Chapter 2

Normative Learning for Normalized Work

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

This chapter discusses the socio-cultural implications of normative learning for normalized work. Normative learning for normalized work from workplace e-learning happens through informationalization of roles and skills as well as the convergence of rules and competencies, for a knowledge-based workplace. Workplace ‘form’ is relevant for workplace e-learning, both as a space for doing work and ultimately for undertaking workplace adult education and training. Workplace form designs have progressed in tandem with changes in society be they social, cultural, political, technological, or economic. In the early 21st century, as workplace form designs again advance to accommodate diverse, global workforces and information and communication technologies (ICTs), workplace e-learning too is impacted.

The manifestation of workplace form into daily organizational life depends on particular types of values, capabilities, and organizational structures. What becomes clear is that each workplace form design (as a space for work and learning) may lead to the development of several organizational structures (as specific sites for work and learning). Each form of workplace design and organizational structure also comes with inherent value propositions that lead to the development of specific capabilities based around the fulfillment of key success factors.

Workplace e-learning and workplace adult education and training are becoming progressively more normative as workplace forms and organizational structures evolve and change. This is happening more often and as a direct consequence of the convergence and informationalization of skills and competencies from organizational structural development and value propositions. All these hold certain ramifications for normative learning;

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BACKGROUND

Emerging Workplace Forms

The late 19th to the mid-20th century was largely dominated by vertically integrated workplaces which leveraged their economies of scale through mass production to deliver standard products and services to the consumer. The principal workplace forms of the day—functional and mechanistic—utilized the separation of management and labour within centrally coordinated, decision-making organizational structures to control workers through highly specialized jobs and highly defined systems of hierarchy, bureaucracy, and regulation.

In the mid-to-late 20th century, globalization, deregulation, technological innovation, and knowledge-based economies, began to have their profound impact on workplace forms. In response, workplace forms progressed and created the divisional form, which allowed for better utilization of workplace know-how towards differentiated products and services. The matrix form grew out of the divisional form by focusing organizational resources on newer, sometimes temporary, and possibly multiple opportunities. Matrix forms made customization of products and services possible without taking away from the organization’s mainstream efforts (Wigand, Picot, & Reichwald, 2008).

The early 21st century sees workplace form designs now move beyond divisional and matrix forms as a result of changing consumer and workforce demographics as well as the proliferation of ICTs in the workplace. Over the past decade, three forms of workplace design in particular garner continued attention as being the emerging forms of workplace designs to emulate: virtual; modular; and, network (Miles, Snow, Mathews, & Coleman, 1997; Mowshowitz, 1997; Snow, Miles, & Coleman, 1992). Each of these particular forms represents a seminal construct that identifies with the 21st century, whether in terms of society, culture, technology, or politics.

The Virtual Form

Virtual form workplace designs correspond to a joining of people or organizations that specialize in their own functional skills and competencies; come together to form temporary, or sometimes a semi-permanent organization; and, tackle a particular task. As a design philosophy, virtual form workplaces are known by their ability to ‘switch’ from one task to the next. Mowshowitz (1997) further describes four basic activities performed by the virtual form of workplace based on the designed separation of ‘requirements’ and ‘satisfiers’ to allow for this seamless switching, including: (a) determining requirements, in their abstract reality; (b) awareness of concrete satisfiers; (c) assigning satisfiers to requirements, based on particular criteria; and, (d) on-going reassessment of assignment criteria for optimal outcomes. When the task is accomplished, the organization ‘vaporizes’.

The Modular Form

Modular form workplace designs possess specific characteristics as implied by the notion of ‘module’. Modules are explicit, specialized, intra-organizational entities designed to be small manageable units. These modularized units exist as part of, and within, permanent organizational structures. Each module develops their own customer-oriented process and decentralized decision-making criteria. Any coordination or integration between modules is achieved horizontally rather than hierarchically (Wigand et al., 2008).