Individual learning accounts
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3 Individual Learning Accounts in labour organisations

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we explained that government policy centralises the shared responsibility of employers and employees for training and development with respect to post-initial learning. Employers account for a major share of post-initial learning undertaken in the Netherlands. Regulative policy measures by the Dutch government intend to encourage employees to take responsibility for articulating training and development demand. Furthermore, social partners on sector level have initiated a number of new forms of employability policy, in which the individual voice of the employee is incorporated. ILA can be regarded as a financial component of innovative employability measures set down in collective labour agreements that aim to stimulate educational demand on the part of workers. This chapter will subsequently address two themes that emerge from the idea to incorporate ILA into labour organisations. In section 3.2., we will examine the principle and functioning of HRD arrangements based on the demand for training development for individual employees. Employee-focused HRD will be discussed against the backdrop of changing labour environments and job requirements. In this way, we will discuss how far current approaches to HRD are applicable to labour contexts and adults who traditionally do not participate in post-initial or continuous learning activities. In section 3.3 we will examine what workers need from their direct work environment in order to formulate their educational demand.

3.2 Employee-focused interventions for Human Resource Development

Traditionally, HRD involves corporate policies and instruments strategically deployed by labour organisations to effectively utilize the competences of workers to enhance company performance. Companies are more and more confronted with dynamic and competitive environments which leads to internal restructuring and ‘delayering’ of the organisation and rapid changes in skill requirements. Although individuals always have been centralised as recipients of HRD, more and more the individual employee is seen as active customer of training and the learning process (Walton, 1999; Hirsh, Jackson, & Jackson, 1995). We have seen that in the Netherlands, this new HRD perspective has been gradually set down in CLAs. This perspective on development demands from individual employees has consequences for human resources management in labour organisations. Van der Zee (1997) criticised the traditional design-approach of human resources in labour organisations and
advocated a more development-oriented approach. He emphasised the complexity of knowledge processes in organisations which, for the greater part, ‘escapes from the consciousness and the will of supervisors’ (Van der Zee, 1997, p. 121). In this section, we will briefly discuss changing requirements of the work environment and its consequence for corporate competence policy and career development policy.

The changing work environment relates to the increasing requirement of contextual knowledge and broad occupational competences on the work floor. Contextual knowledge can be employed to solve problems occurring in an integrated task context (Barley, 1996). According to Hirsh et al. (1995) existing solutions for connecting tasks to individuals, such as function value systems, skill profiles, career paths, databases, are no longer satisfactory. What is more, traditional training models no longer suit the changing work environment. These models are based on fixed problem situations and solution strategies and do not provide the employee with competencies to manage situations that do not take place according to a standard formula. Through contextual knowledge, the worker knows how to diagnose and solve the problem at hand, rather than utilising a theoretical ‘standard’ problem that may not be relevant in all contexts. Work environment require increasingly complex problem-solving strategies. In the beginning of the nineties of the previous century, Onstenk (1992) observed that companies were increasingly expecting workers to ‘learn and think for the company’. There is a trend visible in strategic HRD that individual workers become more and more responsible for their own learning processes (Walton, 1999). Grieves (2003) refers to the term ‘empowerment’. Empowerment relates to the variety of interventions that give more autonomy to employees and increase their power in organisations.

Broad occupational competences have a dynamic character, in the sense that they are continuously subject to gaining new (richer) learning contents and reflection and processing. According to Onstenk (1997; 2000), broad occupational competences involve work task-related problem-solving skills and learning competencies in a dynamic, specific and complicated, organizational hierarchical and social communicative context. The achievement of these broad occupational competences requires a pro-active learner who makes decisions about the learning contents he needs to perform better in his current job, or to otherwise extend his mobility possibilities. In the nineties, increasingly more organisations offered career interventions, whereby companies were incorporating features for self-development (Kidd, 1996). Career interventions gradually became a strategic theme of HRD in organisations (Walton, 1999). Individual workers no longer have a career for life which develops vertically in the same organisation and the structures of organisations are more and more decentralised. Bakker, De Vijlder & Westerhuis (2004), even state that stimulating development of careers is the new value of employership. Traditionally, career development is the domain of initial vocational education. In the previous chapter, we discussed that initial and post-initial education are becoming more intertwined. Learning and working must be in accordance with heterogeneity and flexibility; learning and working are subject to individual combinations. HRD professionals not only focus on Human Performance Technology, but also deal with themes such as transferring from vocational training to work, employability, labour reintegration, policy on minorities, enhancement of learning environments.

