

EDUCATION IN A WORKPLACE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

Challenges connected with the development of the knowledge based economy make contemporary work places enter the path of changes. The process of globalization and the pace of changes in all the spheres of economy functioning caused that the optimal concept of management is a learning organization concept which is based on education and learning treated as tools enabling creation of unique resources of knowledge. Using this thesis success can be achieved only by such work places which faster than others will adapt to the changes by investing in ‘learning’. It has to be accepted that employees’ education is an essence of the XXIst century organizations and builds a new economy.

This concept was an inspiration to start research which aim was to show employee education in contemporary work places from the perspective of a learning organization. The article presents chosen research results concerning mainly employee education at work places

Keywords: Lifelong learning, education of adults, learning organization

Introduction

Problems concerning the dilemmas of functioning and development of contemporary companies are of an interdisciplinary character. These problems are considered by such disciplines as: economy, management sciences, sociology, psychology, and pedagogy as well. This article was prepared taking into account the perspective of a sub-scientific discipline – *work pedagogy*, which subject is education of a person in the course of professional life. Such a subject opens a wide area of issues connected with different fields of pedagogical work. One of such issues is *education in work places*, which is connected with the concept of a *learning organization* developed in the management sciences.

The aim of the article is to present chosen results of own research concerning the implementation of a learning organization model by companies, especially in the context of education run by them. In the research, according to the applied methodology, after specifying aims and the subject of the research, a critical analysis of literature was used, a diagnostic survey as well as some statistical methods. Results of the research allowed qualitative and quantitative analysis of the gathered material. The conducted own research, ran within the area of cognitive research, was conducted mainly with the strategy of quantitative research, included also elements of qualitative strategy. Important for the research conduct was triangulation of sources and methods. Based on the theoretical models of a learning organization available in the subject literature questionnaires for employees and employers were prepared. Moreover analysis of work places documentation connected with the area of education was conducted. The research involved 50 work places, 630 employees altogether at the area of one of the biggest cities in Poland - Bydgoszcz (the eighth biggest city concerning the number of citizens).

Work place in the knowledge based economy

The considerations presented in the article should be started by a statement that *work places*, in the literature referred to as *organizations*, are important components of the global socio-economic system. The significance of their role relies on specifying the features of economy and sustaining the basic components of its functioning. The feedback between economy and company decides about the fact that they are defined as ‘constitutive’ or ‘basic’ institutions of economy¹⁶⁹. As P. F. Drucker writes work places are: ‘driving force of a well thriving, stable society which values individuals and awards achievement; effectiveness of management is the key factor for their efficiency’¹⁷⁰.

Nowadays there are some phenomena happening in the whole global system of economy as well as in the systems of certain national economies which result from technical, technological and economic changes and these influence functioning of the companies. The most important sources of such changes can be divided into six groups. These are:

1. *Deregulation of economic activity* – liberalization of its rules and at the same time restriction of country’s direct interference into companies’ functioning.
2. *Contemporary consumer* – an independent individual in its economic choices, more and more well oriented in seeking values that fulfil sophisticated needs concerning matching and comparison of competitive offers.
3. *Global market* – mechanism of needs fulfilment rising in the process of blurring the borders between local, national and world markets, establishing new standards of activity and solutions involving more and more market participants.
4. *IT technologies* – supporting the creation of global market infrastructure and accelerating its development within the market cyberspace.
5. *New sectors of economic activity* – fast growing enclaves of new ideas, products and services, based mainly on knowledge and providing services of a high added value.
6. *Evolution of the character and employment relationships* – raising the flexibility of employment, shift of a meaningful group of employed into the area of high qualified resources being the base of providing individualized services of a high potential of added value¹⁷¹.

The signalled sources of changes undergo constant changes and need updating. In the conditions of dynamically changing economy, referred to as knowledge *based economy*, work places as P.F. Drucker points ‘act in the world build of bricks’. Moreover, they are built of them. The bricks that make them are people, products, ideas and real property. These are not ordinary bricks – there are no walls or geographical borders for them, they are also transparent. Everything is visible for everyone all the time. The ability of a company to join the bricks and pieces of information into one whole and at the same time cooperate with a client will decide about the company’s future success. These most important trends in the economic activity concern all the companies and branches. They also penetrate borders and touch all the social classes. Business in the known form is vanishing. Companies sell

¹⁶⁹ W. Jaśkiewicz, *Przedsiębiorstwo w procesie zmiany - kreacja modelu*, [in:] *Socjologia gospodarki: Rynek, Instytucje, Zarządzanie*, ed. K. Konecki, P. Tobera, A. Buchner-Jeziorska, K. Karczmarczuk, W. Dymarczyk, Łódź 2002, p. 185.

