ORGANISATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS AND YOUNG WORKERS' ORIENTATION TO LEARN

Robyn Mason

*Department of Human Resource Management,
Massey University, Palmerston North*

Abstract

Rapid advances in information technology, changing workplace structures and labour shortages have increased the need for employees to be multi-skilled, adaptable and self-directed learners. However, with an international agenda for lifelong learning and capability development there are concerns about persistent social and labour market inequities, and low levels of education and literacy of some workers. Moreover, little is known about young people's beliefs and attitudes towards learning during their early years in the labour market. Accordingly researchers have called for the need to develop the capabilities of lower-skilled employees and young workers from lower socio-economic backgrounds - employees who are at risk of being overlooked in a knowledge-driven economy. This paper examines relevant international and New Zealand research and indicates an agenda for research. In particular, it illustrates the need to stimulate the learning orientations of less-qualified younger workers. A model for exploring the relationship between organisational environments and young workers' learning-related beliefs and attitudes is presented.

Introduction

Developing organisational and individual capability as a means of achieving economic competitiveness and growth have been recognised as key goals for New Zealand in the 21st Century. Skilled employees are vital for New Zealand's economic growth and sustainability (Ministry of Economic Development, 2003). Since the late 1990s the New Zealand government has publicly committed itself to the sustainable growth of New Zealand in a variety of ways, including economic and social policy and providing funding for research and development in the area of innovation, growth and capability development.

Capability Development

In view of the need for skilled workers, there are concerns about persistent social and employment inequities for some groups. In particular, the shortage of workers with relevant vocational skills has serious implications for organisational growth. New Zealand's steady economic growth over the last decade has exacerbated the need for skilled workers, particularly in manufacturing, construction and other export-based industries (Business N.Z., 2001). Organisations are finding that workers are increasingly in need of, but often lacking, higher-order skills required for knowledge-based work, but also for the operation of technological-based machinery and work processes. The demand for highly skilled workers is a particular issue for small organisations who have higher demands for skill versatility and adaptability, but spend less on training (Berryman, 1994; Gorard, 2003). These higher order 'skills' are not strictly work-related skills, but include personal attributes such as reliability, initiative, respect for authority, work-related attitudes and behaviours including an interest in work and a work ethic, and learning-related attitudes such as a willingness to learn, trainability and adaptability (Comrie et al. 2005; Smith & Comyn, 2004; Taylor, 2005).

Moreover, there are concerns at the high number of workers, including school leavers, with low levels of foundation skills required for current and future labour market performance (Bowers et al. 1999; Higgins, 2003). Basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy and communication, are fundamental to individual functioning in society and in the workplace, and are essential for organisational productivity. Like many industrialised countries, New Zealand has low literacy levels, posing a significant issue for organisations and increases the risk of poor labour market outcomes for individuals (Johnson, 2000). Studies show that low skills are strongly associated with low qualifications, low earnings, limited job and career prospects including opportunities for training (Ananiadou et al. 2003; Bowers et al. 1999; Bynner, 2002). It is also believed that those with low literacy will experience increasing difficulty in obtaining and retaining employment, and are at risk of becoming increasingly marginalised from society by being confined to precarious types of employment or marginal activities (Johnson, 2000). This is particularly concerning given the number of young people leaving school with minimal qualifications, both in New Zealand and overseas (Bowers et al. 1999; Statistics New Zealand, 2001b).

