Chapter 8: Factors affecting Learning in the Workplace

Project website:
http://www.sussex.ac.uk/usie/linea

One prominent finding of our earlier research on mid-career learning was the overwhelming importance of confidence. Much learning at work occurs through doing things and being proactive in seeking learning opportunities; and this requires confidence. Moreover, we noted that confidence arose from successfully meeting challenges in one’s work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which learners felt supported in that endeavour. Thus there is a triangular relationship between challenge, support and confidence (Eraut et al. 2000).

The contextual significance of the word “confidence”, which was used by our respondents without further elaboration, depended on which aspects of this triangular relationship were most significant for particular people at particular points in their careers. The dominant meaning for most mid-career respondents usually came close to Bandura’s (1995) concept of self-efficacy, a context-specific concept, relating to ability to execute a particular task or successfully perform a role. It is not a general attribute like “self-esteem”. For some mid-career respondents, however, confidence related more to relationships than to the work itself. Did they feel confident about the support of their working colleagues, in more senior, more junior or parallel jobs? This depended on whether they perceived their more significant working relationships as mutually supportive, generally critical, faction-ridden or even overtly hostile. For early career professionals, this latter aspect of confidence was more prominent.

We have now added a further element to each apex of this triangle to reflect other factors found to be significant for the learning of early career professionals. These are: feedback because of its huge importance at this career stage, the value of the work (both for clients and to the individual) as an additional motivating factor and commitment to learning, which together with confidence affects the extent to which early career professionals are proactive in taking advantage of the learning opportunities available to them. Then finally we added personal agency in recognition of participants’ own sense of choice, meaningfulness, competence and progress (Thomas 2000), which is not necessarily aligned with their employer’s priorities.
Our evidence from this project confirmed that both confidence in one's ability to do the work and commitment to the importance of that work are primary factors that affect individual learning. **Confidence** depends on the successful completion of **challenging work**, and that in turn may depend on **informal support** from colleagues, either while doing the job or as back up when working independently. Indeed the willingness to attempt challenging tasks on one’s own depends on such confidence. If there is neither challenge, nor sufficient support to encourage a trainee to seek out or respond to a challenge, then confidence declines and with it the motivation to learn. **Commitment** was generated through social inclusion in teams and by appreciating the **value of the work** for clients and for themselves as novice professionals. Moreover, concerns about **career progress** that arose from **inadequate feedback** of a normative kind tended to weaken novices’ motivation and to reduce their commitment to their organisation.

The inclusion of observation in this study has enabled us to give greater attention to the nature of participants' work and their relationships at work; and this has led to the extension of our model to include a second triangle. This mirrors the first triangle but focuses on contextual variables that influence the learning factors depicted in the first triangle.
The allocation and structuring of work was central to our participants’ progress, because it affected (1) the difficulty or challenge of the work, (2) the extent to which it was individual or collaborative, and (3) the opportunities for meeting, observing and working alongside people who had more or different expertise, and for forming relationships that might provide feedback and support. For novice professionals to make good progress a significant proportion of their work needed to be sufficiently new to challenge them without being so daunting as to reduce their confidence; and their workload needed to be at a level that allowed them to respond to new challenges reflectively, rather than develop coping mechanisms that might later prove to be ineffective. There were also likely to be competing agendas when tasks were allocated. Novices are more efficient on tasks where they already have some experience, but also need to be involved in a wider range of tasks in order to extend their experience. Thus managers and/or senior colleagues had to balance the immediate demands of the job against the needs of the trainees as best they could, as well as satisfying the requirements of professional bodies and/or health and safety.

Factors affecting the early learning of trainee accountants

The accountancy organisations managed to provide appropriately challenging work for most of their new trainees for most of the time. This was achieved by structuring the majority of the work into audit visits lasting from two days to a month, within which tasks of gradually increasing complexity were first observed and then assigned, and a strong community of practice that provided continuity across audit teams (see Figure 1 below). Supporting learning was seen as a good investment, because it increased the capabilities of novice professionals very quickly, made them more useful and gave a good return for intensive early support. The cost of trainees’ time was included in audit contracts, so they were expected to pay their way within a few months. This both added to their sense of inclusion and created clear
expectations for their seniors to provide the necessary support. Other reasons why support was most readily available in accountancy were that:

1. Senior trainees were close at hand and often worked alongside the novice
2. Teams were quite small, sometimes very small, and their objective was a jointly constructed product - an audit report for a specific client
3. There were clear, usually non-negotiable, deadlines; and valuable time would be wasted if trainees got stuck and caused delays, however small their tasks
4. It was normally possible for more experienced trainees to pause or find a convenient stopping point in their own task to answer a question or advise on a problem
5. Their seniors knew from their own recent experience that such help would be needed; and providing it was a taken for granted part of the organisational culture.

Figure 1: Context Factors for the Learning of First Year Accountancy Trainees

Allocation and structuring of their work
Audit teams (temporary)
Scaffolded progression
Contact with range of clients
Formal professional training for examinations

Relationships at work
Strong mutual support in teams
Strong organisational culture
Sensitivity to client differences
Develops peer group interaction

Participation and expectations
Clear apprenticeship route
Pay your way
Must pass examinations

The short length of many audits makes it necessary to have a strong organisational culture and a community of practice, through which expertise is shared and practice is sufficiently common to provide continuity of learning across audits. The overt nature, legal status and clear structure of audit documents give them an important role as mediating artifacts, around which both work and learning revolve. Thus the work patterns of audit teams, continuity of practice across different audits of gradually increasing length and difficulty, and the structure of the audit documents themselves provide strong scaffolding for learning. Newcomers can usually envisage the intended product by looking at the previous year’s audit and monitor progress by examining the latest version of the current audit file. Most of their support is provided by more experienced trainees, who were themselves novices only a few months
earlier; so they feel able to ask them silly questions and appreciate their negligible background knowledge of business.

Regular contact and increasing interaction with clients not only creates awareness of the value of audits, but enables them to gradually acquire the skill of connecting business transactions with accounts and to understand different types of business. The need to keep to tight schedules and adjust plans whenever an unexpected problem arises creates a strong climate of mutual cooperation and sense of joint achievement, even though the team is temporary.

Unlike the other groups we studied, trainee accountants were studying for professional examinations and were given several months of ‘college work’ organised by contracted independent trainers and periods of study leave before exams. They found most of this training both relevant to their work and valuable, but this did not always become immediately apparent. Their trainee contracts required them to pass several examinations and those who failed their first year examinations were usually dismissed.

