

Developing a Learning Organisation within the Field Archaeological Profession – The Case of England

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Abstract

Learning organisation is a concept well-proven to be beneficial in many business models but has rarely been employed in the field archaeological profession. In the case of the English commercial field archaeological profession, limited diversity and multichannel communication system, short-term contracts, and unclear customer needs are the challenges of implementing the concept. The difficulties can be solved by expanding worldwide volunteer and placement programmes, initiating professional practitioners exchange programmes, and establishing professionalism with a more rigorous selection mechanism.

Keywords: *Field Archaeology; Learning Organisation; Archaeological Organisation; English Archaeology; Commercial Archaeology*

Introduction

Learning organisation is a concept that emerged in the late 20th Century (Garratt 1987). While the concept has been well-proven to be beneficial in many business models (Senge 1999), few have ever applied the idea to the modern field archaeological profession. As a pilot study, this paper attempts to examine whether the field archaeological profession could benefit from the learning organisation concept under current circumstances. While different organisations characterize the modern archaeological fieldwork profession (Cooper-Reade 2015, 36-44; Holbrook 2015, 74-77), the study

will focus on the English commercial field organisations, as development-led archaeology – along with the spread of ‘polluter pays’ principles – has grown to be one of the largest sectors hiring the most number of archaeologists, and England is a pioneer and leader of such trend, with sufficient long period data for in-depth analysis (Aitchison and Edwards 2008; Everill 2012; Everill 2015). To tackle the question, this paper will firstly examine the characteristics of a learning organisation, before it will identify the potential challenges and their respective solutions for developing learning organisations in the current fieldwork profession.

Learning Organisation

In the development of learning organisation as a concept, it was Garratt (1987) who first emphasised that learning was the key developable and tradable commodity of an organization, and that sustainable advantage can be generated from learning organization, as the concept can help organisations adapt to the changing environment. Senge (1990; 1994), joined by Swieringe and Wierdsma (1994), further developed the concept with a vision of how to

create a learning-to-learn problem-solving organisation. Pedler and Aspinwall (1998) and Senge *et al.* (1999) demonstrated that a learning organisation can be practically established and sustained.

Among the existing studies, Senge's model of learning organizations is the most widely referenced (Lo 2004, 3). In Senge's (1994) model, a learning organization is a company that facilitates the learning of its members and continuously transforms itself. While different studies could have minor variants, a major common ground is that they all agreed learning organizations should treasure learning and place it at the centre of their values and operating processes. In general, learning organizations should make intentional use of the learning of individual people, and teams, across boundaries of function and status levels, within the whole organization and with the organization's partner and stakeholders (Pedler and Aspinwall 1998, 18). Case studies have shown both business and non-business organizations can generate positive results from the concept, such as better meeting organisations' target, being responsive to change, creating an effective problem-solving system, and generating sustainable advantages (Schein 1992, 361-392; Garvin 1993; Dixon 1994; Dumaine 1994; Swieringe and Wierdsma 1994; Senge *et al.* 2000; Lo 2004).

Challenges and Solutions

While it comes with great benefits, establishing learning organisations can be like 'groping in the dark' (Senge 1990, 5). Senge *et al.* (1999, 67-553) grouped the general challenges into three phases: initiating, sustaining, as well as redesigning and rethinking. All identified challenges have their respective solutions, mainly based on advising how the leaders can tackle the problems. Unlike the above study which discussed on universal problems and solutions,

the following will focus on the English commercial-led field profession, particularly on the difficulties and possible ways to unleash the potential benefits of the learning organisation concept.

First, diversity is desirable to cultivate a learning culture, as it creates subcultures, which are resources for learning and innovation (Schein 1992, 370-371). However, diversity is low in the field profession in the UK. Most archaeologists over age 30 are male, 98.99% are white, and 98.36% are not disabled (Aitchison and Edwards 2008, 49). All young professional archaeologists hold a degree in the subject (Aitchison and Edwards 2008, 13). When comparing the labour market of the field profession with the overall data, the total working population have an almost equal number of men and women over 30, only 92.1% white, and about one-sixth reported to have a limiting long-term illness (Cobb 2015, 228). It was argued that the lack of diversity leads to a dominant view in decision-making, report-writing, and interpretation (Cobb 2015, 228).

Second, a learning culture must be built on a multichannel communication system that allows everyone to connect to everyone else (Schein 1992, 370). There are existing organisations that help the labour in the field to communicate with each other, such as the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) and the trade unions. The rate of participation is however low. A survey in the field profession shows only 35.26% of respondents are members of the IFA and 27.36% are members of a trade union (Everill 2012, 72-75). A high level of connectivity in knowledge only works if high trust exists among all participants (Schein 1992, 370). Although the learning organisation will include all forms of individual learning, it is ultimately about learning relationships between people (Pedler and Aspinwall 1998, 43). A low level of trust not only makes an organisation ineffective (Argyris 1990, 3-4), but also

affects the diffusion of innovative ideas in the organisation's learning process (Senge *et al.* 1999, 418). In the field profession, archaeological employment is highly competitive and characterized by low wages and short, fixed-term contracts (Everill 2015, 121; Holbrook 2015, 74-77). As people must compete severely against each other to secure their next contract, mutual sharing of knowledge which is essential to build up a learning organisation can be weak if without high levels of generosity. The short-term contract system also increases the turnover of the labour and make it hard to build up long-term trustworthy connection among themselves. When asked the reason that the practitioners loved commercial archaeology, only 3.34% of respondents picked camaraderie (Everill 2012, 80). The problem exists also at the institutional level. Regionalism which contributes to a lack of cooperation between different companies widely exists in the fieldwork profession. As Neil Holbrook (2015, 76), the head of Cotswold Archaeology, has concluded, there has been 'more evidence of fragmentation than consolidation.' Under such circumstances, it is hard to establish a learning organisation.

