Integration of on and off the job learning is a complex concept and differs from context to context, learner to learner; blanket solutions are not universally applicable.


What

- understand on- and off-the-job learning
- link them together
- build in key skills
- . . . and basic skills
- involve learners and supervisors.

Why?

Learners on work-based learning programmes learn several different things, in more than one environment. These different aspects of the learning experience must be linked, or there’s a risk that the learning as a whole will not fit together. An obvious example is linking theory and practice so that learners improve their skills and knowledge in parallel.

The three essential ingredients in this, as in most other aspects of their learning, are structured opportunities for learners to:

- acquire new knowledge and skills
- practise using them in a safe environment, i.e. one where the risks of not doing something right are controlled carefully
- apply them to real situations.

The frameworks for Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) show what has to be integrated.

**MA frameworks**

- NVQ
- key/basic skills
- technical certificate
- employment rights and responsibilities
- additional qualifications

The art of designing effective work-based learning programmes is based on making these different aspects of the framework fit together coherently. There are great advantages in doing it well. Inspections by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) show that when programmes are effectively planned, learners:

- are better motivated and tend to stay until they complete their programmes
- complete their programmes more quickly
- understand the links between learning and work
- don’t spend time repeating tasks unnecessarily.
- But it’s not always done well, as the key facts from the ALI annual report for 2001-02 quoted overleaf illustrate.
Key facts

- Training programmes are insufficiently well structured and on- and off-the-job training often poorly co-ordinated.
- Employers and providers often do not relate key skills training to learners’ area of learning.
- Where training is subcontracted, there is a lack of clarity over the roles and responsibilities of the subcontractor.

How?

Understand on- and off-the-job learning

To design a programme for individual learners that successfully links their learning on and off the job, it is necessary to:

- understand what learners do at work and in their off-the-job training
- make the links between them clear and explicit to learners, supervisors and training staff.

Trainers and assessors need to understand learners’ work in some detail. It obviously helps if they are occupationally competent, familiar with the workplace and know in general terms what jobs have to be done. But it’s important to go beyond this generalised understanding, and find out what a learner will actually be doing in the next few weeks.

Staff supporting learners can find out about their learners’ jobs from week to week by:

- looking at job descriptions or lists of duties/tasks to be carried out
- discussing these tasks with the learner’s work supervisor or mentor
- involving supervisors in reviews and planning.

It’s just as important for staff to know about any off-the-job training their learners are doing during the same period. The training may happen in a training centre or college, or at the workplace. Wherever it takes place, people need to know:

- what the off-the-job training covers – its content
- when learners will be acquiring the skills and knowledge
- what opportunities there will be to practise using their new skills and knowledge in a ‘safe’ environment before applying them for real at work.

Link them together

Links go two ways – from learning at work to learning off-the-job and vice versa. Once it’s clear what learners are doing at work, it’s possible to show them how work links to the training they receive when they are not at work. And the same applies in reverse.

Links between training and work can be enhanced by timing the training so that learners have the chance to acquire and practise skills and knowledge before they apply them at work. If this isn’t possible, an alternative is to design off-the-job training so that it reinforces the practical skills learned on the job, e.g. by providing a theoretical basis for practice.

Employers and providers are likely to have more control over the content and timing of training they deliver themselves than when the training is delivered by a subcontractor. But even so, it is still their responsibility to make sure that the training is as relevant as possible to the learner’s work. The NVQ is a key mechanism for making the links.
Using reliable tracking tools, it should almost always be possible to show:

- how the work learners are doing enables them to develop competence against the NVQ standards and produce evidence for their portfolios
- how their off-the-job training provides the practical skills and underpinning knowledge in the NVQ specifications.

And it always helps to plan both work and off-the-job training with learners and workplace supervisors. That way, everyone knows what the learner’s learning tasks are for the next few weeks.

**Build in key skills**

There’s a separate factsheet entitled ‘Key skills’ that goes into detail about them. In this context, it’s important to recognise that key skills can be integrated:

- with other aspects of the learning programme, such as NVQ units or technical certificate modules
- with work
- with each other.

Integration with other aspects of the programme can be planned in advance. NVQs contain ‘signposts’ to key skills, indicating where learners are likely to need key skills to perform tasks and produce evidence. The signposts can be used to plan opportunities for learners to:

- develop their key skills and gain confidence in them
- demonstrate that they can apply key skills effectively

Technical certificates don’t always signpost key skills in the same way, but it usually isn’t hard to see which key skills relate most closely to the different modules and plan similar opportunities for learners to develop and demonstrate their key skills. Some technical certificates provide a good opportunity for working intensively with learners on specific aspects of key skills, such as their ability to extract information from written sources (manuals, instructions, product catalogues etc.) or to produce charts on a computer and integrate them into a wordprocessed report.

There are many opportunities to link key skills to work, and many different ways of making the links. For example, trainers, assessors and supervisors can:

- point out to learners when they have used a key skill
- suggest which specific skills should be used to perform a particular task
- take advantage of opportunities that arise to improve their learners’ key skills, e.g. spelling technical words correctly.

Key skills often link naturally, in work and training. It’s helpful if learners see these links and use them to develop their confidence in key skills. For example, learners’ writing can improve through the use of the spell check and grammar check facilities on a wordprocessor. Similarly, their understanding of converting data to charts can be enhanced by entering data on a spreadsheet and creating an appropriate chart or graph.

