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PRINCIPAL OFFICER IMPLEMENTATION

"Aristotle believed that education was central - the fulfilled person was an educated person. No man before him had contributed so much to learning. No man after could hope to rival his achievement."

Jonathan Barnes (1982) Aristotle, Oxford: OUP.

In the beginning

Lifelong learning is not a new concept in itself. From as early as 384 – 322 BC Aristotle believed that education was central to the ethical and political philosophy of life – the fulfilled person was an educated person. He saw learning happening throughout life and in different situations, with all learning having a positive effect on the development of the person.

This approach to learning opened up the educational debate regarding the value of informal education. It required a shift in formalised educational thinking to realise that learning can take place outside of the educational structures of schools, colleges, institutes and universities and can happen both within the community and in the workplace.

How lifelong learning relates to society today

The concept of formal education for job preparation is outdated both from the standpoint of the individual and society. Lifelong learning has a more uncompromising meaning, certainly for the times in which we now live and it relates to our personal as well as professional development. We can no longer be certain of a job for life, but what is certain is that we will need to be prepared for job changes and for acquiring new skills and knowledge at intervals during our lives. The very nature of work and what it means to be employed is changing, therefore the workplace must also be considered as a learning place.

Lifelong learning can be defined as an all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence. The government's emphasis on lifelong learning in the 20th century promoted the concept that lifelong learning can meet the economic needs of the economy through:

"…increasing general skills levels and meeting the skills needs of the future; helping individuals enhance their employability and developing individuals' self-fulfilment through their achievement."

The Learning Age 1998

Many educational practitioners and enthusiasts have continuously promoted the benefits of lifelong learning to organisations, the workforce and the economy. In the Northern Ireland paper *Lifelong Learning – a new learning culture for all* the government highlighted as their key aims and objectives: increasing provision; widening access to education and training; meeting the skills needs of the regional economy; providing information, advice, guidance and support; developing flexible education, training provision and opportunities for progression and improving quality and raising standards. It is intended that by addressing these themes the gap between the *"knowledge rich"* and *"knowledge poor"* might be reduced by encouraging "a habit of continuous learning throughout life".

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How can people develop the habit of lifelong learning?

Lifelong learning should be open to all individuals although the content of learning, the way the learning is delivered and where it takes place may vary depending on who the learner is. Lifelong learning is as much about providing *"second chances"* to those who have been out of the *"educational"* loop as it is about offering learning opportunities at more advanced levels.

How the workplace can support it

Many employees may need support to develop this habit as they may not have been involved in what they regard as *"education"* for many years. They may be initially worried or frightened regarding the possibility of failure. There are certain conditions within the workplace that support and encourage lifelong learners:

- Being empowered and having ownership of the learning process
- Being motivated to learn
- Development of learning to learn skills
- Being supported, with regular feedback, during learning
- Feeling confident about their own learning ability
- Being rewarded for learning.

Using NVQs as a catalyst for lifelong learning

The use of NVQs within the workplace can play an important role in encouraging lifelong learning within the organisation. Employers recognise the benefits of learning through a competence-based system. Real competence is the ability to apply knowledge to practical real life situations. As well as job skills and knowledge it helps develop a range of high level problem solving skills:

- Planning and time management skills
- Self discipline in carrying out appointed or self appointed activities
- Recognising changes in routine as soon as they occur
- Understanding why as well as how the job is done in order to identify problems
- Being able to evaluate the options for dealing with problems
- Working with a team and recognising the effect of potential action on the work of others.

Employees have an input into the timescale of the learning process while being encouraged by their assessor who provides regular feedback and support. Employees are rewarded for their learning by an accredited qualification, which recognises their competence in their work role.

Many learners are also rewarded for their learning by informal or formal recognition from their employers. For some employees informal support may include training resources, financial aid, study leave, publication of success through company newssheets and company presentation ceremonies while formal recognition may come in the form of new pay and grading structures or progression throughout the company. Whether recognition is formal or informal it is evident through the following case studies that all the organisations value the role lifelong learning plays within their organisations.

The case studies we have featured are drawn from a sample of public, private and voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland. The case studies demonstrate how these organisations support and encourage their employees' learning and development. The studies also highlight the importance of these lifelong learning opportunities for the employees themselves.