¹⁷⁰ E.H. Edersheim, *Przesłanie Druckera. Zarządzanie oparte na wiedzy*, Warszawa 2009, p. 53.

¹⁷¹ C. Bainbridge, *Designing for Change. Practical Guide to Business Transformation*, New York 1996 as cited in:

C. Suszyński, *Przedsiębiorstwo w rozwiniętej gospodarce rynkowej. Natura współczesnych zmian główne wyzwania cywilizacyjne*, [in:] *Przedsiębiorstwo. Wartość. Zarządzanie*, ed. C. Suszyński, Warszawa 2007, p. 40-41.

experience not the products. There is no competition but there are better solutions and more options which can be joined in more ways¹⁷².

Shaping of the knowledge based economy which '*is directly based on production, distribution and use of knowledge and information*',¹⁷³, significantly influences the functioning of the work places and the employees. On the highly competitive market it is innovativeness, use of modern technologies and investing in employees that is considered a condition necessary to survive. One of the most important challenges, which work places face, is the requirement to constantly learn even more than the competition does. That is why an important area of changes to be introduced in companies' management seem to be not only the way of organizing and the flow of the basic function – production, but most of all personal function including the educational one which is strongly connected with the social system of the work place. This area of analysis is an important part of reflexions undertook in this article.

On the level of companies the knowledge based economy is personalized by a *learning organization* which as a concept of management was shaped in the 90's of the XXth century together with publishing of P. M. Senge's book entitled '*Fifth discipline. Theory and practice of learning organizations*'. Such organization treats education leading to the growth of education and development of employees as a subordinate thing allowing adjustment to the new challenges of the environment as well as undertaking innovative actions. It results from the assumption that personal development is strongly connected with professional institutions in which the employee undertakes employment and there is a strong bond between individual personal development and the changes happening within the work place¹⁷⁴. That is why employees in a learning organization by using qualifications and competencies as well as developing new ones take part in creating knowledge for specific use in the everyday organizational practice. Everything serves innovativeness and flexibility in adjusting to the environment needs.

The assumptions being the starting point at supporting the process of learning at the work place are as follows:

1. 'Participants of the organization learn in a natural way while working, however they need help to learn systematically and for the learning to be required.'
2. 'Supporting systems, as well as a positive climate are necessary for the learning to take place where it is necessary.'
3. 'Learning is perceived as valuable from the point of reaching goals by the organization.'
4. 'Organization is able to change in a constant way by learning'¹⁷⁵.

It is necessary to highlight that the concept of a learning organization is among some researchers controversial. Doubts refer to the subject of learning i.e. whether an individual, group or organization as a system is learning. That is why the literature of the subject involves a couple of definitions which highlight a different determinant of functioning. The central category around which different discussions appear is so called *organizational learning*, which is joining individual and group learning. Some researchers prepared a complex description by creating theoretical models. The most often cited is model offered by P. M. Senge based on five disciplines – rules of organization self-development. These include: systemic thinking, personal mastery, thinking models, building a shared vision of the

¹⁷² E.H. Edersheim, *Przesłanie Druckera. Zarządzanie oparte na wiedzy...*, op. cit., p. 44-48.

¹⁷³ *The Knowledge-Based Economy*, Paris: OECD, GD (1996) 102, p. 7.

¹⁷⁴ M. Pedler, K. Aspinwall, *Przedsiębiorstwo uczące się*, Warszawa 1999, p. 52.

¹⁷⁵ B. Garrat, *An Old Idea That Has Come of Age*, „People Management” 21 September 1995 as cited in: J. Batorski, *Organizacja efektywnie ucząca się*, Dąbrowa Górnica 2002, p. 33.

future, and team learning¹⁷⁶. Popular is also model prepared by M. J. Pedler, J. G. Burgoyne'a and T. H. Boydell¹⁷⁷ which includes eleven features which according to the authors are presented by companies wanting to change into learning organizations. These features are: 'a learning' approach to strategy, taking part in creating company's policy, innovativeness, financial-economic education, internal exchange, flexibility of payment, flexibility of structures, employees being detectors of environment, learning between work places, climate favouring learning, possibilities of development by everyone¹⁷⁸.

