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**LEARNING AT WORK:  
A MODEL OF LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT  
FOR YOUNGER WORKERS**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Human Resource Management  
at Massey University, New Zealand

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## **ABSTRACT**

An organisation's competitiveness is largely determined by the capability of its workforce (Combs, Luthans, & Griffith, 2009; Den Hartog & Verburg, 2004). The development of employee capability is, therefore, an important goal for organisations and human resource practitioners. Because the workforce is ageing, organisations need to pay particular attention to developing the capability of younger, novice workers who will become the core workforce as older workers move out of the labour market. However, little is known about the process by which younger workers learn and develop at work or how organisations may be able to influence this process to enhance the development of their skills, knowledge and abilities.

To address this gap in the literature, the present study examined a model of learning and development for younger workers. The model posited that younger workers' 'development self-efficacy' beliefs would mediate the relationship between salient contextual (work environment) and individual factors and motivational components of the development process.

A total of 1758 young people aged between 16 and 24 years employed full-time participated in the study. Eligible employees were invited to take part via their organisations. Organisations were selected using a multi-stage stratified random sampling method which enabled a diverse and comprehensive sample of younger workers to be achieved. The method resulted in a sampling frame comprising small, medium and large organisations from four major industries (business, construction, manufacturing and retail) located in nine medium and large urban centres around New Zealand. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which contained a series of questions about their learning-related beliefs and attitudes, intentions to participate in development activities, and perceptions of developmental support from their organisation, manager and co-workers.

The study found that individual and contextual factors both have an important influence on younger workers' participation in development activities, but affect this through different aspects of the development process. Development self-efficacy mediates the influence of certain contextual and individual factors on learning motivation. In addition, other individual and contextual factors directly influence young people's intentions to engage in development activities through their learning attitudes, motivation and career-job beliefs.

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that certain factors may be more relevant to the development of younger workers than their more experienced colleagues. Consequently, life-stage is a potentially important factor to consider when developing employee capability.

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First, thank you to all the organisations and younger workers throughout New Zealand who took part in this study – it would not have been possible without you! I hope that this study provides some insights into understanding the way in which young people learn and develop at work, and how organisations can enhance this process.

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## PROLOGUE: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

My interest in undertaking this study stems from my own background and journey; a journey which has taken me on a number of paths I had never expected, and resulted in accomplishments I never thought possible. It is this process of discovery, which began long before I was even aware of it, that has been pivotal in my decision to undertake this course of study.

After finding I had hit a 'dead-end' with my academic choices at the end of my 6<sup>th</sup> form year, I left school, moved to the city and, after completing a year of secretarial studies, began working life as a legal secretary. Three years later, with itchy feet and the greener pastures of the UK in my sights, I left my job and spent my summer working at McDonald's. Who'd have thought; I loved it! To cut a long story short, instead of heading off overseas, and despite having already resigned, I accepted a role as a trainee manager.

And so began a new chapter of my life, filled with challenges, laughter (and lots of nightclubbing); but, most of all, with rich personal learnings that have helped shape who I am today, and who I will no doubt be in the future. In addition to my own learning, during my four years at McDonald's I was inspired and challenged by helping others to learn and grow – not just in their job skills, but in discovering what they could do and who they might become. Helping young people realise that they can learn, grow and do things they may not have thought possible have been some of my most rewarding work experiences.

Our experiences, and interpretation of those experiences, both consciously and subconsciously shape who we are now and who we will be in the future. Yes, we are shaped by our history and past experiences, but we can be more than who we were then and who we currently are. I believe we each hold the ability to shape our future, however large or small the influence we have on it may seem. Moreover,

each of us has the ability to be involved in this process: to discover our interests and passions and pursue them, not just once, but over the course of our lives; and, in doing so, to face the things we find challenging and experience what it's like to overcome them. This, I think, is one of the most empowering experiences one can have.

Many young people do not have the experiences of learning at school that they may have wanted. However, once they enter the workforce, the majority of their opportunities for learning and growth come from their work environment. I have seen the enormous impact positive workplace learning experiences can have on young people's confidence, self-beliefs and career aspirations. These and my own experiences of learning has led to a personal interest in exploring the way in which young people's confidence for learning and development may be influenced by their experiences of support in their work environment. My interest in this area is also strongly associated with my belief that many individual skills, knowledge and abilities can be developed, and that one's confidence for learning may be enhanced when they are supported in the development process, particularly in their work environment.

This thesis draws on a broad and diverse body of scholarly knowledge as well as my own experiences of learning and development, and my experiences of helping others to learn and develop in the workplace. Seeing someone who may not have had a great deal of affirmation about their potential develop not only their work skills and capabilities, but achieve meaningful personal growth through their work experiences is, for me, one of the most motivating reasons to be involved in human resource development. The literature suggests, and I strongly agree, that organisations have considerable opportunity to guide, challenge and support young people to grow and develop not only their work skills, but their beliefs about themselves as learners. In this way, organisations have a key role to play in helping young people realise and achieve their potential, both now and for the future.

I hope you enjoy reading my thesis.