

TOWARD VISION 2020: ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING PRACTICES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian Government has adopted organisational learning as a key strategy to assist the country achieve its Vision 2020. This paper reports on a study that investigated the organisational learning strategies practised in Malaysian organisations across four key industries: government, manufacturing, health and academic. Western authors define organisational learning as a process of knowledge acquisition that involves continuous change to create, acquire and transfer knowledge (Garvin 1993; Miller 1996; Williams 2001). The study sought to determine the extent of learning strategies currently being implemented to obtain and transfer knowledge, as well as assess further opportunities for take-up of learning strategies. Thirty-five managers, government officials and academics participated in in-depth interviews in 2004. Data was transcribed manually, and then interrogated using NVivo software to explore similarities and differences within and between the sectors. The findings suggest Malaysian organisations which are implementing organisational learning strategies prefer active and cooperative learning strategies that are

delivered through structured training and development programs.

INTRODUCTION

As an emerging industrial economy, the Malaysian government is encouraging organisations to build their internal capacity to compete globally. This support can be seen in the ninth Malaysian plan: *'the nation's human capital will be the most critical element in the achievement of the National Mission, and thus human capital development will be a key thrust'* (The Ninth Malaysian plan Ch 11, page 237). This initiative matches the widely accepted view that organisations need to continuously improve and adapt if they are to remain competitive (Brown & Brudney, 2003). The resource-based theory of organisations argues that organisations are dependent on the resources they draw from their internal and external environment and having effective and effectively managed personnel create competitive advantages (Barney & Wright, 1998; Boxall, 1996). One way of maximizing the benefits of human capital is through implementing organisational learning strategies, an approach well supported by the Malaysian government and one that has been adopted by many organisations. The value of knowledge acquisition is strongly promoted by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Abdullah Hj Ahmad Badawi, who argues that engaging in continuous and lifelong learning will benefit Malaysia's growth and development (Bernama, 2005).

The pace of change means modern organisations need knowledge and the ability to respond quickly (Poell, Chivers, Van der Krogt & Wildemeersch, 2000; Ni & Sun, 2009), so implementing organisational learning develops internal

capacity that helps organisations remain competitive (Orr, 2000) by promoting performance and effectiveness (Orr, 2000; Robinson et al. 1997). As well as the organisational benefits, proponents claim organisational learning strategies also foster positive employee outcomes by promoting job satisfaction (Jenkins, Antil, Wayne & Vadasy, 2003; Ozuah, Curtis & Stein, 2001), commitment (Becker 1997; Lancaster & Strand, 2001) and loyalty, which combine to reduce turnover and absenteeism (Bowman & Ambrosini, 1997). Although there are numerous studies investigating organisational learning, there appears to be limited evaluations of practices within Malaysia. One study in the hotel industry identified that while managers agreed learning was important, implementation strategies were very limited (Arshad & Scott-Ladd, 2008).

This present study reports the outcome of interviews with practising managers, government officials and academics regarding their understanding of organisational learning. A key objective of the study was to ascertain the learning strategies used to acquire and implement learning and knowledge. From this, the aim is to identify not only the level of implementation, but also the strategies and processes that lead to the most effective implementation. The next section of the paper establishes the research agenda and provides an overview of the literature to provide empirical justification for this study. This leads to the research question and choice of a qualitative in-depth interview methodology.

The results of the study are discussed next and the findings are supported with a number of quotations from the respondents. The final section of the paper discusses the results in relation to the current literature and understanding

of organisational learning practices; this is followed by a discussion of the implications for theory and practitioners, particularly those operating in the Southeast Asian environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In keeping with the purpose of this paper, the literature review firstly discusses the broader literature on organisational learning. This review identifies that various forms of learning can occur in both formal and informal settings. Learning can be from either direct experiences or from the experiences of other people and occur through a number of mechanisms, simultaneously or singularly. Previous research has categorized six different mechanisms that aid learning in organisations, with these being; 1. Action learning; 2. Active learning; 3. Experiential learning; 4. Cooperative learning; 5. Problem-based learning; and 6. Coaching and mentoring; and these are explained below.

