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Employees' perceptions of barriers to participation in training and development in small engineering businesses

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate barriers to employee participation in voluntary formal training and development opportunities from the perspective of employees in small engineering businesses.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory qualitative methodology involving data collection via site visits and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 employees in five small engineering businesses was used. Interviews explored the role of developmental proactivity and employees' perceptions of conditions in the immediate work environment and industry sector that represent barriers to their participation in formal training and development. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings – Three key findings are as follows. First, proactive behaviour regarding access to external training and development is muted in small business settings because of strong resource allocation norms. Second, factors in the internal work environment rather than the industry sector constitute the major barriers to training and development. Third, owner-managers and employees appear to have significantly differing perspectives of barriers to training and development.

Research limitations/implications – The findings suggest avenues for future research. These include examining how workplace norms influence employee behaviour with regard to accessing formal training and development and investigating the learning strategies that employees use to compensate for a lack of access to training and development.

Originality/value – Research into relatively low levels of employee participation in formal training and development in small businesses is deficient because it predominantly involves surveys of owner-managers' opinions. This study is novel because it seeks to generate new insights not previously articulated by employees. The study yielded four propositions that have practical and research implications.

Keywords Training and development, Small business, Barriers, Employee perspective, Proactive behaviour, Workplace norms

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Small businesses are significantly less likely to provide employees with access to formal training and development (T&D) opportunities than large businesses (Ahlgren and Engle, 2011; Devins *et al.*, 2004; Kotey and Folker, 2007; Storey, 2004). The relatively low level of engagement of small businesses in T&D is viewed as problematic from several perspectives. For example, some commentators contend that neglect of formal, mutually supportive "bundles" of human resource (HR) practices aligned with the organisation's strategic

direction might hinder progress towards competitive advantage in small businesses (Kotey and Folker, 2007; Muhlemeyer and Clarke, 1997). There is also a view that lack of access to external T&D hinders innovation in small businesses where many independent small firms do not possess the expertise to develop their staff and fully exploit the opportunities afforded by new technologies (Simmons *et al.*, 2008). A further perspective argues that when employees lack access to formal T&D, this may have negative effects on proximal human resource management (HRM) outcomes such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Pajo *et al.*, 2010). From the viewpoint of small business employees, a lack of access to externally accredited training can gradually erode their employability and significantly disadvantage them in the external labour market (Ram, 1994).

To the best of our knowledge, there are no previous studies on the low levels of small business participation in formal T&D from the perspective of employees. This is surprising, given that researchers and policymakers in several countries have devoted a considerable amount of effort, over a long period of time, to understand how small businesses can be encouraged to increase their levels of participation in formal T&D (Billett, 2004; Bishop, 2011). Therefore, the findings of this exploratory study can cast new light on employee engagement in T&D in small businesses and lay the foundation for future studies that use a similar line of inquiry.

Drawing on literature and our findings, we develop some key arguments in this paper. Our overarching argument is that research into reasons for the relatively low levels of employee participation in formal T&D in small businesses is deficient because it has typically involved surveys of predominantly owner-managers opinions regarding barriers to formal T&D. Our findings suggest employees have significantly differing perspectives of the barriers to engagement in T&D. Given the relatively low level of small business participation in formal T&D (that was confirmed in the current study), we also argue that informal workplace learning through projects is a particularly essential component of proficient practice in the small businesses studied. These broad arguments are advanced in the remaining sections of the paper, which are introduced below.

The next section of the paper identifies the research questions and outlines the conceptual framework that guided the study. This is followed by an overview of the literature on barriers to participation in T&D in the small business sector. The barriers identified in the extant literature will be compared to our informants' perspectives of barriers to show the differing perceptions. Thereafter, we provide a synopsis of the theory of formal and informal learning. This theoretical framework is relevant to our study because the findings suggest that informal and incidental learning through engineering projects is the predominant mode of learning in the small engineering consultancies, as opposed to participation in formal T&D. Next, the data collection and data analysis procedures that were used in this study are described, and the key findings of the interviews are then presented using illustrative quotations. This is followed by a discussion of emergent propositions in the context of both the extant literature and the conceptual framework. The paper concludes with the practical implications, study limitations and directions for future research.

