Enhancing Continued Professional Development Strategically: An Outlook via Adult Learning Theory

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Abstract

Professional development (PD) among organizational talents is a critical element in today's business environment. In view of PD, both organizations and their professional members are required to learn continuously, thus Continued Professional Development (CPD) activities in organizations are gaining prominence. Formal, non-formal and informal learning constitute CPD learning dimensions. Given that professionals are experienced individuals, their learning needs and situations differ from conventional learners. Adult learners are found to be highly motivated, self-directed and very aware of their personal strengths, tend to choose knowledge that is meaningful to them and relate that with their experiences. The theory of adult learning (ALT) suggests that adult learners or working persons have certain characteristics that differentiate them from conventional learners. However, several studies revealed that learning activities to cater for PD are inconsistent with adult learning principles. The adult learners are mostly treated no different than the conventional learners; hence knowledge transfer did not reach its optimal expectations. On that note, this article discusses CPD activities from adult learning perspective gathered from extensive literatures. The objectives of this paper are threefold. First, this paper explains the importance of CPD from the adult learning standpoint. Second, this paper analyses the extent of CPD activities in fulfilling adult learning principles. Lastly, this paper proposes a feasible strategic CPD framework for future research.

Keywords: *Human Resource Development; Continued Professional Development; Formal Learning; Non-Formal Learning; Informal Learning; Adult Learning Theory*

Introduction

Competitive and quality workforce determines the achievement of organizational objectives. The objectives could only be attained based on how best an organization utilises the employees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA). However, one major concern is that knowledge and professional expertise become obsolete rapidly as a result of changes in the nature of work as well as technological and market transformations (Cunningham, 2006; Eddy et al., 2005; Latham & Wexley, 2001; López-Cabrales et al., 2011; Mugisha, 2009; Udin et al., 2012). Scholars in employee development noted that the acquisition and improvement of employee KSA are predominantly related to continuous learning at workplace. To ensure employees KSA are up-to-date, the efforts and organizational support are essential to promote continuous or life-long learning culture (Adanu, 2007; Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Garrick, 1998; López-Cabrales et al., 2011; McGuire & Jorgenssen, 2011; Tan, 2005; Whee et al., 2012). The concept of continuous or life-long learning, also known as CPD, helps to address the 'professional obsolete syndrome' amongst professional employees. CPD is vital for professionals to remain relevant and current as well as for organisations to remain competitive. CPD acknowledges that learning could take place in different settings and it occurs over the whole course of our life (Fuller et al., 2003). Literatures on CPD

suggest that learning ensues in three dimensions namely formal, non-formal and informal learning (Andy Smith, 2011; Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Conlon, 2004; Garrick, 1998; Heijden et al., 2009; Thomas & Anderson, 2006; Tomé, 2011; Wai et al., 2012).

Continued Professional Development

CPD, whether formal, non-formal or informal is a purposeful learning activity, has no age limit, and is based on people's access to knowledge and learning. It also covers a whole range of different contexts – formal learning at school and university (Adanu, 2007; Young, 2005), non-formal learning at the workplace (Maimunah, 2011; Noon, 1994) and informal learning through literature and life experiences (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Garrick, 1998; Leader, 2003). CPD could be defined as the conscious updating of professional knowledge and the improvement of professional competence throughout a person's working life. It is a commitment to being professional, keeping up-to-date, continuously seeking to improve professional practices (Jones & Fear, 1994; Maimunah, 2011) and key to optimizing a person's career opportunities, both for today and for the future (The Chartered Institute of Professional Development, 2014). Encouraging CPD leads to better workforce development, produces competent, talented and skilled workforce and gives a boost to the professionalism of the professions (Adanu, 2007; Jones & Fear, 1994; Noon, 1994; Young, 2005).

A major reason why professionals embark on CPD activities is to improve work performance (Adanu, 2007, p.302). Therefore, CPD activities to be carried out must be consistent and relevant with organizational strategic and operational business plans (Jones & Fear, 1994). The concept and practices of CPD are employed by many organizations for the purpose of improving professional competency to ensure the availability or supply of high quality employees. Typically, CPD is provided through a number of different paths, such as short courses, attendance at conferences, paper presentations and in some instances, PD might take the form of gaining new qualifications to follow a different career direction (Board of Engineers Malaysia, 2013; Malaysian Institute of Human Resource Management, 2013; Malaysian Institute of Management, 2013; The Institution of Engineering and Technology, 2013).

