A Glimpse at the Portuguese Employees’ Perceptions of Training and Development: What They Get is What They See?

Ana Paula Ferreira, Department of Management, School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal
Regina Leite, Department of Management, School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Training and development (T&D) has become a paramount subject in the workplace and societies, particularly in today’s scenario of the European crisis. T&D literature has long highlighted the benefits for employees, managers and governments of training and education strategies and systems. However, the employees’ perception of the T&D process has been systematically neglected. This paper presents an exploratory study focusing on the employees’ perception about the T&D rationale, the initiatives, and tools used by their employing organizations. A sample (n= 101) of currently employed MSc students enrolled in management courses at a Portuguese University was used to analyse their opinion about the employers’ reasons to invest in training activities, the organizational instruments adopted to conduct the training needs’ assessment and evaluating the training effectiveness, and the problems underlying the whole process of training within their organizations. A questionnaire was used to collect data on those issues. Results are analysed and some major implications for employing organizations are discussed.

Keywords: Employees’ Perceptions, Employment Organizations, Portuguese Data, Training and Development (T&D), Training Effectiveness

1. INTRODUCTION

According to official statistics published by the Portuguese National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2012) there has been an increasing investment in training and development (T&D) actions over the past few years by Portuguese organizations. The aggregate data made available concerning T&D activities in Portugal dates back to 2005. At that time the average cost of T&D courses per participant was 288,2 €. The rate of access to continuing vocational training courses amounted to 28,1%. The average duration of continuing vocational training courses
(per participant) is 26.4 hours, lower than the amount of hours prescribed by the Portuguese labour law. Legislation on the issue states that each permanent worker is entitled to a minimum of 35 hours of annual training.

According to the employers’ point of view, the reasons underlying the low investment in T&D can be summarized as follows (INE, 2012): employees qualifications already meet the organizational needs (84.4%); the organization prefers hiring workers with the necessary qualifications rather than training the current employees (53.4%); difficulties in assessing organizational needs in terms of T&D (19.5%); insufficient or inadequate offer of T&D courses (15.5%); high costs of T&D (33.6%); the fact that the organization is more concerned with initial training (5.3%); previous investment in T&D (1.7%), and lack of time for employees to spend in T&D activities (41.1%). Although 84% stated a “match made in heaven” between organizational and employees’ qualifications, there are disturbing percentages, especially those figures referring to the lack of time to spend with training (41.1%), difficulty in training needs analyses (19.5%), and high costs associated with T&D (33.6%)².

This is even more alarming because after the deterioration of the economy and labour market indicators, the Portuguese Government launched a recovery plan for 2009 including a set of measures that aimed at supporting employment retention and increasing qualifications during periods of extraordinary reduction of activities in economically viable companies (Refernet, 2011). The Refernet report (2011) highlights the effort, although not always achieved, made by the Government to increase the qualifications of Portuguese employees. As a consequence, Portugal has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the offer of higher education courses during the last decade, with many employees applying for master and PhD degrees.

It is widely accepted that training is a key determinant of organizational performance, competitiveness, and economic growth. Employees increasingly rely on training to enhance their career opportunities and advancement, get better compensation, and job duration. The organizations need skillful and updated employees to improve performance and productivity, promote competitiveness, decrease absenteeism and turnover, and also improve client satisfaction. Governments depend heavily on a skilled labour force with the capacity to learn, adapt and master competitiveness in a globalized economy (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Buckley & Caple, 2000; Tharenou, 2010). Besides that, some studies suggest that T&D activities promote a large number of positive attitudes towards the organization and the job, namely organizational commitment (Ehrhardt, Miller, Freeman, & Hom, 2011; Vidal-Salazar, Hurtado-Torres, & Matias-Reche, 2012) and job satisfaction (Latif, 2012; Pajo, Coetzter, & Guenole, 2010).

This research has grown out of classroom discussions with students enrolled in masters’ programs in the field of management. It became apparent that the employing organizations of these postgraduate students were facing considerable hurdles as far as training and development activities are concerned. The issues pertaining to T&D have attracted much attention in recent years, but have failed to address the employees’ perspective on the subject. It was then decided to dive deeply into their perceptions of the main difficulties and challenges encountered by organizations through a set of questions. What is the organization rationale for investing in training activities? What instruments and tools do they use to assess the training needs and effectiveness? What major problems do they encounter in the whole training process?

Results are expected to shed some light on the receivers’ perceptions of T&D processes, and speculate on the possible implications regarding some attitudes, such as job and training satisfaction, and intentions to leave (or not) the organization.
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