Action Learning

Miller (2003), and York and Marsick (2000) describe action learning as highly participatory in that learning can be drawn from the real life problems and experiences of others and the actions they take (Rhodes & Shiel, 2007). Learning is drawn both from the feedback and as a result of problem solving. An example given by Robinson (2001) and Bourner (1999) is the learning that occurs when a group of peers meet regularly to discuss problems they are having prior to testing in action the ideas arising from that discussion. Williams (2001) qualifies this by arguing that just solving a problem is not sufficient as evidence of organisational learning, but drawing on beliefs that have worked in the past to solve a problem is evidence of learning. In short, action learning is the

combination of group discussion and experimentation that leads to sharing of knowledge that results in some form of action being taken based on the recommended solution, such as is needed in times of change.

Action learning strategies are therefore appropriate strategies for strategic decision-making and managing change (Dotlich & Noel, 1998) as it equips managers and organisational leaders with lifelong learning skills if they understand and can use the process. Progressive learning by individuals within organisations can provide a competitive advantage in the rapidly changing environment, particularly for knowledge intensive industries (Stata, 1989), which provides a rationale for the adoption of an action learning approach. Another type of learning that is somewhat similar is active learning.

Active Learning

Thomas (1998) and Boyer (2002) explain that active learning comes from allowing the learning process to take place through activities such as problem solving, teamwork, simulations, case study, feedback, small group discussion, brainstorming, reading, and writing. Actively analyzing present knowledge and understanding allows individuals and groups to synthesize their awareness and construct new knowledge. According to Boyer (2002), this approach is more effective at enhancing achievement than conventional methods and is thereby likely to lead to greater employee performance in organisations. In addition, Becker (1997) argues that this form of learning not only provides better learning outcomes, but it increases the learner's commitment to learning. This is because active learning locates the learner in a real situation where they learn by doing the work. Having

had the experience the learner can then recall what they have done and reflect on their understanding (McGoldrick, Battle, & Gallagher, 2000). Being engaged in the process means emotions and intuition are more likely to be involved, which in turn helps to achieve a higher level of expertise because of their engagement with these experiences. Yet another benefit is that knowledge is constructed in a collective way (McGoldrick et al. 2000). Despite this being an effective learning strategy, Salemi (2002) suggests it is seldom used because “chalk and talk” is still the dominant pedagogy in many colleges and institutions.

The next approach to learning is experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is learning by doing, and can occur either in or outside the classroom (Hickox, 2002). Outside learning emphasizes practical experiences and within the workplace this is referred to as on-the-job training, whereas classroom-learning tries to simulate the real situation and uses strategies such as role-playing or case study methods (Geertshuis & Fazey, 2006). Experiential learning recognizes the link between personal experience and learning and suggests a reversal of the traditional “theory to application” mode of instruction (Hickox, 2002; Cooke, Dunscombe & Lee, 2007). The learners use their experiences to formulate new models of thought through reflection and guided discussion, which can then be compared and contrasted with existing theories to provide an opportunity for further critique.

Fiol and Lyles (1985) observed that organisations do learn from their experiences and past incidents will influence future actions. Thus, a successful action in the past becomes a

guideline for similar circumstances. For example, most organisations use post-project reviews, internal audits and/or oral post-mortems to learn from their own experiences. Gustavsson and Harung (1994) argue that it is the level of collective consciousness that determines the quality of life and the level of performance of the organisation. Therefore, learning aims to facilitate a greater awareness of the capacity for organisational development.

As well as learning 'through doing', another approach is to learn, in cooperation with others.

Co-Operative Learning

Co-operative learning occurs in a learning group; here individuals assist each other and are empowered to make decisions that contribute to the groups success (Jenkins et al. 2003). This approach has the benefit of allowing the learner to feel responsible and accountable (Lancaster & Strand, 2001) for their own learning. Co-operative learning encourages involvement, and leads to increased self-esteem and success rates. These, along with a safe learning environment are the three most frequently named benefits of cooperative learning (Jenkins et al. 2003). These findings are borne out by a meta-analysis of three hundred studies investigating academic achievement and comparing the relative effectiveness of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning on individual achievement in college and adult settings (Lancaster & Strand, 2001). The results of 168 of the studies strongly favoured cooperative learning as promoting higher individual achievement when compared to competitive approaches or individual efforts. In addition, this approach often has commonalities with problem-based learning.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

Another approach to learning is problem-based learning (PBL). This is self-regulated learning and occurs where a group or team are given a problem to solve and each member has to come up with a solution (Ozuah et al., 2001). Torp and Sage (2002) define problem-based learning as:

...focused, experiential learning (minds-on, hands-on) organised around the investigation and resolution of messy, real-world problems... [pg. 15-16].

