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Autonomous learning in the workplace, by Jill E. Ellingson and Raymond A. Noe (eds), New York, Routledge, 2017, xxi+225 pp., A$89.00, ISBN: 978-1-138-94074-1

Autonomous learning in the workplace is an edited book that explores the shifting world of workplace learning. The editors' interest in their topic was derived from two insights (p. 2). First, appreciation of how people learn in the workplace is changing. Workplace learning now involves more than just attending formal training and development events and courses. Employees learn informally, for example, through talking to other employees and searching the internet. As well, there are now new autonomous learning methods, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs), communities of practice, social media and YouTube videos. The second insight was that little was known about individual differences and contextual factors influencing the use of autonomous learning and how to evaluate it. These two insights gave rise to this interesting edited collection of readings from contributors working in the fields of management, education and industrial/organizational psychology.

Just what is autonomous learning? How is it possible to distinguish it clearly enough from other forms of learning, at least clearly enough to warrant a consistent theme for an edited book? The editors state that autonomous learning is the ability of the learner to take charge of their own learning (p. 2). In addition to this, the editors warn that the term exhibits complexity, requiring a number of conditions to be added to what appears to be a simple concept. Autonomous learning must be voluntary, not imposed by the organization. It must also be unstructured, in that employees are not learning to meet pre-determined or pre-planned learning objectives. As well, autonomous learning must build human capital (employees gain information and skills that are relevant to their jobs). As if this list of conditions is not enough, the editors argue that autonomous learning encompasses several learning concepts that are perhaps better known: employee development, self-development, self-directed learning, voluntary employee development, workplace learning and informal learning. The definition of autonomous learning adopted in the book proves not to be unduly restrictive for contributors. Even amidst this sea of related terms, the 16 chapters broadly succeed in navigating around the constraints of definition.

The book is divided into four parts, in addition to the editors' introduction. Part I asks what constitutes a contemporary autonomous learning method. There are six chapters in this part which attempts to frame the concept of autonomous learning.

Taken together, the six provide a mosaic of what autonomous learning might look like. Myers and Scott DeRue (Chapter 2) introduce the notion of vicarious (or observational) learning. They argue there is scope for better understanding how individuals take agentic action to learn vicariously from the experiences of others at work. Li (Chapter 3) introduces the idea that cultural exposure can set the scene for autonomous learning but that such exposure does not necessarily mean that an employee will learn autonomously. Chapter 4 (Seckler, Funken and Gielnik) focuses on entrepreneurial failure as a source of autonomous learning. Failure in the entrepreneurial enterprise can give rise to emotional, motivational and cognitive factors that stimulate autonomous learning. Organizational communities of practice (OCoPs) are the focus of Chapter 5 by Cordery and Wenzel. Wenzel and Cordery claim that the body of empirical research on OCoPs is relatively small. There is even less known about how OCoPs impact on the capabilities and career development of those who participate in them. The final two chapters in this part deal with how individuals regulate their learning. Vancouver, Halper and Bayes (Chapter 6) point to the alarming conclusion that autonomous learners seem to be rather resistant to adopting effective strategies for learning. It would seem that old or ingrained habits die hard. Chapter 7 (by Bell) discusses strategies for supporting self-regulation during self-directed learning in the workplace. Bell is of the view that as employees assume greater responsibility for learning decisions, there is a risk that individual development and organizational performance will suffer. Bell suggests some strategies to address this, including using social media to promote learning.

Part II asks how contemporary autonomous learning activities are facilitated. The six chapters in this part, when taken as a whole, provide a backdrop for the general observation that there are many factors external to the individual that can shape how autonomous learning occurs. It is little wonder, then, that organizations find it hard to harness and quantify the outcomes of such learning. Chapter 8 (Parker) introduces a work design growth model by restating an observation (known for over 60 years) that bureaucratically designed jobs can infantalize adults. As a result, work design becomes an important factor (all too often overlooked) shaping learning in the organization. Parker develops a model that promotes individual growth over time, augmenting cognitive, self-development and moral development outcomes for autonomous learners. Chapter 9 (by Sanders, Yang, Shipton and Bednall) investigates the effects of human resource management on informal learning. It is no surprise that they find some human resource management practices can get in the way of promoting learning.