**... and basic skills**

It’s sometimes necessary for learners to work on their literacy, numeracy and language skills, in order to be able to do their jobs and learn effectively. See the fact sheet entitled ‘Literacy, numeracy and language’ for more about this topic. Employers and providers are not always good at seeing the links between poor basic skills and slow progress, or at dealing with the situation.
Although many learners were held back in their occupational training by their poor basic skills, providers did little to help them improve their literacy and numeracy.

Adult Learning Inspectorate (2002)
Annual report 2001-02.

This isn’t because of a lack of opportunity. Like key skills, basic skills can be successfully integrated into work and training, but only if employers and providers are equipped to:

- identify which learners need support
- provide the support.

It is sometimes best to help learners with basic skills on a one-to-one basis, in short, intensive bursts. These can happen at work (‘near the job’) or in short time-out sessions during a training day.

**Involve learners and supervisors**

From a learner’s point of view, the experience of work-based learning makes more sense and is more valuable when the different bits fit together properly. Learners themselves play an important role in fitting the bits together. It’s a continuous process of reinforcement. For instance, if a learner understands how some training they have recently done off the job helps them to carry out a task at work they are more likely to:

- approach the task confidently and do it well
- see the value of off-the-job training and be motivated by it
- make the connections between work and learning for themselves.

These are big gains, because they help to develop skills and confidence in learning in general, as well as in specific job-related areas.

Learners [on work-based learning programmes] point to the benefits of work-related activities, such as developing skills they can use for a job and having a more structured approach to managing their time and responsibilities.

Learning and Skills Council (2002)
Seeking The Views of Learners.

Learners can be helped to see the links by getting them to:

- analyse their job roles and tasks
- help develop short-term learning and assessment plans
- check their own progress and identify areas to work on, e.g. at reviews.

Supervisors and mentors at work can be involved in similar ways, provided that they:

- understand all aspects of learners’ programmes
- spend time discussing progress and planning the next steps
- make links for learners between what they learn off the job and how they use the skills and knowledge at work.
Integrating theory and practice

A specialist early years care and education employer ensures that learners receive a good mix of practical, hands-on experience together with the knowledge and theory they need to become good carers.

Training on the job covers practical aspects such as looking after babies, engaging in structured play activities with children and supervising meals. Experienced staff provide instruction, coaching and feedback. Key skills are integrated into work-based assignments such as measuring play space.

The employer organises a knowledge-based course on child developments during the evenings. Because learners from different nurseries take part in the course, there are good opportunities to share experiences and learn from each other.

A workplace assessor at one of the nurseries comments:

“Learners get a good grounding in theory and practice. The knowledge-based aspects of the course help them to understand children’s needs much better. Because they’re at work every day, they can put the theory into practice in their everyday work.”

Resources

- Learning and Skills Council (2002) Seeking The Views of Learners: Findings from the LSC’s first national learner satisfaction survey 2001/02.

Stay in touch

- www.ali.gov.uk
- www.keyskillssupport.net
- www.lsc.gov.uk

Checklist

- How does your organisation structure the process by which learners acquire, practise and apply new skills and knowledge?
- How does the process differ between different workplaces?
- How do trainers and assessors find out about the duties and tasks learners have at work?
- How do they find out about the content of off-the-job training?
- What practical steps does the organisation take to link on- and off-the-job learning?
- How do trainers, assessors and supervisors help learners to see the links?
- To what extent are key skills integrated with other aspects of learners’ programmes, such as NVQs and technical certificates?
- How do supervisors and others help learners see the connections between key skills and work?
- What opportunities do learners have to link the key skills together in their work and training?
- How are learners themselves involved in fitting the different bits of their programme together?
- What contribution do work supervisors or mentors make to this?
Where and when?

Like many other things in work-based learning, successful integration is a combination of planning in advance and taking advantage of opportunities when they arise. It’s essential to have a structured approach so that the various parts of the programme dovetail as neatly as possible. It’s equally important to be flexible to cope with changes in circumstances and make the most of opportunities.

At the start of each individual’s programme, employers and providers should make sure that learners:

- understand the programme
- will get the time they need to learn, including time for off-the-job training and help with their key/basic skills.

As the programme continues, it’s important to:

- carry on planning off-the-job training, so that it links to work as closely as possible
- keep learners and supervisors up to date with learners’ progress
- check what new skills learners need and how they fit into the programme.

Case studies and examples

On-line learning

One national provider specialising in administration and customer care had problems getting employers actively involved in work-based learning. The provider decided to link on- and off-the-job training by developing e-learning programmes for learners to use at work. Learners have access to CDs and on-line support materials. They can also attend training sessions off the job.

The on-line learning project has particularly helped small and medium-sized employers who are sometimes unable or unwilling to release learners for off-the-job training.

This is how the process works:

1. All learners have an on-line initial assessment.
2. They negotiate on-line learning, off-the-job training or a mixture of both.
3. They complete a training plan and agree it with their employers.
4. Learners then access the training on CD and on-line, e.g. tests to check their knowledge and understanding.
5. Assessors check all learners’ work and give them feedback on-line.
6. Learners’ action plans are checked by employers.
7. ‘Live’ assessments can take place using video conferencing.
8. Electronic portfolios are used and individual learning plans are regularly updated.
9. Each month, a progress chart shows the percentage of each unit of the NVQ completed.
10. All information is shared with the employer.

The training manager reports that learners are pleased with the process, because access to all training is flexible and can be fitted into their working patterns. Employers report that learners are more confident in the workplace and use the materials to solve everyday work-based problems as they arise. Since the programmes were introduced there has been a major improvement in retention.