2. Research questions and conceptual framework
The aim of this study is to investigate the barriers to employee participation in voluntary formal T&D opportunities from the perspective of employees in small

businesses (i.e. engineering consultancies). The specific research questions that the study addressed are as follows:

RQ1. In the opinion of employees in small engineering businesses, what factors in the immediate work environment and industry sector act as barriers to voluntary participation in formal T&D?

RQ2. What is the role of proactive behaviour in employee participation in formal T&D?

The research questions are directly linked to variables in the conceptual framework which is outlined below.

An adaptation of Lewin's (1951) Behaviour–Person–Environment (B-P-E) model served as the conceptual framework. The B-P-E model postulates a relationship among three major components of learning/facilitating interactions. This relationship has been reiterated and extended by several authors (Bandura, 1977; Hunt and Sullivan, 1974; Kidd, 1973; Knowles, 1990; MacKeracher, 2004). Furthermore, according to Davis and Luthan (1980), the B-P-E model has been widely adopted by the organisational behaviour field as a theoretical framework to explain behaviour. For instance, Hersey *et al.* (2012) state that Lewin's (1951, p. 15) "equation" of human behaviour "lies at the heart of our Situational Leadership approach". The B-P-E model postulates that Behaviour is a function of the interaction between Person and Environment: B = f (P, E). In this study, "B" denotes employee behaviour with regard to engagement in T&D opportunities. "P" stands for Person (the employee), and includes characteristics of the individual employee (e.g. self-efficacy, attitude towards T&D, proactive behaviour) that affects his or her level of participation in T&D opportunities (see for example, Maurer *et al.*, 2003). This study focused on proactive behaviour because it is an action-oriented construct that lends itself to being examined in a qualitative way and it is linked to participation in development activity (Major *et al.*, 2006). "E" stands for Environment, and can include any factor in the immediate work environment (e.g. resource paucity) or industry sector (e.g. lack of suitable T&D opportunities) that might serve as barriers to participation in T&D.

Following Miles and Huberman (2002), the B-P-E model was used primarily to help focus the researchers and provide boundaries for the study, that is, to avoid indiscriminate data collection and data overload. Employee behaviour (B) with regard to engagement in T&D opportunities were studied within the boundaries furnished by this conceptual framework. Specifically, this included an investigation of:

• factors in the immediate work environment and industry sector (E) that act as barriers to voluntary participation in formal T&D; and

• the role that developmental proactivity (P) plays in affecting participation in T&D opportunities.

3. Barriers to participation in T&D

The extant literature suggests that there are some significant issues that deter small businesses from participating in formal T&D opportunities and propose a number of hypotheses. One possible explanation is the lack of evidence that T&D is directly linked to business performance. The lack of hard data makes it difficult to convince owner-managers in small firms of the benefits of T&D. For example, Patton Marlow and

Hannon (2000) were unable to find any sound, rigorous research evidence to show that the provision of T&D within small businesses leads to, or is associated with improved business performance. Hallier and Butts (1999, p. 82) contended: "it is perhaps more feasible to demonstrate that organisational performance can be held back through a neglect of training activity", than to demonstrate that the provision of training within small businesses leads to, or is associated with improved business performance. This view is further reinforced by Macdonald *et al.* (2007) who found that providing free education to small and medium enterprises employees did not lead to an increase in innovation or competitiveness.

Previous research into low levels of employee participation in voluntary formal T&D events in small businesses typically involved surveys of owner-managers to gather their opinions in relation to barriers to training. To illustrate, Marlow (1998) asked a total of 28 owners and directors: "What are major reasons why this firm has not utilised training/development initiatives?" The most common reasons were time and money. Matlay (1999) conducted face-to-face interviews with 200 owner-managers and asked them about factors affecting actual provision of training. For these participants, the most important factors were cost of training, time constraints and lack of trainee cover. Kitching and Blackburn (2002) surveyed 1,005 respondents by telephone and asked about their reasons for not providing more training for their staff. Participants cited lost working time while participating in training events and the financial cost of external training as the most important reasons. Mitchell (2007) conducted interviews and focus groups with small business operators, training providers, business advisors, researchers and government administrators in Western Australia. Participants were asked about the lack of participation in external training by people working in small businesses in Western Australia. Two main reasons emerged from the data:

(1) small business employees prefer to learn informally through engagement in everyday goal-directed work activities; and

(2) the extended time required to complete accredited training courses makes them unsuitable because small businesses require just-in-time training to satisfy immediate needs.