Third, the optimal time orientation for a learning culture appears to be somewhere between the far and the near future, and one should take a medium-length time unit for assessment so that one allows enough time to test a proposed change in the learning process (Schein 1992, 369). The field profession has a widespread of time orientation looking back into the past. It does not mean that archaeology is a study that looks into the past, but in general, the practitioners feel no prospects in the field and do not think ahead to the future. In a survey on their views towards commercial archaeology, about 77% responds that the field is 'in crisis' or 'needs a rethink to avert crisis'. In contrast, only about 20% responded 'mostly okay' or 'doing well'. About one-fifth of the respondents are trying to escape from commercial

archaeology (Everill 2012, 75-81). The field has been looking backwards, as Everill (2015, 121) has stated, ‘In 2014 there is a very real sense that a chapter has closed, one that will be looked back at with some fondness as the “golden age” of British archaeology.’ There is no ‘medium-length time unit’ for short-termed contract workers, which appears to be the major feature of a job in the profession (Everill 2015, 121; Holbrook 2015, 74-77), as short-termed contract staff can hardly plan ahead with unstable living conditions.

Being out of touch with customer needs is a poor practice that renders the companies ineffective (Argyris 1990, 3-4). Identifying the customer needs will help identify the aim of the learning policies implemented in a learning organisation. The commercial field profession has a problem in identifying customer needs. Financially speaking, commercial archaeology is mostly funded by the developer. Practically, the developer is who buys the service and thus their need should be prioritized. However, according to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the conserving and enhancing historic environment policy's aim is to contribute to the quality of life of the existing and future generations (MoHCaLG 2018, 184). As such, the existing and future generations should be the real customers of the archaeological service.

To overcome the challenges, this paper proposes that, in the short term, archaeological organisations can cooperate with universities and institutions worldwide and offer volunteer and placement opportunities. This will provide diversity in the workforce and encourage the exchange of ideas in terms of cultivating a learning culture without extra cost. Some field units, e.g. MOLA, have already had placement programmes and an expansion of the scale should be practicable. Holbrook (2015, 76) supported the idea of Joint Ventures and collaboration among institutions. In the long term, this paper will propose a step further, in encouraging professional practitioners exchange programmes

to be established among institutes. While the incomes of institutes are project-based and tend to be unstable, professional practitioners can be borrowed from another institute under the employment of the current institute when there is no project on hand. The borrowing institute will be responsible for the labour's salary during the period. This will release the institute's financial burden, increase the labour's stability, and thus increase the mutual trust among labours, and between labours and the companies. It will also secure the organisation's training input to their labour, and thus enable the establishment of a medium-length time unit for cultivating learning organisation. It will also increase the diversity of backgrounds. A similar system can be seen in operation in professional fields such as lawyers and professional sportsmen.

As another long-term policy, professionalism should be established with a more rigorous selection mechanism for people to advance to a certain position in their career path. There is a surplus supply of labour (Holbrook 2015, 74-77), and bad pay and conditions (Everill 2009, 207), yet meanwhile it is not difficult to find errors in many of the grey literature. It is suggested that the current system cannot encourage the final product to strive for the best, but instead to strive for the cheapest with a fairly acceptable quality. Moreover, there is not enough punishment or awarding system for people to do better or worse. Accreditation to practice is urged in the industry (Holbrook 2015, 77). If the needs of the existing and future generations as stated in the NPPF instead of the developer should be accommodated, the quality instead of the product price should be mostly assured. A rigorous selection mechanism is a way to balance the demand and supply of labour, justify labourers' pay and conditions according to their capabilities, enhance the quality of archaeological works, and thus enhance the quality of conservation as well as the life quality of the existing and future generations. People who do not pass the selection

mechanism can still secure secondary positions, but every project should require a relevant number of professionals who have gone through a rigorous selection system to bear the primary responsibility. Constant reassessment is needed for the professionals to be kept accredited. It will act as an awarding system to encourage continuous learning among professionals. A similar system can be seen in professional fields such as accountants, lawyers, and pilots.

Conclusions

As a pilot study, this paper examines the potential challenges and solutions for being benefited from adopting the learning organisation concept in the case of the English commercial field archaeological profession. Insufficient diversity and multichannel communication systems, short-term contracts, and unclear customer needs are identifiable difficulties. The solutions are worldwide volunteer and placement programmes, professional practitioners exchange programmes, and the establishment of professionalism with a more rigorous selection mechanism.

The case of the English commercial field archaeological profession demonstrates that, with proper implementation, learning organisation is a vision that can practicably improve the field profession, so as to improve the quality of life of our existing and future generations. Should future approaches involve archaeological organisations with other social and cultural backgrounds, that could be a further step to enrich the knowledge and unleash the potential of learning organisations into the wider aspects of the archaeological professions.

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