

ROLE OF INDUSTRY EMPLOYERS IN FOSTERING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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Graduate skills and employability discussions have continued to be a contentious issue for both international and local employers. The concerns of industry employers stem from their inability to acquire graduates with the requisite skills and competencies to effectively solve arising industry problems. This concern has led employers to cast blames on higher education institutions (HEIs), who they feel are responsible for the development of these skills which employers continuously seek from fresh graduates. Subsequently, present-day employers have sought innovative ways to train and re-train new employees to help ease their transition into the world of work. This paper identifies the various approaches and ways by which industry employers develop the required skills of graduates. An extant review of literature was conducted from databases such as Academic Search Complete, ASCE conference proceedings, EBSCOhost, Emerald, ERIC, Science Direct, Scopus, Springer, Taylor and Francis online, amongst others. One of the primary findings stemming from this study revealed that in-house training, job rotation, coaching and mentoring, and cross-functional teams are some of the key approaches by which industry employers can develop skills and competencies among fresh graduates. This study concludes that HEIs are not solely responsible for the development of employability skills among graduates, but reckons that both the employers of labour and graduates themselves have a crucial role to play in the construction education discourse.

Keywords: Mentoring, Construction education, Construction industry, Graduate skills, Higher education.

1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of HEIs in equipping students with the right skills has positioned it as a catalyst for economic growth (Munap *et al.* 2015). Its roles in the areas of research and development have further earmarked it as a critical influence in the construction education discussion. However, in recent years, the world of work has also gained significant recognition in the development of skills and knowledge among graduates or employees. This is because employers have continuously expressed their dissatisfaction at the quality of graduates coming through the HEIs. This frustration stems from the fact that present-day employers are seeking to recruit graduates based on their qualities, abilities and discipline-specific knowledge. This situation has led employers to regularly design several opportunities to train and re-train graduates to hit the ground running in the world of employment. Several scholars also suggest that the industry provides ample opportunity for sound learning which is referred to as work-place learning

(Beckett and Hager 2002, Boud and Middleton 2003, Collin *et al.* 2011). Hence, this paper reviews the significance of these opportunities provided by industry employers.

In the employment sector, learning can be embedded in the context of social practice. This is as a result of the opportunities provided for employees to attain the required knowledge, which connects theoretical and practical activities realistically and efficiently (Lave and Wenger 1991, Billett 1996). Various ways through which graduates can benefit from work-place activities include informal learning (experience-based learning and incidental learning); self-directed learning and formal organizational learning (Foley 1999, Marsick and Volpe 1999, Senge 1990, Marsick and Watkins 1999, Hager and Halliday 2006). According to Mallon *et al.* (2005) and Doornbos *et al.* (2008), the world of work is more concerned with informal learning rather than the formal education and academic qualification. Hence, this study will cast more focus on the informal ways by which graduates' skills can be developed through an extensive literature survey. The acquisition and development of new skills and knowledge ensure the productivity and satisfaction of graduates cum employees.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Informal Learning Process

This form of learning process dates back as far as 1926 in the early writings of Lindeman (1926), Dewey (1938) and Knowles (1970). These scholars suggested that matured learners are apprised of their learning experiences through self-direction. Further studies by Marsick and Volpe (1999) and Dale and Bell (1999) further expressed the correlation between employees and the work environment and acknowledged that a considerable part of the learning process occurs through interaction with others. This learning process could be regarded as a by-product of everyday activities, which are random, implicit, idiosyncratic, opportunistic, unstructured, unintended and unsystematic and driven by serendipity (Sawchuk 2003, Eraut 2004, Hager and Halliday 2006). This form of learning is not limited to a body of knowledge and can be attained via a range of strategies including social interaction, coaching, self-directed learning, random conversation, teamwork and mentoring. Simply put, this form of learning does not lead to formal qualifications. When juxtaposed with the formal learning process, the informal learning process suggests greater flexibility and recognizes the significance of socialization and learning from other people. Hence, this learning process can improve certain values, attitudes, skills and competencies among employees. These include: improved interpersonal skills, problem-solving skills, creative thinking abilities, communication skills, leadership effectiveness, and teamwork skills. Knowledge and skills gained via this learning process can be described as tacit knowledge (Foley 2004).

Furthermore, this form of learning is also referred to as incidental learning (Marsick and Watkins 1990) and can be used interchangeably with informal learning. Just like informal learning, incidental learning is tacit and unintended and can occur by learning from poor judgements, mistakes, trial and error and even a hidden agenda of an organization's culture or set-up (Marsick and Watkins 1999, Tusting 2003).

2.2 Forms of Informal Learning

2.2.1 In-house training

In this form of learning, employers of labor provide intentional and planned activities, courses, symposiums and seminars that provide a learning element. In this case, trainers and facilitators are usually from the organisation, industry, professional bodies or external bodies. According to

Hameed and Waheed (2011) and Kumar *et al.* (2017), training of recruits can be classified as behavioral and cognitive approaches. The behavioral methods are also called on-job training methods. These form of training permits the individuals to practice behavior in real or simulated fashion. These types of training stimulate learning through behavior, which can lead to skill and knowledge development. On the other hand, cognitive methods, which are also referred to as off-job training methods provide verbal, written and conceptual information on how to carry out activities (Hameed and Waheed 2011, Kumar *et al.* 2017). Benefits of in-house training include: improved performance and productivity of the employee, development of technical skills of employees, understanding of what the industry entails, amongst others.

