Widening participation?

Barriers to learning for manual grade staff in higher education institutions

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In a survey conducted across eleven universities in the north of England, attendance figures for manual grade staff attending internal university training programmes was found to be significantly below that of other employee groups. This is unsatisfactory from an equal opportunity perspective since the ethos of a university should encompass all employees. It is also unsatisfactory from a business perspective because all staff need to possess the requisite skills and be able to use them to maximum effect. Furthermore, manual grade staff frequently interact with students and the quality of this interaction may have implications for student satisfaction and course completion rates. This paper investigates the levels of training attendance by manual grade staff at two universities and discusses three categories of barriers to learning identified by Hillage and Aston (2001). A survey of manual grade staff was conducted and supplemented with a number of semi-structured interviews. Forty-four barriers were ranked and the first ten are considered in more detail. Recommendations are made to address some of the equality and business issues regarding the barriers to learning.

Introduction

In an internal survey conducted among staff developers from eleven universities in the north of England, ten confirmed that there were disproportionate levels of attendance among staff groups attending in-house courses. Six of these named manual grade staff e.g. porters, security staff, cleaners and catering staff, as the lowest attending group. The content, availability and suitability of training programmes did not appear to suggest that these were causes of the imbalance, and so more detailed research was then confidentially conducted in two of these universities with the intention of verifying the general observations found in the initial survey.

Attendance records for in-house training at University A (UniA), for a six month period revealed that there was a large discrepancy between training attendance levels of manual grade staff and that of other grades. At the end of this period UniA had 2,080 staff on its payroll with manual grade staff making up 20 per cent (414) of total staff. During this time more than half the total employees (1,156) across all staff groupings e.g. administrative, clerical, manual grade attended at least one in-house training programme organised by the Staff Development Unit. However, only 48 (4 per cent) of these staff were manual grade staff. Fifteen months later this discrepancy had significantly deteriorated with just one manual grade staff member attending an in-house training event in the preceding six months.

In University B (UniB), which had 2000 employees, only 33 out of 288 manual grade staff had attended courses during the last three years i.e. 4 per cent annually. This situation, while very unsatisfactory, is not entirely unsurprising, nor new; with Woodley et al. (1987, p. 71) finding that adult education recruited disproportionately more from non-manual than manual

occupations and that, 'the working class is massively under-represented among mature students.'

Universities are places of education and it would be expected that there would be equality of access to training and development for all members of staff. Indeed, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2002, p. 8) argued that, 'If an organisation offers training ideally there should be no barriers to eligible employees taking up such offers.' However, the evidence above suggests that barriers may exist for manual grade staff attending in-house university courses and this unsatisfactory situation has the potential to impact on the overall performance of universities and is therefore deserving of closer scrutiny.

No articles were found during a literature search into higher education training and development and so to address this lacuna this paper begins by investigating the business case for the training and development of all employees within an organisation. Second, it will examine the literature regarding barriers to learning. Third, it will describe the empirical findings of barriers to learning in two universities; and, finally, it will make a number of recommendations to address this imbalance.

The business case for developing all employees

Universities are not alone in experiencing this problem which was also to be found in local government by The Improvement and Development Agency (2007, p.1) which reported that, 'Councils up-and-down the country struggle to get manual workers involved with training courses that office-based staff take for granted.' The situation only improved when an officer was specifically appointed to encourage refuse workers to develop their skills and qualifications.

There are compelling arguments for ensuring managers' skills are developed (Ramsden, 2000), and the CIPD (2002, 2005) suggested that there is also a strong business case for a re-assessment of the needs of, and provision for, all employees. Through training and development opportunities all staff can make an important contribution to business competitiveness and quality of service (Investors in People-UK 2007; Quayle and Murphy, 1999; Yorke, 2000).

Investors in People is a body that emphasises the importance of a strategically integrated training and development approach to support the achievement of organisational objectives. It cites several major business benefits of training and development, in particular: improved earnings, productivity and profitability; improved motivation; reduced costs and wastage; and customer satisfaction.

