

## **Formal and informal learning opportunities in government organisations: Experiences of public sector employees from six Asian nations**

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*Lifelong learning and professional development have been the focus of government organisations after the 21<sup>st</sup> century was declared the 'learning century', amidst the impact of globalisation and growth of knowledge-based economies. Although lifelong learning and professional development opportunities are available in most government organisations, the conditions for civil servants to take up such opportunities differ across organisations and, even more so, across countries. In addition, the expectations of learning and development from such opportunities also vary, with some organisations focusing on specific work-based competencies, others on formal education and qualifications. However, lifelong learning and professional development in government organisations seldom include informal learning, which forms a part of daily leisure time yet involves human capital enhancement that*

*indirectly impacts work performance. Informal learning, which is facilitated by individual information literacy competencies that involve information search, retrieval, evaluation and use in varying contexts, is largely for personal development rather than economic efficiency, but is equally important in developing effective individuals and knowledge workers. In this exploratory study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 civil servants from six Asian countries to elicit their experiences with regard to lifelong learning policies and professional development opportunities in their respective government organisations, expectations of learning and development from such opportunities, as well as provisions for informal learning opportunities. Shared characteristics as well as distinct differences across the interviewees' organisations and countries are discussed. Finally, recommendations based on these similarities and differences are made specifically to encourage government organisations to review existing lifelong learning policies and professional development opportunities available to civil servants.*

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## **Introduction**

The impact of globalisation and the increased economic and social importance placed on knowledge have brought about greater emphasis on lifelong learning and adult education. The migration of the agricultural and industrial society into the current *information* or *knowledge* or *learning* society has spawned the creation of sub-disciplines such as *knowledge management* and *information literacy*. These emphasise the potential to exploit the spectrum of information, skills and ideas held by members of an organisation, as well as abilities to effectively search, locate, evaluate, and creatively and ethically use information within required contexts to address varying needs. In addition, developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have also lent significant

influence over business processes, and how interpersonal interactions and correspondences are carried out, as well as how entertainment and media information is delivered. These changes have congruently created the need, not for pools of codified and explicit forms of knowledge, but rather for skills that would assist an individual to access, evaluate and use information and knowledge effectively, regardless of where it is stored or located. This, in turn, has deep-rooted implications for workplace learning and professional development, especially in the government sector that has to keep up with mounting public expectations and increasing comparison to and competition from the private sector.

### **Literature review**

Rapid developments across many sectors and changing global demands mean that government organisations can no longer continue doing things the way they have, just because those ways have worked in the past. As Osborne and Plastrik (2000: 11–12) suggest, government or public organisations have to do the right things, rather than doing things right. In other words, there is a need to focus on *steering* functions that would help the organisation remain dynamic and achieve set targets, rather than focus on *rowing* functions where they continue doing things the same way as they have always been (Osborne & Plastrik 2000). When clarity of purpose is established, performance can be improved dramatically.

Having clarity of purpose and being able to focus on steering functions require government organisations to have competent and experienced personnel. This implies that professional development and lifelong learning opportunities must be available for personnel to boost continually their knowledge and skills that will improve their work performance and professional aptitude. Such development and learning opportunities may be in the form of mandatory skills training, prescribed courses or workshops,

and seminars, among others, that may result in the attainment of formal qualifications and certifications. Other than obtaining formal qualifications and certifications, it has been recognised that lifelong learning creates opportunities for greater worker participation in self-directed improvement and scholarship (Dohmen 1996, cited in Field 2000: 27). In other words, through lifelong learning opportunities, employees themselves learn to decide which learning processes, focus in specific areas, and available routes of learning would meet their specific needs as required in their job scope and for their personal development.

However, it has also been established that a more multi-dimensional development is preferred over mere skills or work-based training (Chadha 2005: 103). Where skills or work-based training is seen to be more narrow in focus and more discrete (such as workshops, training courses, seminars), multi-dimensional development or learning is more continuous and wide-ranging, and requires more self-directed research and analysis (Swantz, Ndedya & Maisaganah 2001: 387), and address the individual's need for development in more than just one area (Cheng 2001: 47). Thus, multi-dimensional learning provides opportunities for both professional and personal development related to work performance, as well as the increased capability to assume greater work responsibilities (Chadha 2005: 105).

Although organisations have exercised more flexibility in terms of the focus of staff training and professional development courses, by allowing more multi-dimensional learning contents to be included, it has also been documented that skills or knowledge gained through skills training and professional development courses may not always be directly or immediately applied in the organisational context or work system (Chadha 2005: 338–339). This is especially so in small or highly-specialised organisations. This, in turn, may lead employees to feel demoralised about the training or professional development

courses that they had attended, where they feel that it was a waste of time or be apathetic about future courses.

