services, CIH has developed this new route to CIH Chartered Membership which aims to recognise knowledge and experience wherever it has been gained. This route is more tailored to individual learners. It recognises the diversity of experience housing professionals bring to the sector and offers a flexible framework for learning which allows housing professionals to provide evidence of the knowledge, skills, understanding and experience that they have gathered from a variety of contexts, but particularly at work. In other words, this is a work-based, experiential programme that will be delivered to cohorts, using blended learning techniques, but without a formal curriculum. It is a new, more flexible way to get professionally qualified. The experiential route will provide structure and support, and some opportunities for engaging with other housing professionals following the programme. Overall this programme requires learning through the experience of work.

People taking this course design a learning contract with the support of a tutor, and submit their portfolio of evidence through Word Press. This means that they can use a variety of methods, including blogging, video, oral accounts as well as written documents.
When learners complete this programme successfully they will have demonstrated that their knowledge, skills and understanding of the professional housing context meet the requirements for Chartered Membership of CIH.

**Key points**

- Housing organisations will, over the next decade, be influenced by the economic, regulatory, and social contexts in which they operate.
- They will need to understand and be responsive to the form and content of learning that will enhance organisational performance.
- The current and prior experiences, education and qualifications of people working in the housing industry will become increasingly important; and how housing organisations use and develop these skills will be crucial in terms of achieving business outcomes as well as addressing individual employee aspirations.
- Work-based learning can accredit and extend the skills and abilities of employees and so support workforce development.
- The boundaries between work places and learning places are blurring rapidly; and formal, structured and well-planned work-based learning will assume greater importance.
Endnotes


8 www.chester.ac.uk/undergraduate/housing-practice-learning-pathways [accessed 10 June 2013]