

Management Skills Development: the current position and the future agenda

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Abstract

In the last ten years, the nature of managerial work has changed considerably largely because the organisational, economic and technological context in which managerial work is conducted has changed beyond recognition. Organisations have been delayered; new concepts such as "the self-managed work team" have been developed; organisations have been subjected to a range of guru-driven change such as business process reengineering; the scale of IT-enabled home-based working has increased; the rapid evolution of information and communications technologies have increased the volume and variety of communication that managers have had to learn to cope with; and, increasing globalisation has created a more competitive environment where businesses have had to become leaner, more flexible and adaptable - this often having been achieved by the ruthless implementation of cost-reduction programmes. The consequence of this are that the skills and "capabilities" that managers need to be effective have change radically. The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of these changes and to assess the implications of management development and education programmes.

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Management Skills Development: the current position and the future agenda

Introduction

The changing context for managerial work

In the last five to ten years, the nature of managerial work has changed considerably largely because the organisational, economic and technological context in which managerial work is conducted has changed - in many cases - beyond recognition (Cooper, 1998). Organisations have been delayed; new concepts such as “the self-managed work team” have been developed; organisations have been subjected to a range of guru-driven change such as business process reengineering; the scale of IT-enabled home-based working has increased; the rapid evolution of information and communications technologies have increased the volume and variety of communication that managers have had to learn to cope with; and, increasing globalisation has created a more competitive environment where businesses have had to become leaner, more flexible and adaptable - this often having been achieved by the ruthless implementation of cost-reduction programmes.

It is our view that the outcomes of the these - and other - processes of change have brought about an intensification in the nature of managerial work and that this increased intensification of managerial work has radically changed the skills that managers need in order to be effective in the changed context in which they have to operate. We argue that individual and businesses survival, and business and national competitiveness, will depend on how quickly and how well UK managers develop new skills. This will have major implications for UK educational and its ability to deliver new skills to the workplace (). However, our research has shown that the delivery of relevant and effective management development programmes is becoming increasingly difficult given the high level and increasing pace of change in the nature of managerial work (Worral & Cooper, 1997; 1998).

The purpose of this paper is threefold: first, we contend that the extent of organisational restructuring is a viable proxy with which to measure work and skills intensification, and we will use the Quality of Working Life database to measure the pace of organisational change and to identify business sectors where change is more pronounced; second, we will quantify the amount of management skills development training that managers currently receive and explore their views about the effectiveness of this training; and, third, we will present some of the data we have available about the skills that managers perceive they will need in the short term future. Throughout our analysis, we will compare and contrast managers at different levels of the organisational hierarchy, managers in different sizes of firms and managers in different sectors of the economy.

The extent and pace of change

According to Gallie et al (1998), the level of organisational change in the economy as a whole and in particular sectors provides a reliable proxy measure of the pace of work and skills intensification across the board, and it also exposes sectoral variations in the extent of work intensification. In 1997, we revealed that 59 per cent of respondents had experienced some form of organisational change over the last year, and in 1998, we found that the rate had increased to 62 per cent. This demonstrates a considerable degree of dynamism in one year; a high degree of persistence in the processes which are driving businesses to restructure and an increasing pace of change. More detailed analysis of the 1998 data revealed that there were both firm size and sectoral differences in the incidence of restructuring. While 33 per cent of respondents in organisations employing under 51 people had undergone some form of restructuring, this increased to 76 per cent in organisations employing over 500 people.

