

# Learning@Work: Says Who?

## Institute for Adult Learning Roundtable 2013 Proceedings on Workplace Learning

On 5 December 2013, the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) Singapore hosted a roundtable discussion on Learning@Work at the Holiday Inn Orchard City Centre. The objective of the roundtable was to spark discussion about what workplace learning (WPL) could mean for Continuing Education and Training (CET) providers and businesses in Singapore. Participants were encouraged to share their current understandings of workplace learning; the challenges that are faced in implementing workplace learning, and the opportunities for workplace learning in a rapidly changing economy. This event was a continuation of IAL's annual seminar series, which usually takes place at the end of the year. It was also the first in a series of initiatives on workplace learning to be launched by IAL.

There was a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement among the participants of the roundtable discussion. Many people attended to find out more about what workplace learning can look like and how they might be able to offer workplace based learning solutions to their clients or own employees. A great deal of the discussion raised many of the real problems people have faced in their efforts to encourage workplace learning, as well as small successes of valuable learning moments that they have witnessed or been involved in.

Five key note speakers were invited to share their ideas on workplace learning and what makes it possible by using the Pecha-Kucha presentation style to evoke ideas on workplace learning in relation to the aspects of calling for collaboration, advocating change and the challenges that impede WPL. Over 40 participants then discussed their ideas related to the presentations and their personal experiences. The participants included Continuing Education and Training (CET) providers, businesses, CET consultants, and government representatives.



## Learning at Work

by Ms Tracy Fang, Senior Training and Development Manager (Regional)  
Wing Tai Retail Management Pte Ltd (Wing Tai Retail)

The changing economic environment presents challenges to businesses, and an unstable economy means that there is increased pressure to demonstrate the value of Learning and Development activities. The changing environment also means that individuals need to develop new skills, behaviours and attitudes to become flexible, capable and willing to seek personal development.

Within Wing Tai Retail, the Learning and Development division works with the functional units of various departments to ensure the right skills and beliefs are embodied by employees so that they can perform as expected. The changing environment, however, means that new strategies need to be adopted, which has led to Wing Tai Retail forging two learning and development partnerships with the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and the Workforce Development Agency (WDA). These partnerships help with upgrading technical competencies, designing quality curriculum and assessment, and recruiting, training, and retaining employees.

The value of learning on the job, however, is the most impactful learning methodology, which has led Wing Tai Retail to make learning more experiential. As an international brand, intercultural and diversity skills are also crucial for the future. The question is – how to help employees learn and apply learning at the workplace for continuous progression? Wing Tai Retail has developed a scheme to link workplace learning to performance enhancements and professional advancement.

The challenges faced in implementing workplace learning are responding to the

demand for Return on Investment, measuring KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), inadequate facilities and subject matter experts, as well as the prioritization of limited resources. The role of the manager, then, becomes very important, but they need to be empowered with the relevant skills and support. There needs to be greater integration between coaching, organisational development and performance management, before giving line managers greater responsibility to drive organisational change and progress. It is therefore important for companies to be in touch with their employees' attitudes and behaviours.

One key factor is the rise of the internet and access to social media. This means that learning and development should no longer be top-down, with employees as passive receivers of information. Workplace learning is bottom up as people turn to blogs and twitter for information. Companies need to be aware of these changing dynamics so that the needs of all parties can be met.

Learning and talent development activities are expected to be more closely aligned to business strategies and demonstrate return on investment. This means that learning and development personnel need to seriously consider structural changes in their roles and responsibilities. There needs to be a shift from thinking about individual competencies to organisational capabilities; from people management to strategic development from static curriculum to dynamic agendas and integrated strategies for development. But are we ready?

## Developing People

by Dr Lynda Wee, Chief Executive Officer  
Bootstrap Pte Ltd

When thinking about developing people, there are three C's that should be considered: customise; connect; and coach. Today's environment is very different to the past. There is more information and it is much more accessible than ever before. This means that we live in a world of clutter and we need to find ways to manage that and stand out from the crowd. People are central – people are the ones with ideas.