Parallel with these changing skill requirements, there seems to be a trend visible that labour organisations are decentralising HRD policy. According to Bergenhenegouwen, Mooijman &
Tillema (1999), more and more labour organisations want to change their HRD staff from a bureaucratic training division to a ‘pro-active partner in change’. At the same time, there is a vertical decentralising trend visible in labour organisations. As a consequence, more and more line managers are taking up HRD activities. Walton (1999) stresses the notion of partnership between line managers and employees because of the increasing focus on the individual responsibility for work-based and career-based training. The ILA concept fits in with this model. ILA can be seen as an instrument to stimulate employee drive, because it assumes a partnership between employer and employee with respect to decisions about training and development (see: Kidd, 1996).

Some authors even advocate employee-driven training and employability, as opposed to strategic HRD (Van der Waals, Kessels, & Euwema, 2002). This approach is based on the principles that the employee is entrepreneur of his or her own talent, that work is not a routinised process but rather a learning process, that motivation and curiosity are more important than corporate strategy, and that learning is based on mutual attractiveness between the employee and the labour organisation. The portrayal of the employee as entrepreneur can also be found in the dissertation of Van der Zee (1997). This author predicted the rise of the ‘work entrepreneur’, who gives content and form to his own function and career. This concept can be compared with Wagner’s ‘enterprising self’ (Wagner, 1994). The enterprising self requires of individual human beings that they “… engage themselves actively in shaping their lives and social positions in a constantly moving social context” (Wagner, 1994, p. 165).

The idea of an enterprising self, however, only seems to apply to knowledge-intensive organisations and motivated pro-active employees. In his critique on Van der Zee (1997), Van der Kamp (1997) states that the concept of a work entrepreneur applies to dynamic and highly educated employees. The poorly educated ‘odd-jobbers’ are underexposed in this line of argument. Simons (1990) argues that a considerable number of adults have not learned to function as an independent actor in their own learning process. They lack necessary self-regulative skills and have affective and motivational blockades towards learning. A considerable number of adults have never learned to regulate and direct their learning demands and learning processes by themselves. In addition, affective and motivational blockades often cause reluctance to engage in an active and constructive learning strategy. Employees of a lower standard of education frequently have ‘unlearned’ to take initiative with respect to learning and development through negative school experiences and labour organisations that inhibit individual initiatives to grow. This means that employees in low-qualification jobs especially, in which they are subject to external control and have little opportunity for learning and development, run the risk of losing their initiative for personal development and innovation in the job (Lennerlöf, 1989).

Furthermore, Yeatts, Fols & Knapp (2000) pay attention to specific problems with which older workers are confronted when faced with fluctuous work environments. Older workers in particular are often educated to perform specific tasks in the work process and have gained specialisation in a certain task over the years. These employees tend to run the risk of over-specialisation, and subsequently cannot employ their knowledge and skills in a variety of situations (Marquié, Paumes Cau-Bareille, & Volkoff, 1998). In other words, entrepreneurial competencies often do not apply to employees of a lower educational level who experience affectional and motivational barriers
Individual Learning Accounts in labour organisations towards learning, as well as older employees who often spent most of their working years in traditionally managed employment.

The effectiveness of employee-centred approaches depends on a shared vision on the part of both employer and employee. In line with this consideration, we would like to outline some critical remarks about the idea of employee-focused HRD interventions. In the first place, it is relevant to focus on the hierarchic nature of the relationship between employer and employee. We cannot neglect the role of power in the labour context. Managers might be reluctant to relinquish control or are afraid to lose return of investment. Kidd (1996) observes that companies are often disinclined to invest in employee development, because it might encourage employees to leave the company. An approach to HRD centralising the responsibility of the employee should also be compatible with company strategy. Hirsh et al. (1995) point out that demand-directed career development is difficult to organise in an organisation with a strong short-term imperative. Short-term thinking and time constraints are especially predominant in small companies that tend to deal with training in an ad hoc fashion (Houtkoop, 2002). On the other hand, Hirsh et al. (1995) observe that aspects of employee-centred employability are often more company rhetoric than well-outlined strategy.