As a result, informal learning opportunities are recommended by experts (Conner 2004) and preferred by employees (Coetzer 2007), where employees can learn and develop skills independently, outside of prescribed training courses (Smith 2002: 111, cited in Smith *et al.* 2007). It has been found that informal learning equally contributes to wage growth for employees (Loewenstein & Spletzer 1994) and accounts for some 75% of learning that occurs in the workplace (Grebow 2002). Informal learning opportunities include own-time discovery learning, interactions and exchanges with colleagues, discussions and talks with people across various disciplines and sectors, and any other form of learning that takes place outside a dedicated or prescribed learning environment and which largely stems from the individual's interests and activities (Smith 1999).

Traditionally, informal learning that results in self-development is commonly for leaders and managers (Sheal 1999: 4–5). However, with flatter, less hierarchical, organisational structures, employee autonomy and self-development are desired because they translate to flexible and quick responses to customer needs. Other than that, informal learning among employees (and hence, self-development) creates better work environment and climate, including positive work attitude and a greater sense of personal satisfaction (Hager 2004). This, in turn, increases an organisation's internal capability and promotes enhanced knowledge distribution among the employees as well as improved versatility in responding to environmental changes (Sheal 1999: 4–5).

In the public sector, government officers in decision-making positions or administrators need to 'know, deliberate and decide' more effectively and efficiently (Porat 1998: 127) due to rapidly changing demands and expectations from the public, largely brought about by globalisation and the omnipresence of the World Wide Web in

people's lives that have influenced the way people see, think and feel. Such government officers and administrators are likely to find prescribed teaching and learning settings too restrictive for their own comfort (Geertshuis & Fazey 2006), and are thus more inclined to learn independently and informally, which then requires acute information skills and knowledge capabilities. As Cortada (1998: 5) mentioned, 'information begets more information', which leads to deeper insight and thus a better ability to formulate effective decisions and execute critical actions. Hence, information literacy skills facilitate informal learning, which is crucial especially for government officers and administrators.

Although it has been found that self-directed learning promulgated through informal learning opportunities is effective and takes place more readily than formal learning, it is also recognised that informal learning opportunities are not well provided in most organisations (Smith *et al.* 2007). In government organisations especially, there exists the constant dilemma of whether professional development or formal learning (much less informal learning) is an 'efficient investment of government funds' (Field 2000: 28). Formal learning, such as skills-based courses and vocational training, have considerable legitimacy and are 'safe' in terms of targets (such as the number of people trained and the qualifications obtained) that are set though implemented policies. Hence, it is usually the case that government organisations restrict professional development to formal learning, which is familiar and uncontroversial (Field 2000: 29). Informal learning creates too much 'uncertainty' in terms of measurement and applicability.

### **Problem statement**

Asia has experienced phenomenal growth in the last couple of decades, due to the opening up of domestic markets and rapid developments and infiltration of information and communication

technologies in the region (Lee & Khatri 2003). It is thus timely to study the provision of both formal and informal learning opportunities in government organisations in Asia, which will facilitate more effective and efficient decision-making and action within the public sector.

It has been found that, in the Asian region, only Japan has been a strong advocate of individual informal learning, where the onus of learning is not on employers and not focused solely on vocational or skills-based training (Field 2000: 30). The emphasis has been on creating a cultural climate where employees take more responsibility and are given more opportunities for personal development. For instance, floral arrangement classes are promoted just as much as technology courses, to ensure a more holistic individual development.

Hence, this exploratory study seeks to (i) find out more about lifelong learning and professional development opportunities; and (ii) determine the existence and extent of informal learning opportunities that are provided in government organisations in Asia.

## **Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 civil servants from six Asian nations, namely Bangladesh, (People's Republic of) China, India, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore. Convenience sampling was employed, where the 18 respondents were identified and selected. The respondents were participants in a year-long professional development program that was conducted in an Asian country. English was the language used in the interview.

Seven questions were posed to each respondent during the interview, addressing the following issues:

- (i) description of respondent's duties/responsibilities and the government organisation in which the respondent was working;

- (ii) opportunities for lifelong learning or professional development in the government organisation;
- (iii) expectations placed on employees with regard to lifelong learning/professional development;
- (iv) what the respondent understood by informal learning opportunities;
- (v) provisions for informal learning opportunities in the government organisation;
- (vi) skills needed for informal learning; and
- (vii) how these skills can be developed or learnt.