A strength of this approach, and the reason why results are so positive, is that it uses real-life experiences. For example, an American study by Ozuah et al., (2001) found this approach significantly increased levels of self-directed learning, satisfaction, performance and motivation to learn among eighty paediatric residents at a large urban academic medical centre. Another strength identified by Stroulia and Goel (1994) was that learners targeted knowledge that specifically solved their own problems. Therefore, improvements in problem-solving performance is one way of evaluating the quality of learning, recognizing of course that different models of problem solving have differing knowledge needs, and, as a result, set up different learning tasks and enable different kinds of performance improvement (Gustavsson 2007). Advocates of PBL claim it enhances content knowledge and fosters the development of communication, problem-solving, and self-directed learning, and when undertaken with the support of experienced others, it fits within the approach provided by coaching and mentoring.

Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching and mentoring are 'one to one' learning processes where an experienced partner gives guidance and prepares

another to be self-reliant, even if achieved through different means. Brocato (2003) defines coaching as a process of helping a team member improve a specific work behaviour or skill. In contrast, a mentor is a role model who offers support to another person (McBrien & Brandt, 1997). The mentor has knowledge and experience in an area and shares this with the mentee. For example, the experienced teacher mentoring a student provides a 'valuable form of social development and a vital support mechanism' (Clawson 1996, pp. 6-15). The difference between the two is that unlike a counsellor or mentor, the coach helps clients find their own solutions, by asking questions that give them insight into their situations, rather than offering advice (Brocato, 2003). The coach holds the client accountable, so if a client agrees to a plan to achieve a goal, the coach will help motivate them to complete that plan. In this sentence, the relationship can be either 'top-down', as occurs when a leader provides coaching, or from peers who have more experience. According to Hutchinson, (2007), effective coaching and guidance from the line manager has a significant relationship with employees' satisfaction, commitment and motivation.

Quite apart from the above learning mechanisms, whether learning is formal or informal can also be important in facilitating the success of the learning process, as is explained below.

Formal and Informal Learning

Formal learning refers to formal training that is planned and scheduled by the organisation; for example, yearly, half-yearly or quarterly training programs, which are conducted either in-house or outside the organisation. In addition, organisations can support external learning programs, such as

Education Assistance Programs (EAP) that aids employee career development. Organisations generally view formal training as an effective mechanism for imparting and obtaining new skills and knowledge. Some organisations see little difference between training and learning, and some organisations even include training as part of their corporate objectives. Valley (1992) differentiates training as something individuals have done to them, whereas, learning is something individuals do for themselves. Training is often about learning a specific skill set, whereas learning is more holistic (Kimmerle, Cress, & Held, 2010). This means that learning is more efficient at achieving performance compared to training. On the other hand, informal learning occurs when learning takes place as part of an unplanned activity.

Informal learning occurs when employees learn from others while 'on the job'. This can arise through any number of mechanisms, such as active learning, action learning, experiential learning and problem-based learning. The assumption that learning only occurs through formal training is narrow in scope and fails to recognize the significant contribution occurring through less formal means. Informal learning can also pick up on ideas from training sessions, so is also affected by the formal training. Learning can happen in any setting; from observing others, getting feedback or advice from co-workers or even during a discussion over the lunch or tea break. For example, Oxtoby (1992) suggests that corporate learning can come from sharing information about eliminating waste at work, so that the knowledge is more broadly applied. Similarly, Williams (2001) claims that individual learning is often shaped by circumstances rather than by intention. Thus, sharing information and beliefs about the interpretation of information are two pre-requisites for

this alliance. Linking learning to business changes provides the opportunity for continuous improvement, which leads to improved organisational performance (Ni & Sun, 2009).

