Developing Low-qualified Employees to Become a Learning Organization

A Literature Review

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Introduction

The first part of Peter Senge’s (2006) definition of a learning organization focuses on how “people continually expand their capacity.” Certainly, an organization that seeks to continually improve starts with people who seek to continually improve. While many companies have support staff dedicated to training, learning, and professional development of employees, they focus primarily on high-potential staff, leadership development, and executive coaching. Those who demonstrate high potential and commitment to the organization often receive the most investment from the company, and rightly so, but a true learning organization values employees at all levels, each playing an important role in the system as a whole.

As organizations feel the need to constantly develop and innovate, it becomes even more important to invest in low-level employees. The question then becomes, “What is the most effective way to train and motivate these employees?” Labor market research shows that individuals in positions with low skills and knowledge are highly correlated with low levels of education, also referred to as “low-qualified” in literature (Gvaramadze, 2010). There are for-profit and non-profit sectors characterized by large numbers of low-qualified employees, such as cleaning services, hospitality (including food and beverage), assembly plants (car and other machinery), and many more. Unfortunately for them, the increasing importance of knowledge work, new technologies and automation, and participation in the globalization process foster a shift away from workers with lower skill levels to those with higher skill levels, indicating the greater need to continually develop low-qualified employees (Bates & Holton, 2004).

Since the level of education has proven to be an important predictor for participation in learning activities, it is thus imperative to look at the learning intentions of low-qualified
employees and effective tools to enhance their knowledge and skills, in order for companies to better address professional development and learning for all levels of employees. As noted by many authors and field experts, there is limited research specifically targeting low-qualified employees; most literature and studies use samples with at least secondary education backgrounds and generalize results for all employees. However, it is important to recognize and analyze the fundamentally different social contexts and motivational characteristics of low-qualified employees. This paper reviews the literature on low-qualified employees, discusses the implications of the findings in the practice of learning organizations, and offers recommendations based on industry best practices.

Findings in Literature

Learning Intentions

According to Boeren, Nicaise, and Baert (2010), low-qualified employees participate much less in formal learning activities, often as a result of the “low skilled trap.” Low-qualified workers do not need special skills to perform their work, which gives them fewer job opportunities and a lower expected return on training. Another explanation offered by Boeren et al. (2010) is that low-qualified workers have experienced failures and very few successes in life, which in turn leads to a lack of self-confidence and low self-efficacy. They have a low degree of educational background or have vocational track degrees that do not grant access to higher education.

Low participation in learning activities can be explained by the employees’ attitudes toward education. Kyndt, Govaerts, Keunen, and Dochy (2013) define learning intention as the “willingness, readiness or even plan” to overcome a gap that employees are experiencing
between their current knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to their current or desired job. Learning activities include formal learning required to keep a job, learning for advancement, and learning to bring new skills and knowledge into the organization, though it excludes quitting work to return to school (Kyndt et al., 2013). However, employees’ learning intentions toward these activities are also contingent upon the person, the learning/training activity itself, and the social context.

The decision making process for employees to participate in learning activities is modeled as such:

![Diagram of decision making process](attachment:decision_diagram.png)

Baert et al. (2006)

The employee must first acknowledge the discrepancy between current and desired work, have an intention to learn, which then can be formulated into demand, resulting in participation in learning activities. The research from Kyndt et al. (2013) indicates that an individual’s characteristics in terms of socio-demographic, psychology, living situation, and attitudes regarding learning and education affect the learning intention.

Kyndt et al. (2013) also discovered that work context plays a large role in learning. The organizational philosophy must be supportive of personal and work-related development, especially for those less-motivated and less-skilled. The organization’s policy needs to support innovation, leave room for error, and have rewards for personal and/or professional development to incentivize employees to keep improving and thereby improve the organization.
as a whole. Like any organization, if it offers employees opportunities to grow and move up in the hierarchy (setting goals), then employees are more likely to participate in learning activities.

