

Should employees leave the building? The role of formal education in workplace learning.

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Abstract

In this paper our focus is on the individual employee pursuing learning opportunities by seeking off-job knowledge-based qualifications. Utilising a mixed-methods design comprising 23 in-depth qualitative interviews coupled with a cross-sectional survey of 1,400 employees, we sought to ascertain the underlying drivers motivating such learning endeavours, to assess the extent to which such learning is applied in the current work setting and whether employees felt it made a difference to their organisation. In the interviews each participant volunteered a number of reasons for undertaking study, but usually one primary motivator emerged as particularly salient. Principle components analysis of the questionnaire data provided support for four major drivers of off-job knowledge-based learning largely reflective of those articulated in the interviews: career or employability motives, self-efficacy and self-esteem motives, work effectiveness motives, and lastly, being opportunistic or other-directed. There was widespread agreement amongst participants that the theoretical and conceptual knowledge they gained through study was able to be applied on-the-job. However, participants were less certain as to whether this was of any benefit to the organization as a whole. Questions regarding the differential distribution of financial support for off-the-job knowledge-based learning were also posed and we found evidence for unequal access based on employment status, gender and hierarchical position in the organisation. Our results are interpreted in the light of human capital theory, notions of employability, and credentialing theory.

Keywords: higher education, human capital theory, employability, credentialing theory, learning motivation.

Suggested Track: D Micro, meso and macro institutional factors affecting knowledge and learning.

1 Introduction

Participation rates in higher education continue to climb in most developed nations. According to the latest OECD statistics in the seven years encompassing 1995 to 2002 there were six countries where enrolments in tertiary education increased by more than

50%, and a further eight countries (including the United Kingdom, Australia and Ireland) reported growth of more than 20% over the same period (Education at a Glance, 2004). Recent analyses suggest that this growth is partly driven by increasing demand by those already in employment. For example, in the U.S.A. for the 1999-2000 academic year older working adults comprised approximately one-third of the undergraduates enrolled in post-secondary education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). In New Zealand datum from the Ministry of Education (2003) corroborates the growing popularity of tertiary study for those in employment. In July 1997 19.7% of those enrolled in tertiary study were in paid employment the year before. By July 2003, this figure had increased to 32.4%.

This growth is being welcomed by some analysts and policy-makers who point out that participation in higher education appears to result in tangible benefits for individuals and for society as a whole. As a group tertiary graduates are not only more likely to secure employment, but they also command an earnings premium. Moreover, the OECD statistics also highlight links between rising education levels, labour productivity, and economic growth, with each additional year of education thought to improve economic output between 3% - 6% (Education at a Glance, 2004).

Notwithstanding the putative advantages of formal education much of the current interest in workplace learning has been focused on less didactic and more situated, participative and activity-based notions of learning, such as those of legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice (Billett, 2002; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). These emerging paradigms offer valuable perspectives and insights, and serve to remind us that much learning is socially derived and situationally constituted. In this paper it is not our intention to argue for learning as something privileged by off-the-job practices within established educational institutions. However, it is our belief that the potential benefits of employee learning through traditional knowledge-based qualifications have been downplayed in recent times.

Others have drawn similar conclusions. For example, Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2004) observe that workplace learning is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. They warn against reductionist efforts that narrow our focus and instead call for more holistic approaches to the study of employee development and learning. They employ Sfard's (1998) notion of two competing metaphors for learning, that of acquisition and of participation, and like Sfard they decry efforts by some to prioritise one ahead of the other. Drawing on research that explored the workplace learning strategies of teachers

they note that the teachers they interviewed engaged in a wide range of different types of learning. Of particular significance is the fact that many of the teachers made mention of off-the-job, formal, acquisitional approaches to workplace training and learning. Hodkinson and Hodkinson are careful to note that critics of the 'workplace learning as acquisition' perspective are rightly concerned that it largely ignores the context and nature of learning activities. However, as they hasten to add, those emphasising the socially situated, unplanned, tacit and informal nature of workplace learning have difficulty accounting for '*...the value and place of ...[formal, planned, cognitive] learning...as a dimension of learning at, for and through work.*' (p.262) and tend to underestimate the perceived importance of such learning in contemporary workplaces. Rainbird, Munro and Holly (2004) express similar sentiments noting that issues of learning at work remain embedded in the power relations of workplaces and that "*...it would be erroneous to dismiss the potential of formal learning to contribute to workers' own sense of empowerment and to their ability to improve the material conditions of their work*" (p.51). Indeed, from the viewpoint of individuals, learning as the acquisition of a qualification to act as a proxy for ability may well be growing in importance given the dynamics of modern workplaces.