The latter benefit, customer satisfaction, is particularly important for higher education institutions. If university commitment to manual grade staff training and development is weak, this will have a direct impact on the ability of their employees to contribute to customer service, or what is known as the 'student experience'. Smith's (1999) research into the motivation of ancillary staff found that higher levels of awareness of training opportunities in this group were positively correlated with motivation levels.

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Furthermore, the Widening Participation strategy of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2006) has emerged as a result of the recognition that certain groups, including children from working class backgrounds, tend to have significantly lower participation rates in higher education. HEFCE (2007, p. 1) acknowledged that remediation was, 'vital for social justice and economic competitiveness,' and this situation would appear to have a direct message regarding the lower number of manual grade working class employees attending university training sessions.

The specific challenges universities face, such as competing for students, provides opportunities for each member of staff, at every level, to contribute to organisational improvements (Quayle and Murphy, 1999). Therefore, enhancement of the student experience will lead to increased retention and completion rates thus improving the institution's financial position.

Manual grade staff can have a high impact on these student-related outcomes through their direct contact with students: e.g. cleaners of student residential halls and teaching accommodation are in direct contact with students' daily lives in a very different and personal way from academic staff. Similarly, security guards and porters are often the first point of student contact for problems which have an impact on the student experience, such as feeling threatened on campus, broken central

heating etc. These front-line staff not only provide a service which has a high impact on the student experience, but they are also in the unique position of being aware of student feedback relating to their university experience. In order for this feedback to become valued data in organisational improvement initiatives, manual grade staff must themselves be valued by their higher education institutions and in turn their skills should be developed and motivated.

To achieve quality in higher education Yorke (2000, p. 21) asserted that the internal processes must be working optimally and the organisation must seek to create an 'internality which supports its staff in the fulfilment of their duties (whether these are internally or externally directed).' Second, he advised that, 'an institution which does not work well internally will have an extra struggle to achieve optimally in terms of its intended outcomes' (2000, p. 21).

In other words, the internal processes and culture of a higher education institution must themselves reflect the same inclusivity and quality that is expected to be provided and perceived by its students. If higher education institutions are not focused on the training needs of a core group of staff, and leave inequality issues unaddressed, this may reflect an internal culture which is not working effectively to support its students.

In summary, barriers to attending in-house training may be symptomatic of a failing internal culture which is simultaneously unable to provide students with the level of inclusivity and service it aims to achieve. This, combined with the fact that a large proportion of manual grade staff at UniB are women, part-time workers and from ethnic minority groups, brings further legislative drivers to the equality issues involved.

Levels of participation in learning activities

There is a significant body of research on the exclusion of groups from learning where the focus is childhood education (e.g. Adelman and Taylor, 2001), formal adult further education (eg. Brooks, 1998), and higher education (HEFCE, 2006). Much less research has been conducted into workplace exclusion for public and private sector in-house training. This has been partly addressed by the CIPD (2002; 2005) surveys, 'Who Learns at Work?' which revealed that those most likely to feel their employers did not offer them enough opportunities for training tended to be people with minimal or no educational qualifications. This is despite finding

that those with fewer qualifications believed strongly in the value of training for themselves, and were three times less likely to turn down training than their colleagues who had an undergraduate degree. Further findings included the fact that those doing lower level jobs, as measured by social class, were less likely to receive training (CIPD, 2002) and that line managers initiated a high percentage of training for their staff (CIPD, 2005).

These findings were also mirrored by the National Skills Task Force (2000) research which noted that over 40 per cent of those in professional or associated professional occupations had received training over the previous 13-week period, compared to less than 20 per cent of craft-employees and fewer than one in seven operatives. In addition, it found that participation is also related to the size of an organisation with smaller firms (those employing fewer than 25 people) being the least likely to provide training. Most higher education institutions are large employers and thus it would be expected that training provision is substantial.

A detailed review of UK and international initiatives/ studies of barriers to adult learning was conducted by Hillage and Aston (2001) who concluded that certain demographic groups were more susceptible to these barriers i.e. those with lower levels of previous educational experience, unemployed groups, and manual and craft workers. From the preceding evidence it is clear that an examination of the barriers to learning may provide insights into this inequality and these barriers will be considered next.