The literature provides not only an understanding of organisational learning strategy, but evidence that organisational learning strategies are widely accepted and expanding (Ni & Sun, 2009; Kimmerle et al., 2010). This expansion happens because learning strategies allow organisations to draw on their internal pool of knowledge and information to deliver effective and efficient operations. Given that many Malaysian industries have already entered the Global and South East Asian marketplace and others are seeking opportunities to compete more effectively, research into how organisational learning strategies are understood and practised, is timely. Knowing about individual experiences and expectations and which learning strategies prove most effective within the Malaysian cultural context will provide a benchmark for going forward. This study examines perceptions about the implementation of organisational learning, to identify practices and strategies that can benefit other organisations in Malaysia and in the wider global marketplace. What are the most popular organisational learning strategies used by Malaysian organisation and which are perceived to be most effective?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate approach for developing an in-depth understanding about organisational learning and practices being undertaken. As this research investigates both existing research and the tacit knowledge of people involved in the industry, the nature of

the research is both exploratory and explanatory so a combined interpretive and constructivist approach was deemed the most appropriate paradigm and methodology. The 'Interpretive/Constructivist' paradigm proposes that people construct knowledge in social settings (Gregg, Kulkarni & Vinze, 2001), based on their practices and traditions (Kim 2003) and this helps to construct their perception of reality. Thus, the ontology underpinning the study is that individuals make sense of , or give meaning to, what goes on in the world around them (Pearsall & Trumble, 2002). In support of this, the epistemological stance was to ask open-ended questions and data was gathered from in-depth interviews with 35 respondents.

Sample

Participants were drawn from the manufacturing, health and public sectors and included human resource directors, managers or executives and academics, to harness different perspectives on what is happening. The respondents occupied positions as professors or lecturers, administrators, directors (or assistant directors), or were managers or executives. The majority were from the manufacturing sector as this is the second most influenced by international trade and competitiveness. A number of the manufacturing sector respondents represented foreign multinational companies, (from United States, Germany, Canada, Taiwan and Japan) as well as local Malaysian companies. Public and private organisations were represented. Overall, the respondents were experienced practitioners in the field and had clear views on the topic, despite having differing levels of understanding. Information pertaining to the respondents' backgrounds is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' Backgrounds

	Industry	No of Respondents
1.	Academic	5
2.	Government	9
3.	Health	3
4.	Manufacturing	18
	TOTAL	35 (100%)

Procedure

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling. Manufacturing respondents were drawn from either a membership list of the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) or the telephone directory for the Northern region of Malaysia, due to its proximity to Penang. Selected organisations were contacted via email and telephone to gain agreement to participate, clarify the purpose of the study and set an appointment time for the interview. Interviews were semi-structured and on average each interview took approximately two hours. Written consent was obtained from all respondents and the usual guarantees of confidentiality were given. All interviews were recorded

The interviews were transcribed and the recordings and the data were sorted based on the interview questions and emergent themes using N-Vivo software. The software was used to manage the data and generate the frequency of discussion on each theme. Themes were all then checked manually to ensure that no themes were missed due to participants using different terms or indirect wording. Any areas of discussion that appeared unconvincing were also revisited and checked manually. This provided a backup for the analysis and ensured the richness of the data and

significant contributions were captured, which also makes the analysis more meaningful and reliable.

RESULTS

Approaches to Learning used in Malaysian Companies

Many of the respondents struggled to articulate a definition of organisational learning; for example, the academics made comments similar to *'T&D is actually part of OL and a tool used in order to implement OL, while OL is more of a culture within the organisation (Academic 1)'*. Respondents from other categories often made little distinction between training and development and learning strategies, as is demonstrated by this comment from a manufacturing respondent *'Training is a tool to implement Organisational Learning in-line with the company's vision and mission, to develop the staff competency through formal and informal training and On the Job Training' (Manufacturer 10)*. Others, like this health respondent suggested: *'To us, learning culture and organisational learning is the same and this is the culture that we want to develop ... there is still more to learn' (Health 1)*. Many reiterated this theme of developing a knowledge culture.

