

# Engaging low skilled employees in workplace learning

Executive Summary  
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## Introduction

This report sets out the findings of a study into the motivators and barriers to participation in workplace learning by low skilled employees. Low skilled in the UK is usually considered to be below NVQ level 2 qualifications. The study was carried out by the Employment Research Institute at Edinburgh Napier University on behalf of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. The report presents the results of a survey of both employee and employer views on participation in workplace learning in the care sector in north east England and the hotel sector in Yorkshire and the Humber region. The hotels and catering sector has the highest relative and absolute skill gaps in low skilled occupations, with some 63 per cent of staff suffering skills gaps. In contrast, the care sector has an apparent strong training culture, with care staff expected to progress to NVQ level 3 and only five per cent of low skilled staff suffered a skills gap.

## Evidence Review

The evidence review summarises selected research on the interweaving barriers and motivations to workplace learning faced by low skilled employees. Johnson et al., (2009) highlighted the complex range of extrinsic (workplace, social and economic) and intrinsic (individual, motivational and attitudinal) factors that shape low skilled employees' engagement in workplace learning.<sup>1</sup> These include: limited information; insufficient advice and guidance; financial and time constraints; negative prior experiences; a lack of motivation; and a lack of peer support. Workplace culture and organisational structures; the delivery of training; employee characteristics; personal circumstances (e.g. childcare responsibilities); self-efficacy; and the financial returns from training may also act as barriers or motivators to learning. Previous research (McQuaid et al., 2010) highlighted an evidence gap: the quantification of workplace learning choices made by low skilled employees; and the identification of the potential returns of workplace learning against the participation costs. Studies (e.g. McIntosh and Garrett, 2009) highlight that some learners experience low or negative returns on gaining an NVQ level 2 qualification. The financial returns to developing skills to below NVQ level 3 are small or non-existent for many employees.

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<sup>1</sup>Intrinsic factors include those related to the individual's attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and motivation. Extrinsic factors include work and family commitments, workplace issues and employers' attitudes, and the affordability and accessibility of provision; which may be affected by factors such as the size of workplace, sector and union presence.

## **Methodology**

In total 310 employees were interviewed between January and April 2011. Of these 205 worked in the care sector in north east England and 105 in the hotel sector in Yorkshire and Humberside. Nearly all of their employers (24) were interviewed face-to-face to provide qualitative and contextual evidence. Three interviews were also conducted with NVQ care sector training providers.

An important issue to address is how to disentangle the various factors influencing likely participation in training and how to provide a more realistic set of choices for employees that better reflects the actual decisions individuals make. It is difficult to arrive at a coherent 'ranking' and valuation of the different barriers and facilitators around an individual's skills development, other than merely listing motivators and barriers. Hence, as well as a standard survey, this research also carried out a stated preference experiment whereby employees were given choices of combinations of factors that might affect their preference for, or against substantial training. These factors involved the employee making choices between three job related outcomes: job satisfaction, security and responsibility; pay increases of different levels; or when the training was carried out (in the employer's and/or employee's time). In other words the employee indicated or stated their preference for, or against participation in training by choosing between two potential sets or outcomes of this training (e.g. choosing between training that led to a job with the same pay, more job security and carried out in their own time versus a job with higher pay, more job satisfaction and carried out in the employers time). This allows the effect of each particular factor to be estimated.

## **Findings: Employees in Low Skilled Jobs**

Overall, the employees were keen to engage in training. The expectations of employees concerning the results of the last training they undertook (usually short term training) were concentrated around intrinsic factors. Respondents expected to: do their jobs better; be more satisfied with their work; learn skills to do their jobs better; and sometimes achieve qualifications from workplace learning. They did not generally expect to earn more money, or achieve a promotion or a better job. For 90 per cent of employees the expected outcomes of training actually happened. Employee attitudes towards the usefulness of learning are linked to their specific jobs requiring learning or allowing the use of their knowledge. Those who recognise their own lack of basic skills, also recognise that learning is important for a better job and that qualifications are important. So despite having low skills, employees still recognise the value and importance of workplace learning. Employees were found to consistently value training and prefer it to no training.

With regards to *demographic characteristics*, in the care sector, men prefer training more than women; otherwise there are no significant gender differences. In the care sector there is a significant difference by age, as all age groups prefer training more than those aged 16 to 24 year olds. The strongest preference for training is amongst older care workers aged 50 to 54 years old. For those in the hotel sector, the only age groups where there is a significantly higher preference for training is among employees aged 35 to 44 and 55 to 64 year olds. For employees with an NVQ level 3 or higher, those in the care sector expressed a significant preference for training but this did not apply in the hotel sector.

The main *reasons for not engaging in training* were: family commitments (for both men and women); illness; lack of suitable courses; possible costs; and lack of time. A lack of time was stated particularly by those in the hotel sector. The *main barriers* as to why employees would be unable or unwilling to undertake (further) work related training were extrinsic costs: cash fees for training (perceived to be a barrier for 54 per cent of all employees in both sectors); or time costs (24 per cent).