Referring to considerations by P. M. Senge an assumption was adopted that: '*Organizations learn only by individuals' learning (...) without their learning organizational learning does not happen at all*',¹⁷⁹. Learning within organization is not a simple sum of learning by everyone and all the groups. Learning is a constant process and not a set of some educational actions¹⁸⁰. Although it is perceived as a personal belonging, something that a person does individually, learning may also happen between people within space or within relationships. The concept of a learning organization involves all the forms of individual learning however on the whole a pressure is placed on group learning which happens between employees¹⁸¹.

The cited concept was an inspiration to start research referring to education in work places which is described further in this article.

Development of work places toward learning organizations according to the research

Starting presentation of the research results, it is necessary to highlight that in the light of the development of the new type of economy the scale of needs referring to undertaking interdisciplinary analysis concerning education within work places is huge.

The research was conducted between October 2009 and June 2010. The main goal was *showing employee education run in contemporary work places in the perspective of a concept of learning organization*. The author formed the main problem as a question: *whether, and if yes, in what scope education completed within work places involves the concept of a learning organization?* Initially a thesis was accepted that education completed within work places to a small extent included the criteria of the presented concept. Before the research was conducted a statement was also accepted that the model of work places most often met in the practice of economic life is still traditional model characteristic for the industrial economy.

The gathered material was analysed according to the features ascribed to a learning organization specified in the literature of the subject. The results allowed forming the following conclusions:

1. At 58% of work places a systematic education was run. Episodic education was found in case of 34% of organizations and 8% of work places lacked it. Work places where education was a permanent part of personal policy, declared that '*they have a strong consciousness of the constant need to raise the level of education and employees' skills, as it is necessary to efficiently fulfil the company's mission*'. In order to do that they run a planned and well-thought education. On the other hand companies which educated employees

¹⁷⁶ P.M. Senge, *Piąta dyscyplina. Teoria i praktyka organizacji uczących się*, Kraków 2006.

¹⁷⁷ M.J. Pedler, J.G. Burgoyne, T.H. Boydell, *The Learning Company: A strategy for sustainable development*, London 1991.

¹⁷⁸ M. Pedler, K. Aspinwall, *Przedsiębiorstwo...*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁹ P.M. Senge, *The leader's new work: building learning organizations*, „Sloan Management Review” 32(1) Fall 1990, p. 145.

¹⁸⁰ As cited in: M. Armstrong, *Zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi*, Kraków 2007, p. 480-481.

¹⁸¹ M. Pedler, K. Aspinwall, *Przedsiębiorstwo uczące się...*, op. cit., p. 14-26.

sporadically or did not run education at all justified it as follows: 'lack of such a need', 'lack of financial resources' and the fact that '*not all areas in the company require systematic education*'.

2. When work places showed a systematic education it concerned obligatory content without which employees would not be able to perform their work. They treated education as a necessity not a factor enriching the organizational culture and its market value and giving a chance to become a learning organization. Only 60% of work places thought of education as important in the company's policy. Employers estimated the meaning of education in their companies as 'average' (38%) and 'high' (34%). It is worrying that 16% of work places valued it as 'low'. It seems that for this part of companies education was not valuable, nor basic for its development and future. Moreover 62% of the researched companies did not have basic documents connected with the process of education, which confirmed that their strategy of functioning on the market is not consciously adjusted to the learning goals. Education was mainly of an interim character not resulting from the development plan of work places. The main reason for running education was being competitive. The process of education was necessary for efficient completion of economic mission.

3. Work places invested in their own didactic materials (42% of companies) in order to run so called internal education (40%). Such way of educating was used especially due to a necessity of lowering the costs of education and was run by companies' owners and managers and especially trained, experienced employees. 60% of work places used the support of partners among which most often mentioned were educating companies (66%). The character of cooperation with external partners was connected mainly with the need to fulfil company's current needs, and only 16% was of a permanent and constant character. Moreover work places also received financial support to educate employees from Structural Resources and European Social Fund - 60% of the surveyed did not use this possibility.

4. Traditional, most commonly used methods were dominating in the companies, mainly lecture (average grade 3.7), rarely used were activating methods (discussion - average grade 3.1; situational method – 2.6; mind storming – 2.3; simulation – 1.9¹⁸²). Dominating were courses (37% of employees took part in them) and trainings (26%). Their choice was conditioned by a possibility to get knowledge and skills which can be directly used in completing professional tasks. Using modern multimedia and Internet methods and forms of education was still a rare phenomenon (only 12% of companies).