Accountants were the most likely group to get immediate feedback, because their completed tasks were checked and incorporated into the audit document, and they could easily monitor their own progress by the increasing complexity of the tasks they undertook (see Figure 2 below). However this was not accompanied by good normative feedback on their strengths and weaknesses or general progress. As a result, trainees developed a stronger commitment to their work teams and colleagues than to their employing organisation.

**Figure 2: Learning Factors for First Year Accountancy Trainees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEARNING FACTORS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence and commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short term confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to audit teams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concerns about general progress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less commitment to organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Range of career choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback and support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good on-the-spot feedback and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on evaluation forms too late</td>
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<tr>
<td>Normative feedback weak</td>
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**Challenge and value of the work**
- Good progression and client variation
- Audit is legal requirement
- Value for clients is clear

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Factors affecting the later learning of trainee accountants

The nature of their work continues to be the most important factor affecting the learning of more senior trainee accountants, as they take responsibility for larger and more complex chunks of work, then begin to do small audits on their own and progress to being ‘in charge’ of larger audits with less or equally experienced trainees working under them:

‘I’ve started being in charge of smaller jobs, generally ones where there’s, I’d say, two people on the audit team … And obviously … that’s a big change in responsibility to not just have to do your [own] work, but first you’ve got to monitor someone else and make sure they’re doing their work. And then you have to produce all the summary report … and make sure everything’s under control….More stressful, but it is more interesting.’

Their challenge lies in planning the work, allocating aspects of it to other trainees according to their capability and supporting them where necessary, liaising with the client, adjusting plans to take account of the problems that arise, and finishing it off for checking by their manager and presentation to their client. Many examples of the new learning that accompanied this ongoing responsibility, including working with clients at a more senior level, have been given in earlier chapters.

Challenge was an extremely important factor for most trainee accountants, often the most important:

‘If you get given the opportunity … the responsibility to have … work that you’re in charge of … you’re responsible for, you do … get the more interesting, the more challenging stuff that actually motivates you as well … If I was given more work to do and more interesting work to do, I’d probably do more.’

More often these references to challenge were positive:

‘I think it [the level of challenge] is probably about right at the moment, being pushed forwards quite a lot. I think it was a bit static for eighteen months and now suddenly it’s a huge big step up. I’m quite enjoying it.’

Another senior trainee felt challenged by some, but not all, aspects of her work:
‘The nature of the task [is] often not that challenging, it’s just a case [of] you’re always faced with a new audit perhaps, where you’ve got to get to grips with the client, and ... you need to be on top of the issues with that particular client, that’s quite challenging. And if you’re expected to go into a meeting with the finance director and ... hold your own and know about their organisation that’s definitely challenging.’

These encounters not only confirmed the value of their work, but also exposed them to higher levels of thinking about accountancy work.

‘The kind of support I get [now] is more about ... the overall how you run an audit, what I need to be doing when. It’s probably from a higher level as well because now it’s coming from the audit manager whereas before it would have been the lead on a particular audit but as I’m taking the lead role ... [I get a] higher level of support.’

“There’s ... very little time for technical tuition... it’s assumed that you do know the technical aspects of the job ... It’s more of advice between colleagues as opposed to tuition between colleagues, so that’s obviously changed.’

It also resulted in better feedback for some trainees:

‘I think it’s gone quite well. It’s daunting to start off with, and so the first six months of this year, when I didn’t really have a manager to work to as such, I didn’t know if I was doing the right thing and whether I was going to get things done on time and if I was progressing well enough. But ... since July, August, firstly my manager came back and I talked to him about all I’ve done in the meantime and he ... reaffirmed the fact that I’d done everything I could for this client, that people were happy with the work I’d done. And then I had an appraisal [in] ... mid-September with my reporting officer, and again he ... reaffirmed how happy people were with my work. So that’s been quite good, because until then I was never really sure, you don’t really get an opportunity to talk about how you’re doing with other people in your area until you have these ... formal appraisals.’

New challenges also arose from changes in personnel as other trainees qualified and moved on:

‘I’ve been doing the audit of a big newspaper group ... doing the completion of that. And I was the “in-charge” on completing that work [although] there were a couple of other seniors in charge to start with. They’ve left the department now so I’m doing the completion and... organizing other people trying to get them to complete.’
New clients provided a different kind of challenge, because there was much less prior knowledge than usual; and the ‘value’ of the work was another source of motivation.

‘It was a fairly high profile client, in terms of its importance to the firm...we only won it last year...and it represented our first real breakthrough into a new client area... We go in during the year to evaluate the client’s systems. And so we’re looking to see have they got appropriate controls imposed to make sure everything’s accounted for properly, and make sure their final figures are going to be a reasonable approximation of what’s actually there.’

Factors affecting the early learning of graduate engineers

Some engineering companies had difficulty in providing the appropriate level of challenge for much of the time, not because of a lack of corporate commitment to their graduate trainees, but because much of the work did not lend itself to tasks requiring different levels of expertise that could be easily matched to trainees’ needs. Thinking of alternative strategies for designing and allocating work was not a priority, but some local managers came up with new ideas. Our partner engineering companies operated on a far longer timescale than the accountancy or healthcare organisations. Hence their Graduate Engineers (GEs) were mainly involved in major construction or research and development projects, whose timescales were measured in years rather than weeks or days. The exception was when some engineering companies took advantage of their graduates’ relative IT expertise by asking them to explore the value of new packages, etc.

Graduate Engineers were usually working near other more experienced team members in an open plan office. Tasks were usually part of a medium to long-term project, so there was more opportunity to wait for a convenient time to ask a question and to find the best person to approach. Within a few months, graduate engineers had become aware of who had what expertise, how well disposed they were to answering questions and how well they explained the key aspects of the problem; and this extended beyond their own team and sometimes, through the intranet, beyond their own site. It was up to them to hunt down and use the most appropriate sources of support, which might or might not include their manager or their mentor. Hence we have described them in Figure 3 below as hunter-gatherers of knowledge and resources.
Engineering teams had a rather looser structure, tasks were longer and a wider range of expertise was often involved. People spent more of their working time on their own with occasional meetings of small sub-groups with related tasks. However, their open plan offices and informal social meetings at lunch, by the coffee machine or after work provided a context in which graduate trainees could meet a wide range of people, whom they then felt able to approach later, either to get advice or to find out whom to get it from. Learning was a serious business in engineering companies and this was demonstrated by their strong programmes of CPD courses, readily accessible to GEs, and by their appointment of at least two mentors for each GE, one for internal guidance and one for their progress towards becoming Chartered Engineers. However, many GEs had little or no client contact and very little opportunity to become acquainted with the broader context of the project on which they were working.