Walker *et al.* (2007) conducted an HR training workshop after which participants completed a training evaluation questionnaire and then attended an interview. In total, 80 West Australian small business owners participated and the study found that small business owners were interested in skill development as long as the training is directly applicable to their current business needs and training delivery had minimum impact on business operations.

These five sample studies outlined above exemplify the predominant approach to investigating reasons for relatively low levels of employee engagement in T&D events, and importantly highlight the lack of small business employees' perspectives on the barriers to participation. In the Discussion section of this paper, the barriers identified in the extant literature will be juxtaposed with our informants' perspectives of barriers to show the differing perceptions of owner-managers and employees.

4. Formal and informal learning
The current study focuses on employee access to formal, structured T&D opportunities. However, for the purpose of investigating workplace learning, some learning theorists

believe that it is helpful to make the distinction between learning that occurs in formal contexts, as opposed to those that are informal. For example, Marsick and Watkins (1990) have developed a theoretical framework for making a distinction between formal and informal learning, and understanding the range of learning modes within the domain of informal learning. According to Marsick and Watkins (1990), formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, highly structured, classroom based, and may be undertaken with the aim of achieving a recognised qualification. The learning content is typically chosen by an educator or trainer and presented to the learner. Marsick and Watkins refer to learning that occurs outside formal contexts as informal and incidental learning.

Informal learning is also referred to as "self-initiated learning" (Poell, 2014) to denote an intentional, conscious pursuit on the part of the learner. Strategies for informal learning include self-directed learning, coaching, mentoring and networking. Informal learning could provide a cost-effective approach to developing small business employees if supported in organisations (Rowden and Conine, 2005). Incidental learning is considered a subset of informal learning, and is usually the by-product of some other activity, such as carrying out a task, or interactions with other people. As such, it is never planned or intentional, always delimited by the nature of the task that influenced its creation and unexamined and embedded in the individual's closely held belief system. Lack of both intention to learn, and awareness of learning, is particularly characteristic of incidental learning, because the learner's attention is focused on something else. Incidental learning includes learning as a by-product of working and learning from mistakes.

5. Methodology

To accomplish the overall aim and address the specific research questions, an exploratory qualitative methodology, involving data collection via site visits and in-depth semi-structured interviews, was used. Exploration is the preferred methodological approach when a phenomenon has received little or no systematic empirical scrutiny, or has been largely examined using prediction and control rather than flexibility and open-mindedness (Stebbins, 2001, 2008). For the current study, an exploratory qualitative methodology was therefore appropriate as there has been limited research into the factors that serve as barriers to small business participation in T&D from an employee perspective. In exploratory research, the sample is not intended to represent the population of interest. Rather, the primary aim of exploratory research is to produce inductively derived propositions that serve as groundwork for future research (Stebbins, 2001, 2008).

5.1 Sampling

Taking into account the need to limit the number of sampling dimensions, a decision was made to focus on engineering consultancies, rather than attempt to look at small businesses from all sectors. It could reasonably be assumed that employee access to T&D opportunities would be particularly important in such small businesses. Employees in these organisations must ensure that they remain abreast of current practices, technologies and regulations, although there is no regulatory requirement for ongoing formal training. The Institute of Engineers, Australia, provides membership to engineers and related technologists at either member or chartered status. A component

of the charted status is a requirement for ongoing professional development which entails a minimum of 150 hours of learning over the previous three years composed of at least 50 hours in the area of practice, at least 10 hours on risk management and at least 15 hours on business and management skills. Although this profession development program encompasses institutional training leading to a formal qualification, it also includes an array of non-formal training activities including short courses, workshops, seminars and discussion groups, conferences, workplace learning and private study. A focus on engineering small businesses should therefore provide information rich cases that can provide insight and deep understanding regarding the topic of interest.