5. Analysing work places' support and their contribution in the costs of education of the employed the author received information that 76% of companies covered the whole of part of costs. The possibility to pay for education from company's resources considered situations when the form and content of education was strongly connected with the profession. It needs to be highlighted that 62% of organizations required signing some contracts which governed the rules of participating in education. Employees were qualified to take part in the process of education according to the needs of the work place and position (average grade 4.7), the second rank was given to the type of performed work and scope of duties (average grade 4.3). The level of qualifications was considered to a smaller extent (3.8) as well as length of work (2.8¹⁸³).

6. According to the employees evaluation education was run without considering the aspirations, expectations or individual preferences of the employed, and the completed educational programmes fulfilled expectation only to some extent. The level of satisfaction from taking part in training was evaluated as 'average' – 31.7%. 'High' and very high' level

¹⁸² N= 630 The surveyed graded according to a scale, where: 5 – meant very often, 4 - often, 3 - sometimes, 2 - rarely, 1 – very seldom

¹⁸³ N=50 The surveyed graded according to a scale, where: 5 – a very important factor, 4 – important factor, 3 – average importance, 2 – not important, 1 - unimportant.

of satisfaction was declared by 6.3% and 26.2% of the surveyed, 27% evaluated it as negative. Low level of satisfaction resulted from two things. The first was the motivation systems used in work places which were not according to the needs and expectations of employees.

Lack of relationship between educational activity and strengthening of the position in a company, being promoted or getting a pay raise were often mentioned. The second thing was that employees paid attention to the need of taking part in managing the company which was not completed in a satisfying extent. They declared that all educational activities were their initiative and did not result from the work place activity which resulted from the criteria of informativeness and encouragement to undertake educational activity.

7. The surveyed also referred to the general statements characterizing education in work places being at the same time main assumptions which are the base of the concept of learning organization. The assumptions are specified in the table below.

Table 1. *The relationship of employees to the statements characterizing a learning organization*

Lp.	Specification	Answers according to a scale					Average points	Rank
		5	4	3	2	1		
1.	Each employee at a work place should learn	300	245	55	19	11	4.28	V
2.	People learn from each other	320	245	43	14	8	4.36	IV
3.	Learning allows development	500	110	14	3	3	4.75	I
4.	Learning is a constant process	447	165	5	7	6	4.65	II
5.	Learning is investment not costs	440	123	55	4	8	4.56	III
6.	Employees education is a priority for my work place	74	90	254	154	58	2.95	VI

N=630 the surveyed graded according to a scale, where: 5 – agree completely, 4 – do not agree, 3 – hard to say, 2 – rather disagree, 1 – disagree.

On the base of the received date one can conclude that employees accepted the idea of learning throughout life as they agreed with the statements that ‘learning allows development’ (rank I) and that it is ‘a constant process’ (rank II). The analysis of the data allows adding that 50% of the surveyed declared undertaking additional education. Among the surveyed 52.4% declared raising qualifications within self-development. Acknowledged was also the meaning of such assumptions as ‘learning is investment not cost’ (rank III), ‘people learn from each other’ (rank IV), ‘each employee should learn’ (rank V). Lower grades are a bit worrying. One of the basic rules in managing people needs to be reminded at this point which is necessity to invest in employees in order to create an intellectual capital and at the same time raising the knowledge and skills being at company’s disposal. It seems that while referring to individual learning, employees analysed them in categories of investment, they disagreed with the statement that each employee should learn. They also rejected the thesis which is the base of the theory of learning in organization, which assumes that learning in the course of everyday activities is performed by people who act in groups and teams. Lowest rank was given to the statement that ‘employees’ education is priority of the work place’.

7. Another issue which was analysed were the features of work places which favour education. The answers are in the following table.

Table 2. *Features of work places favouring the process of employee education.*

Lp.	Specification	Answers according to a scale					Lack of answer.	Average points	Rank
		5	4	3	2	1			
1.	Work place concentrates its activities on personal policy	45	13	120	39	37	376	2.96	II
2.	Work place encourages to raise qualifications and professional competencies	70	53	60	117	38	292	3.00	I
3.	There is a free access to information concerning educational offers for employees	79	97	15	110	85	244	2.94	III
4.	All willing employees take part in the process of education	73	110	170	120	98	59	2.89	IV
5.	Work place uses a motivating system supporting employees' education	30	70	133	75	167	155	2.41	VI
6.	Work place promotes team learning	32	42	82	125	139	210	2.29	VII
7.	Employees take part in management and decision taking	21	112	115	80	134	168	2.58	V

N=630 the surveyed graded according to a scale, where: 5 – agree completely, 4 – do not agree, 3 – hard to say, 2 – rather disagree, 1 – disagree.