There are a number of professions that provide CPD to their members and non-members such as The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, The Chartered Institute of Building, The Chartered Institute of Marketing, The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and The Chartered Institute for IT. In the Malaysian context, professional bodies that provide CPD for their members and non-members include Malaysian Institute of Human Resource Management, Malaysian Institute of Management; and The Board of Engineers Malaysia. These professional bodies offer CPD programs ranging from certificates, diploma, and professional courses.

Adult Learning Theory

According to the National Institute of Adult Education England, adult learning is "any kind of education for people who are old enough to work, vote, fight, marry and who have completed the cycle of continuous education commenced in childhood. They might wish to make up for limited schooling, to pass examinations, to learn basic skills of trade and

profession or to master new working processes. They might want to understand, or obtain satisfaction from developing talents and skills – intellectual, aesthetic, physical or practical. They might also seek the knowledge they require from books or broadcasts or take correspondence courses from tutors they have never meet. They could even find education without a label by sharing in common pursuits with like-minded people" (NIACE, 2014).

According to Merriam (2001) in Swift and Kelly (2010), prior to mid-1900s, research in education, particularly understanding how an adult learns was based on research that involved participation of adults just like children. The research did not distinguish the difference in learning between adults and children (Merriam, 2001a). This led to a misleading comprehension of how adults learn, especially professionals. Due to that, the concept of andragogy or ALT was discussed extensively in the 1960s by Malcolm Knowles. It is defined as the "art and science of teaching adults" (Knowles, 1988). The andragogy concept focuses on the learning strategies of adults and the course of actions involved in engaging adults in the learning process (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Knowles, 1988; Marquardt & Waddill, 2004; Merriam & Leahy, 2005; Merriam, 2001a, 2001b).

The ALT suggested that adult learners (working persons) have certain characteristics that differentiate them from traditional learners, that is, they are highly motivated, self-directed (Knowles, 1990), highly aware of their personal strengths, tend to choose knowledge that is meaningful to them and relate that with their experiences (Chuang et al., 2013; Faizah, 2006; Hazadiah & Jamiah, 2006; Illeris, 2003). With respect to adult learning, learning itself must be viewed from the learner's standpoint (Illeris, 2003). This is particularly true as how an adult learns might differ from how children learn. ALT, which explains how adults learn, was developed out of a need for a specific theory on how adults learn. Most educational theories, as well as formal learning institutions, were developed exclusively to educate children and youths and was known as pedagogy. Loveless (1998) as quoted by Briggs and Sommefeldt (2002), defined pedagogy as the "the science of the art of teaching", which means to lead a child how to learn. Educational psychologists, recognising these limitations, developed andragogy, the theory of adult learning.

The concept of andragogy as posited by Cheetham and Chivers (2001) underlined several important tenets such as adult learners want to be 'self directed', adult learners have a greater volume, quality and variety of experiences, adult's willingness to learn is triggered by a chance in their situation, adults are life, task or problem centered, and adults are motivated by internal pressures. In contrast to andragogy, learning that suits children and youths is termed as pedagogy, which highlighted tenets such as the student is fully dependent on a teacher, the student has very little experience that is of much value or is related to the learning content, students learn what and when they are told to learn, the student is subject mattered, and students are motivated to learn due to external pressures (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Knowles, 1988; Knowles, 1990; Rogers, 2002). Differences between these two approaches in learning are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1:

Differences between Pedagogy and Andragogy Approaches

Differences	Pedagogy	Andragogy
The concept of the learner	Students are fully dependent on a teacher	Participations are "self-directing" and not dependent on the instructor.
The role of the learner's experience	Students have little experience related to the learning content. Thus, teaching is straight transmission from the teacher to the student.	Participants have a great volume, quality, and variety of relevant experience. This experience is a primary source of participants' identities. In addition, participants come to workshops or class with many preoccupations and prejudices gained through years of experience.
The learner's readiness to learn	Students learn what and when they are told to learn.	Participants only learn when they experience a need to know or do something. Their readiness to learn is often triggered by a change in their situation.
The learner's orientation to learning	Students are subject-centred.	Participants are life, task and problem-centred.
The learner's motivation to learn	Students are motivated to learn by external pressures.	Participants are only motivated to learn primarily by internal pressures such as self-esteem, recognition, quality of life, and greater self-confidence.

