

# Learning and Development in Challenging Times

## Abstract

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*Eurostat's 2012 Learning and Development Framework clearly sets out Eurostat's ambition to become a learning organization. This discussion paper proposes that, in times of economic uncertainty, reorganizations and staff reductions, it is possible to "do more with less" in areas of learning and development, by explaining and incorporating informal and non-formal training opportunities.*

*Eurostat's 2012 Learning and Development Framework strongly supports the development of good practice in the adult learning world, through thematic working groups, conferences and peer learning activities.*

*Unleashing the potential of individuals within an organization under tight budgetary restrictions requires that internal training schemes reach beyond traditional methods of learning. This paper presents a pragmatic long-term approach; however, the theoretical framework is ripe but the practical implementations remain, as yet, largely unexplored.*

*This discussion paper should not, therefore, be viewed as a suggestion for fundamental change but, rather more, as a starting point for the evolution of Eurostat's profession as adult learning providers.*

## **1. Introduction**

Eurostat has a proven track record for the delivery and execution of statistical training in Europe. In particular, Eurostat has supported the development of the European Statistical System and the high quality harmonized statistics produced by the statistical offices of the Member States.

Recent priorities in training have evolved through the implementation of Eurostat's Vision, with additional support given to the priority policy objectives of Eurostat.

### **1.1 The present situation**

Eurostat's main objectives currently focus on the three following priorities:

a) Vision-related statistical training

Eurostat's vision-related training activities cover a wide range of introductory, advanced and more specific courses. These activities address 12 priority areas of statistical training, with around 25 courses every year carried out by contractors.

Around 50 in-house training courses are also on offer and Eurostat staff members are also eligible to attend the Eurostat Statistical Training Programme (ESTP) courses.

Another initiative, now underway, is the work on the EMOS project, which sets out to establish a European Masters in Statistics.

b) Management development

Leadership and change management skills are essential for the European project; regulation, law-making and efficient cooperation remain the core task of the DG. It is for these reasons that the Commission and Eurostat offer an extensive training package to managers.

c) Making Eurostat a learning organization

With the overall objective of moving away from standard training delivery and moving more towards new approaches to learning, full use can be made of modern learning and development tools, such as informal learning, e-learning, job shadowing, and on-the-job training. In this context, it is essential to support these tools and to capture, develop and ensure an ongoing transfer of knowledge between peers.

## **1.2 Challenges ahead**

The current economic climate in Europe presents many challenges for the European Commission; efficiency gains and savings need to be made in administrative expenditure and it is clear that the Institutions and their staff are not immune to developments in Member State public administrations.

Eurostat will almost certainly be affected by budgetary restrictions; in particular, areas of learning, training and development are likely to be targeted more than traditional statistical production units. This being the case, new ways of implementing training and methods of pooling resources are essential in order to maintain the service levels currently provided and to maintain support to both Member States and Eurostat employees. Less emphasis would be placed on the content of trainings and more on the methods of delivery.

## **2. Methods of learning**

Traditionally, statistical training comes in the form of lectures and presentations made to an audience who has formally applied for a course covering a specific topic. Sometimes, practical exercises are used to illustrate and support the theoretical framework. Formal and non-formal training methods are still very much the 'norm' and are delivered either by in-house resources or via external contractors.

Formal and non-formal training methods are efficient in that the sessions are dedicated to a specific topic and focused on teaching; however, it is sometimes assumed (and incorrectly so) that for every ounce of teaching there is an ounce of learning by those who are taught.

In actual fact, most of what we learn before, during and following classroom-style training is absorbed without it actually being taught to us. By way of example, a child learns fundamental things such as how to walk, talk, eat and dress, without actually being taught these things. In the same way, adults learn most of what they use at work or for leisure purposes whilst being at work or indulging in leisure activities. In contrast, much of what is taught in a classroom setting is forgotten - and what is remembered is often irrelevant.

### **3. Adult learning theory**

Adult learning, as a concept, differs significantly from that of training children or young adults. Primarily adult learning is problem-driven; adults seek educational solutions in order to take them from where they are in life to where they want to be. Secondly, adult learning is results-oriented; the adult learner has specific results and objectives in mind and will drop out if the education process does not lead to those results.

The adult learner is both self-driven and critical; the design of an internal training system therefore needs to take these factors into account and since adult training is not automated, coaching and facilitating techniques are preferred over and above more traditional methods.

The competencies and knowledge gained need to be quickly put into use by the adult learner and in their own work context; otherwise the quality of the training will suffer. Similarly, *'learning by doing'* is an essential element in establishing newcomers in a relatively quick and successful way.

