A Shift from Training to Learning: Self-Directed Learning for the Malaysian Hotel Industry

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With the emphasis on self-directed learning (SDL) and learner-controlled instruction (LCI) the author looks into the mechanism that has made several business and industrial sectors in the Western world progress significantly in the training and development field. The achievement of this strategy as compared to the traditional training of time-based rotation has made several organizations follow the footsteps of the pioneers. The article draws on a range of application of self-directed learning and learner-controlled instruction practiced in the hospitality and foodservice industry from the 70s to the 90s. Based on the adoption of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) or Learner-Controlled Instruction (LCI) in business and industrial sectors overseas, will there be a future for SDL or LCI in the Malaysian Hospitality Industry?

Key words: self-directed learning (SDL), learner-controlled instruction (LCI), Malaysian hospitality industry

Introduction

As the hospitality industry expands, the demand for trained and competent workers has made organizations turned their attention to the development of managerial competence as a mechanism to stay competitive in this new era of globalized business (Prahad and Hamel, 1990; Goh, 1995; Robert and Shea, 1996). The global competition has forced the competitive hotel business environment to respond faster and develop new and innovative approaches to compete in this business. Hospitality organizations are under pressure to improve both training and development to produce effective results and reduce turnover by enhancing the overall workplace experience.

In Malaysia, the projected increase of both international and domestic travelers will create an unprecedented demand for new jobs. Educating and training the workforce is a vital component in preparing for the rapid growth of this industry. In addition, maintaining and improving the quality of the service are also essential components. There is a need for the hospitality industry to create a strategic alliance with the public and private educational providers, since it is recognized that both partners have a complementary role to play and to prepare an industry towards a successful intellectual workforce.

Malaysia’s success of Vision 2020 depends largely on its ability to provide a more comprehensive and effective human resource development program, including that offered at tertiary educational institutions that are designed to foster careers in hospitality and tourism.

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In meeting the demand for semi-skilled, skilled and advanced skilled manpower, in the manufacturing, service and construction sectors, the government has given education and training, a high priority in order to generate a sufficient pool of knowledgeable, highly skilled, computer literate and strongly-motivated workforce.

Training and education has been continually highlighted since the Sixth Malaysia Plan. The focus of this emphasis is to improve the quality of education that aims to develop a competent labor force that will have the competitiveness of the industrial sector in the Malaysian economy. Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan, several measures were taken to increase the service sector participation in training programs. The Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources (MMHR) launched a major human development program in April 1996, to train more hospitality and tourism workers to meet the rapid growth in this sector, when 20 new five-star hotels under construction came on stream in 1997 (Seventh Malaysian Plan, 1995-2000). The Hotel Apprenticeship scheme was launched in January 1997 to increase the supply of skilled workers to the hotel industry and to provide structured multi-skill training for school leavers before entering the job market. This scheme also aims to provide trainees with a recognized qualification that can be used for further retraining and skill upgrading for career advancement.

In line with this, the human policy thrusts in the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) include promoting lifelong learning, improving the quality of education and training delivery system and placing greater emphasis on increasing the supply of manpower equipped with the required academic, technical and extra functional skills as well as imbued with positive attitudes and creativity.

To date, the exceptional growth in the Malaysian tourism industry has become the key sub-sector in generating revenues and career opportunities. Given this scenario, the unprecedented growth in tourism industry has generated exceptional demand for hospitality services (New Straits Time, 1996).

**Current Training Situation**

Research has found that in most of today’s classrooms, whether they are academic or industry-based, teaching or training and learning styles follow the objectivist education model. This theory purports that an objective reality can be delivered to the learner or trainee who will, in turn, modify his or her behavior accordingly. A teacher or trainer, as an expert, transfers the knowledge in an environment where the trainee or learner accepts the reality as it is. The learning and training of hospitality program in Malaysia is also towards the objectivist model. The didactic approach, which is widely used in the schools and institutions of higher learning, are being practiced in the industry.