Source: Briggs and Sommefeldt (2002); Knowles (1988); Rogers (2002)

In adult learning literature, Malcolm Knowles was known as the founder or the father of adult learning theory. Knowles (1988, 1990) argued that adult learners' have special charateristics that differentiate them from young learners. Adults have the need to know why they are learning something, they have a need to be self-directed and bring more work related experiences into the learning situation. Adults enter into a learning experience with a problem-centered approach to learning, and are motivated to learn by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. Further, Brookfield (2001) stressed that teaching and dealing with adult learners requires facilitators to understand certain characteristics of adult learners. These include its voluntary nature, need for respect, the collaborative aspect, have to be nurtured, foster spirit of critical reflection, and is a continuous process. Meanwhile, Smith (1992) stated that characteristics of adult learning signify that, it is lifelong, it is personal, it involves change, it is partially a function of human development, it is pertaining to experience, and it is partially intuitive.

According to Swift and Kelly (2010), adult learners are highly motivated by their specific needs and interests. Learning is a life-long experience thus, experience plays an important source of adult learning. Adults prefer self-directed learning where they like to have input into their learning experience and their individual differences should be acknowledged and respected, given the differences in experience they encounter in life. Meanwhile, Rogers (2002) stated that there are several learning principles that help to understand them better, such as adults bring a lot of experience with them and therefore have something to contribute. Adults require classes that focus on real-life problems and tasks. Furthermore, adults are accustomed to being active and self directing in their quest for knowledge. Many scholars (see Clark, 2001; Hansman, 2001; Hill, 2001; Marquardt & Waddill, 2004; Marsick & Waitkins, 2001; Merriam, 2001a, 2001b) in the adult learning field call for experiences to be taken seriously as this is one of the unique features of adult learning.

ALT has been criticised by several scholars (see Cross, 1981; Davenport, 1991; Grace, 1996; Hartree, 1988; Hanson, 1996; Jarvis, 1977; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Pratt, 1993). They argued that ALT as decribed by Knowles, failed to consider various aspects with regards to how an adult learns. ALT as a theory, provides an unclear framework and only describes the charateristics of adult learners. There is a vague dichotomy whether it describes adult learning or adult teaching, and also empirical testing or analysis was not thoroughly conducted (Smith, 2002). However, despite the criticism, andragogy or adult learning theory provides a useful doctrine in designing PD courses (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Illeris, 2003; Merriam, 2001a, 2001b).

Does CPD Activities Conform To Adult Learning Perspective?

Although CPD plays an important role in developing KSA, there are several issues or challenges to CPD in terms of practices and effectiveness on adult learners. These seem to limit the overall effectiveness of CPD, especially with regard to learning for strategic PD. With respect to learning at workplace, many of the literatures focussed on learning among adults or adult learners (Boud & Middleton, 2003; LeClus, 2011). Caniëls and Kirschner (2010) posited that the concept of CPD is closely related to adult learning. In the organisational context, the types of learning engaged by employees on a continuous basis, understanding how adults learn and what they learn, and how their learning could improve their competency, all contribute significantly towards organisational performance. As highlighted by Cheetham and Chivers (2000, 2001), Garrick (1998) and Merriam (2001a, 2001b), CPD must take into account the aspect of adult learning as a theoretical approach to learning for PD. Adult Learning Theory (ALT) is one of the learning theories that specifically focused on adult development. The following sections analyse to what extent CPD activities fulfil adult learning principles to enhance PD.