Perception affects learning intention, and often, based on the trends of low-qualified employee backgrounds, these workers see themselves as having non-changeable qualities and characteristics, thus not seeing the possibilities and the advantages of education, informal or formal. Due to prior negative experiences related to schooling of low-qualified employees and the negative attitude of management regarding them, low-qualified employees form a vulnerable group in terms of training and development. However, research across most training and development journals state how employees can cope with the changing labor market and demands for skills by participating in continuous training.

Another finding from Kyndst et al. (2013) states that while money may motivate them to participate in learning activities, it is not a significant enough factor for participation. Often, the opportunity cost of training activities (spending time at home, earning wages elsewhere) outweighs the financial satisfaction and thus does not lead to an actual participation in learning. However, those with permanent contract scored lower on learning intention than employees with temporary contracts, indicating a sense of comfort and a lack of immediate need for new skills or knowledge.

Perhaps the biggest finding from Kyndst et al. (2013) regarding learning intention is how low-qualified employees view the concept of “learning.” To them, learning is formal scholastic learning, and as a result of those failures, they have an aversion to the term “learning.” However, in their responses to how they learned their job, they referred to “training on the job” and self-learning. One employee was adamant that learning “was not involved in my job;”
instead, “they just threw me into my job and that’s how I’ve learned how to do my job.” The quote indicates a misunderstanding of “learning,” that training and development in the professional workplace incorporates both informal and formal learning setting. Nonetheless, the sample pool indicated that they learn more from experience, but prefer formal training when they want to learn something in detail. Again, it echoes the understanding that “learning” equates to formal scholastic learning (low intention to participate) rather than learning from experience and on the job training.

**Self-directed Learning**

Many researchers addressed the importance of self-directedness in career processes, which is defined by Raemdonck et al. (2012) as “a characteristic adaptation to influence career processes in order to cope for oneself on the labor market,” such as changing functions or changing companies in order to progress in one’s career. Self-directedness is an important predictor for the learning intention of low-qualified employees, since they will invest in their development if they are self-motivated to advance their career via promotion or other changes. Thus, it emphasizes the importance of psychological characteristics of the individual, including self-efficacy and extraversion, both positively correlated to learning intentions.

However, what are significant predictors of self-directed learning? Raemdonck et al. (2012) tries to get to the root of the cause in their study. At the company level, the economic sector in which the employee is employed plays a critical role in the prediction of self-directededness, as well as the presence of a participatory staff policy. In one way, the company needs to cultivate a culture of seeking feedback and participation form staff. At the same time, the context of the company matters in how employees view growth opportunities. If it’s a dying
industry, employees are very likely to seek formal learning in order to master a skill or knowledge so they may prepare for the next economic sector job.

At individual employee level, a proactive personality, or a desire to take personal initiative in broad range of activities and situations, is a significant predictor of self-directed learning. The personality is rare to come by when low-qualified workers have been performing the same skills over and over, caught in the “low-skilled trap” (Kyndt et al., 2013). Nonetheless, as long as the individual strives for knowledge work and task variety in a growing job, he/she has a high sense of self-directedness. The past also predicts the future in terms of one’s past learning initiative; if they actively sought out learning opportunities in the past, they are likely to be self-directed and thus participate in learning activities.

There is a lot of literature on motivation and self-directedness, but Raemdonck et al. (2012) is one of the first to focus on the low-qualified employee, as they certainly have very different psychological characteristics as others. Past research was also mostly correlational, but this study is among the first to systematically trace individual and company factors in playing a role in self-directed learning. By knowing what drives self-directed learning, a high level of self-directedness is a strong predictor of learning intention, which we know from the chain diagram to be critical in learning participation and the creation of a learning organization.

**Effective Tools to Aid Learning & Development**

Many companies incorporate personal development plans (PDPs) as key resources in their professional development plans. However, there has been little empirical research on its effectiveness aside from general observations by human resource management professionals. Beusaert et al. (2013) attempt to demonstrate the effectiveness of PDPs and how they can be
optimally implemented. Their goal was to analyze the effects of using a PDP on the undertaking of learning activities and the employees’ job competencies.

