An Investigation of Employee Attitudes Towards Training Effectiveness

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Abstract  Little attention has been devoted to an assessment of the attitudes of employees towards the effectiveness of training investment. This study within a large university aims to explore the cleaning staff’s attitudes towards training effectiveness at four evaluation levels: reaction to training course, learning environment, behavior change and employee perceived training outcomes. Results of the study suggest that employees have positive attitude towards training effectiveness when management develop an integrated approach to training which place emphasis on the identification of training needs, the role of supervisors and reward system. Practical implication of the findings and future research are discussed.

Key words  employee attitudes, training effectiveness, evaluation

1 Introduction

Training can be defined as: ‘The systematic development of the attitude/knowledge/skill/behavior pattern required by an individual to perform adequately a given task or job’ (Bramley,1996:xvii). Over the past three year, the interest of investment in training has been increasing. Problematically, the mainstream training and HR literature has neglected the issue of how companies assess the effectiveness of training investments and in particular employees’ attitudes towards training effectiveness (Santos and Stuart, 2003:27). Because of this gap in the literature, this research project will be an exploratory research with attempt to present evidence from a detailed study designed to explore the cleaning staff’s attitudes towards the effectiveness of training in a large university that has a training policy in place. Due to time constraints, the purpose of present study will tend to explore the possible link between employee attitudes and levels of training effectiveness instead of investigating the cause-and-effect relationship between training effectiveness evaluation levels.

2 Effective training

‘Effective training’ will indicate ‘not only finding out whether the training was well done but also asking what it achieved and whether it was worth while for the organization to be sponsoring it’ (Bramley,1997:xvi). Therefore, to ensure the training is effective, the HR and training literatures stress that the organizations need to adopt a systematic approach to training which often include identifying needs, planning, delivery and evaluation.(Keep,1989) Arguably, the evaluation of training is one of the most critical stages in the training process (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2002:410). From the employee perspective, training is unlikely to be effective unless it is related to high level of motivation, better ability to perform their job, and hopefully also makes them feel positive toward their work (Wexley and Latham, 1991; Cascio,1992).

Various evaluation models are discussed about the effectiveness of training (Kirkpatrick’s, 1976; Warr et al 1976; Hambin 1974; Easterby-Smith’s 1986 etc). Each model has its strengths and weakness, but it is clear that there is a similarity among them, which is, the common components to evaluate training effectiveness are based on four levels: reaction, learning, behaviour change and results

3 Employee attitude and training effectiveness

An investigation of employee attitudes towards training effectiveness
Trainees’ attitudes may affect the effectiveness of training. Attitudes are likely to be influenced by participants’ experience of training and in turn affect trainees’ perspectives about the evaluation of training (Rigg, 1989:57). As Noe (1986) argues, ‘the attitudes, interests, values, and expectations of trainees may attenuate or enhance the effectiveness of training’ (p 737). He also suggests that if we are to have an understanding of how to enhance the likelihood that participation in training program will lead to behaviour change and performance improvement, it is important to determine specific individual characteristics that affect training effectiveness. In his training effectiveness model, he identifies participants’ attitudes concerning their jobs and careers and their perception of the work environment may have an effect on training outcomes. Testing this model, Noe and Schmitt (1986) found that participants were more motivated to learn and transfer skills to the work environment when they were highly involved in their jobs. The findings from Santos and Stuart’s (2003:42) case study also provide strong empirical support for Noe’s (1986) contention that employee will transfer skills and knowledge to the workplace if training is associated with rewards. Nonetheless, they point out that the applicability and usefulness of Noe’s model remains underdeveloped although the logic behind it is clear. Indeed, empirical investigations of personality, motivational and environmental factors impact on training effectiveness remain limited (Baldwin and Ford, 1988; Orpen, 1999).