For recruiting participants, a database of small engineering consultancy businesses, using an existing public business directory (i.e. Yellow Pages), was developed. Drawing on this database, small businesses were contacted and the study was explained to the owner-manager. After the owner-managers indicated a willingness to provide access to his or her staff, we confirmed that the organisation met firm-level criteria: the firm was primarily an engineering consultancy with fewer than 30 employees. Approval was obtained from the owner-managers to access staff and make arrangements for contacting them with a view to recruiting participants. Employee participants had to meet two criteria: the employee had to be a professional engineer and must have been employed by the firm for a minimum of 12 months. The maximum number of employees from any one firm was set at four. Where more than four employees met the two criteria, four employees were chosen at random to participate in the interviews.

5.2 Data collection and analysis

The employee was taken through a semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was "conversational" in style, providing a feeling of openness and flexibility (Lee, 1999). The researcher made notes during the interview and where permission was granted, the interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed. Prior to the interviews, several themes were identified from the literature and these themes were explored during the interviews. As noted, the B-P-E model helped to focus and bound the collection of data. Consequently, the interview questions focussed on: proactive behaviour related to T&D (i.e. the P in B-P-E) and internal and external barriers to T&D (i.e. the E in B-P-E).

As recommended in the literature on qualitative data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 2002; Patton, 2001), reflective remarks were recorded in the margin of the transcripts and interview notes. The transcripts and notes were coded and analysed using content analytic procedures (Silverman, 2011). Teasing out themes (e.g. recurring instances of factors that created barriers to participation in voluntary T&D) in the data was the main tactic for drawing meaning from the data (Patton, 2001). As the number of interviews increased, the same patterns and themes began to dominate the interviews. Statements were repeated more frequently without any new information added. This re-occurrence of previous statements and lack of additional information signified data saturation in relation to the barriers to T&D and proactive employee behaviour, where further interviews would yield diminishing value (Kvale, 2013; Sandelowski, 2008). Saturation point was reached by approximately the 15th interview. A further five interviews were conducted and analysed to ensure the research was not terminated prematurely. The analysis of these additional interviews confirmed data saturation.

5.3 Demographic information
Demographic information about the engineers who participated in this study is provided in Table I. The data show that most participants were in the 30-40 age bracket, which corresponds with the establishment phase of Super's (1980) five life and career development stages. According to Super (1980), the establishment stage is a time of growth, advancement and stabilisation, and it is therefore expected that individuals will express greater commitment to participation in learning and development opportunities during this phase, than in any other. Information in Table I also shows that six of the seven organisations that participated in the study had 20 or fewer employees.

6. Research findings
The research findings are presented according to the two research questions which are directly linked to variables in the research conceptual framework.

6.1 Developmental proactivity effect on voluntary participation in formal T&D
In total, 12 of the 20 participants *had not requested access to employer-sponsored T&D*. An array of reasons was provided, including:

- managers knew their capabilities and would propose T&D if it was needed;
- their resource-constrained employers would have to incur substantial financial costs;
- they would lose working time while undertaking T&D;

Participant	Age (years)	Position	Duration of employment (in years)	Company (no. of years in business)	No. of employees
1	30-40	Mechanical engineer	1	A (3)	15-20
2	20-30	Electrical engineer	1.6	A (3)	15-20
3	30-40	Process engineer	2	A (3)	15-20
4	30-40	Civil engineer	1	A (3)	15-20
5	50-60	Software engineer	5	B (25)	25-30
6	50-60	Software engineer	3	B (25)	25-30
7	30-40	Software engineer	4	B (25)	25-30
8	30-40	Software engineer	5	B (25)	25-30
9	30-40	Electrical engineer	3	C (20)	15-20
10	30-40	Electrical engineer	2	C (20)	15-20
11	30-40	Electrical engineer	4	C (20)	15-20
12	40-50	Electrical engineer	1.5	C (20)	15-20
13	30-40	Electrical engineer	3	D (10)	15-20
14	20-30	Electrical engineer	1	D (10)	15-20
15	40-50	Electrical engineer	7	E (20)	15-20
16	30-40	Civil engineer	2	F (5)	15-20
17	50-60	Civil engineer	2	F (5)	15-20
18	30-40	Electrical engineer	5	G (10)	15-20
19	20-30	Mechanical engineer	2	G (10)	15-20
20	30-40	Electrical engineer	1.5	G (10)	15-20