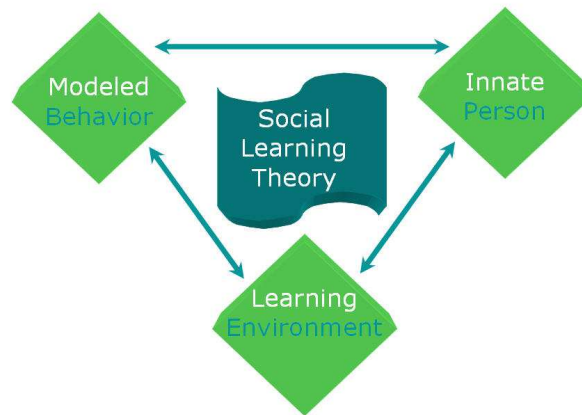
#### **3.1 Social learning theory**

One factor influencing adult learning is the social environment where learning takes place. Adults generally learn by observing others and their respective outcomes. As a consequence, cognitive modelling techniques need to be applied to enhance learning, either in the form of active learning methodologies or other traditional teacher/student learning.

Another factor seldom addressed in relation to social learning is self- efficacy. Social learning depends on group dynamics and how individuals either succeed or fail through dynamic interaction. Social learning promotes the development of individual emotional and practical skills, individual competencies and limitations, as well as the perception of oneself and the acceptance of others. Self-efficacy levels reflect a persons' understanding of what skills they can offer in a group setting. It considers that people learn from one another; observational learning, imitation and modelling.

A holistic overview of social learning theory is illustrated below:

*Illustration 1: Social learning theory*



The learning environment and modelling has a clear and crucial impact on the effectiveness and outcome of trainings; training systems therefore need to be tailored accordingly.

#### **4. Learning organization – a priority for Eurostat**

The most common idea behind a learning organization is that it is developed from a body called '*systems thinking*'; this is to be taken into account as Eurostat develops its own learning organization.

Firstly, there is the issue of personal mastery: the commitment, of an individual, to the process of learning. There is a competitive advantage for an organization whose workforce can learn more quickly than the workforce in other organizations.

Individual learning is acquired through staff training and development; however an individual must be willing and receptive. Research shows that most learning in the workplace is incidental, rather than the product of formal training; therefore, it is important to develop a culture where personal mastery is promoted and practiced on a daily basis.

Secondly, assumptions held by individuals and organizations (*mental models*) play a large part in the relative success of a learning experience. To become a learning organization, these models must be challenged; individuals have a tendency to "marry" theories (i.e. what they intend to follow) with theories-in-use i.e. (what they actually do). Similarly, organizations tend to preserve certain behaviours, standards and values. In creating a learning environment, it is important to encourage an open culture that promotes inquiry and trust.

Another important tool in motivating staff members to learn is a shared vision; this creates a common identity and generates focus and energy.

Finally, there are benefits in team (or shared) learning; staff members develop more quickly and the problem-solving capacity of the organization is improved through better access to knowledge and expertise. Team learning requires individuals to engage in dialogue and discussion; the result is open communication, common purpose and mutual understanding.

## **5. Implications for Eurostat 2013-2017**

In order for Eurostat to provide an ongoing, efficient support system in training through challenging times and with limited financial resources, existing traditions and frameworks need to be reviewed, adjusted and even dismantled, where necessary.

Moreover, efficiency and productivity is not limited to the training system itself; for the system to be successful, staff members need to embrace change and learn to work with it.

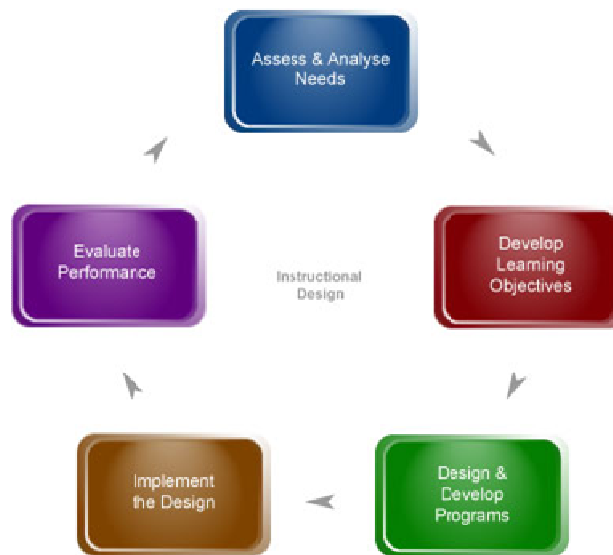
The process of change into unchartered territories has to be participatory and continuous. Stakeholders need to be consulted and channels for essential discussion need to be opened and maintained in order to achieve good results. This process will take time: at least five years of implementation should be foreseen before results can be expected.

## 5.1 Process orientation vs. goal orientation

The text book definition of process orientation is described as an organization that emphasizes process as opposed to hierarchies; a process-oriented way of thinking, outcomes and customers.

In the context of human resource management and training, the instructional design of training systems needs to be considered carefully.

*Illustration 2: Instructional design*



This illustration shows the current work structure in sound and effective way of delivering training and should be kept for long-term progress work. All the same, improvements and efficiency gains can be made in the needs analysis and in the design of the training system.