Many graduate engineers in our sample showed high levels of self-confidence and determination. A lot of this had clearly come by virtue of a successful academic career; and the system of appointment in engineering companies tends to favour such candidates. Nevertheless, a graduate engineer still needs to be confident enough to show his/her relative ignorance, and to ask for help when it is needed.

‘I think the main strength is … my confidence. I have an awareness of what I don’t know, which I think is very, very important in engineering. So, if I don’t know something, I will say, or I will ask … so I think that’s my strength.’
'My determination definitely … not being afraid to ask for help when I need it … but at the same time you know I can use my own initiative. I can get on with things on my own. I don’t need a great deal of guidance… I haven’t turned down any work that has been offered to me so far. I’ve accepted it all. I’ve realised it will all be a learning experience.’

The significance for our research is that the attitudes that accompany high levels of confidence and determination are part of a positive predisposition to learning by trial and error and through making mistakes, which play a particularly important role in the self-development of engineers. Graduates at this level are generally expected to be adept and adaptable learners, and able to learn in many ways, both through doing and by locating resource people and asking them questions and/or observing them in action.

Work suitable for first year GEs was scarce in some companies, but this was not recognised as a problem in need of attention. Thus, although GEs had excellent access to expertise and showed considerable skill in tracking it down, lack of challenging work often rendered this superfluous. As Figure 4 indicates, few mentors interpreted their roles in a proactive way, so the quality of support for learning was dependent on those experienced engineers in their immediate locality. Normative feedback through appraisals was weak; and unlike the accountants they got little immediate feedback on their ongoing work. Indeed very few of the people they encountered seemed to be concerned about feedback, and GEs without access to obvious cues about their progress were left feeling rather rudderless.

‘Sometimes he (my manager) tends to underestimate (me). He thinks, I don’t ask questions … and he thinks, because I don’t ask questions, I’m not curious; and he thinks that I’m not trying to learn, because I don’t ask questions. But I ask questions of Harry because he just sits next to me, and of John, the engineer I work with at the moment, not of my manager… I don’t know [if he appreciates my work], he’s never told me. Yes, I have had feedback, but it’s not on my performance it’s on my training, it’s on the report that I write for my training; but it doesn’t say the job you are doing with us is good … it’s not feedback on my work.’

We can debate whether feedback is the most important part of communication with one’s manager, but it critically depends on mutual understanding. This lack of direction was exacerbated by their discovery that, although they had been recruited
onto an accredited programme for those wanting to become Chartered Engineers, Chartered status was only valued by a few of their senior colleagues.

**Figure 4: Learning Factors for First Year Graduate Engineers**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge and value of the work</th>
<th>Feedback and support</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable types and levels of challenge</td>
<td>GE suss out most helpful people in close range</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depends on work available</td>
<td>GE suss out most helpful people in close range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation from clients resented</td>
<td>GE track down company expertise beyond their office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chartered status valued only by some</td>
<td>Many designated support roles, few of them active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of support varies with immediate locality</td>
<td>Normative feedback weak</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence and commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence ebbs with lack of challenge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to chartered status ebbs if not valued in local workplace</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concerns about general progress</td>
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<td>Range of career choices</td>
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The most critical features of this learning environment stem from the type of work allocated to trainees, the looser structure of the work environment requiring trainees to be very proactive and the frequent lack of normative feedback which might assist trainees in adapting to these circumstances and challenge their managers to give greater thought to the work they allocate to trainees.

**Factors affecting the later learning of Graduate Engineers**

Some of the most challenging experiences of all our participants came from those civil engineers, whose work was reported in Chapter 7. They played important roles in demanding and valuable projects, worked alongside senior engineers with considerable expertise and initiative, and discussed with clients at a senior level. One GE involved in gas distribution revelled in the continuing challenges posed by his manager. This time an economic package was used for modeling rather than a technical package; but Richard was involved in much more than the modeling, including high level meetings with ministers. He commented that:

‘One thing with David [his manager] is that he will throw you in at the deep end and he will he will ask you to meet people who have years of experience… and senior positions…It forces you to prepare for meetings … because you obviously don’t want to fail in what you do … being forced to do it whether you enjoy it or not means that you
probably can't help but get a little better at meeting people and being articulate and making the point, at getting the point across that you want ... but again it's a learning process.’

When interviewed again after 31 months, Richard had acquired even more responsibility, as a result of a further expansion of projects, some of which he had played a large part in getting. As a result new graduates were brought in to help, and at one stage they got an external consultant to help with gas distribution systems. Richard reported that:

“I have learnt a lot from him ... how you put it together, what the principles are, what you look for ... once you know what the principles are you can do it.”

One exception to this trend was a female engineer, who spent 30 months on a large scale water project with little responsibility. But when she moved to a different company office and was fully challenged, everything came out right:

‘I was given three projects on the first day I walked in and that was my three projects ... I’m responsible for taking them through different stages right up to construction so there is a mechanical engineer, an electrical engineer and a process engineer and all the different people assigned to that project. As I need particular guidance in a particular area, I go and speak to those people and get the advice that I need ... All the design work is done by myself ... it’s a lot more interesting than the work I was doing before, it’s a lot more varied ... Whereas before I was working on a very small part on an absolutely enormous project, I’m now responsible for an entire very small project ... [including]... design, health and safety, environment and finance ... Everything we’re designing will get built in the next couple of months, whereas the one I was working on before was very much ... it may get built at some point in the next five years or might not get built at all ... This is a lot more detailed design, whereas perhaps what I was doing before was more towards feasibility ... There’s a lot more real life... If I go to a meeting now I’m chairing that meeting, rather than sitting on the edge and not needing to say anything and maybe taking the minutes.’

The opposite extreme was provided by several electrical engineers, who were under-challenged, disappointed and bored with both the paucity and the level of the work allocated to them. However, we were surprised when one of the mechanical engineers also had a frustrating experience, in spite of pressing for more challenging
work throughout his traineeship. He worked in the usual open plan office, was a good communicator and mixed well, joining a Society and running one of the Sports Clubs. This gave him access to advice about the various company in-house courses. But he was given only ‘minor tasks’, and after 8 months, he felt so frustrated that he emailed the Field Researcher:

’Work here unfortunately has not progressed as much as I had hoped back then and I find myself doing very little sometimes. I am slightly disappointed that there has not been much challenging work and I often feel that the company is not using my full abilities. I have yet to discuss my concerns with anybody senior, as we have not had the chance to have our 4 month and 6 month PDRs with my boss, due to him being busy and away. I intend to speak to someone within the next two weeks. I think it’s time I make it clear to them that I would very much like to do some site training and that I believe proper engineering can only be learnt through first hand experience.’

