CENTRELINK’S NEW APPROACH TO LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

Introduction

It is my pleasure to share with you today, some of the exciting work we have been undertaking in Centrelink over the last couple of years, which we believe has raised vocational education and training to a new paradigm and provides a unique model for learning in industry.

Context

To provide some context for this presentation, you need to know a little about the environment in which this model operates.

You probably know that Centrelink is the largest deliverer of welfare services in Australia, and in this role, it has become the human face of government. It distributes $44 billion in social welfare payments to 6.5 million needy Australians on behalf of 25 client departments annually. It has a recurrent budget of $1.6 billion, and its 27,000 staff operate through 1,000 contact points across urban, remote and rural Australia, including 375 Customer Service Centres and 27 Call Centres.

Approximately 60% of Centrelink’s staff work in Customer Service Centres and 20% work in Call Centres, where multi-channel customer
service is becoming the norm: ie face-to-face customer service, self-
service, on-line service and text-messaging. The remaining 20% work in
Area offices or National Support Office.

Centrelink, in keeping with its welfare culture, is committed to a culture
of continuous learning for its staff, not only to increase work performance
but also to enable each staff member to realise their full potential, to have
the skills to do their jobs well and in so doing, to gain a qualification.
This culture is driven from the highest levels of the organisation,
particularly from the CEO, Sue Vardon, and embodied in Centrelink’s
Workplace Agreement.

The focal point for learning within the organisation is the Centrelink
Virtual College. Established in 2001, its challenge is a very specific one -
to ensure all 27,000 staff have equal access to learning that enhances
work performance and delivers business benefits.

The scope of the learning required changes constantly in response to new
government initiatives, legislative and policy requirements.
Unique RTO Model

As a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) within a large government agency, the Centrelink Virtual College offers a unique model for learning within large enterprises in Australia. The College is acknowledged as a Centre of Excellence within the Australian Public Service and is influencing the future direction of learning in that arena.

The Virtual College is well named. In terms of student numbers, it is a large RTO with over 6,000 enrolments last year, and this number is rapidly increasing as momentum gathers for job-ready learning linked to qualifications and paypoint progression. It has a full-time staff of only 37.

The College is virtual in the sense that there are no conventional campuses with classrooms, but behind the virtual front is a sophisticated organisational structure and operation, enabling the College to have a measurable impact on the learning and job performance of Centrelink’s large cohort of employees.

The impact of the College is measured in a variety of ways: through the six-monthly staff polls, through the Quality On Line tool which measures
payment accuracy and correctness (currently running at 96.7%), through a Business Assurance Framework, through key performance indicators in the corporate Balanced Scorecard and through the use of a comprehensive suite of evaluation mechanisms. The evaluation tools, which correspond to the five levels of evaluation espoused in Kirkpatrick’s model, have been piloted over the last six months, right up to level 5, return on Investment and Return on Training Investment.

Elements of presentation

I have selected just four elements of this unique model to share with you today, both because of the time factor, and also because I thought these might be of most interest to you.

We are going to look at:

Slide 1

• A Career Pathways model for learning and progression throughout the organisation;

• A Strategic Framework for linking learning with performance and organisational improvement;

• A new approach to learning and assessment;

• The satellite capability for delivering learning
I will now introduce each of these elements, starting with the Career Pathways:

The College’s strong commitment to the National Training Framework, including support for the Australian Quality Training Framework and the implementation of Training Packages, is demonstrated by its innovative model for linking career pathways with nationally accredited qualifications from relevant Training Packages. All learning within the organisation is driven by business needs and linked to nationally recognised qualifications. Unlike many vocational education and training institutions, we live with the consequences, successful or otherwise, of our learning programs! This is a great incentive to ‘get it right’.

The Career Pathways model for learning within Centrelink links national qualifications to Centrelink job roles and paypoint progression. The model is summarised here.

**Slide 2**

**Career Pathways slide (Describe)**

This model is underpinned by the organisation’s commitment – supported by the relevant Union – to allocate generous learning and development time for each employee. This includes 12 hours per month for Customer
Service Officers, 10 hours per month for Call Centre operators and 8 hours for other staff.

The second unique element on which the College is built is the:

*Strategic Framework for Linking Learning with Performance and Organisational Improvement*

The College’s sophisticated approach to learning includes the effective linking of Individual and Team Learning Plans to the National Learning Strategy. This in turn integrates with the corporate People Plan and the Corporate Business Plan and also links to *Future Directions*, the overall strategic plan for Centrelink.

**Slide 3**

*Strategic Framework Diagram (Describe)*

This diagram indicates a number of the systems Centrelink uses to facilitate performance improvement. As mentioned before, these include the individual and team learning plans, the individual performance review or assessment, the corporate key performance indicators which link to the Balanced Scorecard, the People Plan, the Corporate Business Plan and *Future Directions*, the Strategic Plan for the organisation.
Within the strategic framework provided by these systems and plans, the individual employee progresses from developing competencies and gaining a qualification to moving onwards towards higher levels of performance and contributing to the organisation’s achievements.

The third element shifts learning to a different paradigm within the organisation. This is a very exciting innovation.