All respondents agreed that knowledge could be acquired through a number of strategies. They emphasised that developing a knowledge culture within the organisation was important to successfully nurture and grow knowledge. They believed that the secret of being creative and efficiently acquiring knowledge was to have a positive attitude towards exploring knowledge and appreciating new ideas and information. For most, this meant using the fastest, cheapest, most effective and efficient methods of acquiring knowledge, as is identified in the following comment:

'learning is always important; in fact, we always encourage employees to gain knowledge by whatever means.' (Government Respondent, G7); *'Learning is either hard skills or soft skill but you learn every day and all the time'* (Manufacturing Respondent, M1.).

The respondents in the study suggested there were many approaches to acquiring knowledge. These included:

1. Product based knowledge, whereby the type of product will determine the appropriate method to learn the skills and acquire other required knowledge;
2. Resource centers, such as a library, video centre and reading room for self-learning;
3. Databases, which are managed by the IT or Training department;
4. Information technology that promotes the use of intra departmental mailing systems;
5. Hiring external consultants to study the organisation;
6. Public and private academic institutions where organisations send staff for short and long-term courses;
7. Problem solving committees like Quality Circles (QC); and,
8. An attachment or visit to another organisation or the parent company

In addition, respondents suggested that attending professional courses such as seminars, conferences, workshops, and discussions, as well as studying the forecast changes in business trends and examining and understanding

product and customers' needs all allowed an organisation to acquire knowledge. Other means they identified were through conducting laboratory experiments; performing on the job training; and establishing a mentoring system. Several also stressed the importance of an appropriate organisational structure that facilitated both horizontal and vertical communication and knowledge capture.

These findings show that Malaysian companies are implementing, at least in part, many of the learning strategies identified as prevalent in the west. Respondents gave examples of action, active, experiential, cooperative and problem based learning, as well as coaching and mentoring; in addition, they identified a mix of formal and informal learning strategies. Table 2 matches the learning strategies identified in the study with those found in the literature.

The commonality between the methods identified in the literature and practised in Malaysia, suggests that despite giving limited definitions of Organisational Learning, many organisations were implementing learning strategies. The manufacturing sector had the highest and most consistent understanding of organisational learning, viewing it as a long-term strategy for skill enhancement and continuous knowledge acquisition. Government respondents held a similar, though less consistently articulated view, whereas, academics were more inclined to view it as a cultural attribute or opportunity for knowledge acquisition. The lowest level of awareness, with little or no differentiation between organisational learning and training and development, was among the health sector.

Table 2: Comparison of Learning Strategies practiced in Malaysia with those cited in the Literature

Learning Strategies	Literature Findings	Research Findings
1. Action Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Group of peers meeting. 2. Group discussion. 3. Experimentation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Research and consultancy (9) 2. Brainstorming and dialogue (23) <p>TOTAL: 32</p>
2. Active Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Problem solving. 2. Teamwork. 3. Simulation. 4. Case work 5. Feedback 6. Small group discussion 7. Brainstorming 8. Reading 9. Writing 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brainstorming and dialogue (23) 2. Experiential learning (24) 3. Self learning (25) 4. Online (18) 5. Outsourcing and networking (7) <p>TOTAL: 97</p>
3. Experiential Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Outside Classroom: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Practical experiences 2. On-the-job training b. Inside Classroom <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Role-playing 2. Case study 3. Post-project reviews 4. Internal audits 5. Oral post mortem 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Experiential learning (24) 2. On the Job Training (OJT) (18) 3. Attachment and exposure (25) <p>TOTAL: 67</p>
4. Cooperative Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Small Group Learning 2. Classroom 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Classroom (15) 2. Seminar and conferences (24) 3. Education Program (17) 4. Training and development activities (20) <p>TOTAL: 76</p>

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5. Problem based Learning	1. Problem solving group	1. Experiential learning (24)	TOTAL: 24
6. Coaching and Mentoring	1. Top down 2. Peers	1. Coaching and mentoring (16)	TOTAL: 16
7. Formal Learning	1. Training program 2. Education Assistance Program	1. Formal (13) 2. Classroom (15) 3. Seminar and conferences (24) 4. Education Program (17) 5. Training and development activities (20) 6. Research and consultancy (9) 7. Attachment and exposure (25)	TOTAL: 123
8. Informal Learning	1. Observation 2. Advice 3. Feedback 4. Discussion over lunch or tea break	1. Informal (13) 2. Experiential learning (24) 3. Coaching and mentoring (16) 4. On the Job Training (OJT) (18) 5. Self learning (25) 6. Online (18) 7. Outsourcing and networking (7) 8. Brainstorming and dialogue (23)	TOTAL: 144

NB: Number in brackets refer to the number of items raised by individual respondents.