If you are concerned with learning and development you need to understand your customers and offer them compelling ideas. From the corporate perspective renewal and profit are important. This makes it important to convince organisations why they should buy in to learning and development, and then they will ask about the how. It is important to speak the language of the client and not the “trainer's” language, or the learner's language. The main idea for customisation is thinking about participants first and *then* content.

Adults learn through connecting with each other, whether it be face-to-face or online. Whatever the learning solution is, it needs to encourage collaboration, connecting, and creating, with somewhere that the learners can deposit what they have done so it can be revisited when they need it. All learning platforms need to be well integrated and seamless.

The final C – coaching is about having a workplace coach who can help “just in time”. A coach is someone who can be a “mirror” when an employee returns to the workplace after learning. A coach needs to be properly equipped with the knowledge, skills, mindset, and certification needs to be considered.

In summary, please customise. It's about them not you. Please connect. Use all the technologies you have. And please ensure that a workplace coach is there to help on a day to day basis.

## The Metamorphosis of Continuing Education

by Mr Arthur Chiang, Learning & Development Practitioner

Continuing education needs to undergo change. While there is a place for training, it is currently over rated. There are other ecological aspects to the learning process – learning is not just about training. Clients want better performance at the workplace, but it is dangerous to draw a direct relationship between training and performance. Performance involves other factors – we need to consider what happens after training takes place.

After classroom training, a learner returns to the workplace where they get swamped and may not have opportunities to apply what they learnt. Learning needs to be sustained in the workplace, and to do that a trinity of training,

coaching, and mentoring at the workplace can help. We are good at the training part, but coaching and mentoring in the workplace need to be put in place for post-training support.

A trainer needs to function as more than just a trainer; a trainer can also be a coach to help bring classroom learning into the workplace. There are still a lot of obstacles that are non-training and non-coaching related. This is where mentoring is important in order to give learners the skills to navigate the obstacles they face at work. The difference between coaching and mentoring is that coaching is more skills based and task focused, with a results oriented view of learning. Mentoring, however, looks at the learner as whole,

considering their well-being and developmental needs.

This trinity of training, coaching, and mentoring could escalate performance, but it needs to be framed up in “the curriculum”. Here the idea of curriculum is a relationship among the learners, the trainer, the coach, the mentor, and the entire workplace. The workplace can become the curriculum. Change cannot happen overnight, but we need to start somewhere to reach a bigger goal.

Are we placing too much emphasis on the notion of training? Change is present in all aspects of life - this includes continuing and lifelong learning. We are too immensely familiar with providing training to boost competencies and work performance. And we are too well acquainted with, even overly reliant on, the Standard Curriculum used in training. But is that all there is to continuing education and learning?

## Rehabilitation & Functional Training – The Perfect Marriage

by Mr Nelson Chong, CEO & Founder  
Functional Training Institute

Functional Training Institute started out as a small dream to help people live pain free lives. As success grew there was a need to “clone” more Functional Trainers. The challenge was how to transform a body builder trainer into a functional trainer.

The plan was simple: perfect practice makes perfect. New trainers undergo weekly intensive training for six months, followed by daily ongoing staff workouts together helping ensure skills were perfected, and finally weekly brainstorming sessions to create even more innovative functional training exercises to satisfy clients. Researching through other means such as the media or reading books also helped our Functional Trainers understand their practice and perfect their skills. As a firm believer in workplace learning, success comes from teamwork and finding people who can teach you more within your limitations.

A golden opportunity then arose as people with chronic pain started to look for us. This required Functional Training to go into the world of rehabilitation and develop a breed of “x-factor” trainers. To do this doctors and physiotherapists from the US and Australia came over quarterly to certify our trainers and

equip them with the right skills. Some of the trainers, however, were fearful of using their new knowledge and skills, which meant that confidence needed to be built. This involved trainers practicing on each other and inviting their parents and spouses to participate in free treatment.