There may be a link between employee positive attitudes and training effectiveness. Keep (1989) argues that at the individual level, investment in training provides a powerful signaling mechanism to increase employee motivation and commitment to the organization. Evidence from the Employment in Britain survey of 1992 supports this proposition by showing that from a dataset of 3,855 employed individuals, the majority of them feel committed to their organization, and for instance, 81 percent disagree with the view that they felt very little loyalty to their companies. Most interesting of all, approximately seven in eight of trainees saw training they received as beneficial, and this is often associated with achieving a qualification, gaining a promotion or a better job, and increase in earnings and other non-financial rewards such as job satisfaction and commitment (Gallie and White, 1993). These findings are informative but organizational commitment appears to be problematic. Although most employees feel committed to their companies, only a relatively small minority are strongly committed (Ibid, 1993:20).

A number of commentator (Green, 1992; Heyes and Stuart, 1994; Heyes, 1998) claim that training effectiveness can be mediated by social and political process that has been downplayed by the above research design. With an attempt to compensate this research design limitation, Heyes and Stuart (1996) conducted a nationwide survey of members of the Manufacturing Science and Finance (MSF) which covered over 1,000 employees working in a wide range of industries. Evidence from this survey suggests that training provision has a positive impact on employees’ attitudes such as motivation and job satisfaction where employers adopt structured, formalized approaches to training which link skill formation to job security, future employment prospects, recognition and rewards. However, the findings of this survey should be carefully interpreted (Ibid, 1996). As Kelly and Kelly (1991) have demonstrated, while ‘new industrial relations’ practices of employee involvement may affect employee attitudes positively, there is no priori reason to assume that positive attitudes will translate into feelings of commitment or mutual interest.

In summary, from the above-mentioned paragraph, it is clear that evaluation training effectiveness is a complicated process. Although the four evaluation levels based on Kirkpatrick’s model can be employed in almost any organization, it is also important to emphasize that different settings may produce different results in certain context (Kirkpatrick, 1967:32) Moreover, the influence of trainee’s attitudes on training effectiveness has been a relatively neglected research area (Noe, 1986) Accordingly, the present study will aim to shed some light on the employees’ attitudes towards training effectiveness in a large university which may provide different empirical evidence when compared with other settings. Also, the primary focus of this paper is upon the evaluation of reaction, learning environment, behaviour change and the impact of training perceived by employees. The evaluation of learning objectives accomplished on the training program and results will not be discussed.
4 Research method

To uncover employees’ attitudes towards training effectiveness, a questionnaire was designed to gather extensive data at four training effectiveness evaluation levels, such as, employees’ reactions to the induction training course, employees’ perceptions of learning environment, employees’ perspectives on the transfer of learning into the workplace, and employees perceived training outcomes. A representative sample of 100 ancillary staff was randomly selected from the name list in the staff manual. At a qualitative level, nine lengthy semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the different perspectives of both management and ancillary staff on the effectiveness of training.

4.1 Measures of attitude

A five point Likert-style rating scale (e.g., strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree) was used to assess employees’ attitude towards training effectiveness by asking the respondents how strongly they agree or disagree with series of statements. This was scored from +5 (strongly agree) to +1 (strongly disagree).

4.2 Measures of training effectiveness

The reaction criteria indicated how satisfied participants were with the content and delivery of the training program. Employees’ reaction to the training program was assessed by an eight item version of the scale developed by Kirkpatrick (1994) with a five point Likert-type format (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The learning criteria were designed to assess the degree to which employees felt their employer and supervisor provide them with support and opportunities to perform their job. It was measured by six items, one of which drawn from the scale developed by Santos and Stuart (2003). To measure behavior criteria, seven items was designed on scales from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Finally, training impact criteria focus on employees’ perception of benefit deriving from training. Six items drawn from Santos and Stuart (2003) and two items adapted from Heyes and Stuart (1996) were used to measure perceived training outcomes by employees such as improving employment prospects, receiving higher pay, getting job security, improving satisfaction, motivation and commitment.

5 Findings

To gain a full picture of the effectiveness of training investment in the university, this study explores the attitudes of cleaning staff towards training effectiveness at four levels, which is reaction, learning environment, behavior change and perceived training outcomes. At the reaction level, research findings indicated that although employees’ experience of induction training course was widespread and the reaction to the delivery and content of this course was generally positive, non-job related training had been a neglected concern by the cleaning staff. From the supervisor perspective, some cleaners did not perceive training as important for their personal development and they worked as a cleaner just for filling a financial gap.