DISCUSSION

Although Malaysian organisations use a number of strategies to acquire knowledge, the various industries agreed that the most popular strategy was structured training and development programs. Most respondents favoured having a specialist department that provided a hub for handling knowledge and skills acquisition for both internal and external learning sources, but did not preclude individual departments, such as finance, operations, or maintenance conducting their own learning activities. The central theme of development related to individuals' specific jobs and focused on problem solving, changes to jobs or the introduction of new technologies. The range of strategies included experiential, participative, active learning, coaching and mentoring.

A number of organisations referred to the importance of providing a learning environment, such as a library or other resources, to encourage self-directed learning as well as the importance of learning taking place through day-to-day activities. The main principle for determining the learning strategy was to choose the best method, with the least cost, time and energy, to improve processes and produce quality outputs, as was previously identified by Joseph (1995). This matches Williams' (2001) argument that learning is shaped by the circumstances or nature of the business, its financial strength, product needs, technology and human resource development requirements.

Most respondents also acknowledged that internal resources had a key role in knowledge dissemination. They often relied on managers or other employees to pass on or share their knowledge or skills by running classes, giving seminars or

demonstrating with on-the-job training, to develop the knowledge and skills of other employees. This approach strengthens and spreads knowledge throughout the entire organisation and aligns with learning network-theory, where interactions among employees, managers, training consultants and others affect learning mechanisms and outcomes (Poell et al. 2000).

The respondents did not categorize the learning methods their organisations used as active, action or cooperative learning and so forth, but rather they explained the method and then referred to examples, which matched categories identified in the literature. For example, laboratory experimentation and product based learning are examples of action based learning (Miller, 2003; York & Marsick, 2000); Having a problem-solving committee, resource centre, maintaining databases and supporting learning through information technology are all examples of active learning (McGoldrick, Battle & Gallagher, 2000; Salemi, 2002).

Examples of experiential learning were evident in on-the-job training, attachments or visits to other organisations, and in some classroom training (Hickox, 2002; Gustavsson & Harung, 1994).

Cooperative learning was implemented through formal organisational structures, and teamwork within organisations (Jenkins et al., 2003) and specific examples of rubber based learning were setting up of problem solving groups and bringing in external consultants (Ozuah et al. 2001). Mentoring systems were also in place, which matches the recommendations of Brocato (2003).

The breadth of the strategies shows that like their competitors worldwide, Malaysian organisations pursued strategies that suited their own philosophy and circumstance.

This lends further support to Williams' (2001) contention that organisations shape learning strategies to fit their circumstances. This is borne out in the preferred use of active and cooperative learning as primary learning strategies, which matches similar findings in the literature. McGoldrich et al. (2000) argue that active learning allows for a collective construction of knowledge, which makes it a very effective learning strategy. The word '*active*' suggests that learners are actively seeking knowledge, either individually, as a group, or through formal or informal channels to enhance their knowledge, skills and capability to fulfill the demands of their work or job. Active learning also has the benefit of being a cost-effective way to improve quality and knowledge capacity.

The benefit of cooperative learning, which was the second most popular learning strategy used by Malaysian organisations, is that it promotes higher individual achievement because the individual efforts are more transparent to others (Jenkins et al. 2003). For this reason, Lancaster and Strand (2001) suggest that cooperative learning also makes the individual more responsible and accountable. This is a significant cultural shift for many Malaysian organisations. Recent studies support earlier findings by Hofstede that Malaysians tend to be collectivist, in that they have high levels of trust, loyalty and belonging; they are generally willing to accept differences in hierarchy, and rely heavily on personalised relationships (Ahmad, 2004). There are certainly differences between the two main ethnic

groups; the Malays and Chinese. The Chinese are denoted as being more competitive, hard-working and financially driven, whereas the Malays are more fatalistic and concerned with maintaining traditions (Ahmad, 2004). However, these attributes are likely to change as organisations adopt more Western practices because of changes associated with globalisation.