Table I.
Demographic data

- their knowledge and skills gaps could be addressed through other modes of learning, such as learning through interactions with colleagues and searching for information on the Internet; and
- they expected their request would be declined.

Participants indicated that their expectations were shaped by their experiences working in other small businesses.

Additionally, in their current workplaces, they had not observed other employees, including their immediate managers, requesting access to external T&D events. These observations had also helped form their expectations. Participant 8 commented:

I think that it is something that the company would prefer to avoid.

Participant 3 had the following to say:

[…] when the manager isn't providing the support downwards to talk about training; you don't feel encouraged to bring it up.

And participant 14 claimed:

You know the company for whom you work, so you know whether they would approve it or not, so it's better not to ask.

Four participants reported that they *actively sought information on T&D opportunities*. Their reasons included a desire to keep abreast of latest developments in the field and to capitalise on networking opportunities that attendance at external T&D events provided. Seventeen participants indicated that factors such as workload pressure and the expectation that their requests would be denied as reasons for not actively seeking information regarding T&D opportunities. Participants also believed that owner-managers would take the initiative and provide them with information about T&D courses or suggest appropriate T&D courses in other ways. Interestingly, five participants noted that their organisations only employed people who already had the required competencies to perform their jobs and therefore additional T&D was not required. Participant 14 stated:

[…] When you join here, you need to be capable of what you're doing; you don't need extra training, that's what they expect from you. That's how they want to hire the people.

Three participants reported *undertaking self-funded education/training*, as they viewed this as beneficial to their careers and self-development. Participants who did not undertake self-funded education/training cited reasons such as a lack of tangible benefits, no need for additional education/training and existing time commitments. When asked how they maintained currency in their field, they mentioned searching for information on the Internet, participating in online forums and learning through interaction with colleagues. In addition, suppliers often provided specialised training in relation to their products, thereby alleviating the need for self-funded training. Younger participants (20-40) indicated that even though they were interested in self-funded education/training opportunities, the courses were too expensive.

6.2 Environmental factors that act as barriers to voluntary participation in formal T&D
In regard to internal barriers, 13 participants were certain that their organisation *did not have an explicit policy* on employee learning and development. Other participants were less certain, reporting that they were unaware of the existence of such a policy.

Similarly, 13 participants believed that their organisation did not have a training budget, while others indicated they were *unaware of a training budget* within their organisations. For example, participant 7 commented:

> Well, I can definitely say I haven't seen any policy, so I would say no. It would be nice to have policy in case you urgently need training – just so you have that backing from the company.

Eleven participants reported having a *personal development plan*, but noted that these plans were informal and not officially documented. In most cases, they were discussed only with the organisation's managing director/owner, and did not involve their immediate workplace supervisors. Discussion of participants' personal development plans usually occurred within the context of annual performance reviews, which typically focussed on areas where participants were performing satisfactorily (i.e. strengths) and areas they needed to improve (i.e. weaknesses). As illustrated by the following quotation from Participant 5, limited consideration was typically given to participants' personal development plans during performance review discussions:

> "As a part of the performance management there is one question – where do you want to be in five years" time? So once a year that question gets asked, and that's about it'.

When it came to *the process of accessing external, company-sponsored T&D events*, 16 participants reported that such requests had to be approved by the managing director/ owner, even in cases where they reported to an intermediate manager. The intermediate manager merely communicated the participant's request to the managing director/owner as borne out by the following comments from Participants 7 and 6, respectively:

> It would be the engineering manager and he would need approval from our CEO and participant 6.

> The CEO – I don't believe that other layers of management have any say.