Overall, PDP users were more involved in learning activities in the past than non-users. Thus, it was a slightly biased sample to be applied to low-qualified workers, but there were generalized findings. The PDP by itself does not, in fact, stimulate users to plan more learning activities in the future, nor do PDP users score themselves significantly higher on job competencies (Beausaert et al., 2013). The disconnect may be that PDPs are often tied to performance reviews, and thus not seen as a competency evaluation.

However, PDPs should be used to steer employees’ competence development. The intent of PDP is to be used as a reflection tool for employees to use in order to better understand what learning activities to undertake. From there, employees can identify the gap and select learning activities to improve their competencies. Whereas PDPs may not always be used in this way by managers and supervisors for their subordinates, the PDP should directly result in learning action. This finding also leads to the possibility that managers may not know the correct way to use the PDP in order to attain the tool’s optimal effectiveness.

The results from Beausaert et al. (2013) stress the value of PDP as a “feed forward” feedback tool. PDPs add significant value to the learning and development process, as long as it is used to look ahead in an employees’ career. The tool should more often be used to get an overview of one’s desired future plan, plan future careers, and the undertaking of learning activities in order to reach these future goals. It should be incorporated in a separate feedback session instead of being directed tied to one’s performance evaluation, to avoid monetary
intents and to ensure that PDPs are based in competencies over performance. However, this discussion should still be given by a supervisor and/or colleague or coach.

More and more companies are starting to implement PDPs because they see the significant value that PDPs add to employee growth and development. It is critical that supervisors stimulate their employees to use the PDP as a tool to look forward, to promote “reflection upon action as well as acting upon the reflection” (Beausaert et al., 2013, pg. 150). Ensuring that PDPs lead to action will improve employees’ job performance quality.

These findings about PDPs as a potentially effective tool lead to the importance of training supervisors and managers on the best practice in use of PDPs. Only when supervisors are giving feedback (looking back) as well as feed-forward (looking forward) do they thereby support their employees with planning learning activities in the future. In order to increase learning intention and activity and thus encourage employees’ competence development, PDPs and top-down feedback should include prospective aspects (as opposed to performance evaluations which are often retrospective) to determine which steps need to be taken next.

**Implications for Practice**

*Reframing “Learning” for Low-qualified Employees*

Senge (2006) quoted a note he received in Deming, describing how “people are born with intrinsic motivation, self-respect, dignity, curiosity to learn, joy in learning.” However, as people grow and move through formal education systems, “our prevailing system of management has destroyed our people” (Senge, 2006, xii). Most of all, it is evident from the findings that the definition of “learning” has lost meaning and hope throughout one’s lifetime as it turns individuals into low-qualified employees.
Thus, it is important for companies to incorporate a learning definition, or certainly what “learning,” “training,” and/or personal and professional “development” means to the organization. This allows individuals to come in anew with a new lens on learning instead of what they came in with. This reframing of “learning” attempts to change entrenched mental models that may thwart changes. Prevailing assumptions about learning needs to be brought to the open recognized as mere assumptions than hard facts about “education.” Adult learning (andragogy), and especially that for low-qualified employees, is widely focused on learning from experiences. In order to change their perceptions about the past, organizations need to establish a learning philosophy and an understanding of mental models in the organization. Thus, a stated definition of learning may help low-qualified employees see learning in a new light and give learning activities another try.

Reframing “Experience” for Employers

The flawed perception of learning that low-qualified employees apply to workplace learning poses difficulty for employers and managers as well. In applying systems thinking, it is first important for organizations to recognize that in order for the organization to move forward, it must improve all levels of the organization as opposed to stretching the skill range out further. Thus, if low-qualified employees express aversion to learning activities or new training, managers cannot simply assume that these employees don’t want to learn or don’t care about moving up in the organization. Rather, managers and supervisors should challenge the views and try to understand what it is that is stopping low-qualified employees from participating in learning activities, whether it is learning intention, self-directedness, or a lack of tools and resources (including monetary and time).
Human resource managers often look for education as experience, but for low-qualified workers, it doesn’t mean that they only have low-level skills and competencies. In terms of asking questions in interviews, it may be best to avoid educational background questions and more based in experience. Although this is what interviews are essentially asking, sometimes verbiage can make a difference in terms of asking employees about what they “learned” from their previous job. As for selection, although high education levels correlate well with high positions in organizations, it may be good to shift away from “linear thinking” about candidates for skills. Though low qualified, many employees are found to be self-directed and fast learners, thus emphasizing the importance to shift from mental models dominated by events to mental models that recognize longer-term patterns of change and underlying structures producing those patterns.