The respondents indicated that Malaysian organisations are adopting western practices for a number of reasons. Internationalisation and globalisation are forcing organisations to match international practices, and this is particularly the case for companies affiliated with or controlled by an overseas company. The international practices in relationships influence the learning strategies adopted at the local level (Collings, Scullion & Dowling, 2009). In addition, information is now more readily available and companies wishing to compete globally and sustain their business operations have access to knowledge and information via the media and through technology.

Other influences are the multi-cultural diversity of the population, particularly the many Indian and Chinese migrants, where a common language facilitates commerce, and more recently the exposure to western education and culture (Data Monitor, 2009). Similarly, respondents indicated that the influence of dealing or trading with American, Australian and European companies means companies have to adopt standards that are acceptable to customers in those countries.

This study also found evidence that other learning strategies such as experiential, action and problem-based learning as

well as mentoring and coaching were practised. Again, this seems to be further evidence to support Williams' (2001) claim that learning choices are often contingent on the circumstances. Organisations need to consider which is the best learning strategy choice in relation to the type of knowledge that is required, when and where the knowledge can be acquired and what will maximize understanding and transfer of knowledge to the employees (Williams, 2001).

Malaysian companies are also more inclined to use informal learning strategies in preference to formal learning strategies as this allows the organisation to maintain control and keep costs down. Providing resources at the workplace not only encourages a learning environment, it means that learning can be 'just in time' in that the new skill is learned when it is most needed, or learnt in smaller chunks that once applied will aid retention. Providing the environment within the workplace, such as databases, resource centers, and information technology, also supports and encourages independent learning. This matches examples cited in the western literature by Bechtold (2000) and Dowd (2000), among others, who argue that informal learning strategies not only keep costs down, they also enhance the chance of learning from other organisational members within the work environment. Keeping these experiences in-house, allows organisational members to effectively navigate changes in operations and achieve better performance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND THEORISTS

This study provides ample choices for how organisations, and in particular Malaysian organisations, human resource practitioners and academics can implement learning strategies. Most critical for those who want to improve

performance, save costs, time and energy is the need to adopt the most effective or “right” learning strategies for each individual organisation (Ni & Sun, 2009). It is paramount that each organisation adopts the learning strategy most suited to their situation and employees, regardless of whether they adopt active, participative, experiential, problem solving, coaching, mentoring and formal or informal learning.

Of more interest though, is that this study provides further evidence that organisational learning is being implemented in Malaysia, and is more widespread than was identified in a previous study by Arshad and Scott-Ladd (2008). Given the value other researchers have identified can be drawn from the application of organisational learning strategies (Armstrong, 2000; Schien, 1993; Senge, 1990), this should provide considerable choice for organisations seeking new strategies to adapt to the current economic climate.

Implementing change does require expensive training programs or the use of consultants. We are not denying that there is a place for these, but there is much an organisation can do internally. The first step is building a climate or culture, where learning is valued and supported. The evidence from this study supports Brown and Brudney’s (2003) argument that facilitating and allowing information and knowledge to be easily accessible from all directions (that is vertically, horizontally, and diagonally), is an effective way of building an organisation’s internal capacity.

Shared knowledge generates and develops core competencies in employees and the organisation, which

combines to make the organisation more competitive (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990).

This exploratory study provides a good foundation for future research. Further studies could investigate the organisational learning strategies being implemented in Malaysia in a number of different ways. For example, quantitative approach could explore and confirm the frequency of use of the various strategies and which settings they are most suited to. This study asked managers about their perceptions of the strategies implemented; however, employees may have different perspectives. Therefore, the impact on employees should also be investigated, particularly in relation to employee satisfaction, productivity, commitment and intent to turnover. Given Malaysia's status as an emerging economy, the influence of organisational learning on innovation could also be studied to identify the extent to which organisational learning enriches innovation and whether some strategies are more appropriate to Malaysia and others.