Participants agreed that the *most common internal barriers* to participation in company-sponsored T&D opportunities were high workloads and the associated lack of time, cost of T&D events, management attitudes toward T&D and the lack of an explicit policy on T&D. High workloads and the associated lack of time were predominantly perceived as the major deterrents. Several participants indicated they worked on one project and moved straight on to the next without any time to attend T&D courses. In their view, project completion, rather than knowledge and skills acquisition, was the company's priority. Project timeframes were frequently short, mostly 3-4 days in duration. Successful project tenders relied heavily on cost competitiveness which translated into completing projects as quickly as possible, as prolonged timeframes eroded the company's profit margins. Participants explained that each employee had a specific role and set of responsibilities in small companies, and their absence from the workplace (to attend T&D events) created a knowledge and skills gap that prevented timely project completion. This was described by Participant 8 as follows:

> […] so obviously the employee has to attend the session during working hours. And being a small company, each of us has some task that only the person can do. So sometimes not having the person in the office can be critical.

Participant 13 stated:

> […] the project itself is for two or four days, you have to put resources into it. You don't have much room for things like training.

Participants were also asked if they were *aware of external T&D opportunities* for engineers. The majority reported being broadly aware of such external opportunities, yet were not able to provide any detailed information about them. When pressed for more information, their responses were vague. For example, Participant 8 said:

> I'm not really aware of any new courses. Since my last request to attend training was rejected I haven't searched anymore.

Participant 1 added:

> I know that there are courses about Sol Works and Inventor, which are the software that we use. I know they exist, but they are not considered by my company.

Participants were asked about *other external factors* that might influence their willingness to participate in external T&D events. These included family considerations and the duration and location of T&D events. As illustrated by Participant 1's comment below, these factors did not carry much weight with regard to decisions to access external T&D opportunities:

> If my company is paying for all the expenses, then I would not think twice.

This is supported by Participant 5's statement below:

> I do care about my career and I do care about development, and my husband knows it. So I'm sure he would understand if I need to do training for a while

7. Discussion

This study builds on Lewin's (1951) B-P-E model and uses an exploratory research design to:

- identify factors in the immediate work environment and industry sector (i.e. environmental factors) that act as barriers to participation in voluntary formal T&D from the perspective of employees in small businesses; and
- explore the role that proactive behaviour plays in employee participation in voluntary formal T&D (i.e. a "person" factor).

According to Stebbins (2001, 2008), inductively derived propositions about the phenomenon under study is the main goal of exploratory research. Consistent with this goal, four propositions emerged from the findings. These are discussed in the following paragraphs in the context of both the extant literature and Lewin's model. The variables in Lewin's model and the presumed relationship among them are integrated into the discussion:

P1. Norms potentially constrain proactive behaviour by employees with regard to accessing T&D

The findings suggest that proactive behaviour from employees with regard to T&D was potentially constrained by prevailing norms within the organisations studied. Although frequently implicit, norms cover several aspects of group behaviour, including resource

allocation and therefore exert a powerful and consistent influence on group behaviour (Ehrhart and Naumann, 2004). Given that resource paucity has been identified as a common feature of small businesses (Storey and Greene, 2010), one might reasonably expect resource allocation norms to be strong in small businesses. In the interviews, several participants commented that they had not requested T&D because they had formed the impression that such requests were likely to be declined. This expectation had been shaped by their experiences of working in other small businesses (i.e. carry-over behaviours from past situations) and through observational learning.

In terms of Lewin's B-P-E model, this proposition is an example of how the interactions of "person" and "environment" shape organisational behaviour. More specifically, the proposition suggests that resource allocation norms within the small businesses studied have a dampening effect on proactive behaviour. Situational strength has been defined by Meyer *et al.* (2010, p. 122) as "implicit or explicit cues provided by external entities regarding the desirability of potential behaviours". Situational strength is posited to induce uniform expectancies (Cooper and Withey, 2009) and result in psychological pressure on individuals to engage in and/or refrain from particular courses of action (Meyer *et al.*, 2010), such as requesting access to firm-sponsored T&D:

   P2. Employees appear to be learning-oriented and projects seem to serve as their primary vehicle for learning.