The stated preference exercise sought to ascertain if three main sets of factors might influence individuals' preferences to undertake significant training. This hypothetical training was a significant regular commitment for two years and resulted in a qualification. The factors are: job related outcomes (such as job satisfaction, security and responsibility); pay increases; or when the training is conducted. The conclusion is that preferences for training of this nature increased mainly by pay rises (both small and substantial ones, but especially the latter). However, if training is conducted in one's own time then it is a significant barrier to training. Job attributes i.e. increased satisfaction, security or responsibility, are not strong influencers.

More precisely the relative importance of the factors show that pay dominates (58 per cent of the effect) the motivations for training and followed somewhat behind by when training is offered (26 per cent), and then job attributes (15 per cent). These general results apply across the sectors, genders, ages and NVQ levels. There are some differences between the hotel and care sectors, with stronger preferences for pay rises and responsibility in hotels, which are probably explained by the younger age profile of respondents.

Women show significantly less preference for training than men, particularly in the care sector. There are some differences with age groups, for example, those aged 50 to 54 are motivated by security and feel the need to learn new skills even if training was in their own time. Those with NVQ level 3 qualifications or higher are more motivated to undertake training than those with lower NVQ levels.

## **Findings: Employers**

Based on qualitative interviews the majority of the employers (12 care providers and 12 hotels) provided non-compulsory work related training. The type of training undertaken varied depending on the interests of the staff, the needs of clients/customers and the level of service provided.

Employers identified that staff undertook non-compulsory work related training for reasons of personal development, creating a sense of self-value, increasing self-esteem and progression. A lack of self-confidence and self-value, age, time constraints, few opportunities to progress, fear of education and literacy and numeracy problems present barriers to training in the views of employers.

Employers use a variety of techniques to actively encourage their employees to undertake non-compulsory work related training: paying staff to train; providing time to train in work hours; and employing training managers. The evidence highlights some mismatches between individuals' expectations and their employers' perceptions. Individuals in all cases prefer training but employers (especially in the hotel sector) think that employees are not interested in training, although the importance of increased pay and training in work time correspond to the stated preference results for employees.

## **Conclusions**

Encouragingly, low skilled employees value both training and qualifications in order to enhance their employment. Despite undertaking low skilled jobs, they are keen to be engaged in training and feel it will help them do a better job. Employees had realistic expectations of what could be achieved through their most recent training. Very few employees felt that the training would lead to a dramatic change such as, getting a new or better job, or a pay rise or promotion. In the majority of cases the outcomes of the training matched individual's expectations, this is a positive factor on which to build future participation in workplace learning. However, there seems to be some mismatch between employees and their employers' views. Unlike employees, employers have reservations about employee's commitment to training and learning.

The 'culture of learning' within the workplace also seems to play an important role. Employees' positive attitudes towards workplace learning are linked to jobs requiring learning or allowing the use of knowledge and skills. This is illustrated by the contrast between the care sector and the hotel sector. In general, the care sector has more of a culture of learning and training than the hotel sector, possibly linked to the types of jobs and

the industry expectation of care workers achieving higher NVQ levels.

The main barriers to future engagement in training were cash fees for training, or time costs. So a lack of demand to invest in training is more about extrinsic barriers than individual intrinsic factors such as, confidence and self-efficacy. Such extrinsic factors can be addressed more readily through targeted policy levers and interventions. Again in contrast, there is a mismatch between employee and employer views regarding the barriers to workplace learning. Employers felt employees' barriers to participating in training were mainly related to intrinsic factors (such as, a lack of self-confidence) rather than extrinsic factors. Whilst this was not borne out in this research, it suggests that: for low skilled employees this may not be as an important factor as has often been assumed by policy makers and employers; and that the positive reactions to job specific training could be built on for non-compulsory and longer term skill development.

The stated preference analysis illustrates the importance of various motivating factors that influence low skilled employees participation in workplace learning. In particular, pay is a significant motivator for employees training, yet previous research evidence indicates that financial returns for low skilled employees undertaking training are low. Even relatively modest linked pay rewards may motivate increased training or qualifications which happen elsewhere, where relevant qualifications automatically translate into pay rises.

This research suggests many positive features which employers, individuals and policy makers could build on in developing the skills of people in low skilled jobs, which is important in securing our competitive advantage in the longer term:

- Low skilled employees are motivated to learn and intrinsic barriers may sometimes be less problematic than previously thought in suitable conditions;
- Increased skills development can be supported by a positive and supportive cultural environment for training within the workplace (perhaps including an industry wide expectation of higher level qualifications, such as NVQ level 3 for care workers) with opportunities for progression through better job design and collective arrangements within sectors;
- Meeting expectations through job specific, short term training, may encourage further training which could support progression to higher skilled roles and higher pay; and,
- Ensuring that training is valued by employers and that it is designed and delivered in partnership with employees so as to further enhance and increase the value of such training.

Executive Summaries present the key findings of the research produced by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. More detailed analytical results are presented in Evidence Reports and all outputs are accessible on the UK Commission's website [www.ukces.org.uk](http://www.ukces.org.uk)

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