After 22 months he had had one month on site in the Middle East, but that was the exception. He still felt insufficiently challenged, both in terms of work load and responsibility:

’It’s been generally quite quiet. I would say that every now and then I’ve had a week with nothing to do … I still do not have as much responsibility as I would like.

He was also becoming frustrated with the lack of technical development as well as site work:

’My full potential would definitely be [developed further with] harder work, more challenging technically, and also requiring other skills. Maybe communicative skills, management skills, managing myself. So more work … definitely more site work.’

He was seconded to a construction site in Eastern Europe to do performance testing for two weeks, and that was valuable; but another secondment to a different department of the company in the UK was not as productive:

’I sat there for a good few days at the beginning until they found work for me. They thought they did, but it didn’t go ahead, so I ended up wasting two weeks really…In fact their graduates, they were really bored as well.’
Further requests for wider experience and greater interaction with engineers in other teams were unsuccessful. Finally, after 36 months, he sent another unsolicited email to the Field Researcher:

‘I’ve finally resigned from [Z Company]. As you know, the last year has been very poor in terms of getting work, experiences or responsibility so I have decided to go back home … Most importantly, I will have responsibilities and challenges so I may even start applying for Chartership again. I tried to be helpful here and gave them some constructive feedback on what they are doing wrong, but I don’t think anyone cares really as most of management are due to retire soon. The other young engineer is leaving as well, one week after me for similar reasons, as are a few others from [another department]. However, the production line [recruitment] continues.’

A potentially lively and enthusiastic graduate appears to have been worn down by the apparent lack of interest, support and opportunity offered by the company. The lack of any effective in-company mentoring stands out (note the cancellation of scheduled early development reviews) and it is significant that the Field Researcher tended to be cast into the mentor role towards the end of the study. Commercial pressures may have restricted opportunities, but that cannot excuse the lack of care.

**Factors affecting the early learning of newly qualified nurses**

The challenges of prioritising from among the many tasks needing attention and the responsibility level to be taken are shared with the other two sectors, but the self-generated pressure to try to meet all the needs of the patient is unique to nursing. The transition from student to staff nurse was typically seen by newly qualified nurses as being massive. At the start of their ward experience they recounted four main areas of concern: striving to achieve technical tasks like drug rounds; being accountable and responsible; ‘doing everything’; and getting to know new people and equipment. They found themselves having to learn many new clinical skills, learning what to look for when monitoring patients and, above all, learning to prioritise, with or without helpful advice from more experienced colleagues.

The emotional dimension is accentuated by the potential significance of errors. While mistakes made in all three sectors can have serious consequences, the immediacy and personal nature of possible harm in the nursing sector can create extreme anxiety. Taking on ultimate responsibility for patients and presenting themselves as
competent, confident and calm nurses, while struggling to survive, caused anxiety and stress:

‘I feel completely overwhelmed by the emotions that I have for this job and completely overwhelmed by the things that I have to deal with on a day-to-day basis which really do affect people’s lives, and yet I feel like I am completely underachieving. I’ve got so many abilities that I don’t feel are tapped and so much potential which isn’t being looked at and it frustrates me.’

Some novices got support from peers whom they had trained with, a practice we have found to be quite common among mid-career nurses (Eraut et al 2000). However, the key issue is that emotion-rich incidents are not just something to be offloaded onto clinical supervision, where it exists. Emotional support is central to developing and sustaining a culture of caring.

There appears to be a lack of appreciation of the importance of careful induction and sustained support in the ward. A high proportion of the wards, where our newly qualified nurses worked, were crowded and extremely busy, constantly challenged to find bed space for new patients and sufficient time from appropriately skilled staff to cope with their patients’ needs. They were frequently short of staff, used a lot of agency and temporary staff, and had a skill-mix on the margin of safety. Novices’ practical and emotional capacity to survive in these environments depended on their ability to learn many vitally important new practices very rapidly, while coping with a very challenging job. Their survival strategies are perhaps best described as “trying to learn in a pressure cooker”.

Although the need for support was very great (see Figure 5), newly qualified nurses found it difficult to get, because those able to provide support were busy attending to the needs of their own patients. Qualified nurses were not working to a common outcome, but working in parallel with a different group of patients. The level of cooperation depended on the skill mix in the ward (if this was low, more experienced nurses were badly overstretched), the disposition of the senior nurses and their ability to keep an eye on nurses working nearby while still attending to their own patients.

Nurses were more likely to be taken for granted than our other participants, both because they were already qualified and because they were less often observed by others. Moreover, complex clinical and communication skills had to be acquired to
reach a reasonable level of performance. But in many wards they were more likely to get negative feedback on one mistake, than positive feedback on everything they did well. Constructive feedback in areas where their performance was adequate but capable of being improved was most likely to occur when membership of a ward community provided access to significant social and emotional support. Such support appeared to be a necessary condition for a positive learning climate, but it was not always sufficient. Strong learning support and leadership from senior nurses was also necessary. A small number of wards provided neither social support nor learning support, though individual nurses were sometimes able to transcend this largely negative climate.

**Figure 5: Learning Factors for Nurses in their First year after Qualification**

- **LEARNING FACTORS**
  - **Challenge and value of the work**
    - High levels of challenge
    - High value for patients
    - Complex relationships with other workers & professionals
    - Complex relationships with patients and their families
  - **Feedback and support**
    - Variable close support
    - Variable mentor support
    - Occasional skills coaching
    - Variable back up
    - Emotional support critical
    - Access to training
    - Learning culture of ward
  - **Confidence and commitment**
    - Strong commitment to patients
    - Variable commitment to colleagues
    - Early loss of confidence
    - Concern about general progress
    - Rebuilding confidence depends on support

Some ward managers, like their counterparts in accountancy, understood that the best way to improve their skill mix and the quality of their collective care was for novices and E grade nurses to develop their capabilities as rapidly as possible. They saw the prioritisation of learning as an investment, which would also improve morale and retention, while other ward managers were too overwhelmed to give it much attention. Hospital managers were concerned about the impact on retention; but it was the ward managers who had the most influence on the learning context. Thus learning cultures could often differ greatly between wards in the same hospital. A contrast between good and poor support is given by this summary of the experience of the same nurse in two different environments within the same department. The more positive Renal Unit had a learning oriented manager, while the Renal Ward did not.
The Ward context

One week supernumerary, working alongside her mentor.
Usual rotation of shift times and days.
Do not pay overtime.
Very short of staff, low quality of care, no time to talk to patients.