The results seen from our x-factor trainers were immense, including an autistic girl being able to open her fists, bounce a ball and run on a treadmill without falling off. Another magical moment was when an 89 year old lady who could not walk due to operations on her knees was able to walk freely after three months of training.

While mastering the art of healing the physical body, Functional Training also brainstorms more ways to reach the mental and spiritual well-being of clients. With this endeavour we started the FTI culture, which included lifting the profiles of females in the fitness industry, ensuring each client laughs during their sessions, and celebrating the birthdays and successes of our clients.

## Learning@work - The PestBusters Way

by Ms Catherine Lau, General Manager  
PestBusters Pte Ltd

Learning is an everyday thing. When anyone joins PestBusters they have something lined up for them in terms of learning at work. There are three main frameworks that this can take shape: structured learning, unstructured learning, and individual learning.

All organisations have structured learning because they have lessons in place and things that they think are right to teach somebody. In our organisation this is very theory based and monotonous. It involves the company induction training about the vision, mission and other organisational jargon. This happens in the classroom, where we also have learning about this like cockroaches, and other pests. This also involves a test that requires 85% in order for an employee to be 'confirmed'.

After this we use a buddy system, where you learn from your coach, mentor, trainer, or whatever they are called, and they learn from you. When an employee has the knowledge about how to deal with clients they will go solo. When an employee is solo they need to be very disciplined to complete their tasks.

Unstructured learning is very interesting and different to classroom learning. It helps us respond to the unpredictable aspects of our work, where we are forced to learn something new. For example, recently someone was killed after being stung by bees, so our Pest Busters really need to know about the different species of bees, exactly whether to exterminate from this direction or that, taking note of the wind, whether or not to switch the lights off, and all of the other very nuanced aspects of dealing with pests. Other examples include learning how to catch birds, alligators, monitor lizards, dogs and a lot of other unusual requests. By working and learning together people also gain intangible skills like leadership, communication and dealing with stress.

Success is very subjective, and learning at work is one of the most powerful tools. My employees are mostly concerned with promotion, but this also means pursuing a journey of learning until you lay horizontal. Learning is every minute, every second.

# Discussion

After the presentations, the participants were encouraged to reflect on what they had heard and to share their opinions. The discussions from all five tables have been synthesised to form the ideas presented below.

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## What is Workplace Learning?

As one of IAL's interests was to hear about understandings of workplace learning on the ground there was a significant amount of sharing about what workplace learning consisted of, as well as tools or interventions that participants could identify as supporting workplace learning initiatives. The ideas presented in this section summarise the sentiments of participants' current understandings of workplace learning.

### Definitions of Workplace Learning

A number of participants felt that WPL encompassed soft skills training, classroom training, structured training, learning about the organisational culture, and self-directed learning. More traditional notions of workplace learning were thought of as on-the-job training, by some participants, including apprenticeship schemes and vocational training. WPL, however, was generally seen to go beyond these traditional methods and helped employees have a more holistic understanding of how to address various problems in different contexts. The distinction between more traditional and more holistic ideas of workplace learning was not so clear cut for some participants who felt that workplace learning referred to the traditional technical and on-the-job training as well as the broader elements of working.

### Social Media and E-learning

*"This is something that all my staff are on... Facebook, all on Twitter." (Benny Lee, Executive Director, Marketing and Operations, Zingrill Holdings).*

Referring, particularly, to the first presentation, participants agreed that social media platforms such as facebook, twitter, WhatsApp, and instagram can be great ways to connect the Millennium Generation and Generation Y with what they need to learn to do their jobs. The younger generations were cited as wanting to use social media and other technology based platform to learn as it fit neatly in to how they already engage with information. E-learning platforms were also discussed as an important option to cope with manpower issues, as drawing on mobile platforms means that staff can participate in training without having to leave their jobs, reducing costs for the company.