Similarly, others have also challenged the preoccupation with workplace learning as a purely situated, tacit, informal, and social process. They have variously pointed to the neglect by situated theories of learning of aspects such as 'curriculum' content and the possible contribution of conceptual and theoretical knowledge to effective job performance (Eraut, 2004; Summers, Williamson & Read, 2004; Young, 2004), the role of individual agency (Billett, 2002; Bresnen, Goussevskaia & Swan, 2004; Evans, Kersh & Sakamoto, 2004), structural conditions that limit effective on-the-job learning (Billett, 2002; Bresnen et al, 2004; Cox, 2004; Rainbird, 2000; Rainbird et al., 2004), the emancipatory potential of off-the-job knowledge-based courses and formal qualifications (Fuller & Unwin, 2004; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004) and the continuing demand for such courses by employees (Young, 2004).

2 Theory/Issues

Given the increase in numbers of employed people entering tertiary education it seems timely to explore in greater depth the role of formal education in employee development. Accordingly, in this paper we focus on the individual employee pursuing learning opportunities by seeking off-job knowledge-based qualifications. Before describing our study in greater detail we review three theoretical frameworks that can

be applied to enhance our understanding of the drive to formal education – the economic theory of human capital, the concept of employability, and credentialing theory.

2.1 Human Capital Theory

According to Human Capital Theory (HCT), individuals will invest in education and development for economic return (Becker, 1975). This approach to employee development places a premium on instrumental rationality. Costs (such as course fees and loss of earnings) and benefits (such as increased salary and more marketable skills) are weighed against each other when making the choice to invest. Likewise, HCT suggests that organisational investment in employee development will be equally rational. Essentially, organisations will look to develop employees if it improves the profitability of the company.

Becker (1975) differentiates between two types of training – firm specific and general skills. Firm specific skills are beneficial only to the organisation providing the training, whereas general skills are transferable and can be valuable to other organisations as well. Becker suggests that from an organisational perspective investment in general skills is risky, as employees may take the human capital gained (and the return on the organisation's investment) with them to competitors. Training in firm-specific skills is proposed as a better strategy as they are of value only to that specific organisation, and consequently there is less risk of a return on investment not being realised. However, Becker's assertions regarding the preferential development of skills have not gone unchallenged. It has been suggested that training in general skills is still likely to benefit the organisation providing the training more than any other organisation as they are aware of the skills the employee now has (Katz & Ziderman, 1990). Moreover, research has also shown that that organisations often will pay for general training for staff, and that general and specific training are often inextricable (Smith & Hayton, 1999). We turn now to the increasingly popular concept of employability for further explanation of why individuals and organisations might invest in education.

2.2 Employability

Employability can be described as *“the permanent possibility of employees gaining employment in the internal and external labour market.”* (Forrier & Sels, 2003, p. 642); a concept that has gained in importance given assertions of the demise of secure

employment. It has proven extremely challenging conceptually and practically for organisations and individuals to grasp its meaning in practice (Baruch, 2001). Yet the concept retains some power perhaps because it does acknowledge potential anxieties about today's labour markets.

Employability asks individuals to prepare themselves, to hold themselves in readiness for an uncertain future. It has been suggested that expanding and improving skills, knowledge and abilities enhances employability (e.g. Finegold, Benson, & Mohrman, 2002; Forrier & Sels, 2003; van der Heijden, 2002). Such improvements can occur in many ways, some more formal than others – from studying at educational institutes, to learning on-the-job. In a case-study by Finegold and his colleagues (2002), the example of tertiary education was used as a way to increase workers employability by increasing their ability to secure jobs in other organisations.

For employers, the concept of employability may be more complex. There is some debate in the literature over where the responsibility for ensuring employability for workers lies. Although the literature on the modern career indicates that increasingly the responsibility is passing to individuals (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), there is also suggestion that organisations continue to have some accountability, even an ethical responsibility (Van Buren, 2003). Millward and Kyriakidou (2004) illustrate this in the context of the unstable environment created by merger-induced change. Where workers are uncertain about the security of their employment, organisations can provide what the authors term “subjective security” (p.23) by affording them the training to develop skills and knowledge to ensure employability.