Despite some criticisms that adult education, particularly literacy and numeracy, does not necessarily improve economic and employment outcomes (Gorard, 2003; Treasury, 2001) and may in fact reduce job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Rose, 2005), there is growing evidence of the benefits to employers from improving employees' basic skills (see Ananiadou et al. 2003 for a comprehensive review). In particular, literacy training is believed to lead to gains in productivity, efficiency and economic competitiveness, directly (through time savings and reduced waste), and indirectly (through uptake of further training, improvements in staff morale, health and safety, interpersonal communication and customer retention) (Johnson, 2000). Literacy training is also credited with positive effects on worker attitudes toward their job, organisational satisfaction, self reported productivity, self esteem, and confidence in applying for and taking up new job responsibilities and promotions (Ananiadou et al. 2003). Recent findings from the Manukau Family Literacy Project revealed significant return on investment and increased earnings from improving adult literacy (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2006). Foundation skills are, unarguably, critical for effective social and workplace functioning, and addressing literacy needs is a key part of improving the skill levels in New Zealand; however, workers increasingly need higher order skills, including a willingness and ability for continual learning.

Developing Lifelong Learners

The need for workers to be active lifelong learners is paramount (New Zealand Government, 2001). Broadly defined, lifelong learning includes "all learning that enhances and contributes to knowledge and skills" (Pendergast et al. 2005), and is believed to help individuals develop skills and confidence enabling continued participation in work and society (Fryer, 1999). Researchers have sought to understand the extent to which capability is innate or learned. Although some extent of individual capacity is innate, it is believed much is learned, both formally and informally, through a variety of situations and environments (Department of Labour, 1999; New Zealand Government, 2001). Because capacity can diminish it is important for society and organisations to continually invest in the maintenance and development of individual and collective capacity – both directly through skill development, and indirectly through enabling and encouraging individuals to grow and develop in organisational settings. Higher-order skills such as adaptability, flexibility, and a willingness to learn are clearly important in today's business environment, and the development of individual's orientation to learn at work can therefore be seen to contribute to a lifelong learning agenda.

Unfortunately, not all workers have equal access to vocational training or opportunities for workplace learning, potentially reinforcing disadvantage faced by some workers. Studies have found that low-qualified and low-skilled workers receive less training, development or promotion opportunities than their more qualified peers (CIPD, 2002; OECD, 1999; Rainbird, 2000; Rainbird et al. 1999). Consequently the role of managers as 'gatekeepers' of learning opportunities has received attention, with suggestions that some managers may regard training as a reward for high performance rather than a tool for skill improvement. It seems incongruous that workers who would benefit the most from training are often excluded from or unaware of such opportunities or, sadly, lack the self-confidence to engage in or pursue them (Fryer, 1999). These sentiments are shared by Bynner (2002) who suggests that lifelong learning is needed in order for all individuals to keep a foothold in the labour market.

Young Workers

In addressing the development needs of lower-skilled workers, researchers have also called for the need to develop the capabilities of young workers, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and with low levels of qualifications and basic skills. In 2001, young people aged 15-24 comprised 13% of New Zealand's total population (approximately 505,000) (Statistics New Zealand, 2001a). This cohort has high levels of labour market participation (64%), with almost 80% of participants in some form of employment. Overall, young workers account for approximately 15% of the total employed labour force, and represent 25% of the part-time and 12% of the full-time labour force.

A closer look at the relationships between with educational achievement and outcomes reveals a number of patterns. Firstly, young workers tend to be employed in lower-skilled occupations, with 80% working as clerks, sales and service workers and in manual occupations (Statistics New Zealand, 2001a). While this may be a reflection of their high involvement in part-time work, it further questions the nature and quality of young people's work, much of which is 'precarious' (Tucker, 2002; WEB Research, 2004), with fewer opportunities for career development than permanent or more highly skilled occupations.

Secondly, those with low or no qualifications experience higher levels of unemployment than those with some form of basic qualification. There is also concern that the requirement for higher levels of skills will increase the risk of job loss for the less-literate, and that such workers will continue to be overlooked for skill development (New Zealand Government, 2001). Although researchers have begun to examine the quality of young people's work, a better understanding of young workers experiences of work-based learning is important in developing a workforce that is skilled, adaptable and motivated to learn.