### Learning Guidance at Work

While workplace learning can come in many different shapes and forms, coaching and mentoring seemed to be the most familiar ways to incorporate guided learning into the workplace. The role of a coach and mentor were emphasised in the second and third presentations as helping employees through on-going support and an expert to call on when needed. Doreen Tan (CEO of the Textile and Fashions Industry Training Centre) shared that it is important to find the right mentor for the specific skills that are needed. You may need more than one mentor and you may need to pay them for their mentoring service, but she felt that a lot of people are not willing to pay for coaching. At Louis Vuitton



the vast majority of learning was structured as a part of a coaching relationship, with a smaller proportion being conducted in the classroom. Taking the time to listen and take care of the employees' aspirations had paid off in terms of increasing sales. Nelson Chong (CEO, Founder, Functional Training Institute) realised that his mentoring work was much more effective when he required his mentees to report back to him about what they had learned and how they had applied their new knowledge. This helped him identify gaps and reassess how he was mentoring each individual. Some participants felt that the gap between the generations could be helped by coaching, but as Lee Tong Nge (Deputy Principal of Nanyang Polytechnic) expressed, it is important to establish a relationship of respect and sharing rather than teaching.

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## What are the Challenges?

There were many challenges expressed when it came to encouraging greater workplace learning. These include the appropriate use of social media and e-learning; building the capability and right structures to support WPL, motivations to work and learn, an emphasis on return on investment (ROI), and the resistance to creating organisational learning cultures.

### Appropriate use of Social Media and E-learning

The use of technology and social media were not seen as appropriate learning platforms for all jobs and all types of participants. Wesley Lee (Safety and Quality Executive, 800 Super Waste Management), for example, shared that their cleaning personnel would not respond well to technology based learning as they are mostly older workers with low literacy levels and respond better to demonstration. Participants also raised concerns about how to validate informal social media learning so it can be considered training. It was also raised that investing in hardware can be expensive and it is difficult to find e-learning experts that have the appropriate content knowledge to create educational materials. There is a high risk that focusing on e-platforms and serious gaming can dilute learning and make assessment difficult.

### Capability and Structure to support WPL

*"They fear that when they coach they are giving a lot, like the Chinese Kung Fu master. You will never teach him 100% because one day the disciple will kill you."*

As coaching and mentoring were discussed frequently as one possible form of WPL, so were their related challenges. These included: what coaching really means; how threatening is coaching for the coach; what types of responsibility are involved; how to account for quality control; how to support the capability building of employees to be workplace coaches or mentors; whether coaching is valuable for certain job roles more than others; as well as whether such initiatives should be structured or not.

When it came to the debate over structure there were two main camps. On the one hand, having a structure was seen as important for identifying what employees should learn and also being able to assess whether the learning goals were reached. Having unstructured learning processes was thought to result in ineffective learning and unable to raise people to the right competency level. On the other hand, some participants felt a more fluid approach could be more responsive to "just in time" information sharing, and helping people do their jobs. Coaching that is too closely tied to evaluation was thought to make learning less effective and put undue burden on the parties involved.

## Motivation to Work and Learn

*“The core is when we say learning at workplace, there is a motivation factor which we are talking about. We were hungry, but the new generation are not.” (Neeru Bahl, Founder, MAGES Institute of Excellence Pte Ltd)*

There was a sentiment that the younger generation in Singapore lacked the motivation to work and learn. This was generally seen to relate to manpower issues of both attracting potential employees and keeping attrition rates low. One example about tugboat drivers cited the millennium generation as impatient and wanting quick career progression without gaining experience. This has led the organisation to try to capture the experiences of senior tugmasters and find ways to pass this knowledge to new drivers. Participants also felt that the idea of customising innovation could be important for addressing, not the lack of motivation, but the different motivations that younger people have compared to their more senior counterparts. As Belle Luo (Manager, Kaplan) expressed “If I can apply it I would naturally be feeling high and motivated...But if it’s not relevant and when it’s not customised...I will kind of switch off.” Incentive programmes were also mentioned as a possibility for increasing motivation, but these were not seen to be successful as employees always want more for less.