2.2.2 Job rotation

This is another strategy through which industry can improve the performance and productivity of employees (Schultz and Schultz 2010). Job rotation refers to the process of switching an individual from one role to another, which increases their value to an organization. It can also occur when individuals are introduced to a schedule of tasks or assignments, which are aimed at providing a holistic breadth of exposure. Two categories of job rotation were proposed, which includes: within-function rotation (rotation between jobs of similar responsibility and orientation) and cross-functional rotation (rotation between jobs in different aspects of the organisation over a period). As a learning approach, recruits are provided ample opportunities to learn the necessary skills needed to thrive in the industry (Adjei 2012). Job rotation also provides the following: adequate work experience, career development, career management and motivation, career satisfaction, understanding of strategy issues, exposure to various functions and professionals, quality learning experience, increased network of contacts, self-confidence, increased transfer of company, increased responsiveness to change, self-efficacy, greater job variety, personal development, skill diversity amongst others (Earney and Martins 2009, Khan *et al.* 2014).

2.2.3 Coaching and mentorship

This form of learning is primarily concerned with the improvement of graduate skills, attitudes and performance within their present job role. Coaching can also be regarded as a task-oriented form of personally tailored training. Carter (2001) further described coaching as an interactive process, which provides employees with the opportunity to develop rapidly, which in turn increases their productivity. Yeo (2008) argue that mentorship provides the opportunities for young employees to master their craft to become experts. This can be achieved by making plans for a trainee to work alongside an experienced head to observe and learn the trends of achieving tasks. Several scholars have identified several roles mentors can play in the development of skills among graduates. These include: monitoring the progress of employees, facilitating their participation in various industrial activities and functions, and providing guidance through the performance of tasks. These mentor-mentee relationships can improve: interpersonal skills, self-image, cultural skills, psychological skills, job satisfaction, amongst others (Ragins and Kram 2007, Abedin *et al.* 2012). In summary, while coaching help trainees to carry out tasks effectively, mentorship deals with the preparation of trainees for future activities and purposes.

2.2.4 Cross-functional teams

Over time, the ability of recruits to work together with other employees in other departments or functions has become key competency employers seek. This has prompted most employers to encourage cross-functional teams as an effective initiative to further improve recruits. Kettley

and Hirsh (2000) state that cross-functional teams are composed of individuals who have a specific domain base but work collaboratively on issues or processes requiring diverse resources. Several benefits of working in cross-functional teams includes timely and effective delivery of tasks, promotion of teamwork, improved communication, new knowledge about job roles, self-development, direct transfer of skills and knowledge from experts and collective problem-solving (Lovelace *et al.* 2001).

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study was conducted with reference to extant works of literature published in peer-reviewed conference papers and journals articles in order to review the various informal strategies by which the construction industry can develop new employees. In understanding these various activities, extensive literature searches were carried out several weeks in July and August 2018, covering the major academic databases including ASC, EBSCO, Emerald, Science Direct, ISI Web of Knowledge, and GoogleScholar. In developing an initial shortlist of these approaches, a preliminary survey of nine sources was done - Academic Search Complete, ASCE conference proceedings, EBSCOhost, Emerald, ERIC, Science Direct, Scopus, Springer, Taylor and Francis online which identified a number of key approaches. The initial search generated a total of 167 articles which was later filtered down to 72. These 72 articles were then examined individually which helped in the realization of this research study. In order to be included in this review, the scholarly article had to comply with certain criteria. One of the conditions is that the article should have been published in a peer-reviewed journal or conference proceedings (which implied that newspaper reports, government articles and unpublished works) were not considered. The other condition was that the article discussed explicitly various approaches by which industry employers can further improve the skills of employees. Furthermore, the literatures utilized for this study was extracted based on the search criteria that included the following keyword combinations: ‘employability’, ‘mentoring’, ‘formal AND learning’, ‘informal AND learning’, ‘construction industry’ and ‘graduate AND skills’.

4 LESSONS LEARNT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The construction industry of today is constantly seeking the services of skilled graduates to meet up with its ever-changing and challenging needs. The benefits of owning a pool of skilled employees with a myriad of skills cannot be over-emphasized. In fact, employers who demand skills from recruits have a responsibility to support and develop such graduates when they are employed. This study suggests various strategies and initiatives by which employers can achieve this. Employers can also improve graduates by implementing a system, which ensures progressive graduation of work activities. These learning curves can be further enhanced by providing a regular feedback mechanism, which strengthens their awareness and abilities. It is also worthy to note that effective learning can be strengthened if recruits are proactive, willing, reflective and creative. This study recommends that employers need to improve on the following to achieve a holistic development of their recruits. These include: developing quality time and resources to train individuals, monitoring of individual interactions, designing task-teams to foster teamwork, ensuring adequate supervision, production of learning maps for trainees amongst others. In summary, it is germane for industry employers to understand their role in further developing their new recruits and employees to ensure a seamless transition into the world of work.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, industry employers can further improve the quality of graduates cum employees through a variety of strategies and perspectives. These can be achieved through formal learning activities, which are intentionally planned, informal activities, which are unintentional and self-directed directed learning which can be accomplished by establishing a rapport with their fellow professionals. Through a literature review, the aim of this study, which was to examine the various informal approaches by which industry employers can develop skills and competencies among fresh graduates were achieved. The studies revealed that in-house training, job rotation, coaching and mentoring, and cross-functional teams are some of the key approaches by which industry employers can achieve this. The study found out that, in-house trainings involve symposiums, workshops and seminars, which can lead to improved employee performance and productivity. Job rotation was found to provide employees with adequate work experience and exposure to various functions within the industry. The benefits of coaching and mentoring as well as cross-functional teams were also examined from literature as these activities lead to improved communication and provide adequate knowledge about job roles. Furthermore, informal learning has the potential to occur more frequently than the formal learning process and can also be regarded as incidental learning. The approaches discussed in this study are extremely beneficial to graduates and reckons that the employers of labour have a crucial role to play in the construction education discourse.

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