The traditional trainer-directed training approach (objectivist approach) for the hospitality program is a time-based rotation, which expects a trainee to rotate from one department or workstation to another according to a fixed schedule. The time allocation to one department depends on the head of departments. When the allotted duration has passed, the trainees move to another department for a similar activity. This time-based rotation of on-the-job training (OJT) remains the dominant training method in the hospitality industry since many organizations have tailor-made it to their operations. Another common training method is the “buddy-system”, where competent employees are made as model employees to communicate their knowledge and skills. However, concepts and ideas may not be properly relayed.
Since the hospitality industry has grown and become more global, both internally and externally, traditional training approach has been found to be inefficient and lacking in effectiveness. Bower and Hilgard (1981) reported that other industries training executives find the traditional formats, which restricted the amount of interaction from the learner, are limited in effectiveness. The most effective type of learning or training is strategic in nature (Haywood, 1992), when they interactively involve the individual, offer training that is highly stimulating to the individual and require the individual to be responsible for the learning of the material.

In line with this, Reigeluth (1996) insisted the current paradigm of education and training need to change from focusing on prescreening trainees for employment position, to focusing on learning. There should be a shift from the normal constant training time with varying achievement, allowing time allocation for each learner to reach the desired attainments. Although it is understood that organizations have time limit for a training program, Reigeluth (1996) argued that the current paradigm of training and education should focus on customization instead of standardization. Any training program that is based on conformity and compliance need to be replaced with self-initiated trainees who will solve problems and bring diversity in terms of perspectives to the workplace. These will enhance the ability to solve problems and be ahead of the competition.

**Approaches to Training and Development**

The focus on learning has had an impact on training and development and human resources development strategy. Due to the increase in globalization, the current hospitality situation has moved from stability and certainty to frequent and often unpredictable, requires a
flexible, competent workforce, able to update knowledge, skills and attitudes, as well as multi-skill and versatile with relative ease. Training and development approaches in hospitality relied heavily on training as the primary tool. The training approaches adopted by individual organization are greatly influenced by the leadership style, commitment and philosophy of top management. Although each approach has its strong characteristics, they are not mutually exclusive and at times may be used to complement each other.

According to Reid (1991), the most appropriate way of achieving training/learning outcomes involves examining three aspects: 1) approaches to training, which falls on a continuum ranging from trainer-directed at one end to trainee-directed at the other; 2) training strategy which involves cross-relating criteria such as training objectives, characteristics of the learner and the resource available; and 3) learning strategy which is the trainer’s and trainee’s choice of learning methods and media appropriate to a particular training/learning activity.

The common training approaches practiced by the hospitality organizations, which emphasizes on trainer-directed include the Systematic Model, the Analytical Approach, the Competence Approach and the Problem-solving Approach. The Systematic model is a four-stage feedback loop procedure: an overall assessment and an analysis of training needs; planning the training; implementing; and evaluating (Reid, 1991). This trainer-directed model or objectivist instructional system allows needs to be assessed and jobs to be rigorously analyzed to yield necessary objectives, content of training, and desired standards of performance. The planning process then involves determining the training techniques most appropriate to achieve the desired objectives and drawing up a suitable program.

Historically, the Analytical approach has been associated with survey of organizational training needs, followed by detailed analysis of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for each job (Reid, 1991). This approach allows an employee’s performance to be measured against the analysis and the training gap identified. This approach is logical and particularly applicable in situations where an activity be closely defined and is likely to remain constant over a sufficiently long period. Handy (1985) described this approach as a ‘role culture’, a bureaucratic manner, where each employee is expected to conform to a written job description. Likewise, the Competence approach is also analytical in nature, but it is not an analysis of job specific for employees, rather it is for trainees on secondment from colleges as a learning experience or industrial attachment. Competence is defined as the ability to use knowledge, product and process skills and as a result, act effectively to achieve a purpose (Hayes, 1983) and it is hoped that the ‘core competences’ will be able to transfer to various circumstances (Reid, 1991).

The Problem-solving training approach emphasizes on the main problems and issues faced by the organization. Training is viewed as a tool to equip employees to overcome the difficulties being experienced. Discussion of multi-faceted problems and the solutions frequently involve group activity, which results in high self-awareness of shortcomings or learning needs. This type of approach is more of the self-development, which may vary from problem solving groups, quality circles to action learning. The problem-solving approach is not trainer-directed but is under the control of a group. Handy (1985) described this as a ‘task culture’, which has a matrix structure so that multi-disciplinary project teams work together on either a temporary or permanent basis. An important aspect in this approach is to reflect upon the results of action taken, thus making the evaluation as part of the learning process.

