Enterprise-based assessment

Introduction

This paper outlines some of the practical issues confronted by enterprises in introducing competency-based assessment practices (incorporating RPL and CBT). The issues have been identified as a result of work conducted with in excess of 260 companies by the Victorian Recognition and Assessment Centre at Broadmeadows College of TAFE.

The recognition and assessment centre

The Victorian Recognition and Assessment Centre is located at Broadmeadows College of TAFE and has been in operation since 1990. The Recognition and Assessment Centre is responsible for supporting the implementation of RPL practices throughout the Victorian State Training System. It is also responsible for initiating a number of related research and developmental projects in the areas of RPL, recognition, assessment and industry competencies.

The major projects for which the Recognition and Assessment Centre is responsible include:

- Research into the RPL model (the Ford-TAFE articulation project);
- Development of RPL assessor program for vocational education and training providers;
- Development of Senior RPL consultants program under the auspices of the TAFE National Staff Development Committee;
- Development of a number of RPL implementation manuals and workshops;
- Research into the applicability of RPL for women—as part of the National Plan of Action for women in TAFE;
- Production of a number of resources to support women RPL applicants;
- Research into the application of RPL and CBT in enterprises;
- Development of a workplace assessment program which integrates recognition and assessment practices.
Workplace assessment

In 1991 the CBT National Secretariat funded the Recognition and Assessment Centre to conduct pilot workplace assessor training programs at Portland Aluminium, Gas and Fuel Corporation of Victoria and Aerospace Technologies of Australia (ASTA). These pilot programs involved the introduction and establishment of workplace assessment programs incorporating RPL and CBT and the training of workplace assessors.

Since 1991 the Recognition and Assessment Centre has been involved in supporting a further 260 enterprises through this process. This has included advice and consultancy services, the provision of general assessor training programs and the development of customised programs incorporating both training of workplace assessors and support with the introduction of appropriate procedures.

This paper outlines some of the general issues identified from the work with these companies. The focus is on issues associated with significant change to workplace culture as the result of introducing enterprise-based assessments. There are a number of other papers produced by the Recognition and Assessment Centre which focus on the industrial relations issues associated with:

- who assesses
- selection of assessors
- skills of assessors
- appeals mechanisms
- access to assessments
- selection of assessment techniques
- assessment of skills used versus skills possessed.

This paper does not re-examine those issues. Instead, this paper will concentrate on the general issues associated with the role of enterprise assessment in a changing work culture, and in the development of procedures to support such implementation.

Purpose of workplace assessments

Companies have been keen to introduce workplace assessment procedures for a number of reasons. A clearer definition of expectations in the workplace as a result of award restructuring and the introduction of competency standards has enabled enterprises to
consider whether they are actually able to meet these objectives. Assessment of work practices and individual capacity is crucial for this aspect.

In addition, enterprises have recognised that a major strategy in increasing the skills base of the organisation in line with stated competency requirements is that of training. Again assessment of the training needs of the organisation and the identification of individual training plans (based on assessment procedures) is critical.

RPL principles and approaches have been used for recruitment, classification and reclassification, training, promotion and achieving multiskilling. Assessment at the workplace has been an important strategy to support these purposes. Workplace assessment, incorporating RPL principles is an invaluable component.

**Workplace assessment and change**

There have been a number of interesting experiences with enterprises introducing assessment practices. Usually this (the introduction of workplace assessment) has been an integral component in a number of workplace reforms, and so perceptions about workplace assessment are often associated with perceptions of the wider change process.

For example, when introducing the need for a systematic approach to assessment, Questions often arise such as 'but I've known him/her for 10 years so I know what he/she can do—why should I assess him/her?'

Similarly, many work practices and job definitions reflect the way jobs have been performed for many years. In some enterprises introducing workplace assessment, jobs and work practices had not been assessed for 30 years; but, with the development of national standards, assessment has gained importance.

In these enterprises it was important that the introduction of workplace assessment was not seen as a threat. Issues of pride and status associated with a long history of a particular approach to work may emerge if assessment is seen as challenging these practices. The successful introduction of workplace assessment involves recognition of the role of assessment in acknowledging expertise and in increasing skills and efficiencies.
It is critical that it is not be seen as part of a hidden agenda designed to gather ammunition against sectors of the workforce. The introduction of workplace assessment as a strategy to enable greater skills acquisition and recognition is a positive approach.