This push for organisations to guarantee the employability of workers is of course not without its benefits to those organisations. As outlined in HCT, where organisations choose to invest in the development of employees, they risk losing that investment to competitors. However, a number of studies have shown that this investment may in fact lead to an increase in commitment among staff, reducing the risk of voluntary turnover (Benson, Finegold, & Mohrman, 2004; Finegold et al., 2002; Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). Interestingly, one large-scale survey in the UK found development activities in a work-related context contributed to enhanced satisfaction and commitment whereas voluntary learning in one's own time was completely unrelated to these work attitudes (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997). It would seem then that efforts to enhance employability have benefits to both individuals and organisations.

Both HCT and the concept of employability tend to reinforce an ideology of individuality, meritocracy and social mobility through education and skill development in

general. These perspectives on employee development have difficulty accounting for patterns of inequality in access to development opportunities and are inclined to overlook structural and societal barriers to employee participation (Keep, 1997; Rainbird, 2000). In the next section we briefly overview credentialing theory, which eschews an individualistic account of investment in education and offers an alternative macro-level perspective.

2.3 Credentialing theory

Educationalists, management scholars and those interested in HRD have long questioned the necessary connection between the content and process of a great deal of formal education (and indeed HRD activities in general), learning, and skills required on-the-job (e.g. Antonacopoulou, 2001; Brown et al., 1989; Grey & Mitev, 1995). There also exists a considerable literature highlighting structural inequalities in access to, and the provision of, education and training (Arulampalam & Booth, 1998; Booth, 1991). Moreover, empirical studies have reported only weak links between educational attainment and effective job performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Such findings pose a troubling conundrum for those considering employee development through the lens of HCT and employability. If the pursuit of formal, off-job knowledge-based qualifications is not about the development of objective technical skills useful in the context of work then what purpose does it serve, and why is it that systemic inequalities in access persist? These are difficult questions to address from the perspective of HCT and employability.

Credentialing theory (Collins, 1979) challenges simple functional explanations for the link between education and labour force outcomes and is well placed to address such difficult questions. In contrast to HCT, which typically regards formal educational attainment as an indicator of articulable skills (Hitt, Bierman, Shimizu, & Kochhar, 2001), credentialing theory places greater emphasis on the cultural, social and political dimensions associated with the credentialed stratification of different labour markets. Educational qualifications are regarded as biased indicators of skill used by powerful groups in society for purposes of social exclusion, the preservation of occupational monopolies, and social control (Brown, 2001; Kerchoff, Raudenbush, & Glennie, 2001). Therefore, credentials are not so much about developing tangible work skills as they are about legitimating existing advantages and ensuring that those aspiring to particular occupations or organisational positions share similar values, attitudes, and cultural dispositions to those already there.

2.4 Research questions

As outlined above, there has been a neglect of formal education and training in recent HRD and learning literature. Nonetheless, education statistics suggest that uptake of formal education is burgeoning for those already in employment. HCT, employability, and credentialing theory offer different insights as to why it is that formal education is regarded as so important in the labour market today. We do not see our analysis in this paper as a test of the relative validity of these 'competing theories', instead we use them to suggest relevant questions, to frame our interpretation of interviewees' answers, and to guide our analysis of responses to the survey questionnaire.

In this paper our focus is on the individual employee pursuing learning opportunities by seeking off-job knowledge-based qualifications. We sought to ascertain the underlying drivers motivating such learning endeavours, to assess the extent to which such learning is applied in the current work setting and whether employees felt their learning made a difference to the organisation, and to investigate factors associated with the differential distribution of financial support for this type of employee learning with particular regard to the influence of gender, employment status, and hierarchical position in the organisation.

3 Method

This study is part of a longitudinal project looking at issues for employees engaged in tertiary study. We have adopted a mixed-methods approach entailing an initial qualitative stage, comprising 23 in-depth interviews, followed by a cross-sectional survey of 1400 employees working and studying at the same time.

3.1 Qualitative Phase

The initial phase of the research was exploratory prompting us to use a semi-structured interview design. Unlike standard survey interviews, in-depth interviews allow participants to speak in their own voices and control their responses, and also have the space to introduce and reflect on issues that they perceive as relevant (Mishler, 1986). The interviews explored individual insights into the drivers motivating their engagement in study, including questions of who paid and why, perceived outcomes, career intentions, commitment within the organisation, experience in engaging in learning activities while at work and the extent and level of support offered.