Unlike the trainer–directed training which is dependent externally on a trainer, the continuous development approach of training is focused on learning that is achieved internally by the trainee. This approach can be achieved if it is self-directed, because it necessitates the ability to learn from everyday experience as well as from any formal training provided (Reid, 1991). Enhancing self-direction can be viewed as facilitating a change for
adult learners from being dependent to being independent. The continuous development approach allows a shift from a focus on standardized training programs to an emphasis on the learning process, and to self-directed and self-managed learning (Sambrook and Stewart, 2000). This strategy is an effective method of meeting the challenge of providing timely training in the face of increasing technological requirements since it allows the learner the opportunity and the ability to make learning decisions.

### Shifts in Hospitality Training

The transformation of training to learning is being brought about by the forces that have been reshaping the marketplace globally. Some of the influential change agents include global competition, downsizing of employees, empowerment and also technology. Organizations, globally, have begun to realize that the abilities to think critically and to collaborate effectively are important skills that should be instilled in the workers and workplace. These skills will be necessary as hospitality organizations are moving towards knowledge-based economy.

The concept of the learning organization in the hospitality industry emerged and became popular following the writing of Senge in 1990. Senge linked learning with “excellence”, a concept enthusiastically embraced by employers and managers as a means of securing competitive advantage in a turbulent trading environment. Although an individual may learn on their own, the concept suggests that, there is no learning organization unless learning is shared and acted on and the whole organization change (Senge, 1990). Go et al. (1996) see hospitality training as a systematic process through which an organization’s human resources gained knowledge and developed skills by instruction and practical activities that resulted in improved corporate performance. Training in the hospitality industry as any activity that resulted in learning. The effectiveness of the training will be measured by improved performance of the learner. If knowledge, skills and attitudes have not been improved, then either nothing was learned or what was learned was of little value. On the other hand, if the acquired knowledge does improve skills, strengthen knowledge, and develop desirable attitudes (which can be observed in the behavior of the learner), then, the training will be considered effective (Forrest, 1990).

O’Donnell and Garavan (1997) stressed that the fundamental role of the trainer is to ensure that effective learning takes place. Effective learning means that the learner is able to demonstrate the desired level of expertise or competence (as in traditional behavioral objectives), and at the same he or she is able to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the underlying principles. The learner or trainee should experience awareness of growth in self-development through reflection on the process of learning, thus developing an increased sense of personal control, empowerment and autonomy.

A review of the hospitality journals revealed that hotels and large foodservice organizations stressed that training will have to include a more educational format that involve frequent and innovative teaching methods (Gregor and Withiam, 1991; Clark, 1991; Pavesic and Brymer, 1990) as well as more efficient instructional technology than is being currently used (Durocher and Niman, 1990). Hospitality training will have to become more individualized, using methods and tools that are targeted toward diverse needs, strategic in nature, tracked on a consistent and longitudinal basis, and evaluated (Harris and Cannon, 1995). The application of theories of adult learning that stressed on the backgrounds and experiences of adults, influence the effectiveness of training both positively and negatively (Knowles, 1984; Berger and Farber, 1986). Harris and Cannon (1995) stated that in incorporating adult learning theories and the needs of the changing workforce, present and future employees will require training to be delivered in their own language, at the their own
pace and communicated at their learning level. Trainers must provide immediate feedback, be interactive, stimulating, and culturally sensitive. Training must be convenient, efficient and continuous over the period.

