

# **LEARNING, COMMUNITIES AND PERFORMANCE**

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## **PREFACE**

This is the second time NIACE has collaborated with Alan Felstead and his colleagues to extend NIACE's annual survey of the learning adults in the UK, to address in more detail issues affecting adults in the workplace. Once again, the findings are of critical significance. At a time when skills policy focuses overwhelmingly on supporting employers to increase the formal qualifications of the workforce this report makes clear that workers show very clear preferences for learning informally. It also shows that where employers create working environments which encourage staff to make use of that learning, significantly more learning goes on, whether that learning is acquired informally, from peer groups or managerial mentoring, or through formal study for qualifications.

Communities of practice may in some contexts act as an inhibitor to change and modernisation, but used creatively have the effect of accelerating successful adaptation. The study is important in pointing to the need to complement existing government skills development priorities with work on developing workplace cultures that foster co-operation and problem solving.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This Report presents the main results to emerge from an innovative survey of the social context in which learning takes place and its impact on performance (known as the Communities of Practice Survey, CoPS). It is based on a survey of 1,899 employees interviewed about their relationships at work, their learning experiences and how they rate their own work performance. The survey was carried out in a three-week period in late February and early March 2007. Its key findings are as follows:

- Strong social bonds created between employees (or the formation of 'communities of practice' for short) have a positive impact on both learning and performance in the workplace.
- Age matters when it comes to social relations at work. Younger workers experience a stronger sense of being part of a community of practice than older workers. This finding is significant given current policy concerns about the skill levels and access to learning of older workers in Britain (see HM Treasury, 2006).
- Over a third (37%) of respondents accepted that they had total responsibility for their own learning and development with only a fifth (22%) thinking that their employer was mainly responsible for this issue.
- Large majorities agreed or strongly agreed that they had 'to give and take to get the work done' (83%) and that 'most of the time, my colleagues and I figure out together how to get the job done' (80%). Both are indicative of negotiating and discussing with work colleagues the way forward.
- Over two-thirds claimed to jointly decide with colleagues what tasks are to be done, when and how. Furthermore, over three-quarters claimed to learn from colleagues, felt obliged to help newer colleagues and were willing to share their ideas with others.

- Respondents were, on the whole, evenly divided on whether the work group to which they belonged had a shared repertoire of stories, anecdotes and histories. For example, a half said that they were not reliant on learning the tricks of the trade from their immediate colleagues, suggesting that the existence of a shared repertoire is patchy.
- Negotiation at work and joint working is strongly related to type of job. The top three occupational groups – ‘Managers’, ‘Professionals’ and ‘Associate Professionals’ – scored significantly higher than occupational groups below them. However, these high level jobs were more or less the same as jobs lower down the occupational hierarchy in terms of *lacking* a shared understanding of how things are done and how to behave at work.
- Women were more likely than men to rate their workplace as friendly and community-like – approaching three-quarters (72%) reported that their workplace felt ‘like a real community’ compared to two-thirds (66%) of men who felt the same. However, men were more likely than women to agree with the statement that ‘you can *only* learn the tricks of the trade from your colleagues’ – the proportions were 43% and 30% respectively.
- There is a strong association between the sources of learning (formal and less formal) and the social context in which it takes place. All ten learning activities, ranging from training courses at one end to trial and error at the other, were reported as being more useful in improving job performance in situations where the notion of a community of practice was strongest.

The implication of these results is that for *all* forms of learning and development – whether it is by watching and listening to others on-the-job or by going on off-the-job courses – the social bonds between employees are crucial determinants of individual and group performance.