**Knowing-Doing Gaps of Employees and Employers**

Low-qualified employees can be high performers (and many of them are as they need the job to survive financially), but organizations tend to invest in “high potentials” who have a strong educational base to work off of. In a sense, many organizations reward low-qualified employees in order to keep them in their job and/or get rid of them as new technology replaces their skills. However, a company’s mission and devotion to their employees need to be satisfied by providing assistance and guidance in personal and professional development for low-qualified employees despite their perceived unwillingness to participate in learning. Knowing that all employees in an organizational system deserve learning is critical to a learning and growing organization.
However, many organizations find it difficult to place high-qualified and low-qualified employees in one learning environment due to the range of skills and learning needs. The knowing-doing gap occurs for both workers and supervisors; they both know that learning is needed, but how do they do it? Furthermore, Kyndt et al. (2013) described low-qualified employees’ perceptions toward high-qualified workers as unrelatable, thus not fostering a conducive learning environment. Managers may not fully understand the needs and how to meet those needs of low-qualified workers.

Pfeffer & Sutton (2000) may recommend to drive out fear that has been implemented throughout the system, but it is much easier printed than done. It’s important to define the importance of workplace learning and professional development to employees, and effectively demonstrate the importance of personal and professional growth of each employee to the organization. Driving out fear also incorporates communicating and putting in processes that demonstrate an organization’s commitment to lifelong learning as an investment in the employee rather than solely making the organization look better to the public.

Using the tools in the right way communicates to low-qualified employees that the organization wants to improve skills and competencies as a mutually beneficial relationship. Low-qualified employees are self-directed and want to progress in the organization, but often feel held back by their education or lack thereof (Raemdonck et al., 2012). However, by presenting PDPs as a feed-forward, supervisors can then reframe the organization’s intent as investment in individuals, offering more opportunities to them than their original vocational degree may have indicated.
An industry best practice is exemplified by QuikTrip, a 7-Eleven type of retailer in a sector full of low-qualified employees. QuikTrip’s investment in retail employees have paid off, whereas its many competitors typically treat low-qualified and low-paid staffers as commodities. According to Hanna (2011), QuikTrip’s above-average wages, job security, and significant benefits produces happy employees who take on more responsibility and invests in their personal development. Of course, QuikTrip has mastered its field in continuous process improvement via standardization and using operational efficiencies, which enables the company to produce the best experience and less frustration for their low-qualified employees.

Whereas learning intention may be low for low-qualified employees who have had negative experiences with learning, these employees enjoy the more responsibility that QuikTrip places on them. Harvard Business School has even produced a case study on QuikTrip, showing that low-qualified employees should not be treated as low-class citizens. Rather, by giving them more job tasks allows them to naturally and informally learn (as compared to formal classroom education). As they master these tasks and responsibilities, it increases their self-directedness and personal mastery, proving that QuikTrip has found a way to invest in their people, despite them being low-qualified employees, and offer low prices to customers.

Certainly, with all the buzz around Costco and best practices in putting people first, companies know that they should invest in their people in all levels, but very few act on it.

**Informal Goal Setting**

With self-directedness comes an investment in oneself. Although low-qualified employees want to improve, they may not know how and do not know if their company views them as valuable in moving forward. By incorporating PDPs and ensuring feed-forward goal
setting, employees can understand where they are going and why they are going there. As Halvorson (2010) wrote, it is key that individuals understand why they are setting goals, getting at the root cause.

The organization can also assist in helping workers understand and set their goals. Moreover, understanding the goal-setting process can allow low-qualified workers to understand the present gap from where they currently are to where they want to be. In a sense, it allows the employee to learn that they need learning activities in order to close the gap. By setting goals in the workplace, it allows employees to work toward something and be able to celebrate the achievement when they reach it. The goal setting process is extremely personal and contributes to their level of self-directedness and internal locus of control, thus leading to an increase in their learning intention.