Impossible to do job properly, or feel you have done a good day’s work.
Low morale.

Eight patients at a time, huge range of tasks.
One co-ordinator tries to achieve continuity of care (nurse sees same patients again), others do not.
Gets little support or feedback. Hence reluctant to take on sicker patients.

Disillusioned with nursing.
Missed induction day and first 3 study days, through lack of staff.
Shown how to run ECG machine but without relevant clinical knowledge.
Training day on peritoneal dialysis machine, but no follow-up, now forgotten.

Mentor does not go through competency booklet with her.
Not assessed before undertaking new activities, e.g. drugs round.
[after interview got 1 day IV training and got a 7 x 1 day renal course.]

The Unit context

Six week dialysis course before starting.
Four days a week, longer day shifts (only open during the day).
Pay overtime.
Much better staffed. No staff want to rotate back to ward.

Greater job satisfaction.

One or two patients at a time. Single focus on dialysis process.
System tries to organise continuity of care (assists fine tuning of dialysis process).
Good support from all around (de-centred).

Sense of developing expertise.
Attention to both machine dials and patient becomes routine.
More rationale and reasoning now, more time to think.
High dependency training day.
Much adjustment of process according to needs/risk factors of individual patients.
Patient folders provide useful framework for questioning.
Not allowed to take patient until assessed on relevant procedures.
[long 9 month renal course next year with rotation around the unit.]

Our previous research had highlighted the importance of feedback and its considerable impact on confidence and learning. This was even more important for nurses assuming full professional responsibility for the first time. The overall problem is lack of consistency. Nurses generally received informal feedback from their mentors, seniors and colleagues, through informal chats or passing comments at the end of the day. While welcomed as a sign of interest, concern and encouragement, its status was uncertain and it certainly did not seem like a considered judgement on their progress,

Only a third of the novices had had formal appraisals with their ward managers/ward sisters, which involved discussing how they were settling in, their progress and
setting objectives. If the ward manager/ward sister was aware of the novice’s capabilities, was encouraging, and focussed on progression, then the novice felt challenged:

‘I’ll be pushing you to learn more things, to do more things, to start thinking about management, to start thinking about maybe pushing up to your ‘E’ grade in a year’s, maybe a year and a half time. So she’s like “Don’t get too comfortable, I’ll keep you on your toes.’

But if managers/sisters showed little interest in the novices’ abilities and were unaware of their learning needs, then the novices felt lacking in direction. Lack of feedback also seemed to trigger feelings of self-doubt:

‘I’ve asked people, like just occasionally said, “Am I doing alright?” Because I am a person that I think I do need feedback, because sometimes I think I’m 7 months into my ward, into my trained career and everything and I think, “Am I at the stage I should be?”

Another factor in nursing is the need to acquire new skills rapidly. Usually the most appropriate method was coaching; but this meant that a ‘coach’ had to be released from their ongoing responsibilities for a significant period of time. This requires that either a senior nurse, or the coach herself, has to negotiate some cover for the coach’s patients. In some wards the mentor was expected to take on this coaching role, in others it might be the local expert or the person who volunteered or just decided to help on the spur of the moment. The consequence was a well-planned skills development system in some wards, but a dearth of coaching in others.

Thus the ward manager plays a critical role in supporting novices’ learning, both directly and indirectly. The key roles are in the allocation of appropriately challenging work and in developing a ward climate of mutual support and mutual learning. Work beyond a novice’s capability could have a serious effect on their confidence and even on the retention of these new employees, while lack of challenge led to stagnation and slowed down their learning. For example, one novice was rotated around the different areas within the ward so she got the opportunity to nurse patients with different conditions and dependencies, and also given the support she needed to do this. But another novice was confined to working on just one bay in one ward, nursing the same types of patient all the time. She was not given the
opportunity to nurse more acute patients because of poor staffing levels on the ward and lack of support.

Several issues, however, are beyond the scope of the ward manager, in particular staffing, the physical environment on the ward and the flow of patients through the ward. Staffing issues never cease to be a problem in nursing, where externally set budgets and switches of funding affect staffing levels, and too much pressure on staff has an adverse effect on retention. The layout of a ward affects nurses’ ability to monitor patients and to supervise less experienced nurses. More difficult still are reorganisations which fail to model their impact on the mix and flow of patients passing through the ward. All these factors in the wider context affect the allocation and structuring of work in the wards as well as the relationships which develop and sustain the quality of learning (see Figure 6).

One problem that is worse in the public sector than in the private sector is the lack of contracts that limit their obligations and their capacity. The combination of very high challenge, very high value and unreasonably high initial expectations is both risky and emotionally draining. Retention problems are predictable. Good back up, strong support for rapid learning and a positive and supportive ward climate are essential. Continuing feedback on both specific skills and general progress is important for sustaining morale throughout the early career stage, but often in short supply. Management development and support needs to be directed towards these issues, if progress is to be made.

Figure 5: Context Factors for Nurses in their First Year after Qualification

<table>
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<th>Allocation and structuring of work</th>
<th>Relationships at work</th>
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Context Factors

Participation and expectations
Unreasonably high expectations at start
Transition problems underestimated
Ultimate responsibility for key decisions
Overwork is the norm
Factors affecting the later learning of newly qualified nurses

In most of the wards we visited, some patients were more ill or had more complex problems than others. Often these patients were grouped together in particular sections of the ward, though this was not always the case. Sometimes such patients would be positioned near the nurse’s desk or close to frequently used pathways, so that they were easily visible and changes in their condition could be quickly noticed by more senior nurses. Judgements about patients needing more or less attention, or attention from more experienced nurses played an important part in the allocation of patients to nurses. Hence the skill mix of each shift was very important, and there was a strong incentive, indeed an expectation that nurses in their second year should become able to care for increasingly challenging patients and gain competence in some of the more advanced technical skills.

