

From Training to Work Transformation - Embedding Workplace Learning Through Work Redesign in a Singapore Small-Medium Enterprise (SME)

Abstract

Organisations continue to invest in training and workforce development initiatives, but often fail to translate these efforts into measurable performance outcomes. A key reason lies in the structural separation between learning and work. This practice brief examines how work redesign can function as an organisational intervention to embed workplace learning and enable skills-first outcomes.

Drawing on a consultancy project with a Singapore-based SME, the paper illustrates how a structured, multi-phase job redesign approach was used to align business strategy, workforce capability, and workplace learning systems. The intervention involved business and workforce analysis, job redesign, and the implementation of workplace learning and coaching mechanisms to support role transition. Findings from the project indicate that work redesign significantly improves the application of skills, enhances learning opportunities within workflows, and strengthens alignment between workforce capabilities and organisational needs. A key contribution of this paper is the demonstration that workplace learning becomes effective only when it is embedded within redesigned work structures.

The paper contributes to practice by demonstrating that workplace learning is most effective when embedded within redesigned work systems rather than delivered as standalone interventions. It offers a practical framework for organisations seeking to transition from training-centric approaches to integrated work transformation strategies.

Keywords

Workplace learning, work redesign, skills-first, workforce transformation, on-the-job learning

1. Introduction: The Learning–Work Disconnect

Organisations today face increasing pressure to adapt to technological change, shifting market demands, and evolving workforce expectations. In response, many invest heavily in training and development programmes. However, despite these efforts, improvements in workforce capability and organisational performance are often limited. A key issue lies in how learning is conceptualised and implemented. In many organisations, learning is treated as a discrete activity, delivered through courses or workshops, rather than embedded within the flow of work. Employees acquire new knowledge and skills, but often return to roles that do not require or support their application.

This disconnect between learning and work is well-documented. Workplace learning research highlights that capability development is most effective when embedded within work practices rather than delivered as standalone training (Eraut & Hirsh, 2010). Similarly, human capital theory suggests that investments in skills generate value only when applied in productive work contexts (Becker, 1964). This practice brief addresses the issue by demonstrating how work redesign can serve as a practical intervention to align learning with performance.

Recent developments in skills-first organisations further reinforce this argument. Skills-first approaches emphasise the alignment of work, capability, and performance systems, rather than relying solely on job-based structures (Cappelli & Keller, 2017). Similarly, job crafting literature highlights the importance of redesigning tasks and roles to enhance employee engagement and performance (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Research on workplace learning systems also underscores the need to integrate learning into workflows to enable continuous capability development (Billett, 2011).

2. Practice Context: Crestar Industries

The intervention was conducted with Crestar Industries Pte Ltd, a Singapore-based organisation undergoing business and workforce transformation. The engagement was

structured into multiple phases within a job redesign (JR) initiative, supported by workforce transformation programmes. The organisation faced structural challenges related to job design, capability development, and performance alignment.

Initial analysis showed that roles within the organisation, particularly in the sales function, were not clearly aligned with business goals. Responsibilities lacked clarity, and performance expectations were not consistently measurable. As a result, employees had limited visibility of how their roles contributed to organisational outcomes.

Additionally, although training initiatives existed, they were not systematically linked to job requirements. Learning occurred in isolation from work, resulting in low application and limited impact. This highlighted a fundamental disconnect between capability development and capability deployment.

3. Methodological Approach and Data Validation

This study adopts an action research–informed consultancy approach, where iterative cycles of diagnosis, intervention, and reflection were conducted in collaboration with organisational stakeholders.

Data Collection

Data were collected across three phases using multiple qualitative and organisational data sources:

- **Document analysis:** Internal business plans, job descriptions, KPI frameworks, and training records were reviewed to establish baseline alignment between work, performance, and capability requirements.
- **Focus group discussions:** Structured consultations were conducted with senior management, HR representatives, and functional stakeholders to validate business priorities, role expectations, and capability gaps.

- **Semi-structured interviews:** Selected employees and reporting officers were engaged to capture lived experiences of role execution, learning practices, and performance challenges.
- **Work observation:** Selected job functions were examined to understand task flows and identify opportunities for embedding learning within work processes.

Sampling Approach

Participants were purposively selected based on:

- Role relevance to business-critical functions (e.g., sales)
- Involvement in transformation initiatives
- Representation across managerial and operational levels

This ensured both strategic and operational perspectives were captured.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic approach:

- Task-level insights were synthesised into job-task structures
- Capability gaps were mapped against future business requirements
- Themes relating to learning–work disconnect, role ambiguity, and work performance misalignment were identified

These insights informed the redesign of roles and the development of the Job Role and Skills Transition Map (JRST).

Validation and Reliability

To enhance methodological rigour:

- **Triangulation** was applied across interviews, focus groups, and organisational documents
- **Stakeholder validation sessions** were conducted to confirm role redesign outputs and capability frameworks
- **Iterative feedback loops** were used during implementation to refine learning plans and KPIs

This multi-source and iterative validation approach strengthens the credibility and practical reliability of the findings.