The interview findings suggest that employees in the sample exhibited a high work-domain learning orientation (Garofano and Salas, 2005). In the opinion of participants, projects served as the primary vehicle for learning, and the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skills was mainly informal and self-directed. This corresponds with consistently held views in the literature that novel and challenging job assignments can be a major source of learning for employees (Ortega, 2001), and that limited reliance on structured training does not necessarily mean that learning is also limited (Field, 1998).

Considered in the light of Lewin's B-P-E model, it could be argued that employees' proactive behaviour towards T&D is inversely related to novel and challenging work assignments and the learning orientation within their work domain. That is, the availability of novel and challenging work assignments and a high learning orientation facilitate learning on the job and diminish the need to participate in formal T&D. As noted, learning that occurs in formal settings is just one of three types of learning activities frequently distinguished in workplace-learning literature (Marsick and Watkins, 1990): incidental learning, informal (self-initiated) learning and formal learning. For participants in this study, most of their learning activities were of the incidental or informal type, with very little engagement in formal learning:

   P3. Employees perceive high workloads and associated time constraints as major barriers to engagement with T&D.

From the participants' perspectives, high workloads and associated time constraints were the most significant barrier to participation in T&D. In Lewin's B-P-E model, this proposition primarily pertains to "environment" (i.e. high workloads and associated time constraints), while the "person" element does not feature prominently. These factors adversely affect employee behaviour in the workplace by reducing the

inclination to access T&D. A lack of time for collaborative reflection inhibits the conversion of tacit experience into explicit knowledge (DeFillippi, 2001) and limits the potential of project-based learning to bring about significant change in knowledge stocks and flows in the wider organisation (Scarbrough *et al.*, 2004).

High workloads and associated time constraints are under the control of managers in small businesses, although, more often than not, financial pressures are likely to take precedence over alleviating such conditions. This is because small businesses tend to focus on short-term survival (Storey and Greene, 2010) and concentrate their resources on generating revenue. Consequently, there are often insufficient resources for T&D, and learning on the job becomes the preferred approach to knowledge and skills acquisition for the majority of small businesses:

P4. Decision-making processes related to T&D potentially act as a barrier to employee engagement.

The findings suggest that T&D was often initiated by managers rather than employees. Furthermore, the managing director/owner usually made the final decision regarding employee access to T&D, and employees' line managers did not appear to have much influence on these decisions. This centralised approach to decision-making is understandable, given that many small businesses face severe resource constraints (Patel and Cardon, 2010) and that organisational decision-makers are often uncertain about the extent to which employees' performance will be enhanced by T&D (Blume *et al.*, 2010). Linking this proposition to the B-P-E model demonstrates the impact of environmental factors on employee behaviour. In this instance, the environmental factor is the organisational decision-making process regarding access to T&D. The highly centralised nature of this process is likely to constrain employee behaviour towards formal T&D by providing a clear signal that managerial approval is not granted lightly.

Centralised decision-making is a characteristic of small businesses (Storey and Greene, 2010) because the owner-manager is usually the only person who is aware of all aspects of the organisation. Developing explicit T&D policies and procedures would assist in laying ground rules for both employees and owner-managers, and will empower employees to request access to T&D opportunities in line with those policies and procedures. However, this will require a departure from the tendency of small businesses to adopt informal, non-documented HRM practices, as shown in the literature (Marlow *et al.*, 2010; Saridakis *et al.*, 2013).

From the detailed findings of the interviews and the propositions that emerged from a holistic review, a preliminary list of potential barriers to participation in T&D from the perspectives of the employees in this sample was generated. The left-hand column in Table II lists the barriers to employees' participation in T&D as cited in the literature. The list is an amalgam of views from authors previously referenced, especially the works of Kitching and Blackburn (2002), Storey and Greene (2010) and Panagiotakopoulos (2011). As previously noted, these barriers were primarily identified from surveys of owner-managers' opinions. The right-hand column lists barriers to employee participation in T&D synthesised from the interviews with employees in small engineering firms. These findings will benefit from (dis)confirmation by larger-scale future studies.