Each interview session with a respondent lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. Each interview session was audio-recorded and later transcribed, and field notes were taken during the interview. Similar responses or themes from the respondents' answers were identified and coded.

### **Demographics**

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the respondents who were interviewed.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

ID	Country	Sex	No. of years as government officer	Government sector	Current post	No. of years in post
A	Bangladesh	M	9	Judiciary	Deputy District Judge	1
B	Bangladesh	M	12	Administrative	Senior Assistant Secretary	5
C	Bangladesh	M	9	Information	Deputy Director	4
D	China	F	11	Economics	Section Chief	4
E	China	F	13	Planning	Section Chief	3
F	China	M	8	Foreign Affairs	Division Chief	4
G	India	M	20	Police	Inspector General	1
H	India	M	13	Finance	Deputy Chief	4
I	India	M	9	Social Security	Executive	9
J	Indonesia	M	12	Finance	Auditor	1
K	Indonesia	F	12	Agriculture	Head of Program	5
L	Indonesia	M	2	Education	Junior Officer	1
M	Philippines	F	24	Think tank	Senior Vice-President	4
N	Philippines	F	7	Foreign Affairs	Development Officer	3
O	Philippines	F	2	Judiciary	Junior Officer	2
P	Singapore	F	5	Administrative	Middle Management	3
Q	Singapore	M	18	Defense	Lieutenant-Colonel	4
R	Singapore	M	20	Defense	Lieutenant-Colonel	3

## **Findings and Discussion**

Respondents' duties/responsibilities in the government organisation

Through the interviews, it was found that the majority (16 or 88.9%) of the respondents held important decision-making positions in their respective government organisations. These respondents were in the middle to upper management ranks, and had at least five years of work experience. Although the remaining two respondents were in junior positions, they were in graduate-level ranks and would be in Division I of most government organisations' hierarchies.

Opportunities for lifelong learning/professional development

Generally, there were abundant opportunities available for professional development and lifelong learning in the various government organisations, especially as indicated among respondents from Singapore, China, India and Philippines. As Respondent Q (from Singapore) elaborated,

...we have to go through certain courses ... they are fixed courses that we have to do for professional development ... there are also other courses for lifelong learning that are either conducted by the military, or paid for by the military and conducted by civilians ... like computer literacy, creative thinking, management of the workplace...

Respondent D (from China) claimed that,

... there are a lot of opportunities for training ... once there are new trade or investment policies, specialised training is required ... only graduates are accepted in the service, and only those who do well can further their studies (i.e. undergo professional development).

Respondent G (from India) added,

... we get a variety of jobs, and each job has something new to be learnt. We go for periodic training ... the government encourages any initiative taken to learn ... even [those by] junior officers.

From Philippines, Respondent O said,

... there are a lot of opportunities for such ... 10,000 pesos are provided a year for each staff to use the money for professional development activities for that year.

On the other hand, a respondent from Indonesia (Respondent J) said that opportunities, although existing, are limited, mainly due to financial constraints. As he explained,

... there are too many personnel competing for these opportunities ... formal compulsory courses are subsidised by the government, but other types of courses need to be sponsored by external organisations.

As Respondent K, also from Indonesia, further elucidated,

... the government seldom gives money to send you for training, especially abroad, except for short seminars ... the cost of training is usually borne by cooperating organisations.

Similarly, Respondent A (from Bangladesh) said,

... training opportunities are occasional and usually done internally ... other training opportunities are recognised, but usually not funded (by the government) ...

Hence, it is seen that for some government organisations, professional development training and lifelong learning opportunities are somewhat limited, although they are highly encouraged and prized. This can be attributed to two main factors: firstly, largely a lack of funds for training purposes, since formal training costs a lot of money that is not readily available in some government organisations; secondly, only employees who have attained a certain degree of seniority and expertise or show capability or leadership potential are given professional development or lifelong learning opportunities more readily.

### Expectations placed on employees who have undergone lifelong learning/ professional development courses

There are varied expectations placed on employees. One common expectation is that employees who have undergone professional development training are considered highly specialised and are expected to contribute more to their jobs. As Respondent J (from Indonesia) alleged,

... those who undergo further training are considered very exclusive and elite ... [they are expected to give] more professional contributions and [have] better job prospects ...

Similarly, Respondent A (from Bangladesh) added that employees who have undergone professional development training are expected to

... increase [their] quality of work ... the expectation is more towards the quality of contribution [towards their job] ...”