Formal Learning Activities and Adult Learning

According to Habibah (2006), large number of adults have been coming back to the university mainly for self or individual development and PD. She further noted that many universities or institutions of higher learning realize that older or mature students are beginning to populate the campuses through various modes of learning such as off-campus programs, distance learning, flexible learning and Open University programs. Many scholars (see Abu Bakar et.al, 1999; Brown, 2002; Heenan, 2002) referred to adult learners as 'non-traditional' students. Formal learning institutions which are adult learners' vehicle for their CPD need to recognize that adult learners have vast experiences, thus making them 'rich resources in the classroom'. This suggests that their experiences determine who they are, thereby creating their sense of self-identity. The adult learners enter the learning institutions to equip themselves with specific and immediate plans for applying the newly acquired knowledge and they want to put to immediate use what they have learnt (Faizah, 2006). However, the spoon-feeding method adopted by many formal learning institutions has created a pedagogical approach that imbue with it a sense of passivity to learning on the part of the students (Young, 2005). Adanu (2007) argued that to keep abreast with new knowledge and skills, it is no longer an option to rely on one-time education, given the rapid changes in technologies. Adanu further suggested that a person leaving educational institution might require periodic upgrading and retraining at least five times in their working life. However,

formal learning does pose some challenges to adult students, such as personal challenges (family matters, house chores), professional challenges (juggling between family, student and work roles) and academic challenges (assignments, examination, coursework presentations, etc.). These challenges prove to be the significant factors that contribute towards the extent to which they excel in their individual development and PD (Habibah, 2006).

Another issue with the educational institutions is whether they are able to keep pace with the advances in new knowledge and technology and impart current and ever expanding knowledge to the students. Besides good support systems, institutions of higher learning also face challenges such as having to cater to the needs, expectations and differences among adult learners who have vast working experiences that might differ with the academic discourses (Faizah & Hazadiah, 2006; Hazadiah & Jamiah, 2006) and that have great influence on their learning styles and strategies (Sohaimi, 2006). Adults also face difficulties in coping with the demands of the academia as compared to their younger counterparts. Quoting Knowles (1990)'s study, Hazadiah and Jamiah (2006) agreed that institutions of higher learning do not make any distinction between adult and traditional learners and therefore adult learners are considered as 'neglected species'. In addition to it, a study on academic performance among adult learners by Yang and Lu (2001) as cited by Conlon (2004; p.289), suggested that formal learning is not the most important factor in determining individual performance which however, depends more on informal learning.

Hazadiah and Jamiah (2006) as well as Habibah (2006) thus call for formal learning providers (institutions of higher learning) to provide good support systems for the development of adult learners by becoming more flexible, inclusive and accommodative. Adult learners who return to higher learning institutions for PD need a supportive environment to succeed and to facilitate their PD process. Interestingly, Tomé (2011, p.529) stated that although competence certification is produced by formal education institutions (such as academic transcript, official certificates) organizations still face difficulties in defining employee competence due to changes in the economy, technology, labour demand, and new discoveries of knowledge that renders them obsolete. Furthermore, evidence from this study shows the critical need for higher learning institutions to face challenges amidst the growing diversity in the group of learners and take into account the distinction between adult and traditional learners. Merriam (2001) was also of the view that formal learning is just another mechanism for adult learning and stressed the importance of informal learning which has a great potential to utilize experiences as a valuable source of learning.

Furthermore, in his most recent study Lockhart (2013) also concurred that there is a huge divide between an academic and a practitioner. The academic (also known as the research community) and the practioner (commonly known as the business community) do not seem to agree on how learning for adults should be conducted. This is because the research community is more focussed on content and theory while the business community has a practical and application based approach. To bridge the academic-practioner divide, Lockhart proposed to offer executive education via formal learning in education institutions. This would enable the executives (or adult learners) to become critical reflective practitioners (to be more flexibel and adaptable). They would have a strong understanding of the theory or theories (know what is being done) and apply their vast experiences and practices (know why it should work) and continuosly learn. This is a great challenge facing formal learning with respect to professional development among adults.