This study could also be expanded to increase the number of respondents and explore a wider range of industries. For example, this research involved four (4) industries; however, Malaysia has a very diverse range of industries, from plantations to banking, construction and education, and given the importance of situational contingencies, research needs to extend to other industries to create better generalisations of how organisational learning strategy can be implemented in Malaysia. An extension of this study across a wider scope would allow a better understanding of the strategies, processes and the outcomes being achieved.

Future studies could also examine the influence of different roles on OL. For example, the CEO or top manager positions mean they not only influence the choices made by the organisation, they also need access to information to evaluate the organisation's progress or to implement new strategies. This means their information and understanding of issues needs to be reliable. Further research is needed to uncover how best their needs could be met. It would also be useful to conduct further studies across cross sections of organisations, to identify how effectively organisational learning strategy has been implemented at the operational level and to understand any changes achieved. Knowing and understanding these would give some indication of how organisational learning strategy contributes to performance, innovation and satisfaction within Malaysia.

This exploratory study is not without limitations. The first is that it is subjective in nature. Factors such as the respondents' willingness, honesty and sincerity influence the reliability of the findings, as does their relationship to the rest of the organisation. Furthermore, organisational learning is a relatively new issue for Malaysia and, as became evident in the study, some managers had limited exposure to and understanding of organisational learning theory and struggled to define the concept, which may introduce some sample bias. The organisations that participated in this study were relatively large and some were engaged in international trade, which likely gives greater exposure to Western practices and ideals. It could also be that the wider community and in particular, small and family-owned businesses, or those who chose not to participate in the study, have a lesser understanding. Alternatively, considering the government has been active in promoting the need for

organisational learning, the understanding might be equally as high, or higher, in some sectors of the wider business community.

Another limitation, associated with the first, is that this study only explored the perceptions of respondents from four industries (Academic, Government, Health and Manufacturing). Different industries might be less or better informed. Similarly, there could be a bias within the industry groups depending on the knowledge of the individual participants in the study. In addition, while one could expect academics to have a better understanding of the theories of organisational learning, the industry practitioners' conceptualisations are influenced by the need to apply the theory in a practical way. In addition, the overall results are influenced by the manufacturing respondents' input, which might not be representative of their industry's views, or understanding in other sectors across the community.

CONCLUSION

The concept of organisational learning is growing in importance as organisations try to discover the secrets of learning so they can understand how to learn and stay ahead of competitors. With mounting globalisation pressures and increasing engagement with international community, Malaysia manufacturers must brace themselves to adapt to the rapid changes especially in the current economic crisis globally and learn to stay competitive. The ability to become a learning organisation as defined by Arshad (2008), Williams (2001) and Garvin (1993) would help Malaysian organisations and serve as a vehicle to help Malaysia achieve its Vision 2020.

In terms of learning strategies practised in Malaysia, this study shows that organisations prefer internal learning strategies, but also use external learning strategies extensively. Both formal and informal methodologies are popular. The use of multi-sources to draw on various sources of learning, such as self-learning by reading, research, books, magazines, journals, publications and resource centres was common. External strategies such as attachment and exposure included job rotation, job positioning, visitations, and exhibitions, and although less common than the internal strategies was still consistently practised across the respondent groups. Similarly, seminars and conferences, experiential learning, brainstorming and dialogue were also popular learning strategies.

Some industries had different preferences, for example, the health organisations emphasised seminars and conferences, the manufacturing sector emphasised experiential learning, government departments focused more on attachment and exposure, whereas the academics relied more on self-learning; however, all respondents did use a mix of learning strategies.

One cause for concern was that some companies are not yet willing, or perhaps mature enough, to implement learning strategies that fully empower their employees. A small number of respondents still focus on task-related skill development, rather than recognising a more holistic approach that develops and empowers employees can add value through synergistic benefits.

The evidence presented here of how organisational learning is being successfully implemented within Malaysian

organisations should motivate other organisations to adopt similar practices, and provide guidance on how to implement learning strategies. Becoming a learning organisation within the Malaysian culture and environment is possible and there are many fruits to be harvested for those who can operationalise organisational learning strategies in practice.

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