Barriers to learning

Adult non-learners do not possess a homogenous set of characteristics; instead barriers to learning fall into different categories that affect individuals differently (Hillage and Aston, 2001). Non-learners included those that simply did not feel motivated to engage in learning through lack of confidence, disaffection or a feeling that 'it is not for them'; and those who would like to undertake learning but were unable to because of external barriers. Both types of non-learners experienced different but related barriers to learning, e.g. lack of motivation to engage may be caused by a perceived lack of benefit or insufficient external incentives. Three categories of barrier were identified by Hillage and Aston (2001): attitudinal; physical and material barriers; and structural barriers.

Attitudinal barriers

These were defined by Hillage and Aston (2001) as a set of reasons associated with attitudes to learning which constrain the initial desire to learn. They can be sub-divided as follows:

Lack of confidence

Although this is not a barrier which is often expressed in surveys, fear of failure and the lack of confidence in ability to learn emerged in interviews as a major deterrent. Other obstacles, such as lack of time, are often given to researchers instead of respondents openly admitting their fears (McGivney, 1990).

Lack of motivation

In the National Adult Learning Survey (Beinart and Smith, 1997) 39 per cent of respondents preferred to spend their free time in activities other than learning. Similarly, in the Institute of Employment Studies (Dench and Regan, 2000) follow-up study of older people, a similar proportion felt they had better things to do than learn.

Negative attitudes to education and training

The Policy Action Team (PAT) report on skills (DfEE, 1999b) argued that deep-seated cultural attitudes often formed by negative experiences at school may lead non-learners to believe that they had nothing to gain from engagement with learning. There were also perceived links between lack of literacy and negative attitudes to training/learning generally (DfEE, 1999a).

Peer group culture

Those people who belong to social or occupational groups for whom engaging in learning is not a 'normal' or habitual activity often develop an anti-learning culture which may be difficult for individuals to go against (McGivney, 1990).

Perceptions of irrelevance

Many non-learners are unable to see what tangible benefit they might gain from engaging in learning and Tamkin and Hillage (1997) described four main reasons for these perceptions. First, training was considered only to be associated with a new job – this perception was more likely to be held by younger workers. Second, people were generally satisfied with their current task and level and, significantly, this perception was more often reported by manual workers. Third, those who believed they were already sufficiently qualified were more likely to report that training was irrelevant to them. Finally, feelings of inadequacy were also correlated with the same perception.

Similarly, Dench and Regan (2000) found the belief that learning itself was not important was one of the main reasons given for non-participation, particularly among older learners. In summary, it would appear that internal attitudinal forces are powerful barriers to engaging in learning; however, they also combine with concrete external barriers which will now be discussed.

Physical and material barriers

The second group of barriers identified by Hillage and Aston (2001) were physical and material and the most frequently cited reasons for non-participation were time and finance.

Time-related

The National Adult Learning Survey (Beinart and Smith, 1997) found that a significant proportion of non-learners reported being too busy either at work (24 per cent), or looking after a family (29 per cent) to engage with formal learning activity. Likewise, Calder and McCollum (1998) reported that those adults that stayed at home to look after a family were only half as likely as even the registered unemployed to have taken part in some vocational training during the previous three years.

Financial

Financial barriers can be categorised into direct costs, such as fees, and indirect costs, such as transport and childcare. Hillage and Aston (2001) stated that lack of good and affordable childcare was one of the most commonly reported reasons for women's non-participation. However, higher education staff development courses are not fee-paying and therefore may have less effect.

Lack of information

Twenty per cent of National Adult Learning Survey (Beinart and Smith, 1997) respondents cited lack of knowledge of local learning opportunities as a reason for not learning. Also, a study by Smith (1999) into motivational factors in NHS ancillary staff concluded that the methods of communication for staff-centred schemes, such as training, were an influential variable in the ancillary staff's awareness of the training opportunities available to them. Non-paper methods, such as face-to-face communication, were considered the best way to inform people of these opportunities.