Winn (1991) stated that classical instruction designing or the trainer-directed training should continue in the basic knowledge of well-structured domain, while Jonassen (1991) argued that constructivist learning environments, or self-directed learning are most appropriate for the second stage, where apprenticeship model in professional education programs such as the internship experience is needed. Figure 2 shows the stages of knowledge acquisition in the apprenticeship model. The important component is situated learning, where trainees learn the conditions for applying knowledge in situations that foster invention, focusing on the implications of knowledge. Winn supported Jonassen’s view by the comment that there is a point where the complexity of learning makes prediction of performance and prescription impossible. In applying the stages of knowledge acquisition in the Malaysian society, where the people are more conscious of social hierarchy and question established norms less, Yong’s (1996) suggestion was similar to Jonassen (1991) and Winn (1991). He suggested the peda-andragogical approach to training, which combines the objectivist and constructivist elements in the learning environment.

The hospitality organizations have also increasingly seen learning as a strategic, competitive advantage, as they struggle to change their cultures and processes so that they can capitalize on “knowledge-based assets”. The public debates regarding life-long learning and the “learning” organization in business are such that organizations are required to compete with new technologies in rapidly changing environments. Sasser et al. (1978) argued that there are five elements in the service rendered by human that technology has not been able to replace so far. These elements include human presence (warmth), human assurance (security), human response, human dexterity and human reasoning. Though there has been a considerable advancement in technology, in the hotel sectors, employees must perform the final delivery of products. In fact, Mullins (1993) stressed that the increasing use of technology and automation will lead to a demand for a higher level of personal attention and service.

![Figure 2 Three Stages of Knowledge Acquisition](source: Evaluating Constructivist Learning by D.H. Jonassen, 1991, Vol 31 (9), p.32. Edu. Technology.)
The general opinion that programs should be learner-directed or controlled is nothing new. What is latest is the methodology of approaches available to help trainees put the ideas of self-directed learning into daily practice. The ideas of self-directed learning (SDL) have received increasing attention in the past 30 years and are having an impact on the education and training at all levels. According to Knowles (1977), a pioneer in the development of teaching adults, SDL is not the best form of education in all situations but whenever more complex human performances are involved, especially those requiring judgement, insight, creativity, planning, and problem solving, self-confidence, and the like, then SDL is appropriate.

Conceptually, self-directed learning (SDL) and learner-controlled instruction (LCI) has been defined as:

- A process of mutual inquiry between the teacher and student (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990).
- The selection and/or modification of course materials to illuminate particular objectives, structured in a way to allow the students to carry out the learning (Rowntree, 1990).
- Behaviourally oriented career development program, which encourage employees and trainees to take great responsibility for their own development (Feeney, 1981; Forrest, 1990).
- A process in which learners or individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating relevant learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975).

**Philosophical Assumptions of Trainer-Directed Training and Self-Directed Learning**

Trainer-directed training (TDT) and self-directed learning (SDL) offer different, contrasting frameworks for use in structuring educational and training system. Trainer-management is the thrust of the traditional training approach while self-managed is encouraged in the self-directed learning approach. Nevertheless, both approaches are being utilized in the training of hospitality individuals. The philosophical assumption underlying TDT is behaviorism or objectivism; a teacher or trainer-centered method. Learning, according to behaviorism, is a change in behavioral disposition of an organism. Learning behavior can be shaped by selective reinforcement. Behaviorism assumes the primary responsibility for planning; implementing and evaluating learning experience lies in the hand of the teacher, instructor or trainer. On the basis of this conception of learning, teaching is concentrated on the systematic planning, realization and evaluation of linear, continuous learning path with regard to specified educational objectives.

The philosophical assumptions underlying SDL are humanist and constructivist orientations (Caffarella, 1993). Humanist theories consider learning from the perspective of the human potential for growth of self-development. Learners are expected to assume primary responsibility for learning which leads to the process of learner-centered learning. It was found that Rogers’s principles of significant learning and Maslow’s view have been integrated much into the adult learning theory, which is congruent with the constructivism perspective. From a learning theory perspective, humanism emphasizes that perceptions are centered in experience, freedom and responsibility to become what one is capable of becoming. These tenets underlie much of adult learning theory that stresses the self-directness of adults and the value of experience in the learning process (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).
Constructivist hold that learners or trainees not instructors govern the knowledge based on their individual experiences, needs and interests in the learning environment. Trainers act as encouragers or motivators for learners or trainees to build learning confidence and voice in the learning process. Self-directed learning encourages collaborative learning environment in which the trainee and trainer both participate and involve in all aspects of instructional system design.

