

**Learning Among Lower Wage and At-Risk Workers:
The Roles of Personal, Organizational and Social Resources**

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Lower wage workers generally report limited access to learning opportunities. This paper proposes an integrated model to explain learning among lower wage workers. This model includes the role of demographics, the self-efficacy of lower wage workers, their outcome expectancies, access to resources, and the moderating role of social capital.

Despite learning being critical to an individual's career progression and job security, not all individuals are given the same opportunities to participate in learning activities. When organizations provide opportunities for learning, those who take advantage of those opportunities are typically higher wage employees with higher occupational status and higher education, who typically reside in high-skilled jobs (Tharenou, 1997). In addition, the employees who already have the highest skills tend to be the ones who receive and benefit the most from training (e.g. Altonji & Spletzer, 1991; Veum, 1993). This is of concern because, as Bowers and Swaim (1994) suggest, less-educated and less-skilled workers' skill development needs are not being met. Likewise, Greenhalgh and Movrotas (1994) suggest that lower wage workers are less likely to have experienced any recent training. The implication is that organizations tend to discard lower wage workers, and allocate their learning resources to higher skilled employees. With their access to learning resources limited, and their unlikelihood to participate, the level of learning among lower wage workers is hindered.

The amount of learning that an individual partakes in depends upon many factors. Learning theory explains some of those factors, including an individual's self-efficacy and outcome expectancies. Equally important are the resources available to the individual. An individual's access to learning, self-efficacy and outcome expectancies are dependent on the demographics and characteristics of the organization, the job, and the individual. This paper

proposes that the effect of these demographics on self-efficacy, outcome expectancies, access to resources, and subsequently on learning, is moderated by the individual's level of social capital. Lower wage workers are proposed to possess certain human, organizational and social resources which impact their access to resources and learning. Figure 1 outlines the theory that is proposed in this paper:

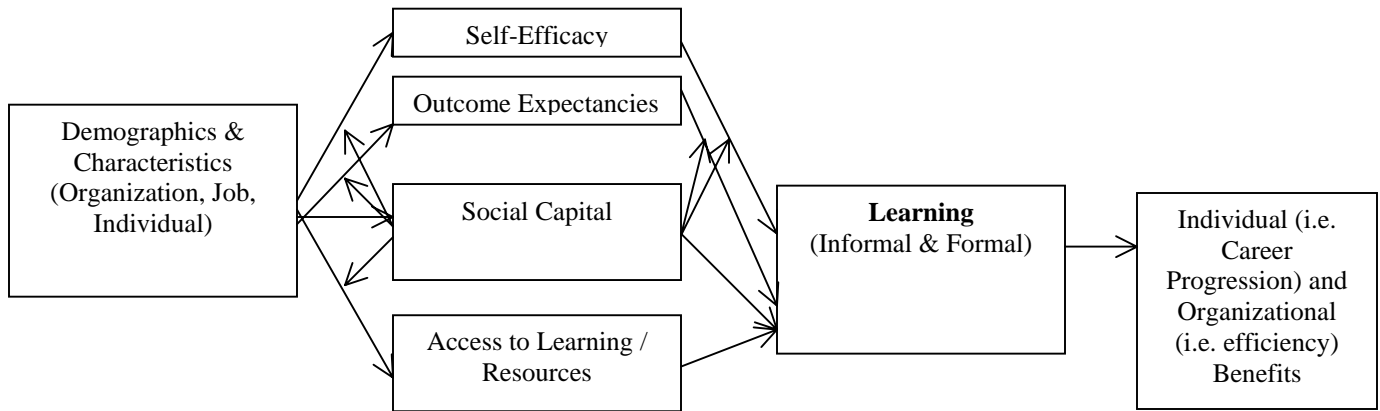


Figure 1. The antecedents and consequences of learning

This study is being conducted in two stages. First, four focus groups were held, followed by the distribution of surveys to over 800 employees. Generally speaking, the focus groups confirmed the relationships in the proposed model, with two exceptions. Surprisingly, lower wage workers do in fact have high levels of self-efficacy. They do believe that they would be capable of participating in and completing training offered by their employer or on their own initiative. They also have high outcome expectancies with respect to participating in training outside of work, on their own initiative. However, they experience many barriers to training that prevent them from participating in such training. They do not have high outcome expectancies with respect to training offered by their employer. The focus groups allowed us to examine the potential validity of our model. In addition, it helped to shape the development of our survey, and encouraged us to include questions on motivation to learn, as well as measures of employee-management relations.

Preliminary findings from the survey support the findings from the focus groups held in manufacturing workplaces, hotels and nursing homes in the Toronto and Ottawa areas. The sample (n=209) is comprised of 52% females at an average age of 42 years old, 61% of whom were visible minorities. This sample is derived from a population of 620 employees at eight

workplaces (for a response rate of 33%). The findings show that despite their high levels of self-efficacy, expectancies and motivation to learn, there is a low incidence of training reported by lower wage workers, with only 13% receiving formal training from their employer, and only 8% participating in training on their own initiative.

What is particularly interesting is the high motivation to learn amongst these workers, suggesting that they have a high level of self-efficacy, high expectancy, high instrumentality, and high valence with respect to learning. These findings are consistent with the findings from the focus groups which suggest that these individuals have a high belief that they can complete the training, that training would result in opportunities for a “better” job (outside of their workplace), that the outcomes of training (career goals, advancement, and job security) are all important and that they have a high motivation to learn.

The negative relationship between being a visible minority and the receipt of training is of concern given the disproportionately high number of visible minorities in lower wage jobs. The positive relationship between social capital and the receipt of training is encouraging. However, lower wage workers tend to report low levels of social capital. 43% of the respondents report that they discuss learning new skills with other family, friends and coworkers, however the results suggest that on average, each respondent only discusses learning new skills with one other individual. These findings suggest that lower wage workers receive low levels of training, despite their high motivation to learn. These results also suggest that lower wage workers would participate more in learning activities if they had better access to learning opportunities and if they had higher levels of social capital.

The survey findings do not strongly support the findings from the focus groups that there are significant barriers to training. However, this may be due to the fact that training is simply not readily available for these individuals, therefore barriers are less of an issue as is the lack of available training. Consistent with the results from the focus groups is the finding that there are significantly more barriers to taking courses on one’s own initiative. This is concerning considering that employees have a high motivation to learn, high self-efficacy, high outcome expectancies and a high of valence.

Over 200 additional surveys have been distributed to employees in the hotel sector in the Toronto area. Following the receipt of these responses, further analyses, including regression and structural equation modeling will be conducted.

Conclusion

Despite decades of research concluding that learning new skills is essential to an individual's career progression, lower wage workers report restricted access to learning opportunities. Despite their high levels of self-efficacy, expectancies and motivation to learn, there is a low incidence of training reported by lower wage workers, with only 13% reporting receiving formal training from their employer, and only 8% participating in training on their own initiative. The negative relationship between being a visible minority and the receipt of training is of concern given the disproportionately high number of visible minorities in lower wage jobs. The positive relationship between social capital and the receipt of training is encouraging. However, lower wage workers tend to report low levels of social capital. These findings suggest that lower wage workers receive low levels of training, despite their high motivation to learn. For policymakers, these results suggest a two-pronged strategy to increase learning among low wage workers. First, more training can be made available to these workers at the workplace. Since private employers generally do not invest in training unless the skills are directly related to job performance, general learning or learning for career switches have to be provided outside of the workplace. In this respect, improving access to learning opportunities outside of the job is critical to learning for such workers. Second, even when opportunities are available, lower wage workers may be less likely to engage in learning activities due to lower levels of social capital. Hence, some effort has to be devoted to showing workers the importance of social capital and ways in which they can enrich their social capital.