Respondent P (from Singapore) mentioned that

... it is not a hard and fast rule, but it is an increasing requirement for people to share what they have learnt especially when they have gone for expensive training programs.

However, some organisations do not have such expectations for sharing knowledge or new responsibilities, nor provisions for new competencies to be applied to the current job scope. As Respondent C (from Bangladesh) explained,

... there is no explicit expectation for new duties ... [formal] training does not mean you can always apply it in your job ... it depends on what you know ...

Respondent Q (from Singapore) added,

... more on an optional basis ... only for certain courses where you are expected to share with others (i.e. your colleagues) ...

Respondent H (from India) claimed,

Frankly, my organisation will not give any value addition to me when I complete [the training] ... I have to do the same routine job again ...

Hence, it is seen that not all formal training opportunities are utilitarian or will make much difference to the job that is already done by employees. Although new responsibilities are sometimes expected to be given, this is not a guarantee. In addition, employees who undergo formal training are not usually expected to share with their colleagues what they have learnt.

#### Informal learning

Respondents were asked what they understood by informal learning opportunities. Respondent D (from China) stated that 'it involves discussion and sharing with colleagues'. Respondent J (from Indonesia) explained that informal learning opportunities included 'volunteer work with other agencies to broaden experiences ... [anything] outside of work hours'. Respondent Q (from Singapore) added that informal learning involves 'learning on the job...learning from peers and superiors', while Respondent H (from India) felt that informal learning occurs 'through observing and interacting with people [outside the office], such as on my farm ... the villagers'. Respondent M (from Philippines) elaborated,

... informal learning opportunities ... are occasions or activities outside of the Human Resource programs [run] by the organisation, which nevertheless enable staff to exchange experiences and enhance knowledge of job ... and their life ... on top of the vast opportunities to learning provided by the Internet and ... published materials which individuals can do on their own.

It is seen that informal learning is understood to involve any sort of unstructured or non-institutionalised learning that occurs outside formal work hours or boundaries. Respondents also mentioned that a

lot of informal learning takes place through observation, interactions with peers and other people, as well as through online or published information sources. More importantly, informal learning is believed to take place voluntarily and is largely self-directed. In other words, informal learning is not explicitly endorsed by the government organisation.

Provisions for informal learning opportunities

Respondents were also asked to describe opportunities for informal learning in their organisational workplaces. Respondent Q (from Singapore) shared that

... my organisation institutes a system of reflection and debriefing of projects ... so there are plenty of opportunities for informal learning where we discuss with one another what happened and what we learnt.

Respondent I (from India) added that 'in my organisation, informal learning is through different job postings and job rotation ... people learn on the job and from their colleagues'. Similarly, as Respondent E (from China) asserted,

... opportunities to learn [informally are] through working on inter-departmental projects, where different information can be shared and learnt ... you learn from those who are more specialised and expert.

Respondent L (from Indonesia) explained,

... we have *ad hoc* sessions where we are from different departments and we share with one another [things such as] books that we have read, our opinions on national issues ... but this involve usually the junior officers only.

Similarly, Respondent B (from Bangladesh) said, 'certainly, especially ... in the initial years of our service [where] we ... must master certain practices in an informal way because we do not have formal training ...'

However, Respondent F (from China) opined that

... mature employees can learn more from informal than formal learning ... the former is more practical[-based] while the latter is usually [about] theories ... when you are mature, you know how to learn anything in any possible situation.

Although several government organisations have some form of provision or system for informal learning to take place, this is not a common practice. Respondent O (from the Philippines) said that, 'because [the] organisation [I work in] is democratic, there are a lot of informal learning opportunities ... only that [the provision] is unwritten'. Respondent J (from Indonesia) added, '... not really ... it depends on the individual'.

Respondent G (from India) said,

... not really structured ... it depends on your own initiative and interest ... one can decide not to learn or learn as much as possible, but it ultimately makes a difference in your performance and recognition in the organisation.

Thus, it is seen that government organisations, which do provide opportunities for informal learning to take place, would have instituted a certain structure or system for it. Otherwise, informal learning would have to take place at the discretion and out of the personal interest of the employee concerned, even though it is generally recognised that informal learning is effective and utilitarian to the job.

#### Skills needed for informal learning

Respondents were asked what they thought were certain skills or personal characteristics that are required for informal learning to take place. Several respondents alluded to the use of technologies and various information sources that are especially expedited by the Internet, in addition to the initial recognition of an information need by the individual.