Participants were self-selected (replying to a mailed request). Students who had been enrolled in either the Graduate Diploma in Business Studies (HRM) or the Graduate Diploma in Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) at Massey University, New Zealand were targeted as it was felt they were likely to have people enrolled who were also working. The final sample of 23 had slightly unequal numbers of males (N=9) and females (N=14), with a wide range of ages represented (29-55 years, M=39.8 years). Fairly equal numbers of those from the HRM and OSH samples were represented (N= 12 and 11 respectively). The majority of the sample were living with a partner (61%), and just under half had dependents living with them (48%). Those with a high school qualification made up 30% of the sample, while 26% had a trade certificate or diploma and just under half already had some form of university qualification (43%). The largest group of participants had been with their employer for 1-5 years (57%).

Data were analysed using a template approach (King, 1998) guided by initial interview questions but amended and augmented inductively as themes emerged. The qualitative data software package NVivo was used to facilitate this process. Two people coded the interviews, checking for consistency and refining the coding template. We identified themes in the responses such as drivers, barriers, support, work-life balance issues and so on. Of relevance to this paper were the observations people made about their motivations for engaging in study, issues to do with organisational support, and benefits of learning.

3.2 Survey Phase

A self-report questionnaire was sent to 4,991 students enrolled for tertiary study at Massey University. A total of 2,372 surveys were returned (48%). Consistent with the review by Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley (2005) employment was characterised as paid work, including those employed part-time (but not self-employment). Because of our interest in organisational support we elected to include only those working for organisations with 6 or more employees and eliminated those that described themselves as owner/operators. This resulted in a final sample size of 1400 (28%).

The average age of participants was 37.6 years (SD=9.1), with the majority female (58.4%), married or living with a partner (77.6%), and slightly less than half (47.1%) had dependent children living with them. Most indicated they worked full-time (90.8%) and less than half (43.5%) had completed a university qualification. There was a reasonable spread of positions with 37.9% describing themselves as non-

management, 9.5% as supervisors, 33.9% as middle managers, 10.8% as senior management, and 7.9% as 'other'.

The questionnaire we developed included a range of measures. Of particular relevance to this paper are 13 items where respondents had to indicate how strongly different factors influenced their decision to undertake tertiary study. Sample items included "To prove to myself that I can do it" and "To change the direction of my career". Ratings were coded 1=No Influence and 7=Strong Influence. Application of their learning in their current work setting was assessed using the mean of two items "I have been able to apply my learning at work" and "My learning has improved the way I perform my job". Ratings were coded 1=Strongly Disagree and 7=Strongly Agree. The alpha coefficient for these two items was .82 indicating acceptable reliability. Utilisation of their learning by the organisation was assessed using the mean of two items "My organisation has utilised my learning" and "My learning has made a difference to the organisation". Ratings were coded 1=Strongly Disagree and 7=Strongly Agree. The alpha coefficient for these two items was .83 indicating acceptable reliability.

4 Results

4.1 Drivers to Education

From our interviews we identified three primary drivers among the reasons people gave for participating in education – their career, their job, and personal development reasons. Although for each participant there was one clear overarching theme, in most cases people did in fact mention more than one driver to education. This suggests that motives for undertaking formal study while working are complexly determined, and this is echoed in the quantitative data (see below). Of the three primary drivers, we differentiated between career and job drivers, with the first being more to do with future jobs "*I knew that if I wanted to become an HR advisor I'd have to have a tertiary qualification ...I mean I could stay in this role forever...you know but you know because I want progress... I certainly want to become an HR advisor*" (Jane) and the second relating to developing skills specifically relating to the participants current job "*OSH was done because I had OSH responsibilities and I wanted to learn a bit more about it...I tend to do things now that I relate to my work... That is where my motivation is.*" (Alan).

These differentiations are similar in part to the HCT differentiation of general and firm-specific skills. An example of a personal reason was doing the study to prove something to oneself – "*I just wanted to see if I could do it*" (Bill).