When companies adopt aspects of employee-centred career development, it is often more a practical than an ideological decision. In some large organisations, the Human Resource function is fragmented and self-development is viewed as both cheap and requiring less support. Outsourcing HRD professional staff and decentralising HRD functions to line managers is often an economic company decision. This brings us to the second point of critique: are line managers sufficiently equipped to stimulate and realise potential training demands? Hirsh et al. (1995) argue that managers, who operate as employee developers, need specific skills such as: appraisal and target setting, planned development opportunities, mentoring and coaching. This assessment is a complicated process. The authors observe that labour organisations often lack a supportive environment and line managers lack the skills to assess potential and needs. Furthermore, the process of assessment of potential and needs of individual employees requires the acknowledgement of skills acquired informally. This involves a process of identifying, assessing and recognising skills, knowledge, or competencies acquired through experience during working life, self-study and unrecognised training, but also through volunteer and leisure activities. According to Kidd (1996), line managers not only frequently lack these skills to support employees in this assessment, but may also feel threatened by the development of a subordinate.

Finally, Kidd (1996) distinguishes problems regarding the information supply about career development in organisations. Realistic information about few opportunities for advancement in the organisation might be detrimental for the employee’s organisational commitment; and realistic information of possibilities outside the organisation might encourage employees to leave. The author also foresees difficulties with respect to the content of information. Employees might want information about training and educational opportunities that are not related to the work, while organisations want them to engage in work-related training.
3.3 The work environment and educational intention

With an instrument such as ILA, the individual employee should have more control over training decisions. The rate to which the employee has his own say in HRD activities very much depends on organisational and workplace features. In this section, we will briefly discuss structural and social aspects of work environments that can support or impede the self-directive conduct of employees in taking educational decisions.

3.3.1 The structure of the work environment

The individual initiative to engage in learning can be stimulated or impeded by the structural features of the job. With organisational structures, we refer to the way in which labour within an organisation is divided and supervised. Strategy is the integrated totality of actions that constitute the long term viability of an organisation (Bergenhenegouwen, Mooijman, & Tillema, 1999). Different strategic perspectives and organisational structures are, in theory, linked to qualification strategies of organisations and learning strategies of workers. In previous sections it is argued that workers are required more and more to adopt a learning strategy which is directed at concrete problems in different contexts. This problem-oriented learning strategy can flourish in organisations with a flexible structure, in which responsibility is delegated to autonomous work groups and coherence between different tasks and processes occurs through mutual adaptation. Autonomy and responsibility can challenge the individual to use innovative procedures to solve problems while on the job (Eraut, Alderton, Cole, & Senker, 2000; Noe, Noe, & Bachhuber, 1990).

Van der Krogt (1991) argues that this learning strategy flourishes optimally in an ‘adhocracy’. The concept of adhocracy is one of the typologies in which Mintzberg (1983) categorises organisational structures. Although these typologies are ideal types, they provide a powerful conceptual framework to understand behaviour in organisations. In an adhocracy, work constellations are divided according to a matrix structure: on the one hand professional specialists are divided into function groups, however there is enough structural flexibility for specialists to work in project-based interdisciplinary constellations. In these types of innovative organisations, such as Research and Development centres, mostly highly-educated professionals are employed. In these extremely knowledge-intensive companies, an instrument such as ILA can flourish. Employee-centred HRD is vital in such organisations, because the kind of knowledge and skills required for carrying out the job is scarcely manageable by those other than the professional himself.

Van der Krogt compares an adhocracy with more bureaucratic organisations. In ‘professional bureaucracies’ such as hospitals and care institutions, the focus is on the professionals who operate according to specific vocational profiles. These professionals are trained outside the organisation and problem-solving occurs by means of standard resolutions for standard problems, acquired through formal training outside the actual work context. In this sense, the learning strategy of the professionals is ‘vocation-related’. Training and development is to a high extent dependent on the initiative of the professionals or their vocational associations. According to Van der Krogt, organisations in which such professionals are employed provide workers with the time and...
opportunity to follow training course and highlight training possibilities. Therefore, professional bureaucracies often operate as ‘training brokers’ with regard to upgrading their employees. The use of an instrument such as ILA will be limited by the skills-requirements of the profession of the individual. Although these professionals should be provided with ample means to follow courses, it is not up to individual professionals to make educational decisions. Decisions about what to learn, and when, are imposed by their profession. Therefore an individual financing mechanism is unlikely to be of addition use in this kind of organisation.