By better setting and implementing goals, low-qualified employees can then better understand the need for learning, thus taking action as a result. As Beausaert et al. (2012) indicated, the feedback process is critical for improving competencies in employees. Halvorson (2011) also discussed the importance of feedback after goals are set. Essentially, the feedback, or feed-forward, process is critical to giving support for employees and allowing low-qualified workers to grow and move forward in their careers.

**Contributions from Employee and Organization**

Helping low-qualified employees grow through learning and development can be difficult, as their perception of learning is their reality. However, employees, organizations, and society have all contributed to their reality. Stone, Patton, and Heen (2010) urge all players to recognize their individual contributions to one’s perception in order to better understand
where they are coming from. A feedback session can easily be a “difficult conversation,” and it’s important to understand through literature and interactions what drives a low-qualified employee. Although research has been scarce for this particular audience, it is nonetheless important to learn their story, express your views and feelings, and problem solve together (Stone et al., 2010).

A way an organization can attain mutual understanding and move forward is following those three purposes. Exploring the low-qualified employee’s perspective is critical in understanding information that was missed, the influence of their past experiences, and how certain actions impact them. As such, a supervisor or HR manager may better understand why the low-qualified employee is averse to learning or not as self-directed in their role. The supervisor should also express his/her views and feelings in helping the employee better understand why learning and the continuous improvement of skills and knowledge are essential to their role, their future, and the organization. By presenting both sides’ contributions to the issue at hand, organizations and employees can then better problem-solve together in order to growth and develop together.

**Aligning Personal & Organizational Learning**

Everyone has different interests and priorities that affect their intentions and activity. It is critical to align the employees’ interest with the organization’s. Fisher and Ury (2011) focus on the importance of interests. Although they are focused on interests as a medium for negotiation, it is even more important for learning. Having shared interests is key for moving forward, whether it be personally and professionally for the employee, or developmentally for
the organization. Many times companies’ efforts go toward fitting the employee into their organization, but rarely consider how the organization fits into employees’ lives.

Often during orientation and the on-boarding process for a company, it’s all about the company’s culture, values, mission, etc. Training best practices indicate that the first minutes are critical to new-employee orientation. Nobel (2013) recommends that orientation programs need to be less about the company and more about the employee. This is monumental is the shift of perception of companies away from themselves and bringing in good employees for corporate gain, but also equally giving back to the employee as much as they put in. Especially in that first impression during orientation, companies need to communicate an investment in employees, that there is opportunity within the company for all employees to reach for. Sincerity in the message would motivate low-qualified employees to take action and be more likely to pursue learning activities.

Conclusion

Through an extensive literature review on low-qualified employees, their learning intentions, and other factors that drive their learning, it is evident that there is much possibility in developing low-qualified employees. Whereas many companies forget about those in low-skilled jobs and often low-paid positions, companies in best practice recognize the importance of the growth of all employees in order to grow as an organization. A systems thinking mentality must be incorporated to recognize the need for low-qualified employee training, because they have levels of self-directedness, social context, and financial situations different from other employees. What drives low-qualified employees is hard to generalize to all employees.
As a result of these findings, it is imperative that companies focus on feedback yet use PDPs as a tool to feed forward and set goals for the future. As a low-qualified employee sees the potential and opportunities that lie with increased competencies, skills, and knowledge, they then are more motivated to set goals for themselves and bridge the current-future gap. The closing of the gap will indeed include learning, despite their aversion to the process. Thus, it is also necessary for supervisors and HR managers to reframe what learning means for the organization and within the workplace, working with employees and implementing learning philosophies and processes to guide personal and professional development.

As Eckert (2013) writes, “the two most important words are ‘thank you.’” As low-qualified workers feel recognized for their efforts, their successes drive their self-directedness to overcome whatever social context may exist (financial burdens, family, time), change their mental model on learning, and take action in their personal development. If low-qualified and high-qualified workers continuously learn and improve themselves, it will inevitably lead to continuous improvement for the organization.
References