We developed lists of the learning challenges faced by most hospital nurses during their second year (see Chapter 6), how they responded to these challenges, how they learned and how they were supported. Nearly all of them overcame these challenges but at varying rates, which depended both on personal factors and the level of support they received. During this second year, the kind of support most of them needed was as follows:

- Ongoing interest in them as a learner from their manager/mentor/themselves
- Support from helpful others
- Support and guidance from seniors/colleges of HE in their role as mentor to others
- Constructive, regular feedback
- Time to discuss their career progression and development with their manager/seniors and implement a plan for the next 6-12 months
- Discussion time amongst peers to share and reflect on experiences
- Access to formal learning opportunities and support for study time
- To be able to ask questions without feeling stupid and regardless of how long they’ve been in post – they need a ward culture where everyone asks questions at all levels of seniority
- Appropriately challenging work – so more complex patients or running a shift under supervision
- The opportunity to practise in a safe environment
- To be encouraged to question their own practice and that of others
• To feel valued by their manager/mentor/helpful others/patients and their contribution acknowledged

• To understand better their role within the whole organisation.

‘There is a lot going on in this ward, particularly overnight as well...you’re left in charge and it’s like organising transfers, discharges, making sure who’s going home, who’s going for certain procedures...basically organisation really and supervising some of the junior staff and students.’

As an E grade, Jody thought her manager expected her to take charge of the ward and be responsible. However, these were also some implicit expectations:

‘I expect he thinks I should be able to take charge of the ward and be responsible...and just ensure that the ward’s running safely...but it’s kind of implicit isn’t it you know what’s expected of you and they know what they expect’

Jody also had responsibility for overseeing junior staff, ordering agency staff, coordinating patient admissions and discharges and ensuring the efficient running of the ward:

‘Responsibility for junior members of staff, yes definitely... If somebody goes sick... if there’s no-one else senior to me, then I’d be responsible for ordering agency or bank or something like that...and just making sure that, if you’re in charge... the ward is running smoothly and... we’re using our beds appropriately and the ward is safe really, we’re not admitting patients that we’re not able to cope with’

Jody found these responsibilities quite daunting at first, but she feels that she’s got more used to them now:

‘When you actually say it, it’s quite scary but I think when you’re actually in that situation I think you maybe don’t think about it so much, I think at first it is frightening when you first start but then you just get used to it.’

As a more senior member of staff, the junior house officers also ask Jody for help. Sometimes they tend to just take her word for it, without really understanding what they’re doing:
'They usually ask you which makes it, that can be “Oh God don’t ask me, why are you asking me?” yeah it’s like when you do learn about the ECGs and you see something on it and you say to a house officer “Look he’s got this, that and the other on it” and they think “Oh well I’ll take your word for it” … and I could be talking complete nonsense really.’

Jody finds this scary as accountability for her actions is always at the forefront of her mind:

‘Because you do things and you just want to be sure that you’re doing it right… I always say “Is this right, is this what?” I always try and find somebody if I’m not sure, because I would never just make it up as I go along kind of thing, because that’s really awful isn’t it’

Another insight into the ward manager’s role came from a nurse whose ward had acquired a new manager after a long period without one:

‘I think things are definitely more organised whereas before we just sort of floated along and, although everything got done, it was a bit hit and miss sometimes; whereas now if we want to change things, she can actually give us the go ahead. She can give us more leadership really, things like staff appraisals … were very hit and miss and very informal, whereas now we have a yearly appraisal plus. If she’s aware that staff are wanting to …go for the next grade up, or do certain courses, she will make time to sit down and do a bit of a development plan; so that we can hopefully all make the most out of the courses that are available and things … In that way, it’s a lot more structured;…and just getting new equipment and things, again we couldn’t get anyone to sign our (laughter) requisition forms and things, it’s small things like that really that have just made life so much easier.’

The new manager also brought valued new clinical experience from her previous job in a special care unit.

This ward already had a ‘fellowship’ of senior sisters who had sustained a climate of mutual support. For example, they gave our respondent advice on where she should focus her learning before she applied for her E grade, e.g. taking charge of the ward and feeling more confident dealing with other professionals; then they organised a dummy run for her:
‘Before I was left in charge on my own, when I was just doing a dummy run… they went through who to phone if we ran out of beds, who to phone if there was a security problem, who to phone if…we already know like the emergency bleeps, if there’s a child who crashes or anything. So it was just more the managerial side, like who to phone if we ran out of beds, if we needed cubicle cover, that sort of thing really… The rest of the time I got on with it; but obviously they also knew what was going on in the ward, so they were there if I needed to ask them anything.’

The availability of such support was highly dependent on the culture of the ward and the commitment to learning of the ward manager. Most nurses in our sample were promoted to E Grade in their third year, and a significant minority in the latter part of their second year; and this was preceded by a period of team leading. The experience of being promoted was a big step for many nurses, because of the increased responsibility. Those for whom the change was less significant had been doing virtually all the E Grade job before they were promoted. All, of them, however, were unprepared by the step change in expectations from other professionals and visitors to the ward, even when they were not ‘in charge’:

‘I first thought, before I got the job, that the responsibility would come from … or only be there when I was in charge, because obviously then you’re responsible for your twenty-six patients on the ward plus all the staff… you’re working with … but I’ve since found that even when you’re not co-ordinating … the doctors expect more from you … if the other co-ordinator nurse is busy, they kind of still expect you to know the answers, even if you … don’t have any idea of what’s happening at all, but also the other members of staff, knowing that you’ve got that extra grade… it’s very strange how you do get viewed differently … all I’ve done is change from one grade to another and all of a sudden it’s almost as if I’m … I don’t think it’s fair to say better than I was before, but I’m viewed as a different person … that all of a sudden I have more knowledge or I can deal with more things’

This was not as traumatic as the period immediately after qualification; but it took some nurses quite a while to feel comfortable in their new role:

‘I think the other thing that I found is that people always have news for you, they have information they need to give you and they all want to give it to you at the same time, and you can have two or three people even trying to speak to you at the same time or queuing up to talk to you at the same time; and while they’re trying to tell you this information, you’ve still been trying to do something else from three quarters of an hour ago and it’s just the…the kind of being the sponge, absorbing the information, making
sure that you’re retaining that information for whatever you’re going to be using it for when you have the time to; and making it look like you have the time for people, even when they’re coming and telling you sometimes the most useless things…you still pretend that you care.’

