

## **CEDEFOP – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training**

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**Facing up to the learning organisation challenge**

**Volume I - key issues from a European perspective**

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**Volume II - selected European writings**

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European goals related to 'lifelong learning' and the creation of a 'knowledge-based society' can only be attained if the organisations in which people work are also organisations in which they learn. This means that work organisations must become, at the same time, learning organisations.

In reviewing the current state of learning organisation thinking in Europe it is necessary to address a new agenda. While keeping in mind that the educational and humanistic dimension is central to the *European social model*, the agenda-setting must follow a path based on negotiation and agreement about how businesses can become competitive while at the same time enhance the quality of people's learning at work. The aim is to enable organisations to become more effective and the individual members of these organisations to find meaning in what they are doing and thus gain personal learning benefits.

Two volumes are being published together as a set to provide an overview of the current state of thinking in Europe on this issue.

Volume I provides an analytical overview of the main questions emerging from a number of recent European research and development projects related to the topic of the learning organisation. It attempts to elucidate the issues, dilemmas and challenges arising from these research projects with the view to assisting policy makers – from employer, trade union and government backgrounds – to devise policies that will promote learning at work.

The second volume (Volume II) contains 15 papers drawing on the work undertaken in the above mentioned research projects.

These two volumes are published in the context of a 'Cedefop research arena' (Cedra) knowledge development initiative that has become known as the 'Cedra learning organisation project'.

### **Four key messages**

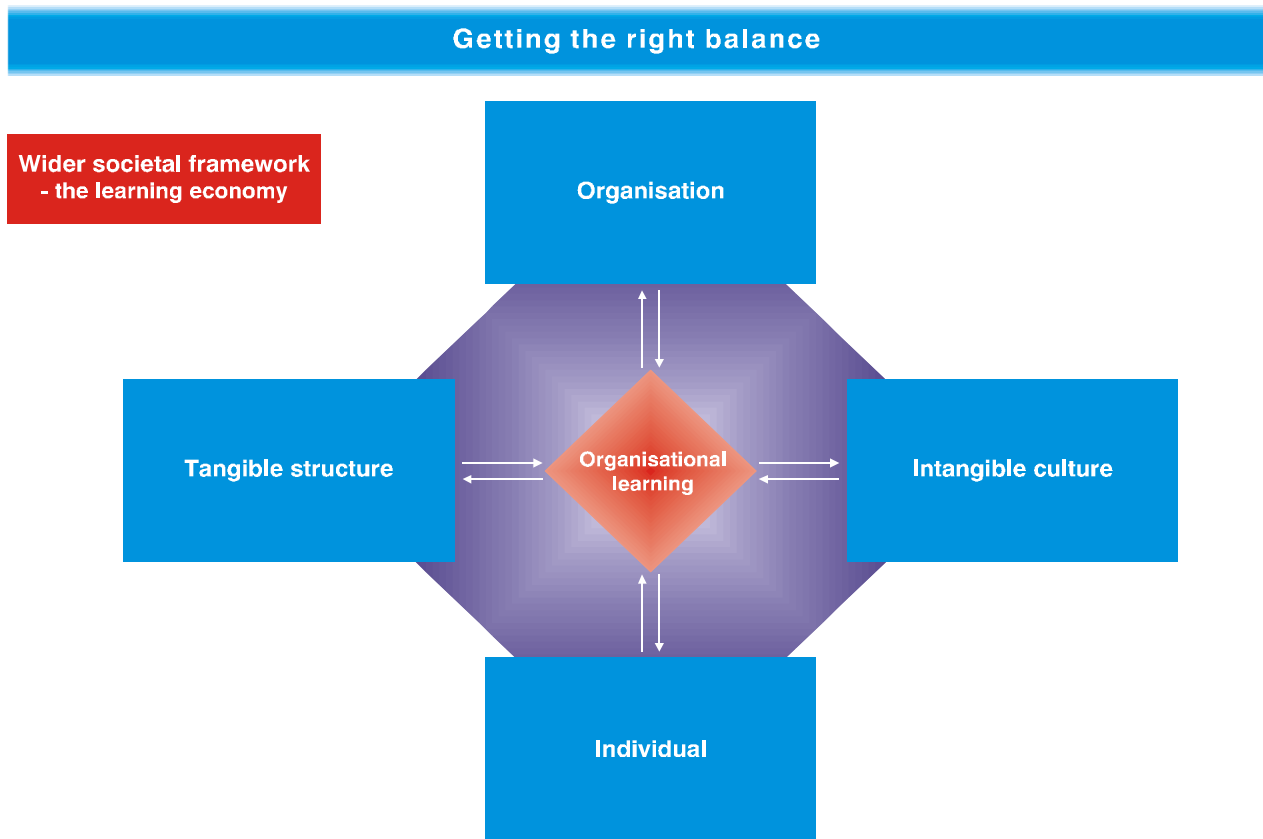
The Cedra learning organisation project has four main messages.