Consultation with and involvement of those affected by the introduction of workplace assessment procedures can facilitate the acceptance and support of the change. In some enterprises, the introduction of RPL was actually a catalyst which supported a number of reforms taking place. It was an acknowledgement of the contribution of employees and thus underpinned a process of significant workplace reform, including job redesign and reorganisation.

If the assessment processes are understood and if employees can see a valid purpose associated with change, issues such as potential bias and assessing and placing new employees are dealt with equitably and systematic assessment procedures can be implemented.

Consultative processes involving management and union representatives, eg consultative training committees have been very constructive in facilitating workplace assessment processes.

Common concerns associated with workplace assessment

There are a number of common concerns which arise in consultative committees. These include:

- concerns that assessors might be biased, especially when assessing their peers, or when there are complex personal relationships based at the workplace;
- concerns that assessors might enable favouritism or nepotism to occur—especially if there are financial implications of assessments;
- concerns that prejudiced views might interfere with the process, ie that the process must be fair;
- concerns that particular groups within the organisation might be disadvantaged by formal assessment processes. Often women or people from non-English speaking backgrounds are cited here. A commitment to equity is necessary to allay these fears.

These legitimate concerns can create barriers to the introduction of workplace assessment practices. Enterprises that demonstrate thorough consultative communication strategies generally are able to resolve these issues constructively, often the consultation process
actually increases support and commitment to implementation and can prevent other potential issues from disrupting the process.

Implementation procedures

Clearly, there has to be a purpose for the introduction of workplace assessment processes. Interest in RPL or competency standards often leads to a desire to introduce assessment practices, as they both provide mechanisms to identify existing skills levels and to plan training or retraining strategies to increase skills levels. However, there need to be clear potential outcomes for assessment practices to be successfully implemented. For example, when enterprises wish to use assessment processes for classification or reclassification purposes, there must be some potential outcome in the form of possible classification decisions which arise from the assessment. This could be a reclassification with associated benefits. If it is impossible to actually obtain a reclassification, for example when there are no vacancies or positions available, then the assessment exercise can be viewed as meaningless.

Similarly, when assessment processes are being introduced to assist in identifying training and retraining options they need to enable recognition of skills assessed, usually in the form of adjusting the training program to enable acquisition of new skills rather than making people relearn what they already know.

Enterprises wishing to implement workplace assessment procedures need to consider the procedures and structures that will support such implementation. Some examples of administrative decisions associated with workplace assessment include:

- how will people be notified of assessment times and places?
- how will assessors be allocated to those being assessed?
- how will assessments be timetabled?
- what sort of application will be required?
- where will it be obtained?
- where will it be lodged?
- what sort of information will be available to applicants?
- what forms will it take?
- how will assessments be promoted?
- who are the assessors?
- is there a ‘bank’ of assessors?
- is there a schedule of availability of assessors?
- what assessment techniques will be used?
- how will assessors record the outcomes of assessments?
- where do assessors lodge the outcomes of assessments?
- how are assessment outcomes processed?
- how are those assessed notified of decisions?
- where do they go if they wish to appeal?
- is the process evaluated?
- how and by whom?

This is not a complete list of the administrative implications of workplace assessment. Nevertheless it provides an overview of the detail which must be considered in implementation of workplace assessment.

From the enterprises which the Recognition and Assessment Centre has worked with, the most successful examples of the introduction of workplace assessment are those where such processes utilise wherever possible existing and accepted practices and procedures. This ensures that the activities are attainable and efficient. For example, BHP's implementation did not create any new administrative systems for RPL and workplace assessment. Rather, they broadened and extended what they already had; and they simply expanded the roles of those people normally responsible for training and assessment functions within the organisation.

Industrial relations issues

The introduction of enterprise-based assessment raises a number of potential industrial relations issues. These issues need to be resolved by the industrial parties prior to the introduction of workplace assessment.

Some of these issues relate to the range of potential assessment outcomes (eg retraining, reclassification), to the validity and fairness of the actual process, and to the resolution of any difficulties that might arise during the process, eg appeals mechanisms.

Where the vocational training sector (eg TAFE colleges) is involved in designing and delivering workplace assessment training programs it is important that this is done with a clear understanding of the limits on involvement. Industrial relations issues are the rightful realm of the industrial parties—and not of training providers.

Nevertheless, training providers can play an important role in sharing their expertise in training and assessment and in the design of appropriate and relevant programs with enterprises.