Several expressed concern about their ability to take the lead in emergency situations, for which they had received training but had little experience. The challenges the majority of our participants had to face in their third year covered most of the following:

- Deal with and troubleshoot clinical situations, e.g. knowing what treatment course to follow and informing the doctor of this, as opposed to waiting for them to decide what to do and informing you, before you order an x-ray
- Use your clinical judgement to adapt protocols to suit patient needs, or not using protocols at all if you think it’s not appropriate and making that decision
- Comfortably manage the whole ward or a side of the ward, so being responsible for all of the patients as well as the staff on shift
- Allocate staff to patients, taking into account the skill mix of staff on shift (e.g. agency/students/juniors) and the dependency of patients
- Know what’s going on with all of the patients on the ward so that you can successfully give the required information to the team, doctors, other professionals, or members of the public.
- Attend medical ward rounds and ensure that any patient care issues are voiced and attended to
- Deal with and troubleshoot managerial situations e.g. knowing what course of action to follow if a member of staff calls in sick or a patient is aggressive
- Take the lead role in an emergency situation e.g. in a cardiac arrest
- Support juniors and students with their work and learning whilst ensuring the safe running of the ward
- Present yourself to others as a competent, responsible senior member of staff
- Maintain established credibility with team/doctors/other professionals
- Build up relationships with more senior staff on and off the ward
- Be an advocate for your staff and the patients
- Challenge others about their practice/decisions and back up your argument
- Know who to contact if you need help e.g. site manager
• Take on extra responsibilities e.g. hold the bed manager bleep

• Risk manage

• Filter down Trust information to staff on the ward

• Act as a go-between between manager and junior staff

• Maintain relationships with juniors/peers who may be your friends, whilst managing them

• Teach the in charge role to Ds who are next in line

• Teach and mentor students/juniors whilst being in charge of a shift

• Being a change agent

• Being a motivator of others

They still needed considerable support at this stage, in particular:

• Ongoing interest in them as a learner from their manager/themselves

• Continuing support from helpful others

• Continuing support and guidance from seniors/colleges of HE in their role as mentor to others

• Constructive, regular feedback

• Time to discuss their career progression and development with their manager/seniors and implement a plan for the next 6-12 months

• Discussion time amongst peers to share and reflect on experiences

• Access to formal learning opportunities and support for study time

• To be able to ask questions without feeling stupid and regardless of how long they've been in post – they need a ward culture where everyone asks questions at all levels of seniority

• Appropriately challenging work according to their level of expertise

• To be encouraged to question their own practice and that of others

• To feel valued by their manager/mentor/helpful others/patients and their contribution within the whole organisation acknowledged

Recurring issues in the nurses’ interviews related to confidence and feeling comfortable, a term that signified doing a task or performing a role without feeling anxious or stressed, or having a relationship that you could rely on and take for granted without having to pause and think carefully before you speak. Concerns
about this aspect of their daily work were especially prominent in the interviews with nurses who progressed more slowly than their colleagues. A careful reading of the case study of Amy in Chapter 3 reveals that it took her a lot of time to begin to feel comfortable about each new step she took. She was finally promoted to E Grade after 30 months, just after the last interview in the case study. Exceptionally, she was interviewed again in her fourth year; and she disclosed that it took her 10 months to feel comfortable’ in the E Grade role, but now she was fine, and busily engrossed in a part time degree course. The case study also shows that she had excellent support throughout.

Lisa, however, who showed a similar level of anxiety in her first year, continued to avoid taking on new technical skills needed on her ward, displaying what could only be described as mini-phobias about new challenges. As her contemporaries got promoted, her morale worsened and she seemed to give up on the idea of seeking promotion. Thus she was one of the few members of our third year sample not to be promoted. She was not unsupported, but nobody tried to cure her ‘confidence’ problem, and for a while it got worse. She considered all kinds of moves within and outside nursing; but was still working in the same ward at the end of our project.

**The role of helpful others**

We found that decisions affecting the **structuring and allocation of work** could be determined by any combination of the following factors:

1) The nature of the work, the way in which the organisation handled it and the discretion given to local managers in decisions of this kind. In all three of our professions local managers had significant opportunities to facilitate learning through their allocation of work and support of novice workers.

2) The quantity and urgency of the work in hand at the time. This was a major issue in hospitals where work overload almost overwhelmed novice nurses, while at the same time reducing the amount of support they could get from more experienced colleagues; and was sometimes important in engineering, if a company was undergoing a fallow period that limited the supply of challenging assignments.
3) Periodic decisions made by managers in which learning needs might or might not have been considered. This was relevant when allocating novices to audit teams, nursing shifts or medium term engineering tasks.

4) Decisions made by more experienced colleagues with delegated authority, who were currently working with the novice, and probably best able to judge the appropriate level of challenge if they thought it was important.

Whether these decisions benefited the learning of the novice professional depended on the disposition, imagination, competence (in making these kinds of decisions) and available thinking time of those who made them.

The accountancy organisations managed to provide appropriately challenging work for most of their trainees for most of the time; the most frequent reason for giving a trainee too little challenge or too much challenge was the availability of an appropriate mix of staff. This was achieved by structuring the majority of the work into audit visits lasting from two days to a month, within which tasks of gradually increasing complexity were first observed and then assigned, and a strong community of practice that provided continuity across audit teams.

Some engineering companies had more difficulty in providing the appropriate level of challenge for much of the time, not because of a lack of corporate commitment to their graduate trainees, but because much of the work did not lend itself to tasks requiring different levels of expertise that could be easily matched to trainees’ needs. Thinking of alternative strategies for designing and allocating work was not a priority, but some local managers came up with new ideas.

Nurses who managed hospital wards were those under the greatest daily pressure. They also showed the greatest variation in their responses, some making learning a major focus of their work because they recognised its importance for morale and retention, while others were too overwhelmed to give it much attention. Thus learning cultures could often differ greatly between wards in the same hospital.

In both accountancy and nursing it was clear to most people that supporting learning was a good investment, because it increased the capabilities of novice professionals very quickly, made them more useful and gave a good return on their investment in learning. In engineering, progress is somewhat slower and the return on investment
takes longer to materialise. This matched the longer timescales of our partner engineering companies involved in major construction projects and/or a significant amount of R&D; but not the short term responsive work of a local authority department. The exception was when some engineering companies took advantage of their graduates' relative IT expertise by asking them to explore the value of new packages, etc.

Three patterns of support are frequently discussed in the literature – apprenticeship, mentoring and supervision. Nielsen and Kvale (1997) make a further distinction between person-centred and de-centred apprenticeship, while others have referred to the possibility of team mentoring as well as personal mentoring. The theoretical issue is the relative balance between individual and social forms of support. To avoid making too many prior assumptions we have chosen to use the term ‘helpful others’ because, like G.H.Mead's concept of ‘significant others’, this term is sufficiently general to avoid making too many premature assumptions. Using it enables us to select data without making any assumptions about types of apprenticeship, or using terms like ‘mentor’ or ‘supervisor’, which carry a range of meanings and often represent organisational aspirations rather than realities. The particular research questions we address are:

- In what ways, and from whom, do our participant learners acquire knowledge from other people in their workplace?
- What help and advice do they seek, find or receive; and with what degree of success?
- What help and advice do they not get, but express a need to get?
- What formal and informal roles are taken up by helpful others?
- Which needs for help and advice are most likely to be met by person-centred approaches, by de-centred or team approaches or by combinations of the two?