Table II shows that, for owner-managers, the barriers to employee T&D tend to centre on associated costs and the uncertainty of returns on T&D investment. The

Owner-manager perspectives	Employee perspectives	Barriers to participation
High cost of external T&D courses	Workload pressures and associated time constraints	
Limited financial resources for T&D provision	Strong resource allocation norms	
Employees do not have time to participate in T&D	Centralised decision-making with regard to access to T&D	**573**
Lost working time for employees participating in T&D	Owner-managers, not employees, initiate access to T&D	
Lack of suitable external T&D opportunities	Small engineering firms are "production-oriented" rather than "learning-oriented"	
Lack of awareness of available T&D opportunities	Lack of formality regarding process for accessing external T&D	**Table II.** Owner-manager and employee perceptions of barriers to training and development
Fear of "poaching"		
Lack of awareness of the importance of T&D for firm success		

lack of suitable and timely T&D opportunities was also of concern to owner-managers. In contrast, employees in this sample were apparently dependent upon the business providing access to T&D opportunities, and there was little incentive for them to proactively seek or request this. The lack of formal (documented) HR policies and procedures seemingly created a climate of uncertainty for employees due to reliance upon informally derived expectations and behaviours with regard to requests for T&D opportunities. To reduce such uncertainty, owner-managers should negotiate a set of common expectations around group members' behaviour (i.e. group norms) with their employees. This would represent a proactive stance towards issues related to T&D.

8. Conclusion and implications
Research into relatively low levels of employee participation in formal T&D in small businesses is deficient because it predominantly involves surveys of owner-managers' opinions. This study is novel because it seeks to generate new insights not previously articulated by employees (Colquitt and George, 2011). Consistent with the principal aim of exploratory research, the current study yielded four propositions, grounded in the employee interview data and based on Lewin's B-P-E model. These propositions were used to identify practical implications and avenues for future research.

Practical implications include the limitations of the workplace as a setting for learning. Factors limiting efficacy of workplace learning include (Billett, 1995):

- recognising that it is inappropriate because it perpetuates "undesirable" practices;
- the absence and/or reluctance of experts to provide guidance;
- difficulty gaining access to increasingly challenging activities; and
- neglect of conceptual knowledge.

Poell (2014) argued that creativity, innovation and double-loop learning does not come easily from workplace learning, and unless these inhibiting qualities are addressed, the potential of workplaces as learning environments will not be fully realised. Therefore,

managers play a critical role in organising and managing workplace learning and creating work environments conducive to learning. To this end, managers need to understand how people learn in the workplace. More specifically, managers in small engineering businesses that employ a project-based approach should understand how to leverage the learning potential of projects.

Future research could address how workplace norms influence employee behaviour with regard to accessing formal T&D. This study suggests that employees in small businesses lack developmental proactivity because of constraints in small business settings. An examination of employee behaviour regarding access to T&D from the perspective of workplace norms (Feldman, 1984) and situational strength (Mischel, 1973) may cast new light on the low levels of small business participation in formal T&D.

The learning strategies that employees use to compensate for lack of access to T&D present another avenue for future research. Limited reliance on formal T&D does not necessarily mean that learning is also limited. This study examined knowledge and skills acquisition through a training lens. Future inquiry through a learning lens is likely to provide a rich and complex picture of employee learning processes in small businesses. The potentially different perceptions of employees and owner-managers with regard to the nature and significance of barriers to T&D also require more scrutiny. The rationale for this study was underpinned by the lack of employee perspectives, and the findings suggest that owner-managers and employees are likely to differ markedly in their perceptions of the nature and significance of barriers to formal T&D.

Other possibilities for future research include how decisions are made regarding employee access to formal T&D opportunities that are at least partially funded by the firm. This study revealed that the decision-making role of small business owners is potentially critical to employees' access to formal T&D opportunities. A broader focus on the nature of the entire decision-making process should produce beneficial results. Future research to address these questions will help (dis)confirm the findings of this exploratory study and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of employee participation in T&D in small businesses.

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