In industrial organisations, qualifications and required skills are determined by technical staff. Just like the professional bureaucracy, workers in industrial organisations work in function groups which specialise in a specific part of the work process. This work process is designed in detail. The learning strategy of workers in these organisations is therefore strictly task-related. Workers in so-called ‘machine bureaucracies’, who often have a low level of initial education, are not actively involved in training and competence development (see: Sierksma, 1990). Employees involved in such contexts often have ‘unlearned’ to take own initiative for training and development. Employee-centred HRD interventions do not take part in the corporate strategy of companies pertaining to this classification.

Another organisational typology distinguished by Mintzberg (1983), in which poorly qualified workers are often employed, are ‘simple structures’. The simple structure is a concept relevant to the analysis of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These organisations have a typical centralised structure, in which virtually all decisions are taken by one person, the owner of the entrepreneur. There is no management layer between the workers and the strategic top. Although the structure of such organisations is flexible, it cannot survive in a complicated environment. Whenever complicated knowledge and technologies are required, it becomes harder for just one person to manage workers and work processes. Through its flexible structure, a simple organisation is capable of innovation; however the innovation should not be too intricate. Although this means that there are hardly any mobility options, it is interesting to see what an instrument such as ILA will achieve in this kind of organisation. In spite of the centralised structure, relationships in small organisations are often characterised by personal and informal contacts (both among employees as well as between employee and employer). Because work processes are not fixed or formalised, this kind of organisation might provide individual workers with some latitude for expressing individual educational demands.

3.3.2 The culture of the work environment

In this subsection, we focus on the role of a supportive employment relationship and teams to encourage self-directiveness in making educational decisions. Mintzberg (1994) argues that in practice, there is no hierarchical sequence between strategic planning and designing the structure of a labour organisation. Not all action patterns are deducted from strategic policy. This could mean that HRD interventions focused on individual employees do not necessarily have to imply that employees are indeed encouraged to engage in learning activities. The fact that Personal Development Plan meetings are regularly organised in an organisation does not necessarily provide
the employee with a resource of help, support and an exchange of ideas. Hoogervorst, Van der Vlier & Koopman (2004) argue that official explicit communication is not received by workers in a neutral context. In fact, it is the implicit communication of the organisational context that affects the workers’ behaviour. Meijers (2003) comes to similar conclusions. He observed that in a number of SMEs, schooling in relation to career development was a recurring issue of dialogue on the work floor, “although this dialogue is not defined as such and although there are no formal mechanisms (such as PDP meetings) to prime and maintain it” (Meijers, 2003, pp. 2.2-3.11).

Communication in organisations is not only embedded in the organisational context that consist of structure and systems, management practices, but also in corporate culture. Corporate culture is important because values, norms and beliefs serve as models for behaviour within organisations. Schein (1999) distinguishes three levels of corporate culture. The most superficial of these levels refer to the organisation’s artefacts; the atmosphere of the interior design, the way people dress, the amicability of the communication among colleagues and between employee and immediate supervisor. These directly observable artifacts are based on espoused values, the second level of organisational culture. Often these values are explicitly present in organisations in verbal communication, pamphlets or even posters. Values can be, for instance: ‘We believe in teamwork’ or ‘In order to perform better in your job, it is important to constantly keep up-to-date through training and attending congresses’. These values are based on a deeper level; that of shared tacit assumptions. The first two levels are concrete behavioural expressions of these implicit beliefs shared by the participants in the organisation through informal learning and socialisation processes. We assume that the rate to which active engagement in training activities in organisations is supported in the employee’s immediate work environment, depends on these shared values and assumptions. With the immediate work environment, we refer to the relationship between employee and immediate supervisor and the relationships in teams.

In first instance a supportive relationship between employee and immediate supervisor stimulates participation in learning activities. Eraut, Alderton, Cole and Senker (1998) argue that a manager should positively support employee initiatives to learn, rather than be duly permissive. Noe, Wiggins Noe and Bachhuber (1990) explain managerial support as the extent to which the manager identifies recourses to help the employee with specific problems, is willing to provide information about performance and suggestions for improvement, and helps the employee to clarify both performance and career goals. The researchers discovered that there were positive correlations between managerial support and the match between individual and organisational development. Furthermore, managerial support enhanced the individual’s insight in his or her own strengths and weaknesses in relation to his or her career goals. The authors demonstrated that managers who provided feedback, coaching and advice with respect to development and schooling, consequently provided the employee with insight into the actual functioning on the work floor. This insight stimulates the employee to set his or her own goals for career development.