To explore linkages between organisational support and drivers to off-job learning we divided our interviewees into two groups – those who were financially supported by their organisation in their study, and those who were not. Just under half of those interviewed (10 out of 23) had financial support from their organisation for their education. Of the remaining 13 who were not supported financially by their companies, four of these mentioned that they had had support from past organisations.

As can be seen in Table 1, a majority of those interviewed cited career as their primary driver, indicating that employability is a highly relevant concept for this group. Also of note is the fact that for most of the respondents engagement in tertiary study was a calculated and very instrumental decision. This is evident by the fact that only two of those we interviewed cited personal reasons as their primary motivation. When we divided our interviewees into two groups based on financial support some clear differences emerged. Most notable was that career was more likely to be a primary driver for those without financial support. This seems reasonable as this group is investing in themselves, and would perhaps need to be more focused about what they spent their money on – also likely the reason why none of this group were driven by personal reasons. The higher proportion of those driven by the need for job-related skills among those receiving funding may also reflect the organisations investment as described by HCT. Although no university education could be described as firm-specific, organisations may still be more restrictive in what they are willing to fund, more likely to provide finance for specifically relevant courses.

Table 1. Drivers to tertiary education for employees interviewed

	All interviewees (%) N=23	Interviewees with financial support (%) N=10	Interviewees without financial support (%) N=13
Primary Driver			
Career	61	40	77
Job	30	40	23
Personal	9	20	0

Principle components analysis (PCA) of the questionnaire data provided support for four major drivers of off-job knowledge-based learning largely reflective of those articulated in the interviews: career or employability motives, self-efficacy and self-esteem motives, work effectiveness motives, and lastly, being opportunistic or other-directed. Item loadings, eigen values, percent of variance accounted for, and alpha coefficients are reported in table 2.

Table 2. Principle components analysis of drivers from the questionnaire

Item	Factor 1: Other- directed	Factor 2: Effectiveness	Factor 3: Career	Factor 4: Personal
Presented with opportunity by company	0.80			
Manager suggested study	0.85			
Co-worker(s) suggested study	0.72			
To keep up-to-date		0.81		
To benefit organisation		0.69		
To enhance practical knowledge		0.79		
Increase chances for promotion			0.60	
To develop necessary job skills			0.62	
Improve employability			0.82	
Change career direction			0.62	
Prove to self				0.87
Prove to others				0.85
Desire for qualification				0.59
Eigen Value	3.04	1.96	1.74	1.23
Percent of Variance	23.3	15.1	13.4	9.4
Alpha Coefficients	0.71	0.70	0.61	0.69

Table 3 gives the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between the four drivers. Consistent with the results from our interviews career-related reasons were found to be the most significant driver to the pursuit of off-job knowledge-based qualifications. However, in contrast to what our interviewees reported, respondents to the questionnaire indicated that personal motives (self-esteem and self-efficacy) were very influential drivers to study as well.

The pattern of intercorrelations between drivers is also of interest. Those pursuing study to enhance their performance at work are also likely to report being motivated by career. Similar significant associations between drivers emerged for other-directed and work-effectiveness, and for personal and career motives. However, consistent with our interview data, and notwithstanding their statistical significance, the generally modest magnitude of the correlations suggests that employees are typically motivated by one primary driver. When we looked at drivers for those receiving financial support compared to those without support, we found that those being paid were significantly more likely to rate being other-directed ($t = 19.7$, $df = 1239.6$, $p < .001$) and work

effectiveness ($t = 5.4$, $df = 1060.8$, $p < .001$) as important, but for both groups career and personal drivers remained the most influential motives.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between drivers

Driver	1. Other-directed	2. Effectiveness	3. Career	4. Personal
1. Other-directed				
2. Work effectiveness	0.25**			
3. Career	0.07*	0.32**		
4. Personal	0.04	0.09**	0.18**	
Mean Rating	2.0	3.8	4.9	4.3
SD	1.3	1.5	1.2	1.4

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

4.2 Benefits of Learning

Most of those we interviewed were positive about learning in general and felt participation in tertiary study was worthwhile. With the exception of just two of our interviewees nearly everyone was able to elaborate on how they applied their learning at work. For five this manifested itself through a better understanding of their work, and three actually made changes to processes in the workplace. A majority of our interviewees indicated that knowledge, concepts and techniques learnt through study were applied daily in the course of their work, as their learning was directly applicable to tasks they had to carry out. For one interviewee her learning enabled her to participate more fully in the organisation, making suggestions to management about possible solutions to organisational problems.

