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The Effects of Managers on Employees' Learning in Selected New Zealand Small Manufacturing Firms

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ABSTRACT

The view that there should be increased emphasis on learning in workplaces because of rapid changes in business environments, and the suggestion that managers should foster the learning of employees, is prevalent in the workplace learning, organisational learning and 'learning organisation' literature. In New Zealand, and in other developed economies, small firms represent a very significant part of the workplace-learning context. Given the vast knowledge and skills base vested in small firms, how knowledge and skills are developed and maintained through learning processes in these firms are matters of major interest.

Overall, this study seeks to answer the question: In selected small manufacturing firms, what effects, if any, do managers have on employees' learning? To help answer this question, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and mail survey questionnaires. Verbatim expressions of the interview participants were analysed using content analytic procedures. Data gathered from employees through mail survey questionnaires were analysed using a range of statistical methods.

Findings of the content analysis of the verbatim expressions of the interview participants reveal that managers use a variety of strategies to foster learning at and through work in the small firms studied. Analysis of the mail survey data provides a description of how employees in the sample firms perceive their workplaces as learning environments. Employees' attributions of their work-related learning to various sources and methods of learning are also described. Additionally, specific managerial actions and behaviours that have potential to increase employee satisfaction with workplace learning are identified.

Findings of this study contribute to knowledge in the fields of management and human resource management in the small firm context. Synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative findings suggest a conceptual framework that can be used for analysing the effects of managers on employees' learning and help to evaluate the current state of research in the fields.

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