At the learning environment level, general response to the learning climate was positive, for example most respondents agreed that their employers viewed training as important and training opportunities were open to all cleaning staff. Nevertheless, there was a concern among the respondents that supervisor did not keep them informed of training opportunities to date except the compulsory induction training course. The research finding from this study also showed that dissatisfaction was pronounced over the linkage of the skills development and pay among the supervisors. Hence, the role of supervisors is of crucial importance in discussing training needs and improving the value of training with the staff. With no reward for the acquisition of new skills and implementation of training evaluation, the commitment and involvement of supervisors in training activities was proved to be potentially problematic.

At the behavior change level, the majority of cleaning staff applied learning to their work and found training had been useful particularly in terms of handling health and safety issues. At this point, this study replicate Santos and Stuart (2003)’s previous study finding that the successful transfer of training was found to be dependent on the opportunities and resources available to apply new knowledge. As the previous paragraphs presented, cleaning staff that reacted positively to the training course was more likely to apply learning to the workplace. Likewise, trainees who agreed that the learning environment was supportive were most likely to transfer training content to their job. Thus, the analysis of the
findings in this study strongly suggests that positive reaction was related to behavior change, and supportive learning environment was related to behavior change.

At the level of perceived training outcomes by employees, most employees showed favorable perspectives on job ability, future employment prospects, and job security, but just a small proportion believed that skill acquisition would positively lead to higher pay, promotion prospects and nationally recognized qualification. Compared with the evidence in Heyes and Stuart(1996)’s study which suggested the important role of reward system in influencing employees’ attitudes in training where employer took an integrated approach to training, the research findings in this study showed that training was rarely correlated with the attainment of nationally recognized qualification. Nor do cleaning staff perceive an association between qualification and promotion. Moreover, in employees’ eyes skills acquisition had little linkage with remuneration. Even though the employees showed positive attitudes towards future employment prospects that were limited to similar cleaning job, there was little linkage between training and career progression. All these results suggested that employers in cleaning services department failed to develop long-term, systematic approaches to training which link skill acquisition to rewards in the respect of cleaning staff development. On the contrary, supervisor appears to show an optimistic attitude towards training, qualification and career progression.

Building on the preceding paragraphs, it is clear that cleaning staff identified a potential for training to have a favorable impact on job satisfaction, motivation at work, ability to do their job better, future employment prospects and higher job security. As evident in Table 1, the majority of the correlations between the perceived outcomes and satisfaction, motivation and commitment were statistically significant, but the correlation between higher pay and commitment was not statistically significant. These results would suggest a positive response toward the provision of training program was related to the training rewards provided by the organization.

In the case of personal satisfaction, it had statistically significant positive relationships with higher pay(r=0.394,p<0.01), higher job security(r=0.411,p<0.01), ability to do a better job(r=0.528,p<0.01), future employment prospects(r=0.660,p<0.01) and qualification(r=0.541,p<0.01). This means that those cleaning staff was feeling more satisfied with their job if they had received a pay rise, felt secure about their job, received a nationally recognized qualification, improved their ability to do their job better, or had their future employment prospects expanded. In particular, future employment prospects, receiving nationally recognized qualification and ability to do their job were the more important factors influencing the anticipated impact of training on personal satisfaction. Similarly, in the case of motivation at work, employees felt more motivated in response to the above variables, such as higher pay(r=0.288, p<0.05), higher job security(r=0.557, p<0.01), ability to do a better job(r=0.596, p<0.01), future employment prospects(r=0.748, p<0.01) and qualification(r=0.672, p<0.01). Furthermore, Table 2 indicated that although not statistically significant, there were positive relationships between the length of time trainees last took place and motivation at work(r=0.117, p<0.05) as well as job satisfaction(r=0.031, p>0.05). Where cleaning staff were currently receiving or had

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived outcomes</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher pay</td>
<td>r=0.394(**)</td>
<td>r=0.288(*)</td>
<td>r=0.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job ability</td>
<td>r=0.528(**)</td>
<td>r=0.596(**)</td>
<td>r=0.364(**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment prospects</td>
<td>r=0.660(**)</td>
<td>r=0.748(**)</td>
<td>r=0.435(**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>r=0.541(**)</td>
<td>r=0.672(**)</td>
<td>r=0.441(**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job security</td>
<td>r=0.411(**)</td>
<td>r=0.557(**)</td>
<td>r=0.577(**)</td>
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</tbody>
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N=53
*  p<0.05 (2-tailed)
** p<0.01 (2-tailed)
received training during the last three months, they were likely to associate it with higher job satisfaction and felt more motivated at work.