Non-Formal Learning Activities and Adult Learning

Non-formal learning refers to programs or courses that are intended to increase employee competencies. It is also known as workplace learning (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Garrick, 1998; Kie, 2010; Young, 2005). Non-formal learning as a learning medium is also known as training and development and frequently used in planned organizational socialization programs (Thomas & Anderson, 2006; Tina, 2007). Training has gained popularity as a means to improve employee competencies since the 1950s (Zadel, 2006) and is widely organized in organizations as the universities and/or other higher educational institutions are unable to teach students everything that they need to know in order to prepare them for real-working lives (Lappia, 2009 in Tomé, 2011).

Although non-formal learning is considered as the most popular form of fulfilling the required CPD, some argue that this does not lead towards applying and putting into practise the knowledge gained at the workplace (Kie, 2010; Tan, 2005; Torres, 2004). Adult learners are always entrapped in the effectiveness of training, thus creating a serious gap between knowing and actually doing it (Ong, 2005). In non-formal learning, trainers tend to be driven by the curriculum (Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002) and hence conduct series of lectures to cover as much content as possible in the training session. This makes it less effective, especially to adult learners who are more learner-driven and tend to relate to workplace application.

Several scholars debated that relying on formal education and training are not sufficient to improve work performance as rapid changes are taking place in almost all professions, organizations and industries (Adanu, 2007; Burns & Chisholm, 2003; Fuller et al., 2003; Heijden et al., 2009; Jones & Fear, 1994; Nägele & Hasler, 2010; Newton, 2010; Ong, 2005). Adanu (2007) argued that developing employee competencies should not be restricted to acquiring education or knowledge in the traditional way. Organizations also need to integrate learning and competency development and relate them directly to the working place where changes constantly occur. A study on CPD by Jones and Fear (1994) also demonstrated that many of their respondents preferred to take advantage of professional job-related opportunities (79%), and informal learning, self-directed development (68%), followed by structured formal training not leading to qualifications (non-formal learning-54%) rather than structured formal training leading to qualifications (formal education-49%) as their PD methods. Thus, the literatures concluded that teaching adult learners require a different approach (such as more participative nature of teaching and learning, two-way communication) than the traditional way of teaching that mostly employ the mode of 'chalk and talk' (Habibah, 2006). However, as Lappia in Tomé (2011) pointed out, work-related learning arrangements are still rare in higher education. Thus the major concern is whether formal or non-formal learning is the best remedy for PD among adults.

Informal Learning Activities and Adult Learning

Literature reviews affirmed that informal learning occurs through the sharing of experiences at the workplace (Ayobami & Rabi'u, 2012; Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Conlon, 2004; Garrick, 1998; Hamidi et al., 2012; Lin, 2010; Torres, 2004) and thus experience is often the best teacher (Roth & Kleiner, 1997). Everyday experiences at work and workplace practices greatly influence employee's KSA. However, CPD literatures mostly discuss extensively formal and non-formal learning. This has resulted in neglecting informal

learning, an equally important component of workplace learning (Garrick, 1998; Jones & Fear, 1994). As mentioned, CPD does not necessarily take place in the formal context of education but could be integrated with the experience gained informally (Eddy et al., 2005; Leader, 2003; LeClus, 2011).

Conlon (2004) and Awang and Wah (2005) argued that adults learn informally at workplace and this in fact constitute a major portion of learning at workplace than formal learning. It is evident that employee experience and knowledge obtained at workplace are powerful tools of learning that help to enhance their competency. Conlon further suggested that daily interactions among employees does involve knowledge transfer informally and is a legitimate source of learning among adults. This is supported by Tan (2005) who indicated that informal learning provides opportunities to capitalize on staff competency through sharing of accumulated KSA and experiences among them. A study conducted by Berg and Chyung (2008) on 125 professionals concurred with Conlon's claims that adult workers are more engaged in informal learning than any other form of learning. Through informal learning, adults learn effectively by imparting what they have learnt, are more engaged and involved in the learning process, and are able to relate to their past experiences and apply in their daily work-lives (Ong, 2005). Adults learn best in teams or learning collectively by sharing ideas and responding to others, improving their thinking and deepening their understanding (Awang & Wah, 2005; Swift & Kelly, 2010).