Transition from School to Work

Young people have received special attention in policy and research agendas, most notably with the Youth Development Strategy in 2002. The Strategy (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) outlines how government and society can support young people aged 12 to 24 years to develop the skills and attitudes they need to take part positively in society, both now and in the future. These

years are seen as being critical for human development as they build on childhood experiences and set the foundations for adulthood. Others have also signified the importance of young people's labour market participation and outcomes (New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2003). Consequently, researchers are investigating the nature of young people's post-school pathways and experiences in New Zealand (Steedman, 2004; Vaughan, 2003), and also Australia (Ball & Lamb, 2001; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Smith & Green, 2005), the United Kingdom (Biggart, 2002) and the USA (Lamb & Rumberger, 1999).

The transition from school to work or other activities is often characterised by moves in and out of the labour market, between occupations or employers, and some spells of unemployment. This time is often referred to as one of churning, turbulence or floundering (Gardecki & Neumark, 1998). However, turbulence is often short lived, and the risks to labour market outcomes can be reduced by avoiding unemployment, receiving on the job training, or increasing qualifications (Biggart, 2002).

While many young people successfully navigate their way from school to work, and often independently, there are concerns about the numbers of young people leaving school with low or no formal qualifications (New Zealand Government, 2001), posing threats to the average skill level and adaptability of the labour force in the future. Approximately 19% of school leavers each year leave with no or low qualifications, and almost half (42%) of all young people leave school before Year 13 (Statistics New Zealand, 2001b). What is more, despite overall increases in tertiary enrolments, most students are studying at levels equivalent to senior school qualifications or basic vocational qualifications (Ministry of Education, 2005).

Concerns about the risks of poor transitions have resulted in an explosion of initiatives aimed at creating more stable movements from school to other activities (see Higgins, 2003 for a comprehensive review). A number of these target school leavers with low or no qualifications to improve their work and life skills and subsequent labour market outcomes (e.g. Training Opportunities, Youth Training), or provide school students with an opportunity to gain work experience and explore their career options (e.g. Gateway, STAR). Other initiatives include the Mayors Taskforce for Jobs, with the goal of having all 15-19 year olds into work, education or training by 2007; the Youth Employment Project, targeting youth at risk of not training or working, including school leavers with little or no school qualifications, unemployed or underemployed youth, and Maori and Pacifica youth (New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2003); and the development of Youth Transition Services and One-Stop Transition Shops.

While indicators suggest many programmes are helping achieve smoother post-school transitions (e.g. Boyd & McDowall, 2004; Skill New Zealand, 2002), little is known about the experiences of young people beyond their initial destination, or the experiences of those who independently transition into the workforce. The majority of studies have focused on the destinations or labour market outcomes of young workers after leaving school (McMillan & Marks, 2003), or the experiences of adolescents also in compulsory or further education. Few researchers have explicitly examined the experiences of young workers for whom employment is their primary activity. In view of current capability and youth development agendas, research is needed to provide a better understanding of the experiences of young workers as they begin forming their working careers – in particular, their perceptions, attitudes and participation in learning at work.

An 'Orientation to Learn'

Research indicates that younger workers are generally more positive about learning (Maurer *et al.* 2003a) and more adaptable to change than older employees. According to Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000a; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000b), learning careers are shaped by a range of life experiences and learning that occurs outside of formal education or training settings. Their study of adolescents aged 15 to 19 years showed that the personal identities of younger workers were significantly transformed during these years. However, younger workers also face a number of barriers to learning. In particular, family backgrounds provide important influences and access to modelled behaviours, aspirations, and access to information and opportunities, and are important predictors of adolescent outcomes (Ali *et al.* 2005; Caspi *et al.* 1998; Johnson, 2002; Steinberg & Sheffield-Morris, 2001).