## Return on Investment

*“HR start off with that mindset...don’t tell me what we can learn, tell me in terms of ROI”.* (Suresh Punjabi, Director, Singapore Polytechnic)

The idea of measuring Return on Investment (ROI) for training was talked about as a great challenge. If learning at work can be quantified it becomes very meaningful, but how can the value of such learning be captured? Nelson Chong (CEO, Founder of Functional Training Institute) expressed that ROI can be measured in many ways such as written testimonials from clients, referrals, and on-going renewals of contracts even though fees increase. The main challenge raised was the attitudes of bosses who are primarily concerned about the cost of training and sending staff and may not be interested in intangible returns.

## Learning Culture

*“I think employers, organisations, have to take ownership and build this learning culture and...shift away from the funding stuff.”* (Lynda Wee, CEO Bootstrap Pte Ltd)

An overarching theme picked up by many participants was the challenge of creating leadership and an organisational culture that support workplace learning. Peggy Lee (Director, SIM Professional) explained that the work culture affects the emphasis placed on learning and development and the ability for learning to truly *enable* business. Roger Lee (Director, Singapore Institute of Material Management) believed that creating such a culture as a part of an organisation’s DNA gave it a competitive edge. The current general sentiment, however, was one of very few organisations wanting to build a structure for workplace learning, but rather preferring to “wash their hands” of the learning responsibility and outsourcing it to training providers or consultants. For workplace learning to have a chance, leaders need to bring about cultural change and foster a conducive environment for acknowledging, encouraging and providing opportunities for learning at work.



# Opportunities

A number of opportunities for encouraging workplace learning were discussed that could help address some of the above challenges.

## Developing Effective Coaches

It was suggested that the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) could develop a good coaching programme for line managers and supervisors to be effective coaches. This could include learning from people from other organisations, including foreign experts.

## Job Rotation

Job rotation was mentioned as one way an organisation can build workplace learning into an employee's career path. Job rotation was thought to encourage resilience, resourcefulness and networking. But job rotation may not be appropriate for everyone or every type of organisation.

## Project Based Learning at Work

It was argued that true learning occurs when it is applied to real situations. For learning to be effective it should be project based. Collaborative learning with expected outcomes can be a painful process, but highly effective. Individuals involved in projects work together and think of solutions to problems with support from their supervisors.

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## Where to from here?

As the first part of IAL's series on workplace learning, the roundtable successfully sparked interest in the notion that learning does not have to be physically separated from work. The presentations, particularly on Weng Tai, Functional Training Institute, and PestBusters provided good examples of how learning can be incorporated into the workplace when an organisation invests in a learning culture and addresses the inherent challenges of keeping their employees well equipped. Participants also provided examples of their experiences of workplace learning and the challenges they have faced. The discussions highlighted that capability to support workplace learning is an issue, as well as workplace cultures and practices, with the common sentiment that work and learning are two separate activities. There is clear evidence that infrastructure and institutions that can support the adoption of workplace learning practices is currently lacking.

We would like to sincerely thank everyone who participated in the roundtable (see Annex A). Riding on from the fruitful discussions, IAL has a number of initiatives lined up to further understand and support workplace learning in Singapore. Keep your eyes peeled upcoming activities listed below under research, programs, and events.

## **Research**

The following two projects will commence during 2014:

- Learning, performance, and productivity – focusing on learning at work in SMEs
- Assessment as learning across workplaces and classrooms

For each of the projects we will be seeking interested individuals and organisations to participate as Reference Group members (to provide feedback on the project design and the findings, implications and recommendations) and as participants in the research.

## **Programs**

IAL is in the process of developing a workplace learning program (tentatively called “It’s all about Bottomline!”) for L&D practitioners to learn about workplace learning concepts and apply them in an action learning project supported by senior management and IAL facilitators in their organisations. Organisations typically complain that they cannot afford to release their staff for formal training due to high opportunity costs. What learners will create through this program will be learning solutions that are highly contextualised that could be a combination of both formal training and workplace-based learning that will benefit the organisation through raising staff job performance levels.