In ALT literature, self-managed learning in an organisation is construed as personal development and career management increasingly becomes the responsibility of the individual (Junaidah, 2008; Young, 2005). Therefore, Junaidah (2008) emphasized learning for professionals or adult learning should be left to the learners to decide what is best to improve their KSA. She further mentioned that professionals or adults prefer informal learning as it provides flexibility and best suits their needs. With regards to providing or improving PD, Swift and Kelly (2010) and Cheetham and Chivers (2000, 2001) argued that the needs and the requirements of adult learners must be addressed. Adults learn best in a collaborative environment in which knowledge and skills are shared freely, communication is open, trust and working relationship among staff is high, and support, feedback and opportunities are entrusted on them. These important and key ingredients promote the intended change on them, particularly change in CD.

Studies show that informal learning fills in the knowledge and skills gap that are not covered by formal and non-formal learning (Andy Smith, 2011; Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Garrick, 1998; Heijden et al., 2009). Adanu (2007, p.295) agrees that informal workplace learning is at its best and is accurately described as a form of lifelong learning. Several other scholars (Andy Smith, 2011; Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002; Burns & Chisholm, 2003; Fuller et al., 2003; Heijden et al., 2009; Kie, 2010; Nägele & Hasler, 2010; Ong, 2005) urged organizations to integrate informal learning in employee development as it also contributes significantly towards betterment of work performance and employee competency.

Nonetheless, many organizations or even professional bodies do not consider informal learning to be evidence of CPD and prefer to give more weight to formal courses. However, not all the professions require undertaking structured courses as a method of self-development. The type of form of methods to undertake should be in accordance with the development needs. In addition, CPD should also accentuate the significance of informal

learning, which should be recognized and valued equally with other forms of learning (Jones & Fear, 1994).

Recommendation and Conclusion

With respect to strategic PD, Swift and Kelly (2010) asserted that understanding how adults learn is central and hence the unique needs and requirements of adult learners must be addressed. Identifying what constitutes best in terms of learning among adult learners is crucial as this could boost or hamper their motivation and purpose. Adults learn best in a collaborative environment in which knowledge and skills are shared freely, communication is open, trust and working relationship among the staff are high; as well as support, feedback and opportunities are entrusted on them. These key ingredients are able to bring about the intended changes, particularly in competency development. However, experience in particular still poses a great challenge as a rich source of learning because it is inherently tacit in nature.

Notwithstanding the challenges discussed above, CPD is essential in developing employee KSA in order for organizations to remain competitive. The concept of CPD motivates the sensible practitioner to undergo continuing education, either voluntarily or mandatorily. Thus, this affirms the need for life-long learning as a basis for maintaining competencies (Noon, 1994, p.7). Learning that is linked directly with knowledge acquisition, dissemination and utilization is becoming the key driver towards attaining competitive advantage (Whee et al., 2012).

Authors also noted that the cultural implications of adult learning has to be addressed as there are significant variations, interpretation and impact on the learning habits of adults. Cultural implications are good for diversity studies and contribute towards the effectiveness of adult learning. However, as this aspect is not deliberated upon in this paper, it is proposed that future research take cultural implications into consideration for further investigation.

Current CPD model proposed by Kie (2010) only focuses on formal and non-formal learning for the purpose of PD and neglects the informal learning activity. However, Kie also noted the possibility of integrating informal learning as it could produce the intended outcome for PD. On that note, this paper suggests that informal learning which is more practical and caters to the adult learners' needs and requirements should be promoted and integrated with formal and non-formal learning as vital CPD activities. This is due to the fact that working adults tend to utilize their experiences in the learning processes and usually adopt informal learning as a bigger portion of their learning throughout their working life. Adult learners too prefer to determine and take responsibility for their own learning styles.

This paper also suggests for future research to explore possibilities of exploiting informal learning, mainly experience and knowledge-sharing among employees in the organization, along with non-formal and formal learning as a means for professional development. Such studies are particularly proposed in the Malaysian context as this area has received little attention from Malaysian scholars. Appropriate techniques and methods have to be identified to ensure professional development of organizational experts or talents could be effectively undertaken. An extensive and comprehensive study involving the professional talents as well as the top management would provide useful insights into understanding how

an adult learns. The findings might offer some feasible thoughts and mode of action on this matter.

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