Learners also face barriers in organisational settings when excluded from opportunities for learning and development. Exclusion from developmental opportunities is a particular issue for workers in lower skilled, part-time or precarious employment (CIPD, 2002; Tucker, 2002; WEB Research, 2004). Dispositional factors can also act as barriers to learning. In the context of adult learning, negative perceptions of learning ability, confidence, self esteem and anxiety can act as barriers to participation (Culligan, 2005). Another study found that for participants of adult education, schooling was perceived as a 'disabling experience', and reinforced internal beliefs about learning qualities reducing intentions to participate in further education (MacLachlan & Cloonan, 2003 cited in Culligan, 2005).

Poor experiences of learning can have potentially damaging effects on an individual's beliefs about their ability to learn or the value of learning, and may reinforce or generate negative attitudes towards participation in learning at work. Thus it is conceivable that young adults who leave school early or with few qualifications may have had poor learning experiences in the formal schooling system. The importance of outcome expectancies is also important in understanding learning motivation (Colquitt *et al.* 2000).

In an attempt to integrate numerous learning-related concepts, Maurer (Maurer, 2002) proposed a model describing an 'employee learning and development orientation'. This orientation, referred to here as an

'orientation to learn', is described as a motivational state whereby an individual has a tendency to learn and develop, in so far as learning is seen to be relevant to the individual. The model draws on foundational theories of vocational behaviour including Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent *et al.* 1994) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). An employee's learning and development orientation incorporates cognitive, affective and behavioural components, including dispositional traits and more malleable attitudes and beliefs. In particular Maurer draws attention to the need to examine the role of organisational environments in relation to employees' tendency to learn in work settings. Maurer and colleagues (Maurer *et al.* 2003a) have subsequently examined relationships between a number of individual and situational variables in predicting work-related developmental activity. Their results indicate that an employee who is orientated towards development has participated in prior developmental activities, perceives themselves as being able to learn, has support for development both at and away from work, has insight into their career and need for development, and values intrinsic outcomes.

In attempting to determine differential predictors of organisational outcomes, researchers have examined a number of dispositional traits including conscientiousness, neuroticism and goal orientation. Judge and colleagues (Judge *et al.* 2003; Judge *et al.* 2002) recently developed the Core Self Evaluation Scale (CSES), a measure of four strongly-related traits – self esteem, neuroticism, locus of control and general self efficacy. Subsequent studies have found that CSEs are distinct from other dispositional traits (e.g. conscientiousness and openness), and are positively associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment (Judge *et al.* 2003), perceptions of organisational support and perceptions of investment in employee development (Pajo *et al.* 2005a).

Other researchers have examined the role of dispositional goal orientations in relation to employee learning and organisational outcomes (Martocchio & Hertenstein, 2003; Pajo *et al.* 2005b; Potosky & Ramakrishna, 2002). One study found that learning goal orientation was not, as predicted, related to work-related development intentions, but that a positive climate for employee development was more strongly associated with the outcomes studied (Pajo *et al.* 2005b). Openness to experience (OTE) has received less attention in relation to workplace learning, but may be potentially important in understanding employees' orientation to learn and career success (Lounsbury *et al.* 2003). Dispositional traits are clearly important predictors of vocational behaviours, and may provide a better understanding of the relationships between organisational learning environments and employee learning orientations.

Organisational Learning Environments

In examining organisational environments, researchers

distinguish between psychological climates and organisational climates. Psychological climates are individual-level perceptions of specific organisational characteristics, while the latter are an aggregated measure of individual climates for a specific work group or entire organisation (Parker *et al.* 2003; Patterson *et al.* 2004). Measures of specific learning-related climates include perceptions of organisational support (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), organisational support for learning and development (Lee & Bruvold, 2003), supervisor support (Eisenberger *et al.* 2002; Maurer *et al.* 2003a), and peer support. These climates provide important insights into a range of workplace behaviours and outcomes, including attitudes towards learning, job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

