

Developing Skills for Life programmes in the workplace

By **Lesley Howard** of In House Training Services

For colleges or training providers used to providing Skills for Life courses in the college or in community learning centres, it would initially appear that workplace provision would not require any change to current practice and procedures. However, the demands and requirements of this kind of provision are completely distinct from those that are encountered elsewhere. The first obvious difference, generally speaking, is that with mainstream provision, learners come to the provider, whereas with workplace Skills for Life usually it is the college itself that has to find the learners. This means setting up discrete marketing services which may be a new activity for many colleges and obviously has resource implications. ‘Selling’ training for shop floor, non-management staff is not always easy – even when the employer does not have to pay – and the statistics confirm that employers are far more willing to invest time (and thus money) in management training than on training for their cleaners or factory operatives.

In terms of the actual provision, ‘Workplace ESOL, Literacy or Numeracy’ can mean a multitude of different things depending on which ‘workplace’ it is. The type and size of organization is relevant here. Large unionised public sector organi-

sations have a completely different set of values, working practices and ‘cultural norms’ from that of SMEs or micro-businesses. In large organizations there are usually sufficient numbers of employees from which to make up training groups containing employees who have similar learning needs, whereas in small companies this is not the case. Different sectors have different training needs and there are a variety of reasons why employers want workplace provision. Sometimes it is because of issues to do with Health & Safety (making compliance difficult where there are large numbers of workers who don’t have English as their mother tongue). Sometimes it is to do with meeting legal requirements; for example, in the food industry, the requirement to obtain Food Hygiene Certificates, or in Care the requirement to have Social Care NVQs.

Different types of learner groups will be encountered: are they British born or newly arrived migrant workers? What is their past experience of education? Will they be tired after their shifts? Will they be embarrassed to admit to having training needs in front of their employer and their colleagues? How do you accommodate changing shifts or night workers? These are all the constraints that employees

have on their training and which are barriers to their learning which do not exist elsewhere.

Then there is the ‘politics’ of the workplace to consider e.g. differences in values/opinions between different levels of management, relations between unions and management, conflicts within the workplace hierarchy. Sometimes, even though the senior management might be committed to the workplace provision, supervisors who manage the learners may not be. They might find it threatening (because they lack skills themselves) or they may be reluctant to release their staff from the shop floor because of the pressure of work.

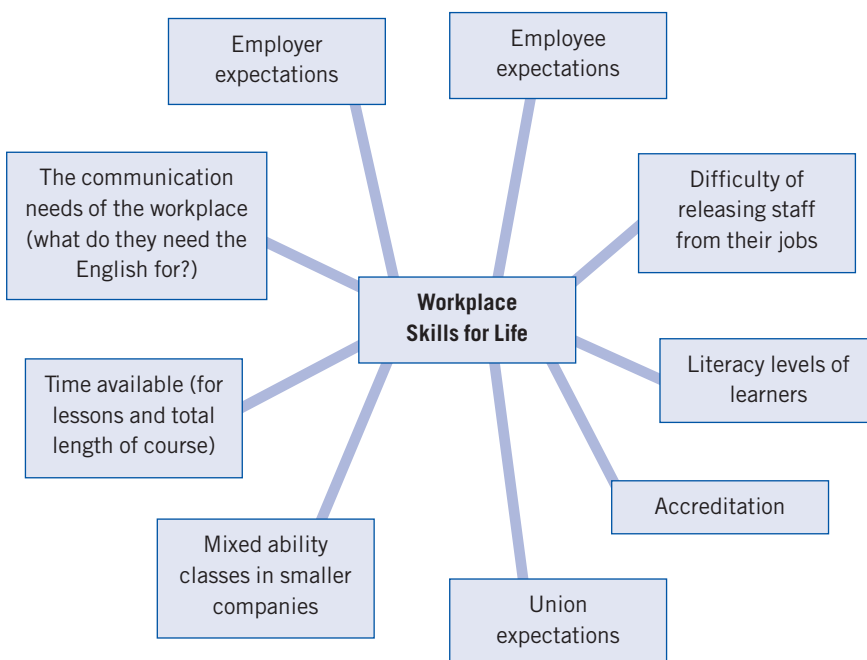
Working with Unions and Union Learning Reps adds another dimension. Often there are ‘agendas’ to do with general work conditions that the Skills for Life training impinges upon. Sometimes unions will argue for release for the employees as part of a general Negotiating Agreement and this may not necessarily be welcomed by all management.

All of these factors have a bearing on the type of provision required and as such adds an extra dimension to designing and delivering suitable learning programmes. They place additional demands not only on managers who have to set up and develop the provision, but also on the tutors, who, I would argue, need to have an additional range of skills: a need to understand the context and a sensitivity to knowing how to deal with this.

The chart below shows some of the range of factors that must be taken into account which are particular to training in the workplace.

Although these ‘extra’ constraints exist, workplace Skills for Life is nevertheless challenging in an *interesting* way; no other type of Skills for Life training work offers such a wide variety of experience and insight into how our economy works ‘from the inside’. It is also very rewarding because one is providing a vital service – workplace learners generally have few opportunities outside of work to improve their skills; unfriendly shift patterns, long working hours and domestic responsibilities all mitigate against them being able to undertake such training elsewhere.

All the challenges for workplace training providers, I believe, can be met, by using an approach which takes account of



all the variables involved and all these differing agendas. Careful planning and following a process which takes account of all the issues outlined above is the key to success. Below is a suggestion for doing this which meets the needs and expectations of all those involved.

- 1 Meet with the employer and, if a unionised organisation, the union representatives, to set clear goals for what needs to be achieved.
- 2 If possible, hold a meeting with the staff to give them information and gauge their expectations about the planned courses. This will allay any fears they may have. If unions are involved, ensure the Reps are the ones who organise this

and encourage their colleagues to come.

- 3 Meet with the line managers and resolve any issues they might have. Even though the courses may have been cleared by the senior management, supervisors and middle management might not have been consulted. Their support is crucial as it is they who will be in charge of releasing their staff for the training.
- 4 Draw up a contract or formal agreement. This is particularly important if the employer is not paying directly for the tuition.
- 5 Carry out individual initial assessments to establish levels and to group the learners into appropriate classes. Avoid mixed ability groups unless (as is often

the case in Small or Micro businesses) it is absolutely necessary.

- 6 Ensure the courses take place at times which are convenient for the employer as well as the learners.
- 7 Obtain feedback on the course from employees that can be fed back to the employer.

In summary, the development of workplace courses is qualitatively different from other provision. However, with sufficient time spent on planning you will achieve a result which is successful, relevant and beneficial to both the employer and the employees.

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