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The Little Things Add Up

May 5, 2022 21 CLEO

By 21CLEO Research Team

Our research has focused on the forces that support working learners to participate in employer supported education and training initiatives, and more generally, efforts that lead to professional growth and career advancement. As we talked to working learners across the country, we noticed patterns in who participated in those initiatives and who benefitted from them. We shared these findings in blog posts discussing which working learners get recruited to participate and shared personas that capture some of the reasons for that participation. We have taken note of the little things that add up to make it possible for working learners to grow.

In this blog we describe a pattern of resources and interactions with direct supervisors that, in aggregate, provided support to working learners. These were supports that helped them connect to and continue benefiting from both formal learning opportunities and less formal just-in-time learning opportunities. To illustrate, we share the experiences of two working learners who had very different backgrounds and were at different points in their careers. Ainsley had a high school diploma and was still figuring out her career path. Muhazzim had an advanced degree, work experience, and a clearer direction of what he wanted from his career. Despite these differences, each benefitted from the multiple small efforts made by their direct supervisors. We've used their own words illustratively but edited for length and clarity.

Ainsley

We interviewed Ainsley multiple times over the course of a year. By the last interview, Ainsley had been working in a fast food establishment for about three months. However, when we first interviewed her, she had been working at a retirement center for a few months – one of a series of jobs that she held for a short time. At that time she did not express any interest in advancing within the company. Instead, when asked what she saw for her future, she seemed uncertain and mentioned hoping to be self-employed. In her new position, however, she is engaged both as an employee and a working learner. Ainsley mentioned several moments in her interactions with her supervisor that made a difference in her attitude and engagement. In the first excerpt, Ainsley described how her manager had first identified her potential as a leader. Ainsley said,

“ *when [manager] saw my leadership ...And then she sees, my like, my voice. Like she heard me telling a coworker hey you need to put on gloves. You're touching a customer's food you need to put gloves on. She's like, Ainsley, where is this leadership*

coming from? And I'm like, that's how I am. And she's like, well I see you as a manager, I do.

Ainsley's manager went on to explain the process through which Ainsley could move toward a manager's position:

"So what I need you to do is, I need you to finish all of your [training] videos. And I need to have you take the operations test. Um, and I need to see you kind of lead."

In these brief exchanges, the manager connected the dots for Ainsley. The manager let her know that she had leadership potential, that she should watch training videos and take a test, that it's good to show leadership, and as a result she could advance to the next job.

Later, Ainsley described how the manager gave her an opportunity to demonstrate leadership within a guided or supervised experience. The manager provided a just-in-time learning opportunity for Ainsley to identify what leadership skills are in that setting, and to practice them in a safe way where the manager could step in if Ainsley made a mistake. Ainsley describes how the just-in-time opportunity arose, when a co-worker expressed that a customer had ordered a bag of food but didn't return to pick it up

"My manager was like okay well let's see what's- let's see, Ainsley, why don't you go with [coworker] and see what you can do. And I'm like, so you're having me take charge and lead? And she's like yes I wanna see what you do."

Ainsley also demonstrated that she is aware that her manager supports her and her learning and the reason for it. She indicated that the manager recognized something within Ainsley that Ainsley didn't even see, and that support is what helped shift Ainsley's commitment to learning. Ainsley described her perception of her boss's support in this exchange,

Ainsley: For me, I think I would definitely say it's my boss. She's the person who's supporting my learning.

Interviewer: Okay. How does she do that?

Ainsley: When she first met me and once she was ready to hire me she's like, this person looks very detail oriented, very multitasking, who's like a born leader. And I'm Like, me? I'm not really a leader type but I will work hard, I will do whatever you need me to do.

For Ainsley, the manager helped her to see leadership potential, the steps to take to get there, and provided informal opportunities to demonstrate her growing leadership skills. The differences were striking between how Ainsley described her experiences the first time we interviewed her and the last and it was the manager that made the difference.

Muhazzim

At the time of our interviews, Muhazzim was working for a large company where he had several positions in different departments due to promotions. We interviewed him three times over the course of a year. The first time we spoke with him he had just completed a six-month, online, faced-paced supervisory training program that was sponsored by his employer. At the same time, he was in a new position within the same department.

In our interviews, Muhazzim emphasized the important role that his supervisor had played in his learning and advancement. In analyzing what Muhazzim described, we can see that his supervisor helped to connect the formal learning to the work setting, provided encouragement, and created opportunities for informal learning. As Muhazzim described it,

“ *Since I joined in that department he’s the one who encouraged me all the time and gave me more opportunities, pushed me up to do more things, and like to learn new things, and even call my name on our daily meetings to appreciate my work and to give me new ideas.*

Muhazzim reported that his supervisor helped to connect the formal learning to the work explicitly. He described how his supervisor discussed how he could help Muhazzim in his training program and work duties,

So, I mean he [supervisor] invited me to like, describe what I’m working on and we discussed how I could use it for school.

Muhazzim explained that his instructor let him adapt a class assignment to the context of his new job promotion. As Muhazzim described it,

“I wrote a report about when I started my job, what the criteria they used to hire me on the new department, the new job assignments, who supervised me, and who gave me training. I also included the kind of training I had, and the content of the training, the hard material and the system applications.”

The adapted assignment helped Muhazzim make sense of his new position, the training, and the system being used in the position. This flexibility made it easier for Muhazzim to connect what he was learning in the supervisor training program with his job and made it easier for him to be successful.

Muhazzim’s supervisor also provided opportunities for informal learning. For example, after interviewing for a promotion, Muhazzim was told that his work was fine but that his communication skills were not. According to Muhazzim, he talked too much, had too many pauses, and gave too much detail. Upon getting that feedback, Muhazzim’s supervisor provided informal opportunities for Muhazzim to practice informal presentations in order to hone his communication skills in their regular staff meetings. Muhazzim said,

“...so my supervisor, he called me and said okay so I will help you out ... I will call your name during every meeting and let you talk about different issues, just normal routine issues, so your communication gets better.”

By providing Muhazzim with opportunities to practice and develop his communication skills in a safe environment, the supervisor supported Muhazzim's growth as an employee. Muhazzim was able to be successful in his work.

The Little Things Add Up

Both Ainsley and Muhazzim's experiences demonstrate that the efforts of direct supervisors do not have to be wide-reaching or even part of a plan for them to have a positive impact on worker learners' professional growth. Instead, it appears that it is the small but immediate efforts that make a real difference in how the working learner sees themselves and encourages participation in learning opportunities. In Ainsley's case, the supervisor saw Ainsley's potential, immediately acknowledged it, and when the opportunity arose made space for Ainsley to demonstrate her abilities. For Muhazzim, the supervisor acknowledged the learning Muhazzim was engaged in, helped make connections, and provided opportunities for Muhazzim to grow within a low-risk environment.

These two cases suggest that the immediate supervisor is a vital link in the learning and employment development of an employee. Supervisors who successfully guide a working learner do more than supervise. They mentor and guide employees toward career goals they might not have even seen for themselves. To this end, we suggest that employers take a closer look at the support being provided to direct supervisors and help them see themselves as vital links in the development of talent.

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