**Application of SDL/LCI in the Service Industry**

The earliest documentation of an LCI-designed program in the training field was by Robert Mager and John McCann in 1961. They discovered training time saved significantly when trainees were given control over the sequencing of their training program. This principle, as it relates to adult learning, has been further developed and conceptualized by Knowles (1975). The application of SDL mostly in the education sector has brought about the LCI concept in the hospitality industry. This behaviourally oriented career development program encourages employees and trainees to take a great responsibility for their own development (Forrest, 1990). As a management-training technique that applies many of the principles of adult learning theory, LCI has emerged during the past decade as an increasingly promising training and development alternative.

Although, many training and development practitioners agree to this principle but LCI was rarely used in the hospitality field. Rather, this methodology is widely used in the education sector, especially in the area of teacher education. Today, this concept is well accepted and gradually adopted by many organizations in the United States and Britain, however, many organizations in other parts of the world, are still hesitating to employ this strategy into the workplace. Top management need to be convinced of the payoffs of SDL or LCI in the long run.

In the business and industrial sector, Wydra and Rivers pioneered using LCI program, to achieve a goal of training 100 store managers per year at Allied Supermarkets, Inc. in the early 70s. The required traditional rotation-based program of 52 weeks was reduced to 7.6 weeks while achieving higher individual performance results. Simultaneously, training costs reduced due to the tremendously accelerated learning speed. The LCI design exceeded the first year goal of producing 100 trained assistant managers. The company produced 110 graduates during the first year.

Between 1971 and 1972, the LCI program for management training was first introduced in the service industry by The Marriott Corporation, a leader in the hospitality industry. The Marriott design was referred to as “individual development” (ID) program for entry-level supervisors. Training time reduced significantly. Marriott eventually implemented LCI programs in other divisions. Since this time, several other hospitality organizations followed Marriott’s lead, implementing various types of LCI programs. In 1976, at the Pants Corral, a retail division of Giant Food, Inc., Rivers and Stewart applied LCI to the training of specialty clothing store managers. Average training time reduced from 26 weeks to 6.5 weeks.

In the early 80’s, one chain restaurant that has had considerable success with LCI is Darryl’s (a chain of 34 restaurants) in the south-eastern United States. Darryl’s uses LCI primarily to train new managers. After a brief orientation program management trainees study a comprehensive training manual that explains the LCI process; responsibilities of the trainee; contractor, and training advisor, and how training contracts are used. The normal 16 weeks of traditional classroom techniques have reduced to 11 weeks (a 31% decrease in training time). Furthermore, positive comments and appreciation from employees for allowing them to make decisions that affect their training.
At Johnsonville Foods, the Sheboygan, WI (sausage maker), the change of management style that allows the people who do the work to make decisions relating to their jobs, yielded great improvements in the commitment. These changes had a measurable effect on the bottom line. From 1982 to 1990 return on assets doubled, sales increased eightfold, rejects were reduced from 5 percent to less than 0.5 percent, and the ratio of complaint to compliment letters went from 5-to-1 to 1-to-2.8 (Honold, 1991)

Study done on best practices in the lodging industry in 1999, found that Ritz-Carlton Tysons Corner initiated self-directed work teams, which shifted decision-making responsibility to hourly staff and eliminated management positions. With employees’ participation, the organization identified tasks to be transferred to staff members. A one-year trial run was first experimented with the front desk employees taking over the tasks of the front-office manager and self-managed the department. The success of this trial led to full adoption to the entire hotel in June 1995. The result of employee turnover fell to 25 percent in 1998. There was a reduction in payroll costs, a reduction in manager-to-staff ratio (from 1:15 to 1:50) and improved employee-satisfaction ratings (Dubé et al., 1999; Enz et al., 2000).