Geographical isolation

People who lived in both isolated estates and rural areas were found to be less likely than average to have time to participate in learning (Tremlett et al., 1995). This appears to be especially true for older students (aged 25+) who were much more concerned with location and nearness than younger students (Institute of Employment Studies, 1999).

Structural barriers

The third main impediment was structural barriers defined by Hillage and Aston (2001, p. 18) as, 'the way learning opportunities are provided, and the lack of appropriate provision, either in terms of content or format.'

Although employed people were much more likely to participate in learning activities than the unemployed, the distribution among the former group was uneven. It was sometimes difficult, even for well-intentioned employers, to find courses or qualifications that were relevant to an employee's particular learning need. Hillage and Aston (2001) also noted that the nature of the workplace, for example its size and business activities, is also correlated to the amount of learning within it.

Further exploration of research has expanded on Hillage and Aston's third category, 'Structural Barriers'. One explicit legal limit to learning for people in receipt of social security benefit in the UK is the 16 hour rule. If registered unemployed people attend courses for more than 16 hours per week they are then considered to be in education and not seeking employment, thus removing their entitlement to social security.

Two additional barriers were identified by Hughes and Turner (2002) relating to the image of students and courses, and entrance restrictions. In particular, they found that the negative stereotyping of colleges by potential learners could form a barrier to attendance. They also reported that there was a promotion of entry into training for those perceived to be 'job ready' who might be accepted for training in preference to those who were in greatest need of help.

Methodology and methods

This research sought to identify those factors which might affect attendance at training courses and the main challenge was to identify reasons why something did not happen. As Cross (1981, p. 97) stated it is harder 'to find out why people do not do something than why they do.'

Another challenge was to provide a more holistic picture to ameliorate the criticisms Gorard et al. (1999) raised about investigations into barriers to learning which isolated individuals from their context. Therefore, a balance was sought between surveying whole manual grade staff groups and creating a more confidential, personal setting where more private data could also be collected. For example, although 'lack of time' was often reported as a barrier to learning in questionnaires, more personal issues, such as fear of failure emerged during interviews (McGivney, 1990).

To address these issues it was decided to circulate a questionnaire to all manual grade staff and follow this with semi-structured interviews. Drawing from the literature and preliminary interviews with a range of employees 44 factors which might inhibit learning were identified. A method was used, replicating research by Carp et al. (1974), in which barriers to learning were listed and respondents circled important items which were felt to inhibit them learning what they wanted to learn.

The initial draft questionnaire was piloted with 10 manual grade staff and each was subsequently interviewed about the clarity and suitability of the contents. In addition, interviews were held with UniB's Head of Ancillary Services and Equality Officers, and the questionnaire was emailed to UniA's Head of Staff Development. Based upon CIPD (2002; 2005) experience, training managers were also interviewed, in order to enquire about the learning culture of the institution. It was not reasonable to expect individual staff members to be aware of hidden resistance from line-managers, for example. Subsequently, several changes to wording were made and the feedback confirmed that the questionnaire did not omit any major barriers to attending training.

Initially, 702 questionnaires were distributed to all manual grade staff at both universities and 33 were returned from UniA (11 per cent) and 35 from UniB (8.5 per cent). All the questionnaires contained an invitation to be interviewed and 5 respondents volunteered. Semi-structured interviews were then held in both universities either during a working break, or at the beginning or end of a shift. The relatively low response rates may reflect not only staff barriers to training attendance but also their barriers to participating in this research, for example, low level literacy, or lack of trust in their organisation. Relevant staff development units and manual grade staff managers

were consulted to address these concerns, and managers briefed manual grade supervisory staff about the nature of this research. As with much research, the findings only represent the views of those who responded and this was taken into account when interpreting them.

Findings

The 68 respondents circled statements which they believed created barriers to learning and these are ranked in Table 1.