The pattern of change by business sector shown in Table 1 reveals that in the (former public) utilities, 90 per cent of managers had been subjected to some form of organisational change with above

average rates being experienced by managers in the uniformed/emergency services, the financial services sector, manufacturing, public administration and the health and education sectors. If our assertion that the scale of organisational change in a sector is a measure of work and skills intensification in that sector, then this would indicate that the skills needed by managers in the sectors listed above are likely to have changed more significantly than those of managers in other sectors. In the case of the utilities, manufacturing and financial intermediation, this is an assertion which is supportable by other evidence. For example, the last decade has seen the wholesale “translocation” of the former public utilities from the relative shelter of the public sector, into a domain where these organisations have had to face massive competition on a global scale (for example, in the telecommunications and in the energy production and supply sector). The competitive pressures facing the UK manufacturing sector have been considerable due to macro-economic effects (such as the strength of the pound) linked to the growth of new, low cost suppliers in emerging, low cost economies. At the same time, a strong emphasis on quality improvement and increased productivity - often driven through the supply chain - has forced many manufacturers to re-engineer and restructure in order to maintain market share. In the financial services sector, the rapid growth in the opportunities afforded by developments in information and communications technologies such as tele-banking, tele-sales and the growth of the call centre have all had significant impacts on organisational structures and, most important from the perspective of this study, on the role of managers and the pressures placed upon managers within those structures.

Table 1. The extent of organisational restructuring by industrial sector 1998

Base 1312	% stating that change had taken place in the last 12 months
All	62
Utilities	90
Uniformed services/emergency services	75
Banking/insurance/finance	74
Manufacturing/production	72
Public administration/government	72
Health services	69
Education/training	64
Distribution/transport	56
Construction/engineering	54
Retail/wholesale	53
Business services	44
Consultancy	32

Skills development, business competitiveness and current training provision

In a recent study (Storey & Worrall, 1996) of 1,000 West Midlands Chief Executive Officers, which explored the question of how regional competitiveness could be enhanced, two factors emerged as being perceived to have the greatest impact on improving the competitiveness of the region: these were, in priority order, improving managerial skills in the region’s businesses and improving the training and education of the workforce. Having established that CEOs regard management development as the top priority in driving forward the

business and regional competitiveness agenda in one region and assuming that this holds more generally, the Quality of Working Life database can be used to identify current patterns in the amount of training received by managers, disaggregated by their level in the organisation, by firm size and by business sector. If managerial quality is perceived to be the key factor in driving competitiveness, then we should expect a level of investment in management development commensurate with its importance.

In 1998, 22 per cent of UK managers did not receive any training, and this varied from 11 per cent not receiving any training in the utilities sector (in which the average manager received 7.0 days of training per year) to 16 per cent not receiving any training in the public sector (an average of 5.3 days of training per manager per year) to 25 per cent in PLCs (an average of 4.9 days of training per manager per year). Given the importance of PLCs in the wealth creation process - and the need to drive forward the national competitiveness agenda through enhancing the management skills base - it is somewhat disconcerting that the percentage of managers not receiving any training at all is higher in PLCs than in the public sector. A more detailed sectoral breakdown revealed substantial differences in the volume of training received by managers: in the construction sector and the retail sector, over 35 per cent and 28 per cent of managers respectively had not received any training in the previous year compared to 10 per cent and 12 per cent in the utilities and public administration respectively. In the transport and distribution sector, 24 per cent of managers had not received any training. Our research has revealed that there are significant differences in the volume of training delivered by sector with PLCs, construction, retailing and transport and distribution proving relatively low volumes of training for managers.

Analysis also reveals that there is a significant difference in the percentage of managers not receiving any training by firm size, with over 29 per cent of managers in small firms (employing 50 or less workers) not receiving any training compared to 18 per cent in firms employing 5,000 or more. Overall, current levels of training in terms of the average number of days per manager by firm size equates to 5 days of training per manager per year, ranging from 4.3 days per manager per year in businesses employing under 51 people to 5.8 training days per manager per year in firms employing over 5,000 people. A recent study of small firms () has revealed that the opportunity cost of training and the impact of days lost to training on production, tend to prevent managers in small firms from undertaking or funding more training.