The traditional approach to learning and assessment in enterprise-based RTOs is primarily based on assisting employees, as students, to learn, in order to gain a qualification. The new approach I am about to outline, puts the emphasis on assisting employees to perform their jobs well and, as a result, gain a qualification. The new approach replaces what we call the ‘delivery’ services model which most of you would be familiar with.

The following two diagrams I am about to show you summarise the conventional pathway for the individual and the pathway for the individual within the new approach to learning and assessment.

As I mentioned before, the traditional approach is a linear model that focuses on the individual acquiring competencies in order to satisfy the requirements for a qualification. This is described here.
The **new approach** to learning and assessment is described in the following slide and places the emphasis on assisting employees to perform their jobs well.

**Slide 5**

**Slide of new approach to learning and assessment (Describe)**

Some of the differences between the approaches can be expressed as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Enterprise RTO approach</th>
<th>New approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RTO focuses primarily on delivery of learning services</td>
<td>CVC focuses primarily on recognition of existing job competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the goal of staff acquiring qualifications – and hopefully improved job performance will follow</td>
<td>Focus on business goal of staff doing their jobs expertly – and qualifications will follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTO works closely with trainers to ensure competencies satisfy qualifications</td>
<td>CVC works closely with job supervisors to ensure competencies are aligned with existing jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTO identifies the individual’s learning gaps</td>
<td>CVC acknowledges existing work skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTO produces Learner Guides, Facilitator Guides and Assessor Guides</td>
<td>CVC assists assessors to acquire evidence of competencies, at the earliest possible stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners need to understand the structure of a qualification and the training methods</td>
<td>Learners focus on improving their work performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies are identified theoretically and job roles largely sit</td>
<td>Job roles are centre stage and competencies are aligned with them, and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
outside of the learning activities | training and assessment occur as a result of job performance  
---|---  
Qualifications viewed as a reward for undertaking discrete units of competence | Qualifications up to and including Certificate IV viewed as an acknowledgement that the job is being performed well.  
Attitude of employee: “I want a qualification” | Attitude of Centrelink employee: “I want to do my job better”  
Attitude of employee: “Doing training leads to doing my job well” | Attitude of Centrelink employee: “Doing my job well is acknowledged by my gaining a qualification”  
Attitude of employee: “I am – for the moment – not an employee but a student working through a process in order to get a qualification” | Attitude of Centrelink employee: “I want to be able to do my job better and I expect a qualification when I achieve my goal”  
Attitude of trainer: “Valid learning experiences are tied to the Training Package” | Attitude of Centrelink trainer: “Valid learning experiences are tied to your job”  

It is important to note that some approaches will remain the same in the future. For example, defensible assessment practices will be in place, including the collection of sufficient evidence for recognition purposes.

The new approach amounts to a commitment to continuous improvement.

It can be summed up as a shift towards recognising job skills, and these job skills are acknowledged by qualifications. This is a shift away from the previous starting position of developing learning materials and then preparing students for assessment.

Pilot activities were conducted by the College in 2003 to assist individual Centrelink trainers to make the transition to the new approach.
The focus of Centrelink trainers is now moving towards the recognition of skills, developing an enhanced capability in gathering evidence, understanding the Centrelink context for jobs and learning, and understanding the many different ways assessment can be conducted. In this new mode, the trainer is more aware of, and able to manage, the range of variables affecting the recognition of current competencies.

The following diagram underpins the new approach to teaching and learning for both new starters and existing employees of the organisation.

**Slide 6**

**Summary model of learning and assessment for the Certificate IV in Business (Describe)**

The final point I want to tell you about is our chief delivery mechanism, our satellite capability, called the Centrelink Education Network.

Although the College uses a range of flexible approaches to ensure that high quality learning can occur no matter where the staff member is located, the central plank of our blended approach to learning is the College’s satellite network. This is the largest educational satellite network in Australia, providing over 1,000 hours of structured learning.
programs each year. The Centrelink Education Network provides interactive, real time, distance learning through one way video and two way audio interaction so participants can communicate with the facilitator and subject matter specialist in the studio in Canberra. The technology allows us, via an interactive keypad, to test participant knowledge and knowledge absorption and provide reports on attendance to Area managers and supervisors.
It has proved to be very cost effective, saving the organisation $8 million over the first two and a half years of operation.

I’ll show you how it works.

**Slide 7**

*CEN diagram (Describe)*

**Slide 8**

*Pictures of studio*

**Slide 9**

*Virtual Classroom*

The satellite video and audio images are soon to be delivered direct to the desktop computer of each Centrelink staff member, enabling the staff member to participate in live sessions or to access video on demand.

The College uses a blended approach to the delivery of all learning, in accordance with individual learning styles and business capability. The blended approach involves, as appropriate, structured training sessions, self-paced resources, videoconferencing sessions, online learning and mentoring and coaching.
**Conclusion**

I hope what I have shown you today will stimulate your thinking about the interface between vocational education and training, skilling people for jobs and corporate performance.

It is a model which is working extremely well in a large organisation like Centrelink and one which we believe to be replicable in smaller government and private organisations as well.

I hope you enjoyed the presentation and Thank you.