Table 1: Ranked List of Barriers to Learning

Barrier no.	Barrier statement	No. of True Responses
1	No one explains the purpose of the courses	32
2	My manager does not encourage me to attend	28
3	I have never heard of these courses	28
4	I'd be too busy to attend	27
5	The subjects covered are not useful to me	26
6	I have more important things to do than attend a course like that	26
7	I wouldn't be confident enough to attend a course like that	26
8	I would not enjoy or learn a lot from a course like that	26
9	I am happy working as I am and don't need a course like that	25
10	The organisation is not really interested in my development	24
11	The courses are held at inconvenient times	23
12	I wouldn't know how to apply for these courses	23
13	I can't see what benefits I'd get from going on a course like this	22
14	These courses are for staff new to their jobs with most to learn	22
15	I would have financial difficulties in attending	21
16	I'd be too busy looking after my family	20
17	Even though the courses are free attending would incur financial costs to me	19
18	I'd feel uncomfortable being in areas that I don't normally work in	18
19	I'm not interested in learning activities at this time of my life	18
20	These courses are for staff at a higher level than me	18
21	I'm too old for a course like that	17

Barrier no.	Barrier statement	No. of True Responses
22	These courses are not really for people like me	17
23	I couldn't afford to lose wages from my other job	17
24	I didn't do well at school	15
25	These courses are for staff who want promotion	15
26	No one could provide cover for me whilst I was away attending training	15
27	These course are for younger staff	13
28	I never enjoyed school and don't wish to repeat the experience	12
29	I'd be too busy at my other job	12
30	I couldn't afford the transport costs involved	11
31	I'd be too busy doing other training/ learning activity	11
32	Courses like that are intimidating	10
33	I wouldn't understand a course like that	10
34	My manager makes it difficult for me to attend	10
35	None of my colleagues are attending so I don't see why I should	8
36	I couldn't afford to pay for childcare	8
37	I'd be too busy with childcare	8
38	Others on the course would make me feel silly as they are so clever	7
39	I do not wish to appear ambitious in front of colleagues	7
40	I don't enjoy learning activities	6
41	I would not get on with others attending the course as they do different jobs to me	2
42	My colleagues would tease me if I went on these courses	2
43	I've heard the courses are not very good	2
44	These courses would be too easy for someone with my skills	0

The top ten barriers have been considered in more detail also drawing upon comments made by staff during the semi-structured interviews.

Barrier 1: No one explains the purpose of the courses.

It would appear that although there is a menu of courses openly available these are not communicated in a fully accessible way either online or through more direct means.

'The courses sound a bit over-complicated and the course descriptions need simplifying too.'

'I need pointing in the right direction – I thought the Staff Development Unit would explain what's related to your work and what isn't.'

Barrier 2: My manager does not encourage me to attend.

With tight staffing levels there is little slack in the system to encourage attendance.

'My manager says he could never sort out cover for me to attend the courses. He's frightened that if one of us goes, all of us will want to.'

Barrier 3: I have never heard of these courses.

Many manual grade staff have lower levels of access to the internet. An SPSS analysis of the data linking the findings to demographic data found a significant cor-relation between this statement and ethnic origin.

'I might have read a brochure, but because I don't have access to a computer I get so much paper in the internal post – it's hard to know what to read and what to ignore.'

Barrier 4: I'd be too busy to attend.

The demands of work load would appear to inhibit attendance on courses.

'If just one of us is ill or on holiday then there's not enough of us to take time off for training courses.'

Barrier 5: The subjects covered are not useful to me.

There was a significant relationship between answer-ing this statement and not attending any recent learn-ing events.

'I want to do English classes.'

Barrier 6: I have more important things to do than attend a course like that.

Women tend to take more responsibility for child care

and there was a significant correlation for them with this statement.

'I couldn't do a full-day course, I'm recently divorced and nowadays I need to leave at 2.30pm to pick up my two children.'

Barrier 7: I wouldn't be confident enough to attend a course like that.

'I'm not very confident about learning. I'm 40 and I've been out of that environment for so long….. my self-confidence is a bit dented due to personal issues, I'm re-building my life at the moment.'

Barrier 8: I would not enjoy or learn a lot from a course like that.

'I wouldn't go; they (colleagues) wouldn't go'.

Barrier 9: I am happy working as I am and don't need a course like that.

This statement also correlated significantly with people who had not undertaken any recent learning.

'I've got a lot on at home, work is my break!'

Barrier 10: The organisation is not really interested in my development.