In all three professions support was provided by people within the same team; but this support varied in quantity, quality and timing. We found that it was most readily available in accountancy, because senior trainees were close at hand, often working alongside the novice, teams were small and their objective was a jointly constructed product - an audit report for a specific client. There were clear, usually non-negotiable, deadlines; and valuable time would be wasted if trainees got stuck and caused delays, however small their tasks. Moreover, it was normally possible for
more experienced trainees to pause or find a convenient stopping point in their own
task to answer a question or advise on a problem. Their seniors knew from their own
recent experience that such help would be needed; and providing it was a taken for
granted part of the organisational culture.

In nursing the urgency was even greater, but support was more difficult to find,
because those able to provide support were busy attending to the needs of their own
patients. Qualified nurses were not working to a common outcome, but working in
parallel with a different group of patients. The level of cooperation depended on the
skill mix in the ward (if this was low, more experienced nurses were badly
overstretched), the disposition of the senior nurses, and their ability to keep an eye
on nurses working nearby while still attending to their own patients. This almost tacit
supervision becomes much more difficult when the ward layout restricts inter-
visibility. The ability to spread one’s attention widely, and prioritise according to one’s
perception of an ever-changing situation, is a critical aspect of nursing expertise for
senior nurses. Another factor in nursing was the need to acquire new skills rapidly.
Usually the most appropriate method was coaching; but this meant that a ‘coach’ had
to be released from their ongoing responsibilities for a significant period of time. This
requires that either a senior nurse, or the coach herself, has to negotiate some cover
for the coach’s patients. In some wards the mentor was expected to take on this
coaching role, in others it might be the local expert or just the person who
volunteered or just decided to help on the spur of the moment. The consequence
was a well-planned skills development system in some wards, but a dearth of
coaching in others.

In engineering, graduate trainees were usually working near other more experienced
team members in an open plan office. Tasks were usually part of a medium to long-
term project, so there was more opportunity to wait for a convenient time to ask a
question and to find the best person to approach. Within a few months, graduate
engineers had become aware of who had what expertise, how well disposed they
were to answering questions and how well they explained the key aspects of the
problem; and this extended beyond their own team and sometimes, through the
intranet, beyond their own site. It was up to them to hunt down and use the most
appropriate sources of support, which might or might not include their manager or
their mentor. We have described them as hunter-gatherers of knowledge and
resources (Eraut et al. 2004).
Accountants were the most likely group to get immediate feedback, because their completed tasks were checked and incorporated into the audit document, and they could easily track increases in the complexity of the tasks they undertook. Nurses were more likely to be taken for granted, both because they were already qualified and because they were less often observed by others. However, this did not prevent mistakes from being noticed. In many wards they were more likely to get negative feedback on a mistake, than positive feedback on everything they did well or constructive feedback in areas where their performance was adequate but capable of being improved. In other wards people were careful to avoid this imbalance. This was most likely when membership of a ward community provided access to significant social and emotional support. Such support appeared to be a necessary condition for a positive learning climate, but it was not always sufficient. Strong learning support and leadership from senior nurses was also necessary. A small number of wards did not provide either social support or learning support, although some individual nurses were able to transcend this largely negative climate. Some ward managers understood that the best way to improve their skill mix and the quality of their collective care was for novices and E grade nurses to develop their capabilities as rapidly as possible. Others did not see this as a form of investment or were just too daunted by the problem of trying to implement it.

Engineering teams had a rather looser structure, tasks were longer and a wider range of expertise was often involved. People spent more of their working time on their own with occasional meetings of small sub-groups with related tasks. However, their open plan offices and informal social meeting at lunch, by the coffee machine or after work provided a context in which graduate trainees could meet a wide range of people, whom they then felt able to approach later, either to get advice or to find out whom to get it from.

Access to feedback could be a problem for novices in all three professions. Their patterns of work meant that accountants could get excellent immediate short-term feedback, but found it more difficult to get medium to long-term feedback, because they had no continuity of contact with more senior staff. Nurses received varying amounts of short-term feedback, depending on the culture of their ward; but tended not to get much medium-term feedback, because most senior nurses were very busy, and inclined to think that feedback was superfluous once the novices had been integrated into the ward. Thus progress tended to be taken for granted, rather than openly discussed in a formative manner. The engineers’ experience was similar to
that of the nurses, except that they had fewer informal cues if they were not engaged in challenging work. Very few of the people they encountered seemed to be concerned about feedback, and those without a discernable learning trajectory were left feeling rather rudderless.

While a sense of progression is closely linked to recognition of learning, it is possible to know that one is learning without knowing that one is making good progress. How does my progress compare with that of other trainees, present and past? Am I meeting the expectations of significant others in my organisation? Making such comparisons depends on getting feedback that extends beyond immediate actions to make general normative judgements about a person’s strengths and weaknesses. Thus it is useful to make a distinction between quick feedback on performance that supports learning how to do particular tasks, and a more deliberative kind of feedback on general progress. The former is best given by people present at the time, and is reported above as playing a key role in the development of confidence and hence of learning. The latter is thought to require someone more senior and experienced who knows the trainee but has also consulted other people about his/her progress. One of the most telling lessons of this research is that even when novice professionals appear confident and are working competently, they still need to have a discussion of their own views of their progress. For example, we found that nurses who were contemplating leaving often doubted their capabilities or had other problems associated with their management on the ward, which, if acknowledged, might have been rectified.

Giving medium to long-term feedback is usually associated with appraisal; but we encountered relatively few examples of appraisal, if it happened at all, being valued by our participants. This may be part of a wider problem, because earlier research on the learning of mid-career professionals (Eraut et al. 1999) found a similar range of responses - a few positive examples and many that regarded appraisal as a wasted opportunity. Indeed, many of our partner organisations in that previous project confessed that appraisal was not working as intended and said that they were trying to reformulate it. We intend to investigate this issue further in the next phase of our research, in particular (1) whether there needs to be some continuity of relationship between novice and appraiser and (2) whether appraisers have the information they need for engaging in the kind of discussion that novices are seeking.

11,915 words