Table 2. Days of training received by managers in firms of different size in 1998

	All	1-50	51-500	501-5000	5000-
1-5 days	48.9	49.1	54.1	47.7	44.8
6-10 days	18.5	13.4	17.4	19.6	23.5
11-20 days	6.2	3.4	3.5	8.4	9.5
20+ days	4.7	5.0	3.8	5.3	4.6
No training at all	21.8	29.2	21.2	19.0	17.7

While the overall volume of training is clearly very important, what is more important is the 'perceived effectiveness' of that training by the managers who have received it. The Quality of Working Life database reveals that for 1998, 65 per cent of managers who had received training in the past year thought that the training they had received had been effective.

Clearly, the remaining 35 per cent were less than positive about the effectiveness of recent training, with 16 per cent of training recipients thinking that the training they had received had not been effective. An analysis of the perceived effectiveness of training reveals that there is a relationship between the percentage of managers thinking that training had been effective and their level in the organisation (see Table 3).

Table 3. Perceived effectiveness of training by managerial level

	All	Chair/ CE/MD	Director	Senior Manager	Middle Manager	Junior Manager
Very effective	13.1	21.6	8.9	12.9	11.7	12.1
Quite effective	51.7	53.7	60.9	54.1	44.5	44.9
Neutral	19.3	17.2	17.8	18.3	25.5	17.8
Not very effective	9.1	5.2	7.1	8.1	10.9	11.2
Not at all effective	6.8	2.2	5.3	6.6	7.3	14.0

While 75 per cent and 70 per cent of Chairs/CEs/MDs and Directors think the training they have received is “quite” or “very effective”, this declines to 56 per cent for middle and junior managers, with 25 per cent of junior managers thinking that the training they received was “not very” or “not at all effective”. This relationship between level in the organisation and perceived training effectiveness is an issue in that if junior managers and middle managers are experiencing training that they regard as “ineffective” this might cause them to develop negative attitudes to training as their careers progress. With training at a very low level generally (an average of 5 days per manager per year), it is doubly worrying that for junior managers, only 25% of training is perceived as positive.

Just as our research has identified sectoral differences in training rates, an analysis of perceived training effectiveness showed strong sectoral variations. Overall, 16 per cent of managers regarded the training they had received to be ineffective. Two sectors which scored relatively badly on the volume of training delivered, also scored relatively badly on the perceived quality of training provided: in the transport and distribution and construction sectors around 25 per cent of managers thought the training they had received was ineffective. While the utilities sector was found to be a relatively high volume training provider, over 25 per cent of managers who had received training over the last year thought that the training had been ineffective. The sectors where training is perceived by managers to be most effective are the retailing and wholesaling, health services and manufacturing sectors.

In our research, we have sought to assess whether managers feel satisfied with amount of training they currently receive. Overall, 24 per cent of managers are not satisfied with the amount of training received. As the volume of training increases by broad sector, the percentage of managers feeling satisfied with the amount of training received declines - this may indicate that the more that managers are trained, the higher their expectations are. For example, in PLCs (where the volume of training received is lowest), 24 per cent of managers are unhappy with the amount of training they have received, but in the utilities (where the volume of training received is at its highest, but the perceived effectiveness of training is low), 29 per cent are unhappy with the amount of training received.

Our research into the amount of training received by managers in different firm sizes and sectors, and managers' views about the effectiveness of training have exposed a number of concerns:

first, the "average manager" in the UK receives about 5 days training per year and 22 per cent of managers receive no training at all;
 second, training rates in SMEs are well below those in larger firms where well developed internal labour markets and training infrastructures are more likely to exist;
 third, there is wide variation in the volume of training managers receive by sector and in the perceived effectiveness of training by sector; and,
 fourth, training rates in PLCs and other private sector firms are well below those in the public sector, raising questions about the amount the private sector is investing in improving managerial quality in the UK and the potential impact this under-investment in human capital may be having on the competitiveness of the UK economy.

Managers' views on the types of skills they will need in the next five years

While the section above raises questions about the volume and effectiveness of management development training being delivered in the UK, in this section we present an analysis of the skills that managers think they will require in the next five years.