The first is that in order to build learning organisations, one has to ensure that: a) there is coherence between the 'tangible' (formal) and 'intangible' (informal) dimensions of an organisation; and b) that organisational learning goals are reconciled with individuals' learning needs. The complexity involved in ensuring the right balance between these different and often competing dimensions means that in the final analysis one cannot realistically expect more than the implementation of incomplete or imperfect learning organisations. However, this does not in any way negate the validity of the quest to reconcile these competing but 'real' factors. On the contrary, it calls for enlightened leadership from decision-makers and management and requires the skilled interventions of committed organisational learning professionals. In the *realpolitik* the key issue is the promotion of organisations that, in a context of shifting priorities and volatile economic environments, can somehow sustain the right balance between work demands and learning demands. This calls for bottom-up, problem-centred and non-ideological learning coalitions involving all of the stakeholders within an organisation.

The second key message is that developmental or challenging work is a prerequisite for implementing a learning organisation. One of the keys to promoting learning organisations is to organise work in such a way that it promotes human development. In other words it is about building workplace environments in which people are motivated to think for themselves so that through their everyday work experiences, they develop new competences and gain new understanding and insights. Thus, people are learning from their work – they are learning as they work.

The third message is that the provision of support and guidance is essential to ensure that developmental work leads to developmental learning. A condition for developmental learning is that people are supported and guided while undertaking their developmental work tasks to ensure that these become opportunities for learning. So, for example, while an appropriate amount of stress is conducive and indeed necessary for learning, too much stress, brought on by overwhelming tasks or too much uncertainty, can block learning. Good management and leadership are necessary to ensure that work is planned in a way that people are stretched but at the same time are able to cope with the demands. In this regard, support for planning and reflection is essential. This means that people have space and time to reflect on their work in a learning mode, through receiving supportive feedback on what they are doing and how they are doing it – both positive and negative – and receiving teaching, training, coaching and guidance as a regular part of their work. From an organisational learning point of view, reflection activities need to take place in collective learning settings so that people can engage in finding common meanings in making sense of the collective work they are doing.

The fourth key message is that to address organisational learning there is a need for boundary-crossing and interdisciplinary partnerships between the vocational education and training and human resource development communities. The wide and complex notion of learning that is implied in the concept of the learning organisation draws attention to issues that are normally considered to be outside of the realm of education and training, such as how organisations are designed, developed and managed. Indeed, the very



vocabulary of most of those involved in vocational education and training, for whom learning is very much a formal, individualistic matter. It is argued in this book that vocational education and training must engage more with learning in untidy social environments in, for example, small enterprises and in different sorts of socio-economic 'real-life' contexts.

This is a more complex and unstructured form of learning dealing with the relationships between business strategies, technological development, social innovation, winning people's commitment and harnessing their skills. Organisational learning is about applied learning and supporting 'practices' where 'non-professional training and HRD' actors – managers and team leaders – facilitate learning while people are working. All of the professional education and training actors concerned with the business of work-related learning have to rethink their positions to respond to the challenge of organisational learning. This entails a re-evaluation of vocational education and training and also human resource development practices and strategies.

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