'It's been quite good really, I'm going to do a degree here soon.'

'Some areas of the University are better than others, some areas they send you on everything, others they wouldn't mention them.'

Despite not making the top 10 barriers, 'The courses are held at inconvenient times' was highly ranked and was discussed at length by each of the interviewees.

'Even courses related to my job like Customer Serv-ice…I couldn't go because of my shift times'.

'My manager says, 'I can't get cover''.

'Anything that's 9-5 is inconvenient for us to go because of shift work.'

Conclusions

Adults do not stop learning when they have left school even if that experience was not a positive one. Calder (1993, p. 127) noted that on average people spend 500 to 700 hours/year in deliberate learning activities e.g. how to drive, garden, speak a language; but she added,

'Education and training which is undertaken in formal structured settings is not an attractive proposition for disaffected adults.'

The identification and ranking of the learning barriers provides a prioritised list of areas for managers and educational leaders to address in order to increase participation. On the whole, it would appear that the barriers are inter-related and for this reason an integrated, rather than piecemeal, strategy is needed to redress the inequalities demonstrated by the findings. This requires the three main areas of attitudinal; physical and mental barriers; and structural barriers to be addressed together.

The findings within the two universities tend to reflect those found in the wider community: e.g. it would appear that confidence levels for some female manual grade staff are not high. This could be addressed with a bespoke assertiveness / confidence building training course designed to be safe and welcoming. Indeed, the international Springboard programme (Springboard, 2007) designed specifically for women has proved very successful and this or a derivative might be appropriate.

The provision of courses for specific client groups can present challenges because of limited resources and the fact that they limit opportunities for cross-university sharing of good practice. Even though bespoke training itself may not be a long-term solution, this does not preclude training deliverers giving more attention to the specific needs of manual grade staff participants, to create safer, non-threatening atmospheres, and to review the learning objectives, content, delivery style and venues of the in-house training programmes.

It is essential that manual grade staff who are an important component of the student experience benefit from training, and to encourage their interest there must first be an acknowledgement and understanding of the business case for their training and this must involve all levels of the organisation: senior management, manual grade staff management and manual grade staff themselves. This commitment at senior management level should cascade down to create a sense of organisational urgency to address this issue and thereby increase confidence among managers to encourage staff, and feel empowered to make the necessary budgetary and staff planning decisions.

A quick and practical intervention would be to run courses in the mornings only, from 8am-12pm to allow for part-time cleaning staff to attend. Courses which are currently one day sessions could be converted to two mornings. This, in itself, would send a large message to manual grade staff about organisational commitment to their development.

Also, it appears that there is a special need for managers and staff developers to communicate about the courses more effectively in order to address the apparent discrepancies in levels of awareness about the courses. Staff developers must review their means of advertising courses to manual grade staff. Since managers are the most cited means by which manual grade staff hear about courses, they should be considered for targeted advertising of courses. Briefing information also should be reviewed to explain learning objectives as plainly as possible.

UniB is responding to equality issues from a mainly assimilationist perspective. If institutions are to understand how to become more inclusive in the context of the Widening Participation (2007) agenda they must also reflect this inclusiveness with their staff. Rather than aiming to change groups to fit in with the organisation, the organisation must find ways to make its structures, processes and culture more responsive through inclusion and empowerment of staff. This empowerment would ideally include the impetus for manual grade staff to also address their attitudinal barriers. These proposals would have significant implications for training including a review of the style and modes of training delivery, and creating a more welcoming atmosphere on courses. This is illustrated by UniA's Cultural Awareness programme where barriers are greatly reduced and training is delivered in a way that meets the needs of manual grade staff and has management backing.

In spite of spending approximately £350m the widening participation strategy has struggled to increase numbers of entrants from disadvantaged groups (University of York, 2006) which might be because of complex societal factors beyond the control of universities. However, the same apology cannot be used to justify

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lower levels of training for manual grade staff. For organisations to be successful all employees need to be fully developed to achieve their maximum potential and to ensure that they function successfully as an integrated whole. From an equal opportunities perspective this would appear to be an unacceptable state of affairs. From a business perspective it is an imperative.

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