### 5.1.1 Needs analysis

Eurostat employs a common system of needs analysis that can be best described as a top-down approach. The main stakeholders are managers and the central guidelines stem from the Commissions global priorities. Whilst the input from stakeholders is generally forthcoming, a major drawback of this top-down approach is that there is little input from those receiving the training courses. Therefore, priority must be given to strengthening the needs assessment system by including elements of a bottom-up approach.

### **5.1.2 Design of the training system**

The framework objective and main challenge of the design is to incorporate structures of non-formal and informal learning mechanisms. This would initially be done in three areas, as follows:

- Strengthening mentoring for newcomers;
- Development of internal training;
- Informal study groups.

## **5.2 Strengthening mentoring of newcomers**

The most natural starting point is to strengthen the role of mentors for newcomers. At present, the mentoring experience of newcomers can vary considerably: a mentor is appointed to show the ropes to a newcomer; and typically, the mentor has to manage this responsibility in addition to his/her normal workload.

There are some training courses on offer to prepare mentors for their role, but these are not obligatory. Moreover, the current mentoring arrangement does not provide a wider corporate understanding and vision.

The learning and development framework of 2013-2017 allows for improvements in this area: the role of mentors will be professionalized and ongoing support will be provided to those involved.

## **5.3 Development of internal training**

Although this paper mainly focuses on informal and non-formal learning in Eurostat, more formal approaches still have their place, especially as far as statistical training is concerned; these are achieved either by tendering work to external contractors or by using in-house resources.



The advantage with external contracting is that the quality of training courses can, to a certain degree be guaranteed. That said, contractors are not always familiar with Eurostat and its training needs and external contracting can also be expensive.

The development phase for statistical training using in-house resources spans more than one year and even though it is cheaper in monetary terms, this arrangement can stretch human resources.

In conclusion, a combination of both external contracting and internal resources for statistical courses in Eurostat makes the most sense, both in budgetary terms as well as making good use of the human resources available.

Basic statistical training should rely upon in-house resources; and external contractors would be required to provide targeted, advanced and more specific statistical courses.

#### **5.4 Informal study groups**

Eurostat also intends to develop non-formal study groups and individual sessions.

Experience indicates that willingness to share knowledge and the ability to do so does not necessarily mean that colleagues are comfortable enough to give formal trainings.

However, many colleagues would perhaps be more open to share their expertise in an informal session, involving one or two participants. This would likely be the case for staff involved in administrative support systems - the rules and obligations that govern our daily work - key staff members would need to be identified and a general plan drawn up by the end of this year.

A longer-term goal would be to develop informal study groups where like-minded colleagues have the opportunity to share and drive their knowledge forward. Such informal networks need to be promoted but cannot be realistically implemented until further experience has been gained in this area.

## **6. Implementing a learning organization**

Implementing a learning organization is an issue that goes beyond the current policy of the Training Section and requires good practices to be established and changes to be made.

The practical implementation of informal and non-formal learning will give food for thought for developing personal mastery. This is also true for team learning where structures are being developed through the new proposals.

Establishing new working patterns and working differently will reflect on the current tasks of the Training Section. Administrative & more routine work will remain vital elements of everyday work and other skills will become increasingly important.

The challenge for Eurostat in this context is to develop competences in its staff in areas of moderation and facilitation; it also implies a high increase in the coordination of working groups.

For staff members involved in the daily work of organizing training activities, much emphasis will be placed on more specific measures in 2013: the concept of *training the trainers* is already well-established and from now on, the aim is to *train the course organizer* in moderation and facilitation techniques as well.

This approach will require formal training courses, with staff members learning from external contributors, and internal coaching methods.

The objective is to implement and sustain informal and non-formal training initiatives in a coherent framework and these skills need to be developed in staff members rapidly, ideally by the end of this year, implying an intense learning curve for the last quarter of 2012.

## **7. Conclusions**

The changing climate in Eurostat and budgetary restraints can be viewed as an opportunity to improve upon and enhance the training system and to maintain a high level of excellence by doing things differently.

Undoubtedly, the period of 2013-2017 will be a transitional phase, a period of trial and error, and a learning curve in terms of the practical implementations of revising the training system.

It is essential to make sure that all staff members are on board and are willing to dedicate their expertise to the work at hand.

**“It is good to have an end to journey toward;  
but it is the journey that matters, in the end”**

*Ernest Hemingway*

## **ANNEX 1: RELEVANT LITERATURE**

- "Eurostat's Learning and Development Framework 2012" (*internal*).
- "The Adult Learner: the definitive classic in adult education and human resource development" (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). *Malcolm Knowles, E. F. Holton, III, R. A. Swanson* (2005). Burlington, MA: Elsevier.
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- "Training as a tool to improve motivation and efficiency in Nuclear Safeguards", *Mats Olsson, Richard Clarke*, Nestet 2008