The programme will be delivered through a unique blend of formal, informal and workplace-based learning, unfolding over 6 months, with learners conceiving and testing some workplace learning initiatives in their organisation, culminating in a presentation to their senior management at the end of the program.

This program is scheduled to be offered in the second half of 2014. Interested participants (who have an organisation to host their action learning project) can contact Lee Wee Chee (Mr) at [lee\\_wee\\_chee@ial.edu.sg](mailto:lee_wee_chee@ial.edu.sg).

## **Events**

In May 2014, Professor Lorna Unwin (IOE, University of London), world renowned expert on workplace learning, will be hosted by IAL. Look out for details of two seminars/workshops on workplace learning for:

- Employers and Training Providers:  
***The What and How of Workplace Learning: A Holistic Approach and Specific Techniques and Strategies***
- AEN Seminar for Adult Educators (AEs):  
***What does Workplace Learning do for me, my Role and my Skill Sets?***

# Annex A: List of Attendees

Sal.	Name	Designation	Company name	Table No
Mr	Nelson Chong	CEO , Founder	Functional Training Institute	1
Mr	Nelson Lee	Head, Human Resources	Sime Darby Holdings	1
Mr	Benny Lee	Executive Director, Marketing and Operations	Zingrill Holdings	1
Dr	Lim Cheng Bee	Programme Director	AIC	1
Ms	Loh Su Ming	Manager	ODC Training	1
Ms	Doreen Tan	CEO	Textile and Fashions Industry Training Centre	1
Mr	Tee Soo Kong	General Manager	HMI	1
Ms	Neeru Bahl	Founder	MAGES Institute of Excellence Pte Ltd	2
Mr	Thomas Chong	Senior Academic Staff, Centre of Education Development	Republic Polytechnic	2
Ms	Tracy Fang	Senior Training & Development Manager (Regional)	Wing Tai Retail Management Pte Ltd	2
Ms	Lai Kuen	Manager	Kaplan Professional	2
Mr	Roger Lee	Director	Singapore Institute of Material Management	2
Ms	Loh Gek Khim	Deputy Director	Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA)	2
Ms	Elizabeth Chan	CEO	Competency Based Learning and Development	3
Ms	Vivian Colvin	Senior Academic Staff, Centre of Education Development	Republic Polytechnic	3
Mr	Gunasegaran	Manager	Training Vision Institute Pte Ltd	3
Ms	Peggy Lee Phaik Ee	Director	SIM Professional	3
Ms	Clare Poon	Curriculum Manager (Capability Management)	NTUC Learning Hub	3
Ms	Tan Min Wee	HR Executive	Oiltankng Asia Pacific Pte Ltd	3
Dr	Lynda Wee	CEO	Bootstrap Pte Ltd	3
Ms	Jennifer Chong	HR Manager	Kinergy	4

Sal.	Name	Designation	Company name	Table No
Mr	Raja Chowdhury	Director	Lithan Hall Academy	4
Ms	Catherine Lau	GM	PestBuster Pte Ltd	4
Dr	Lee Tong Nge	Deputy Principal	Nanyang Polytechnic	4
Dr	Lee Tsao Yuan	Coach Practice Leader	Capelle Academy	4
Mr	Mark Seow	Country Manager	Louis Vuitton	4
Mr	William Tan	Senior Sales Manager	Dou Yee	4
Mr	Philip Aw	Senior Manager, Training Development & Projects	Certis CISCO Security	5
Mr	Arthur Chiang	Learning and Development Practitioner	-	5
Dr	Keow Yeong Ming	Director	BCA Academy	5
Mr	Wesley	Safety and Quality Executive	800 Super Waste Management Pte Ltd	5
Mr	Suresh Punjabi	Director	Singapore Polytechnic	5
Mr	Vincent Tan	Learning Specialist	Training Vision Institute Pte Ltd	5
Mr	Bernard Wong	Manager, Human Resources	PSA Marine	5
Mr	Thomas Yeo	Assistant Director	Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA)	5