Table 2: Correlation between satisfaction, motivation and training incidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>After training, I feel more motivated at work</th>
<th>I get a feeling of personal satisfaction from my work after training</th>
<th>*when did you last receive training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After training, I feel more motivated at work</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation 1</td>
<td>.823(**).117</td>
<td>N 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000 .405</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>53 .405</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get a feeling of personal satisfaction from my work after training</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation .823(**.000)</td>
<td>1 .031 .825</td>
<td>N 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000 .825</td>
<td>53</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>*when did you last receive training</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation .117</td>
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<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>53 .825</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Note: respondent’s options were: received training currently, in last 4 weeks, within the last 3 months and within the past 12 months

With regards to employees’ commitment to the organization, it clearly demonstrated the importance of the reward system in Table 2. There was a statistically significant positive association between increased commitment and perceived outcomes, which was defined in terms of job ability (r=0.364, p<0.01), future employment prospects (r=0.435, p<0.01), qualification (r=0.441, p<0.01), and job security (r=0.577, p<0.01). This indicated that those who associated training with better job ability, better employment prospects, nationally recognized qualification and higher job security were significantly likely to be highly committed. Although it was no statistically significant, pay was positively related to commitment (r=0.222, p>0.05). Those respondents were more likely to stay with the organization if they were adequately rewarded. Thus, the reward system played a big part in increasing employees’ commitment towards the organization.

6 Conclusion

Returning to the extant literature on the training effectiveness evaluation models, this study provided some supports for the highly influential Kirkpatrick’s (1967) hierarchical evaluation model in that positive reactions to training program and supportive learning climate had important consequences for training transfer, although cause-and-effect chain can not be traced due to the time constraints in this study. Unlike Easterby-Smith(1986)’s methods in evaluating training effectiveness, this study did not take into account both pre and post training activities. In the Noe(1986)’s training effectiveness model, he identified participants’ attitudes concerning their jobs and careers and their perception of the work climate that might have an impact on training outcomes. This study offered empirical evidence to support this model in that the behavior change occurred when training provision was linked to supervisor support, adequate resources and rewards.

6.1 Practical implications

The findings of this case study have several probable implications for increasing training effectiveness within the cleaning services department. For one thing, training resources should be made full use of by correctly identifying staff training needs. For another thing, more attention should be given to improve the commitment and involvement of supervisors in the training activities. Moreover, managers are likely to achieve greater training effectiveness by not only improving the employees’
performance at work, but getting them more involved with the activities such as the Christmas party held by the department they are cleaning although majority of them are part-time workers to make them have a sense of belonging instead of being only a member of the cleaning staff.

6.2 Study limitations
The first limitation of the study refers to the collection of research data. Due to the time constraints the research data was collected in a short period of time. Both Interviews and the delivery of questionnaire were conducted at the same time. This did not enable adequate time for the research to focus on some research question such as commitment issues which needed more examination. Furthermore, the collection of cross-sectional data yielded low validity, so it is impossible to determine the causal relationship between variables. The second limitation refers to the number of questions in the questionnaire. Questions were designed according to the overall objectives of the research. Thus, a potential problem might be that the respondents might not have the capacity to complete them all. Another limitation refers to the application of this research findings to other similar sectors. Because this is a single case study with small questionnaire and interview sample size, its research outcomes cannot be generalized to a wider population or other settings.

6.3 Future research
Although this study has shed light on the importance of employees’ attitudes in influencing training effectiveness, further empirical studies are needed to assess the impact of employee job involvement on training effectiveness and evaluate training effectiveness in terms of bottom-line results such as staff turnover. Furthermore, there is still a need to administer pretest and posttest longitudinal research to make a comparison of the extent of behavior change that takes place following training.

References:
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