Only two of our interviewees specifically mentioned there being no benefit from their learning. For one the learning was not perceived as relevant to his current position, and the other felt she had picked up more from just being on the job. Organisational benefits were mentioned by all of the other interviewees except one who had been made redundant by his organisation. It is important to note here that these benefits for the most part were assumed by the participants because of their application of learning, rather than as an observation of any positive organisational outcomes. Personal benefits, including career benefits, were mentioned by 21 participants. Apart from those career benefits, two types of personal benefits were discussed – benefits to the family, and increased confidence and self-esteem. In terms of family, people spoke about it being beneficial for their children “to see Dad studying”, for studying to become

“part of the culture in our household”, and for establishing “a work ethic for my kids”. In terms of confidence and self-esteem, people spoke about an increase confidence that they were doing the right thing at work, and better able to put their opinions forward. The sense of achievement was a boost to self-esteem, especially for a number who had not been academically successful at school - “the fact that ‘gosh, I can actually do this’ and that sort of thing, that you can achieve that so its better for you, gives you good self esteem because you can actually can do something.”

A clear majority of those we surveyed agreed that they had been able to apply their learning from tertiary study at work to improve their job performance (Mean=5.2, SD=1.5), but there was less agreement on whether it had made a difference to their organisation (Mean=4.3, SD=1.7). However, it is evident from table 4 that employee perceptions of the job-related and organisational benefits of tertiary study are influenced by their motivations for engaging in such learning. In particular, those whose primary driver is enhancing work effectiveness are more likely to report job-related and organisational benefits. In contrast, we find that personal motives account for very little variance in perceptions of benefits.

Table 4. Correlations between drivers and learning benefits

Variable	Apply learning in job	Learning benefits the organisation
Drivers		
1. Other-directed	0.15**	0.22**
2. Work effectiveness	0.40**	0.40**
3. Career	0.17**	0.13**
4. Personal	0.07*	0.01

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

4.3 Access to Financial Support

We found that a majority (58.1%) of those we surveyed reported receiving financial support from their employer for their studies. We conducted a number of cross-tabulations and Chi-square tests to establish if there were any inequalities in access to financial support associated with gender, employment status (part-time vs full-time) and organisational status (non-management, supervisor, middle management, senior management). We acknowledge that gender, employment status, and organisational status are likely to be conflated, but unfortunately low counts in some cells meant that

we could not fully control for all such effects. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, we concentrate on bivariate associations, but wherever possible indicate to what extent effects persist after controlling for other influences.

Overall, we found a significant difference in access to financial support according to gender ($\chi^2 = 26.4$, $df = 1$, $N = 1233$, $p < .001$). Approximately 70% of the men received financial support compared to only 55% of the women. This gender effect persisted for full-time employees (but not part-timers) and across most levels of the organisational hierarchy (no significant differences based on gender for non-management employees).

We also found a significant difference in access to financial support according to organisational status ($\chi^2 = 46.2$, $df = 3$, $N = 1233$, $p < .001$). Supervisors (70%), middle management (70%), and senior management (64%) were all more likely to receive financial support than were non-management employees (50%). These organisational status effects persisted after controlling for gender, but were less marked for women.

Finally, we found part-time employees (33%) were significantly less likely to be supported than were full-time employees (64% $\chi^2 = 46.0$, $df = 1$, $N = 1233$, $p < .001$). The concentration of part-time employment amongst females and at lower levels of the organisation precluded any further analyses.

5 Discussion

In this paper our focus is on the individual employee pursuing learning opportunities by seeking off-job knowledge-based qualifications. We utilised a mixed-methods design; to shed light on the underlying drivers motivating such learning endeavours, to assess the extent to which such learning is applied in the current work setting and whether employees felt it made a difference to their organisation, and to explore issues of differential access to financial assistance from the employer to offset tuition costs. The theoretical lenses of HCT, employability, and credentialing theory were used to help frame our questions and to interpret our data.

We found career-related motives to be the most important driver stimulating employees to seek tertiary qualifications. For these individuals university study represents an opportunity to change occupations, to gain promotion, and to otherwise enhance their career prospects. To us this suggests that for many employees traditional notions of career advancement, progression, and upward movement maintain considerable currency. Standing in counterpoint to these instrumentally oriented employees we

found that for many others the decision to pursue tertiary study was for reasons of self-development. For these individuals university learning was not driven by considerations of pay-offs, but rather by a desire to achieve and to prove their capability.