Studies examining young people's experiences of work have historically tended to focus on work quantity, but more recently have signalled the potential importance of work quality for young workers (Loughlin & Barling, 2001). Work quantity has been examined in relation to school achievement, career interests, and the formation of work values (Johnson, 2002; Shanahan *et al.* 2002). Measures of adolescent work quality have included job status, earnings, job characteristics (including skill variety, autonomy, skill utilisation and opportunities to learn) role stressors (ambiguity, conflict, overload) and interpersonal relationships (Johri, 2005; Loughlin & Barling, 1998; O'Brien & Feather, 1990; Stern *et al.* 1990). No studies appear to have specifically examined young workers' perceptions of organisational learning environments. Including such measures in future research may offer new insight about the quality of young people's work environments.

By providing opportunities and support for learning at work, organisations may be able to positively influence individuals' beliefs and attitudes about, and experiences of learning. Individuals who believe they *can* learn, see the value of learning, and are encouraged to learn at work are more likely to be interested and engaged in learning. If an employee's orientation to learn can be enhanced through a positive learning climate, other outcomes (such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment) may also be expected. Accordingly, organisational environments may be potentially important places for the development of young people's identities of themselves as learners.

Proposed Research

Given the importance of developing capability of *all* levels of employees, a more robust understanding is needed of the experiences and characteristics of those who will be the future labour market – that is young workers. A model for examining young workers' orientation to learn in the context of their organisational environments is proposed, which forms the basis of the author's current doctoral research (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Model of an orientation to learn.
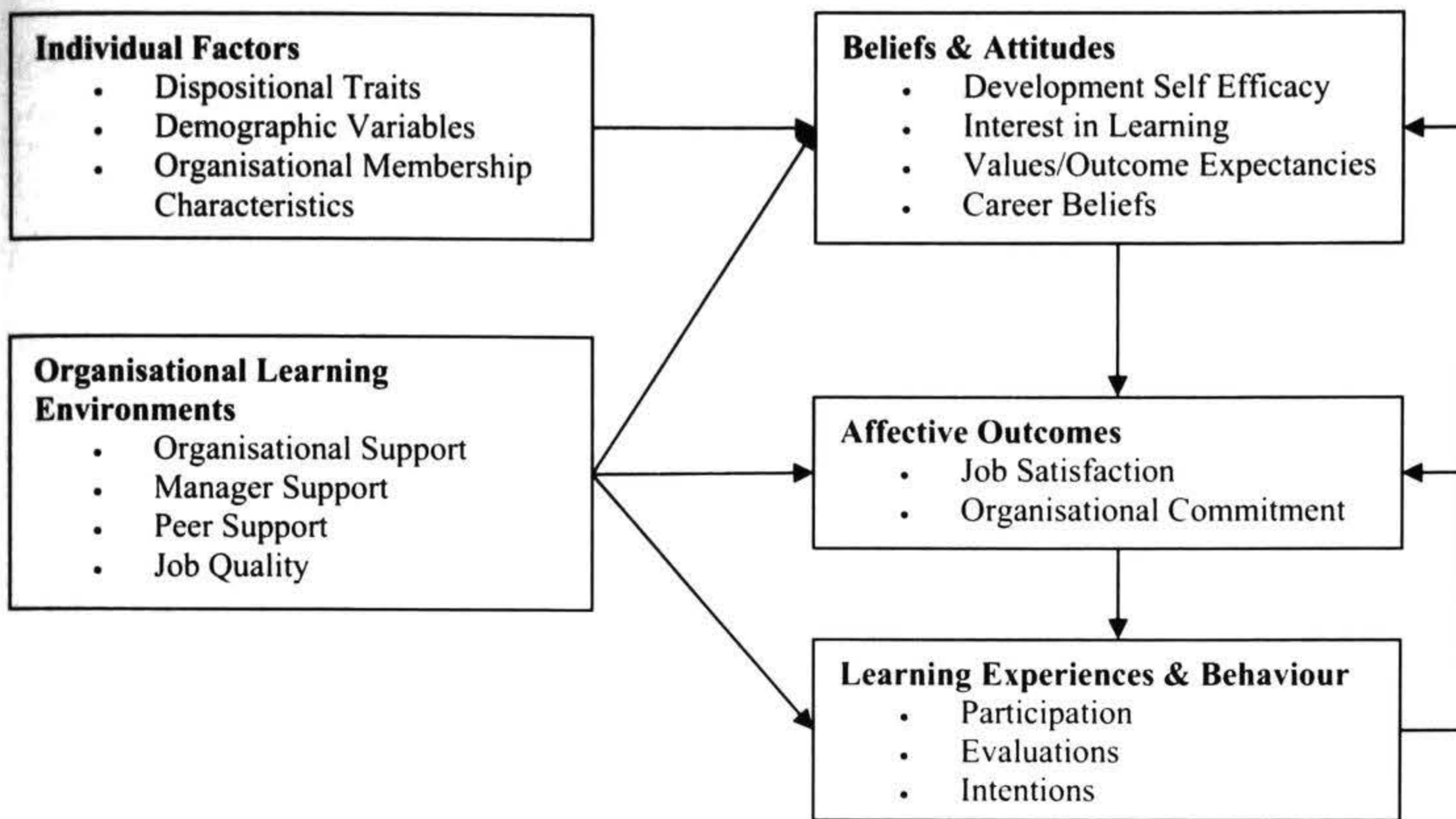
This research will examine the experiences of (primarily) vocationally-skilled young workers (aged 16-24) in order to identify the relationship between organisational learning climates and individual's orientation to learn. Specifically:

- What are young workers perceptions of organisational learning climates?

- How are organisational climate perceptions related to learning-related attitudes & beliefs, affective (organisational) outcomes, participation in work-related developmental activities, and intentions to participate in developmental activities?

- To what extent do individual differences (e.g. socioeconomic status, school leaving age, dispositional traits) influence these attitudes, beliefs and behaviours?

Three phases of data collection are proposed. Using semi-structured interviews, the first phase will explore the understanding of a number of young workers about various learning-related concepts that will inform questionnaire development. The second and central phase of the research comprises a cross-sectional survey to measure a number of learning-related beliefs, attitudes and experiences of young workers. The third and final phase of the research will use in-depth interviews with a small number of young workers to gain a better understanding of their experiences of learning at work.

Limitations and Considerations

There are a number of potential limitations relating to the proposed method – specifically literacy, individual motivation, and availability. Thus survey questions need

to be easy to understand by respondents who may have low literacy levels. In addressing motivation, particularly for young workers who have had poor experiences of prior learning, and availability, the researcher proposes to provide survey completion support to participants, via their organisations, using small-group settings; a drop-off and pick-up method; and where necessary a drop-off and mail return method. The most significant limitation is the voluminous number of interrelated variables relevant to a learning orientation. An attempt to measure and/or control for all such variables is, in a word, impossible. Consequently this research proposes to limit its focus to those most relevant to the stability and malleability of young workers' orientation to learn. It is hoped that identifying the existence and strength of hypothesised relationships will contribute a foundation for future longitudinal studies.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed New Zealand and international literature relevant to understanding the development of young adults as they enter the labour market as full-time participants. Previous research has established important relationships that explain the nature and outcomes of learning at work; however few studies have paid attention to the learning experiences of young workers in the labour market, or the potential impact of learning environments on their orientation to learn. Given the importance of this group of workers to future organisational and economic growth, it is imperative we develop a more robust understanding of the nature of their experiences of work-based learning. Identifying the potential impact of organisational environments on employees' attitudes and beliefs about learning may provide an important step toward developing adaptable,

learning-focused and skilled workers required for the future.

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Author

Robyn Mason
Assistant Lecturer
Department of Human Resource Management
Massey University
P.O. Box 11 222
Palmerston North
R.L.Mason@massey.ac.nz