... ability to identify from which sources [you] can get knowledge ... who you can approach to learn from. Also before that, you need to be able to identify what specific knowledge you need to learn (Respondent E, China).

...informal learning needs that hunger for learning ... based on one person's perceived learning needs as demanded by his or her work. It requires ability and self-cognition to be able to identify the appropriate fit ... (Respondent N, Philippines).

... no particular skills ... it starts with ideas ... to materialise, you need to discuss [these ideas] and see it evolve naturally ... (Respondent L, Indonesia).

... a great personality, discussion skills, and [skills to use] computers and the Internet or other new technologies... (Respondent H, India).

... life skills ... and computer-related skills that would be useful for research ... (Respondent O, Philippines).

Several other respondents mentioned that communication and social networking skills are important: 'be[ing] active in social networks is an important thing ... [when] you build up the social network, you learn more from different people' (Respondent F, China), '... communication skills and individual initiative required' (Respondent I, India) and '[f]or informal learning to take place effective[ly], social and communication skills are probably key ...' (Respondent R, Singapore).

There is therefore a range of skills or abilities that need to be developed in order for informal learning to take place. First, there must be the definition of an information need; that is, knowing what it is that you do not know and thereafter, hatching an idea and realising what it is that you want to find out. This alludes to information literacy competencies (American Library Association 1989). Then there are the tools that can be used to obtain that needed information, such as various published information sources, new technologies such as the Internet, and interacting with people who are

rich but tacit sources of information. Here is where communication and social networking skills are important so as to tap in on the knowledge that is held by people.

#### Means of developing such skills

Respondents were asked to describe how they felt such skills could be developed. A few respondents mentioned the need for wanting to know more: 'inquisitiveness and based on needs' (Respondent B, Bangladesh), 'keep your eyes and ears open and have a probing mind for whatever that is new or different' (Respondent G, India), and the 'need to question assumptions ... how things are derived' (Respondent Q, Singapore).

Several respondents cited the need to be open to learning through different means and from different sources: 'be open-minded to everything' (Respondent F, China) and 'one can also learn this in the community ... opportunities for acquiring knowledge have been expanded with changing pedagogies and technologies' (Respondent N, Philippines). Others added:

... individuals autonomously seek new knowledge and information. They are motivated and open to learn because they find immediate gratification and application of their learning. What the organisation needs to do to develop this attitude is to provide the opportunity and stimulate motivation for continuous self-improvement (Respondent M, Philippines).

... you need to understand more about the background ... understanding of culture (Respondent J, Indonesia).

... informal relationships with people ... through networking opportunities ... (Respondent L, Indonesia).

... these skills are lifelong skills and [are] developed in the course of life and work where the opportunities for social interactions are ... (Respondent R, Singapore).

It can be seen that, to develop skills to facilitate informal learning, there must firstly be the willingness to learn and question. Next, there must be opportunities for the knowledge that has been learnt to be applied with the help of various tools such as technologies and through provision by organisations. Then, there must be the awareness of various cultures and contexts so that relationships can be forged and social networks can be formed.

### **Implications**

There are several implications that can be derived from the findings of this exploratory study. First of all, it is evident that, although opportunities for professional development are abundant in some government organisations, this is not the case in others. In both cases, the availability of funds and the stringent selection of employees, based on seniority or potential, for such opportunities are strong determining factors. As Gorard and Selwyn (1999) claimed, one of the most obvious barriers to formal learning is cost, involving both financial and opportunity aspects. Hence, it can be concluded that formal learning opportunities are rather costly and can be provided only selectively. For governments of wealthier Asian nations, funding formal learning opportunities may not be a problem, but for the governments of less wealthy nations, this funding probably needs to be tapped from elsewhere. For instance, countries such as Bangladesh can look for funding from cooperating private or international organisations to fund their civil servants for training, such as that being done in the Indonesian government which has cooperative ties with one or two organisations in Japan that provide funding and training opportunities for Indonesian civil servants.

