THE TRANSFERABILITY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND LEARNING FROM THE MILITARY CONTEXT TO THE CIVILIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract:

One of the most commonly advanced reasons for joining the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is the quality of the training given to enlisted personnel. The access to quality vocational education and training is a significant recruitment and retention benefit put forward by the ADF and is highlighted on all the recruitment related materials available for potential military personnel. This paper describes the results of research undertaken into vocational education and training within the military context and how it compares and aligns with similar civilian delivered vocational education and training. The paper also looks at the transferability of vocational learning from the military context to the civilian context through a series of case studies in three vocational areas and finds that while the content of military training is highly transferable the context and culture of the vocational education and training is quite distinctive and some of these factors could lead to a possible disjuncture when military personnel transfer to the civilian sector.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe a research study that was undertaken to examine Vocational Education and Training within the military context and the transition of vocationally trained military personnel into civilian work. The research was undertaken regarding Vocational Education and Training in the military to determine whether military delivered VET courses are adequate in preparing military personnel for civilian work, if this training is effective enough for postings, and what alternative technologies and methods of delivery are used by vocational education trainers in the military. It also hoped to uncover the nature of vocational education experiences and learning of military personnel within the military context of using three vocational education areas of interest: aviation, hospitality and administration as case studies.

While this research considers the transferability of skill from the military to the civilian context, it is imperative to clarify that the primary function of the military is in staffing the Defence needs of the country and not that of providing transferable skills. Yet for individuals considering joining the Defence Forces this is an important consideration particularly as the period of service an individual joins for is a considerable amount of time. Furthermore once the end of that service period concludes the individual is then concerned with a smooth military-civilian conversion specifically in employment life. Strength in the Defence Force's Human Resources therefore lies in that ease of skill transferability.

Previous research studies that have been conducted in the military predominantly pertain to e-learning and training technologies (e.g. Newton & Ellis, 2005). However they are not primarily concerned with vocational education nor do they shed light on military vocational education practices. It was the aim of this research to endeavour to reduce the gap in the literature through contributing to an understanding and knowledge of vocational education and training within the military context.

Workplace Culture and Learning

Work-based learning not only signifies the process of knowledge and skill acquisition by employees in the workplace (Smith, & Chepelin, 2009), it also concerns the

development of individual competence as well as the marketability of skills acquired through formal and informal workplace learning. Yet it is the transferability of these skills and the realisation of the full benefit of their application, that determine the extent of marketability (Gibbs, & Morris, 2001; Svensson, Randle, & Bennich, 2009). There are however various components that affect the development of individual competence in the workplace.

Key components in developing individual competence in work-based learning, as identified in the literature (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Leslie, Aring, & Brand, 1997; Goldman, Plack, Roche, Smith & Turley, 2009), are context and contextual elements particularly in influencing how and what adults learn. These elements include demographics, globalisation, technology, the environmental factors of the learning site as well as the extent to which an organisations' learning culture, and its features, are present. This is due to the learning processes of an individual which cannot be separated from the learning context. It is therefore apparent that these elements either catalyse or inhibit learning through the level of stress contribution in the work environment (Goldman, Plack, Roche, Smith, & Turley, 2009).

The type, amount and quality of learning-related occurrences that take place in the workplace can be influenced by an organisation's culture and environment. Job satisfaction and motivation to transfer recently attained knowledge to the workplace context. It is therefore important that organisations provide employees with an optimal context to develop and advance in their jobs as it is the mutual interaction between the individual and the workplace that determines learning (Egan, Yang, & Bartlett, 2004; Kyndt, Dochy, & Nijs, 2009; Hagar, 1997).

According to Lynch, Leo, and Downing (2006) an organisation's culture determines and creates a distinctive set of formal and informal 'ground rules' for how individuals within the organisation think, behave, and what they assume to be true. Culture therefore becomes crucial to any learning taking place. Poell, van Dam, and van den Berg (2004) acknowledge that managers recognise that organisational culture affects workplace learning, yet more so that the culture is important to stimulating learning. It is evident that the military has its own distinctive culture and this culture pervades all

aspects of life for military personnel and plays a very important part in workplace learning.