Benefits yet with Limitations

According to Knowles, the andragogy pioneer, SDL or LCI is not a perfect training strategy but it addresses adult learning needs of management trainees better than most management development approaches. LCI is a field-based, hands-on training process that occurs on the job. The unique characteristic of self-directed learning is its unrestricted arbitrary rotation-based of training programs. This promotes empowerment and liberation of both trainees and trainers, and others with whom they interact. It is however undeniable that in implementing this approach, there may be some limitations. This program is very dependent on technical experts within the organization and requires full support from supervisor and managerial level. The potential problem that can be seen is that trainees or learners, who are accustomed to trainer or teacher-directedness or other approaches, may initially resist SDL or LCI since this technique is unfamiliar. The evaluation and administration of this self-directed learning are particularly demanding tasks requiring openness and creativity from both trainees and trainers or as known in SDL program as ‘facilitators’.

Forrest (1999), the Food service and lodging industries’ leading authority on the application of LCI states that LCI is a solid adult learning system, which incorporates the best approaches to adult learning and treats management trainees as adults learners. Steven Covey, in his best selling book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, described learner-controlled instruction as a “win-win” situation to management training. Covey stated that he is “always amazed at the results that happen, both to individuals and organizations, when responsible, proactive, self-directing individuals are turned loose on a task.”

Incorporating SDL and TDT in Hospitality Training

Based on an expert survey on human resource and training practitioners in 20 four and five stars hotel in Klang Valley, it was found that a model that incorporates the components of self-directed learning and trainer-directed training might serve the needs of management trainees in the Malaysian hotel organizations. Figure 3 illustrates the possibility of integrating TDT and SDL with training needs activities. The model includes the trainer-directed training context, self-directed learning components (Andragogical Process Model), and the needs assessment time and processes (in the center) (Zainal, 2002).

The model illustrates that as trainees enter a hotel organization, prior to departmental training program, needs assessments are conducted. The assessed needs are then taken into
consideration, and the trainers will analyze, design and develop the training program according to the trainer-directed approach, since trainees are new to the organization. During the first half of the training period, the trainers will carry out and monitor the program closely and conduct departmental evaluation on these beginners. Through the traditional TDT evaluation, the trainers will identify the potential trainees that could be considered for the self-directed approach during the second half of the training duration.

A training needs assessment is carried out further during training to determine any existing improvements or shortcomings. The determining or decisive factors to achieve self-efficacy (increase morale and motivation) among trainees would be the part where trainers and trainees are able to mutually plan, diagnose, formulate and execute learning objectives together in the second half of the training duration. These potential trainees are then guided and facilitated for experiential learning during-training and until the end-of-training program, where both the trainers and trainees mutually discuss and evaluate the learning outcome. Finally, a needs assessment is carried out again during post training to identify the strengths and weaknesses (if any) of the program and to develop better learning strategies for the future.

**Figure 3** Integrated Framework for Training and Needs Assessment in Malaysian Hotel Industry

**Conclusion**

The change in customer needs and preferences require the management of hotel organizations to be continuous learners in order to successfully compete in the current competitive environment. Therefore, the adoption of more than one approach of training is viable. Trainer-directed training (TDT), a widely adopted training approach has proven to be an important and appropriate framework for instructional system design for the hospitality
industry. On the other hand, self-directed learning (SDL), a fairly new training approach to the Malaysian hotel industry has been considered as an appropriate framework for instructional system design for the industry that is moving towards learning organizations. The systematic model of training or the objectivistic approach is best used for training novice hospitality management trainees, while the andragogical process model or SDL is an appropriate instructional framework for advance trainees. In line with this, if the institutions of higher learning could develop a self-directed learning course in the hospitality curriculum and inculcate in learners, the need to be self-directed and to be more responsible, then the industry will be able to carry out the continuous development training approach or self-directed learning successfully in the next five years (Zainal, 2002).

TDT and SDL, being two polar extremes on a continuum; namely the behaviorism and constructivism, are able to increase trainee morale and motivation in their own way. With the combined instructional systems of trainer-directed training and self-directed training approaches in the industry, the hospitality practitioners and the institutions of higher learning with hospitality degree programs should be able to prepare personnel, qualified to improve hospitality organizations in the future (Zainal, 2002). However, the combination approach can only be achieved if the management and the practitioners are willing to practice customization (training tailored to individual needs) rather than doing a standardization of training scheduled for the same badge of trainees that are recruited.

References