Meijers’ (2003) attempts to capture supportive employment relationship in the concept ‘schooling culture’. In this concept, social-cultural elements of the work floor and company strategy are intertwined. On the basis of an explorative study during the first experiments with ILA in Technical Installation companies, the author distinguishes three different types of schooling cultures (Meijers & Teerling, 2002; Sanou, 2002; Meijers, 2003). According to the authors, the failure or success
of an instrument such as ILA very much depends on the direct work environment in which the employee is emerged. The first category of companies lack a well-outlined training policy, hardly ever organise or stimulate training activities and individual development, nor is the company’s corporate development ever discussed. In this category of companies, ILA triggers the individual employee to think about schooling options and to proceed to the training market as consumers with purchasing power. In the second category of organisations, a purely economic short-term perspective determines interaction between organisation and individual employees. Schooling and training of employees is strictly functional and aimed at increased productivity or involves legally binding training (such as corporate safety procedures and certification). According to the author, in these companies, an ILA can open up the opportunity to employers and employees to commence a dialogue about which courses are relevant for the development of the company. Here, an ILA can help to broaden the perspective of the company from a short-term imperative to longer-term strategic developments. The third category of companies does have a well-outlined long term training policy which determines the interaction between employer and employee. Although in this category there is no dialogue between employer and employee about training in relation to employability, employees have broad training opportunities. In this type of organisation, interactions between employee and employer and among employees are bound by constructive feedback loops, whereby employees feel that individual competence development as a professional is appreciated. In the third category, ILA could open up the opportunity to employers and employees to commence a dialogue about training; on the one hand, in relation to individual career needs; and on the other hand, in relation to expected development of the company.

Meijers draws attention to the immediate work environment and, specifically, the dialogue between worker and immediate supervisor as a basis for individual and organisational development. Within the framework of employee-driven approaches to HRD as described in the previous section, the concept of ‘dialogue’ seems to refer to an ideal situation in which employee and employer (or immediate supervisor) are equal partners in a shared enterprise. Dialogue relates, according to the author, to the extent to which employee experiences freedom of decision making with respect to competence development and employability and feels appreciated as a professional worker. Several authors underpin that dialogue about learning on the work floor can enhance participation in learning activities through activation of the individual. Maurer (2001), for instance, argues that support and encouragement from the immediate supervisor encourages self-efficacy and the intention to voluntarily participate in competence development activities (see also: Maurer & Tarulli, 1994). A number of researchers emphasise the importance of this dialogue for older workers in particular. According to Hansson, Robson and Limas (2001) for instance, the manager is responsible for the prevention of work stress in older workers by individually assessing how they fit to their work environment, providing additional training, support or modification in work or the work place. Furthermore, Meijers & Teerling (2002) refer to the concept of perceived organisational support (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-Lamastro, 1990). Perceived Organisational Support consists of a set of beliefs about the supportive activities of the organisation. The study of Eisenberger, Fasolo and Davis-Lamastro (1990) showed that perceived organisational support was positively related to innovative behaviour of employees and affective attachment to the organisations. Innovative problem-solving behaviour on the part of the employee
Within the organisation, or on behalf of the organisation, did not necessarily go with anticipated reward or personal recognition.

Apart from a supportive employment relationship, we distinguish the influence of teams. Maurer & Rafuse (2001) emphasise the importance of supportive communication and positive feedback from both immediate supervisor as well as from co-workers. Motivation to engage in learning activities can be influenced by social interaction among peers, constructing subjective norms about intentional learning. According to Smith and Spurling (2001, p. 80) “Peers pass among themselves a kind of motivational folk-knowledge based on myths, assessment skills and/or bad habits which they have picked up at home and elsewhere”. On the other hand fellow workers can also demotivate each other from engaging in learning activities. Therefore employers and immediate supervisors should support the motivating role of fellow workers. In the next chapter we will present a model of variables that influence the decision to engage in educational activities in which supportive elements on the work floor are taken up.
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