Research Approach

The research was conducted through a qualitative study with the use of semi-standardised questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These methods were then further supported by triangulation of data with the use of document analysis. Through the application of these three data collection methods, various aspects of Vocational Education and Learning within the military were sought, including the learning experiences and views of learners, and the views of trainers in regard to the transition of military personnel from the military workplace to the civilian workplace.

The case studies presented within this study enabled the illustration of varying perspectives from a range of organisations and organisational personnel, furthermore, the data collection methods; questionnaires and interviews, involved a cross-section of people with whom the study was concerned. The case studies therefore were made up of the on and off-the-job learning experiences of the learners with a focus on how learners engaged with learning in a military context, and how transferable the skills and knowledge gained by trainees in the military are once military personnel move into the civilian workplace. Within this body of research, the nature of vocational education experiences and learning were investigated along with the combinations of on and off-the-job training, and the hierarchical disciplines of military life associated with compulsory training, vocational education training, and its interdispersement with military training.

Participant Selection

This research study sought particular knowledge and experiences which could only be derived from specific individuals with the insights, views and understandings of concern to the study, this study chose to utilise two groups of participants; military vocational education learners, and military vocational education trainers. In selecting these particular participants, views and experience of military delivered VET could be gathered from two perspectives as well as opinions on the transferability of these VET skills and knowledge to the civilian workplace. In doing so, this assisted with the

triangulation of data collection methods and to further support and substantiate results and findings of the study.

Explicitly important to this study was that the research participants fulfilled the participant selection criteria. The military vocational education and training learners (N=13) were required to have completed a vocational course in either catering, clerical-administration or aviation disciplines of military VET, currently work for the Australian Defence Force in a posting that requires that vocational training and the training must have been delivered by the military. The Vocational Education and Training Trainers were required to be currently working in the Australian Defence Force in the position of a vocational education trainer in either of the three Vocational disciplines mentioned above, with at least two years experience as a military trainer as particular experience and knowledge within the industry must be evident.

Research Context and Sites

Consequently due to the participant selection criteria, it was essential that certain organisations were contacted for access to those individuals that the research took an interest in. Several military organisations were therefore contacted through the use various information letters and follow up phone calls concerning the purpose and intention of the study as well as the practical benefits to those organisations, as a result the research study received assistance from four defence agencies situated both in Queensland and around New South Wales. These organisations were chosen via convenience sample as were the participants who were offered participation in the study according to availability of personnel and other ethical considerations the organisations considered in providing the study with access to the trainees.

Limitations of the study

This research study had various limitations, a main limitation is that it is only an illustrative study, the participants and research sites were chosen via a convenience sample not via random sampling and is therefore not generalisable. The study only

includes two Defence Organisations and involved only a small number of learners and trainers and therefore does not present a statistical generalisable conclusion. Another evident limitation is that the researchers were not in the military and therefore had limited access to information, learners and the research sites. Time available was another limitation of the study as the researchers could not follow the trainees throughout the duration of their training. Furthermore the study was also limited to three fields of military VET delivered courses.

Results of the Study

Questionnaire Data

Trainee views on what was delivered through their vocational training

	Strongly disagree	Moderately Disagree	Neutral	Moderately Agree	Strongly agree
Q1. The apprenticeship provided me with the 'latest and greatest' current and up to date information and technology utilised in the industry in civilian employment.		7.69%	46.15%	46.15%	
Q 2. The apprenticeship trained me in current skills used in the industry.			23.07%	46.15%	30.76%
Q 3. The apprenticeship provided me with only military specific skills.	23.07%	61.53%	7.69%		7.69%
Q 4. The apprenticeship provided me with employability skills utilised within the trade.			7.69%	53.84%	38.46%

Q 5. The apprenticeship provided me with the training and skills needed for my military posting(s).	7.69%		38.46%	30.76%	23.07%
Q 6. All my apprenticeship training was provided in house.	23.07%			15.38%	61.53%
Q 7. The apprenticeship provided me with opportunities to train with external providers.	46.15%	15.38%	23.07%	7.69%	7.69%
Q 8. The on-the-job training components provided me with valuable experiences in working with industry equipment and technology			30.76%	46.15%	23.07%
Q 9. The off-the-job training components provided me with necessary industry knowledge, strategies, skills and information to capably work in the industry.	7.69%	7.69%	30.76%	38.46%	15.38%
Q 10. Both on and off-the-job components of my apprenticeship provided me with, and further developed my technical skills.			7.69%	53.84%	38.46%

Interviews with trainers: (N= 8)

Similarly the interviews with trainers all revealed that the skills and knowledge acquired during the period of training in the military gave the learners all that was needed to transfer to the civilian context. Some of the trainers (N=4) had made the switch to the civilian sector and stayed for various periods of time before switching back to the military environment so were quite familiar with the requirements of working in the non-military sector; both for profit and non-profit.