Also of note was the widespread consensus amongst our respondents that the theoretical, conceptual, and technical knowledge they gained through study was applied at work and enhanced their job performance. This implies that there remains considerable scope for context independent 'generic' skills and knowledge to contribute to employees' work effectiveness. However, it was apparent that our employees were much less certain regarding the overall organisational benefits of their learning. They were not at all confident that their learning was fully utilised by the company, nor that it made an appreciable difference to the 'bottom line'. This uncertainty may reflect the fact that in many organisations recognising and accessing existing capability remains a major issue. More prosaically, it may simply indicate that many employees are simply not well placed to make such judgments.

In addition, we found that a majority of those we surveyed received financial assistance from their organisation to offset the costs of study. However, we also observed inequalities in access to such support based on gender, employment status, and organisational hierarchy, with women, part-time employees and non-managerial staff all less likely to receive financial assistance.

Taking the results from our survey, along with the rich data obtained from the interviews, we can see that HCT still has a role to play in unfolding the decision to seek off-job knowledge-based qualifications. Looking first at the interviews we find that those who financed their own education were driven primarily by concern for their careers. This appears consistent with formulations from HCT in that they are investing their own money in the expectation of future gains. Although not elaborated upon here, a number of interviewees specifically mentioned other elements that fitted with HCT – for example, being able to study extramurally so maintaining their salary (reducing opportunity cost) and so on. Turning to the survey data we find that more than 40% of respondents were willing to pay for what is a relatively expensive tertiary education. Given that the primary driver for those we surveyed was career, which clearly has an economic dimension, it does seem as HCT suggests, that for many employees a critical ingredient in their decision to pursue qualifications is the expectation of a return on their investment. However, of note is the prominence accorded self-development motives as a driver for engagement in tertiary study. Moreover, many organisations were willing to financially support employees whose primary reason for studying was

self-development. Given the absence of any obvious economic benefits, HCT is clearly not well equipped to explain these findings. We remain intrigued by the thought that organisations are prepared to support employees for tertiary study with the prospect of receiving little in the way of direct benefits.

Career as a primary driver also provides support for employability as a tool for understanding the move to higher education by those in work. Interviewees talked about the need for higher level qualifications to secure future employment. As organisations look for credentialed staff, individuals feel ever more need to protect themselves in the labour market. They are prepared to pay for the qualifications they perceive they need, even if their organisation is not. The fact that wanting to secure employment is likely to be motivated at least in part by economic considerations suggests that employability and HCT each add to the other as explanatory tools, rather than being exclusive ways of looking at decisions to develop. It is also interesting to note that in the interviews when asked about employability, participants for the most part referred to qualifications and credentials, rather than increasing knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) in general. Although there is some question over whether qualifications can act as a proxy for KSAs (Fuller, Munro, & Rainbird, 2004), it seems that among this group at least, they were perceived as important for employability *outside of* their organisation.

Credentialing theory offers different insights regarding the strong career motives of those undertaking further education. When people are aware that certain credentials will afford them entrance to particular occupations or organisational positions, they will be motivated to obtain these qualifications. However, credentialing theory suggests that in response the goalposts are likely to be moved. Where exclusive membership is threatened, requirements for new and higher educational qualifications will be imposed to maintain that exclusivity.

Credentialing theory also serves to shed some light on the inequalities in access to support for higher education. If we accept that the purpose of credentials is indeed about legitimating existing advantages, and that they are used as biased indicators of skill by powerful groups in society for purposes of social exclusion, then we see where some of these differentials are born. Disparities in support between part-timers and full-timers, between management and non-management, and between males and females are simply part of an exclusionary and inclusionary process that helps authority elites to reproduce themselves.

In conclusion, we have heeded calls to be mindful of workplace learning as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon (Antonacopoulou, 2001; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004; Rainbird et al., 2004). We have used diverse methodologies and a range of theoretical frameworks to explore the value and place of off-job knowledge-based qualifications for employees. Our findings add to those from other studies highlighting the likely significance of formal education in the workplace (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004; Rainbird et al., 2004) and suggest that for many employees there are good reasons to leave the building and seek out opportunities for tertiary study.

6 References

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