Second, the expectations from government organisations vary where employees who have undergone professional development are concerned. To elaborate, some employees are expected to take on more responsibilities upon completion of the training, while

others experience no change to their duties or responsibilities at all. Some employees who return to their job after such training may be expected to share their experience and knowledge with their colleagues, although this is not formally institutionalised or enforced. It is believed that employees who undergo further training hope to take initiative and develop new ideas that can be applied in the workplace (Evans 2003: 59). However, this is not always the case. Hence, formal learning or training may not always be useful for the job or be effectively shared with other colleagues in the organisation due to different job scopes and organisational policies. For instance, what has been learnt through a formal training course such as a certificate program may not be holistically employed in the employee's current job, although parts of it may be directly applied. In another instance, what has been learnt through a formal training course that is directly relevant to an employee's current job may not be easily shared with another employee with a different job function because it is too specialised in scope. There is then a need for government organisations in Asia to be clearer regarding the expectations and outcomes of formal learning or professional development for employees. To elaborate, employees who have undergone further training or professional development through formal courses or programs ought to be informed about their next job posting, expectations and responsibilities, even *before* embarking on those courses or programs. It becomes futile and inefficient when employees are sent for further training or professional development courses or programs only to return to the same routine work where the new knowledge and skills learnt cannot be readily applied.

Next, informal learning is recognised to be largely voluntary and self-directed, occurs outside formal work hours and boundaries, and involves interaction with people and observation or through published information sources. It is also generally felt that informal learning opportunities are not well-provided for by government organisations, even though employees vouch for its value. It has

been claimed that much of adult learning takes place informally (Field 2000: 147) through various means such as interactions, group memberships or engagement in a public sphere. However, most of the time, informal learning is usually not recognised or is taken for granted by governments which prefer formal learning (Evans 2003: 7) as part of employees' professional development. Hence, government organisations need to and can institute formal provisions for informal learning to take place (Conner 2004), at employees' convenience and which cater to their interests. Examples of such provisions could be in the form of allocated time weekly for employees to come together to share ideas or knowledge, all within a 'coffee break' or alternative relaxed ambience; setting up a learning commons area where employees can share ideas or knowledge with their colleagues, whether in a physical space (e.g. discussion lounges or philosophy cafés) or an online environment (e.g. discussion forums or social networking websites); and the inclusion of staff sharing as a compulsory component in the annual employee performance appraisal.

Finally, other than the provision by government organisations for informal learning opportunities, the employees themselves also need to be equipped with several competencies before informal learning can take place. For example, as determined from the interviews, employees have identified several of these competencies, such as the ability to identify one's information need, knowing how to access various information sources and how to use technological tools to expedite them, and being acquainted with the right people who may be a rich but tacit source of knowledge and who can help them address their information need. The American Library Association defined information literacy as the ability to recognise the need for information, and effectively access, evaluate and creatively use information (ALA 1989), which in fact mirrors the perceptions of employees with respect to competencies needed for informal learning to occur in the workplace. In addition, information literacy,

which requires access to social and physical sources of information as well as textual or digital sources, contributes to workplace learning (Lloyd & Somerville 2006). It can then be concluded that, essentially, employees need to be equipped with information literacy competencies in order to facilitate them to carry out more efficient and effective informal learning. Thus, a government organisation should provide opportunities for employees to be equipped with information literacy competencies, such as dedicated time or platform for employees to share these competencies that they have obtained or developed with their colleagues through departmental sharing workshops or seminars, or allocated in-house training sessions for information literacy competencies to be taught to employees by information professionals, whether from the organisation's own learning and development unit or from external agencies.

### **Limitations**

There are obvious limitations to this study. Being exploratory in nature, the study has involved perceptions and data that may be more anecdotal than empirical. Since only three civil servants from each of the six Asian nations involved in the study were interviewed, their inputs may not be representative of the entire civil service of their respective countries. In addition, Asia itself is a very expansive and diverse continent. Data from civil servants from six nations in Asia would really be a mere scratch on the surface in terms of eliciting the exact nature of formal and informal learning opportunities in the civil service in this part of the world. Hence, the generalisability of this study must be approached with a lot of caution.

### **Conclusion**

Lifelong learning or professional development opportunities through formal learning means are usually costly and can only be selectively allocated to employees in Asian government organisations. In addition, the knowledge and skills learnt through formal training may

not always be applied to the job or shared with colleagues effectively. Hence, there is a need to take a closer and more serious look at informal learning opportunities that are less costly, more voluntary and self-directed in nature, and that allow more interactions and exchange of ideas to follow. Employees need to have specific skills or abilities such as information literacy competencies and good communication and networking skills, to help them exploit informal learning opportunities. However, more importantly, these Asian government organisations must be able to provide informal learning opportunities such as allocated time or learning common spaces for employees so as to allow it to occur spontaneously in the workplace. These measures would facilitate greater employee effectiveness and competence, and would most likely contribute to overall organisational efficacy and growth. In turn, these Asian government organisations would be able to play a more significant role in shaping global growth, which is still currently regulated by the more developed western nations.

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