Document analysis:

An analysis of a range of documents relating to Training Packages, training experiences, on and off the job learning activities from the military and a range of civilian Registered Training Organisations revealed that the learners in the military were exposed to very similar experiences and activities as learners in the civilian sector. In many instances their experiences exceeded those offered in the civilian sector and demonstrated that the military training was both comprehensive and well structured.

Conclusion:

Qualifications are highly important to military personnel when seeking civilian employment and as the competencies covered in military trade training identified by trainers and trainees are: "direct reflection of diplomas and things done at TAFE" (trainee 9). This enables a military personnel to "apply for those certificate so that once you do get out you've got them there and...we've actually got the certificates to say we've done the same training as someone in civilian life" (trainee 9). Qualifications and trade certificates as identified by one trainee can be gained from "Sydney training command which is a headquarters that recognises your military qualifications and provides you civilian qualification equivalent...so it's easy you can just put it in your resume that you've got these qualifications instead of just trying to think what that (military training) means in the civilian world" (trainee 10).

Having that civilian equivalent qualification will greatly assist military personnel in seeking transition to civilian work as the civilian employer will be familiar with these nationally recognised qualifications without the need for the military personnel to present military competencies and training packages which may not necessarily come across to the civilian employer as well as the civilian equivalent qualification.

Other skills and experiences acquired by military personnel through their military service could also be useful to the individual seeking civilian employment as this may be an attribute which gets them employment over other job applicants. Features such as military values and attitudes, as well as employability skills not specifically

mentioned in military training packages such as team work, leadership skills, communication, supervision and which are prominent attributes gained through military employment. This ability to promote skills and experiences gained through military employment may very well assist in a smooth and successful transition into civilian work and transfer of skill, particularly as the individual will be looking at their previously attained skills for their applicability and transfer to the civilian trade context.

As evident through the discussions above, there are various factors that support and conflict with the transition into civilian life and work, particularly as the military is more so a way of life rather than a job incorporating the values and attitudes unique to the military. A very important factor where military personnel may feel transition to be difficult is in the loss of identity and status particularly if one was of a certain rank before they left. However, this loss in role and status could provide the individual with a purpose in attaining a good position within a civilian organisation in order to regain purpose and identity within a workplace.

In transferring to a civilian workplace the individual leaves the 'family' of the military as well as the camaraderie felt amongst colleagues. In this family aspect of the military each individual knows their place in the family and once the individual leaves that, they are left to recover a sense of family and camaraderie. An important consideration therefore is that of developing friendships in the civilian world as it is often challenging to make new friends particularly as most friends are left behind in the military. Developing these friendships will then assist the ex-military personnel in not feeling so cut off from the civilian world. This could also assist in developing an understanding of the context that they now find themselves as well as the people whom they must work with.

The disciplined, organised and regimented nature of the military is another area in which an ex-military personnel may find difficult in leaving behind as they may find civilian life to be somewhat chaotic. This could be due to a perceived lack of structure as well as direction as in the military they are to an extent able to predict what they are going to do next whether it is which posting they will be assigned to next, what rank they will next assume, and what area of their trade they will purpose. Once in the civilian context however there is not direct path they will be expected to take and they

must then make their own way and make career decisions without that military like structure.

In seeking employment and obtaining a job in a civilian workplace military personnel will need to be adaptable, have the ability to promote military experiences, and qualifications gained through their military career. The ability to adapt is very important when moving into a new organisation which may have a very distinct culture from that of the military, adaptability will also assist in lessening culture shock an individual may experience in transferring particularly as the individual will have to transition to both civilian life and civilian work.

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