Continuous development throughout a career is the theme of Chapter 10 (Beier, Torres and Gilberto). These authors make the point that autonomous learning is ubiquitous throughout a career. They argue that continuous self-directed learning helps employees to remain vital and productive in the workplace. How people learn, and what they learn, changes with career stage. Chapter 11 (Kyndt and Beausaert) addresses the issue of how conditions fostering learning in the workplace differ across occupations. The point made here is that autonomous learning is not uniform across occupations or, indeed, sectors. The final two chapters in this section take a refreshingly more circumspect approach to autonomous learning. For example, Telford, Fletcher and Bedwell (Chapter 12) remind us that learning does not necessarily equate with something that is beneficial to the organisation. Their case study is the healthcare industry. They argue that healthcare organizations capitalize on informal learning experiences to make up for gaps in technical skills and resources. Inevitably, as part of this informal learning, employees pick up behaviours and practices that they glean from organizational culture and norms. This is termed the 'hidden curriculum'. If this curriculum happens to embed a toxic culture of dangerous work-

arounds, employees as well as the organization can suffer. Ambiguous or questionable evaluation processes and poor or absent feedback from organizational representatives may perpetuate a hidden curriculum. Chapter 13 (Billsberry and Brown) explores the implications of technology-enabled active learning, often encapsulated in MOOCs. The dark side of the popularity of MOOCs and related technologies is that employers have the ability to transfer the costs of training to their workers. The same trend appears in higher education, with students paying more and more for tuition on a user-pays basis. Whether this is desirable, the trend is clearly observed. Autonomous learning is an inescapable feature of the modern workplace and knowledge-based organization in particular.

Part III asks whether autonomous learning is effective and whether it benefits the learner and the organization. There are two chapters in this section. Chapter 14 (Williams and Ehrlinger) reminds us that there are many barriers to learning. The authors focus on the issue of feedback, and the numerous ways it can be distorted, misunderstood or ignored, which contributes to poor learning outcomes. Chapter 15 (Polyhart, Call and McFarland) focuses on the notion of value capture from autonomous learning. The authors cast some doubt on the generally held belief that autonomous learning benefits the organization simply because employees take more responsibility for their learning and development. On the contrary, how well an organization is able to capture the benefits of autonomous learning will depend on a careful analysis of how resources are allocated. This type of analysis enters uncharted waters.

Part IV, a single chapter, is devoted to a 'closing comment'. Kraiger masterfully brings together the range of themes addressed in the preceding chapters. Kraiger points out that the twentieth century saw the responsibility for training shift from foreman to training manager. The trend in the 21st century is clearly a further shift from training manager to individual learner. This, of course, creates opportunities, but it also brings costs. Technological change and new work practices place increasing stress on individual employees, but also require organizations to look at new ways to extract and manage knowledge. There is no doubt that autonomous learning is a phenomenon that poses many interesting theoretical and practical challenges for researchers and practitioners.

The book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of autonomous learning. It is difficult not to conclude that autonomous learning will be a significant feature of the modern workplace, contributing to skill development. The connection between this type of learning and skill development is neither simple nor direct. Autonomous learning does have a dark side. Not all learning is good: some behaviours may be learned that are detrimental to the organization; and there is a shifting burden of costs from the organization onto the individual. How well organizations capture value from autonomous learning will be of growing concern. Taken together, the various chapters are a salient reminder to all who think that knowledge management can be easily described or implemented as a process, or even a technology. There are just so many variables and possibilities alive here that the control and management of knowledge remain an ever-receding frontier. It has been said that only half of what organizations spend on training and development is well spent. The problem is that management has no idea which half. This book makes a valiant contribution to demystifying autonomous learning, but it still makes only a tentative foray into unexplored territory.

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