Table 5. Managers' view of the skills they will require in the next five years

Skill/size of business	All	1-50	51-500	501-5000	5000-
Using IT	61.4	62.4	65.4	61.4	56.8
Managing information/knowledge	41.9	43.1	34.6	40.0	49.5
Financial management	38.5	36.6	35.0	38.3	43.9
Strategic thinking	35.3	30.7	34.3	39.3	36.9
Project management	29.4	22.4	22.6	33.1	38.9
communication skills	25.9	29.0	21.6	29.3	23.9
Leadership/motivational skills	24.3	23.1	22.3	24.8	26.9
Marketing skills	24.3	33.4	22.6	19.7	21.6
Negotiating	22.9	20.0	24.0	23.4	23.9
Environmental management	22.1	19.0	28.6	22.4	18.6
Coaching and counselling	20.9	17.6	23.0	22.4	20.6
Foreign languages	20.4	21.0	23.3	18.6	18.9
Interpersonal skills	16.9	15.9	11.3	20.7	19.6
Working as part of team	9.7	6.9	8.5	10.3	13

Note: this is a multiple choice question where respondents are invited to indicate all the skills that they think they will need from the above list.

The range of skills that managers overwhelmingly think they need are the “hard” skills, such as using IT, managing information, managing organisational knowledge, financial management and strategic thinking. The “softer” skills such as inter-personal skills, working as part of a team, coaching/counselling and negotiating skills are placed much further down the priority list. The differences between managers in different sizes of firm and between those in different sectors are not significant.

While our analysis gives an overview of what managers think the priorities for skills development are in the near future, the question remains: who is the best judge of what future skills managers are likely to need? While managers seem to be more firmly focused on acquiring hard skills, much contemporary literature is pointing to the increasing importance of the soft skills in the changing context in which managerial work is enacted (Coppelli, 1998).

Overview of the issues raised

This paper does not claim to give a definitive view of the changing skills needs of UK managers and the issues affecting their acquisition of skills. Rather, we have tried to assemble a range of evidence from the Quality of Working Life database that we can use to identify and explore some of the issues involved in this complex set of questions. However, our research does provide some empirical evidence of the volume of training currently being delivered, and what managers themselves think about the effectiveness of the training they have received and what skills they think they will need in the near future.

If our hypothesised relationship between the scale of organisational restructuring taking place within a sector and the degree of work and task intensification taking place in that sector, then we have some evidence to say that the utilities, financial services, manufacturing and public administration are sectors where the context in which managers are operating are the most rapidly changing, and where more research is needed to explore the detailed nature of that change and its impact on the skills managers require in order to be effective.

Our finding that the “average manager” receives 5 days of training a year is a point of some concern, and this is exacerbated by our finding that private sector organisations train less than public sector organisations. We argue that how well private sector managers perform is a key driver of the competitiveness of the UK economy and that more investment in effective training is required if the UK’s competitiveness agenda is to succeed.

The low volume of training in some sectors is accompanied by low perceived levels of training effectiveness. This indicates that a stronger sector based perspective is needed on the design of training and on the crafting of strategies designed to encourage organisations to engage with training. While NTOs are charged with this task, it is important that the brief they adopt focuses sufficiently on the management development agenda in particularly sectors in addition to addressing the more traditional “craft” oriented view of training needs.

We have identified the skills that managers themselves think they will need, it is important to ask whether managers are best placed to articulate their own training needs. While we have identified what skills managers think they will need, we argue that this can only be one input to the design of management development programmes that managers and their organisations consider effective.

One of our main objectives in writing this paper has been to begin a debate about management development, by exposing levels of investment in management training that we consider to be inadequate in a global economy, where survival will depend on managers' ability to add value, to adapt to rapid change and to adapt to a radically changing managerial contexts. While the overall level of training is low, we are particularly concerned by sectors of the economy where not only is the volume of training being delivered low but the managers who are receiving that training regard it as being ineffective. It is a point of concern that perhaps 35 per cent of training budgets may be being wasted. It is also a point of some concern that management training levels are particularly low in the small firm sector - small firms will not live up the rhetoric that surrounds them unless the quality of management within them is radically improved.

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