The answers given by the surveyed show that the researched work places: ‘encouraged to raise qualifications and professional competencies’ (mean 3.00); ‘concentrated their activities on personal policy’ so that employees’ development was possible’ (2.96); ‘enabled access to information concerning educational offers for employees’ (2.94). To a smaller extent the surveyed agreed with the statement that: ‘all willing employees take part in the process of education’ (2.89); ‘Employees take part in management and decision taking’ (2.58); ‘Work place uses a motivating system supporting employees’ education’ (2.41). The lowest rank was given to the feature connected with ‘promoting team learning within the work place’ (2.29).

9. An important part of the research was also specifying in what way work places ‘learn’. It was specified that ‘learning ways’ of companies involved mainly ‘using other companies experience (mean 3.10) and ‘using own past experience’ (3.16). The least used were – from the perspective of a learning organization – ‘creating new knowledge’ (2.76) and ‘employing experts and systematic problem solving’ (2.74¹⁸⁴).

To continue the presented research results some crucial empirical data needs to be signalled which concerns the process of organizational learning. According to the employers opinion education was mainly directed at individual employees and only than to teams of workers. The level most important from the perspective of a learning organization – the level of the whole work place – where people learn from each other, and the results of this learning are visible in everyday activity – was evaluated as the lowest (the average grade 2.28). The data is specified below.

¹⁸⁴ N=50 The surveyed graded according to a scale, where: 5 – great extent, 4 - great, 3 - average, 2 - small, 1 – very small.

Table 3. *The levels of completing education within work places.*

Lp.	Specification	Organizational, law form			Average of grades	
		Average grade				
		Przedsiębiorstwa własności indywidualnej	Spółki	Przedsiębiorstwa państwowne		
1.	Individual employee learning	3.80	3.51	3.80	3.60	
2.	Employees team learning	3.10	3.23	3.60	3.24	
3.	Learning takes place at on the level of the whole work place	2.70	2.00	3.40	2.28	

N=50 the surveyed graded according to a scale, where: 5 – very often, 4 - often, 3 - sometimes, 2 - seldom, 1 – very seldom.

In the context of the results it needs to be highlighted once again that the basic result of learning on the employee level is individual, personal getting knowledge, new skills and the change of attitude. On the level of team the results remain the same however its participants communicate with each other. For the concept of a learning organization the results of learning need to be widespread to be meaningful from the point of view of company's effectiveness.

10. The criterion of employees being 'detectors of the environment' remains unfulfilled. Only in case of three work places (6%) some activities based on constant analysis of the closest and distant environment by the employees who have contact with the external environment were noticed. Unfulfilled was also, connected with this criterion, feature referred to as learning between work places. Among the companies which took part in the research only 10% were participants of the Agreements or Clusters. The results of the research showed very weak cooperation with other companies which resulted from the fear of competition. Most of work places did not have contacts with companies within the same branch, did not share knowledge, and rarely undertook shared activities. The analysis of the relationships between the companies and higher schools and scientific-research institutions also proved to be weak (48% of companies did not enter into such cooperation; 34% declared that have only occasional contact).

The presented results of the research allow to say that *education completed in the surveyed work places to a small extent involved the assumptions of the concept of a learning organization*. It can thus be assumed that employee education was understood mainly as the process of raising qualifications and professional competencies of the employees. In such a form 'learning' was the most completely fulfilled task of the personal function. Creating possibilities for individual employees to learn and even investing in their training and education did not allow considering the work places as learning organizations. Activity at this level is equal to learning of the organization as a whole. Learning organization is such an organization which completes and improves the process of organizational learning in which all its members consciously take part.

Conclusion

The problems highlighted in this article are justified both in the area of social sciences, as well as from the point of view of practical economy and inspire to have an interdisciplinary look at work places as educational institutions. Without doubt competitiveness and innovativeness of companies is nowadays strongly determined by the development of their ability to learn. To sum up the presented considerations one can cite the words of P. M. Senge: 'True learning reaches for the core of what is meant by being a human.'

Through learning we are able to do something we would not be able to do. Owing to learning we change ourselves. Due to learning we perceive the world and our relationship with it. Through learning we develop our creative abilities, we become part of creative life processes,¹⁸⁵.

Summary

The aim of the article was to present chosen results of own research concerning the implementation of the model of a learning organization by companies, especially in the context of their employees' education.

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¹⁸⁵ P.M. Senge, *Piąta dyscyplina. Teoria i praktyka organizacji uczących się*, Kraków 2006, p. 19-20.