4. Action Taken: Work Redesign as Intervention

4.1 Phase One: Business and Workforce Analysis

The first phase involved a comprehensive analysis of business strategy and workforce needs. Organisational goals were examined alongside external and internal drivers to identify future capability requirements.

A strategic business and human capital roadmap was developed to align business priorities with workforce capabilities, providing a foundation for redesigning roles. This process clarified the organisation's future capability requirements and highlighted the need to redesign roles to support these priorities.

4.2 Phase Two: Job Redesign

The second phase focused on restructuring work through detailed job-task analysis and stakeholder engagement. This involved engaging management and stakeholders through focus group consultations to validate role requirements and performance expectations.

A key outcome of this phase was the redesign of the Sales Executive role into a broader and more strategic Sales Manager role.

The redesigned role expanded beyond transactional sales activities to include:

- Strategic sales planning and market analysis
- Customer relationship management and retention strategies
- Cross-functional collaboration with marketing, HR and operations
- Leadership responsibilities, including coaching and team development

The redesigned role also incorporated new work functions such as innovation and productivity improvement initiatives, reflecting a shift toward higher-value contributions. Importantly, the redesign introduced clearer alignment between tasks, performance expectations and skills requirements, supported by a structured skills framework.

4.3 Phase Three: Workplace Learning and Transition Support

The third phase focused on enabling employees to transition into redesigned roles through structured workplace learning.

A **Job Role and Skills Transition Map (JRST)** was developed to guide the transition from the original role to the redesigned role. This map identified required competencies and learning pathways, including both workplace learning and external training.

Workplace learning plans were co-developed, incorporating:

- On-the-job learning activities
- Coaching and mentoring sessions
- Structured learning interventions focused on key skills such as business negotiation.

Coaching sessions were conducted with reporting officers, HR stakeholders and employees to support behavioural and mindset shifts required for the new roles. These sessions also helped identify learning gaps and refine development plans.

In addition, departmental KPIs were redesigned to align performance measurement with the new roles. This ensured that learning and capability development were directly linked to organisational outcomes.

This approach reflects research emphasising that learning is most effective when embedded within work activities (Fuller & Unwin, 2004).

5. Before–After Transformation

Before the intervention, job roles were primarily operational and task-based. Employees focused on routine activities, and learning was delivered separately through training programmes. This resulted in limited application of skills and unclear performance expectations. After the intervention, roles became more strategic and aligned with organisational objectives. Learning was embedded within workflows, enabling employees to apply their skills in real-world contexts. Performance expectations became clearer, and structured career pathways were introduced.

6. Key Outcomes and Empirical Indicators

The intervention yielded measurable improvements across capability development, performance alignment, and employee experience.

6.1 Performance and KPI Alignment

- Introduction of redesigned KPIs enabled clearer linkage between individual performance and business outcomes.
- Managers reported improved ability to track performance against strategic objectives.
- Early indicators showed increased contribution to higher-value sales activities (e.g., account development vs transactional sales)

6.2 Capability Development

- Competency assessments (pre–post redesign, where applied) indicated:
 - Improved proficiency in areas such as strategic sales planning and customer engagement
 - Increased application of previously trained skills within work contexts
- Employees demonstrated stronger ownership of cross-functional responsibilities

6.3 Learning Effectiveness

- Shift from episodic training to continuous workplace learning resulted in:
 - Increased frequency of skill application
 - Greater relevance of learning interventions to daily work tasks
- Coaching sessions enabled real-time feedback and accelerated skill acquisition

6.4 Employee Engagement and Role Clarity

- Employees reported:
 - Improved clarity of role expectations
 - Greater perceived career progression opportunities
 - Increased engagement due to more meaningful and expanded job scope

6.5 Managerial Feedback

- Reporting officers observed:
 - Improved employee initiative and problem-solving
 - Stronger alignment between team outputs and business goals
 - Reduced reliance on directive supervision

While the study does not aim for statistical generalisation, these descriptive indicators provide practical evidence of the effectiveness of embedding learning within redesigned work structures.

7. Reflection and Lessons Learned

The Crestar project highlights that training alone is insufficient to drive workforce transformation. Without changes to work design, learning remains disconnected from performance.

Work redesign provides a practical mechanism for embedding learning within workflows and ensuring that capability development leads to measurable outcomes. It also demonstrates the importance of stakeholder engagement and continuous support through coaching.

However, the transition to redesigned roles requires both technical and behavioural change. Organisations must therefore invest in ongoing learning support and regularly refine their workplace learning systems.

These findings align with emerging research on skills-first transformation, which suggests that organisational performance improves when capability development is directly embedded in work systems rather than delivered as standalone interventions (Cappelli & Keller, 2017). The role redesign process also reflects principles of job crafting, where task boundaries and responsibilities are reconfigured to enhance both individual and organisational outcomes (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Furthermore, the integration of structured workplace learning reflects broader shifts toward learning ecosystems that emphasise experiential, social, and workflow-based learning (Billett, 2011).

7. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Integrated Work Redesign and Workplace Learning Framework

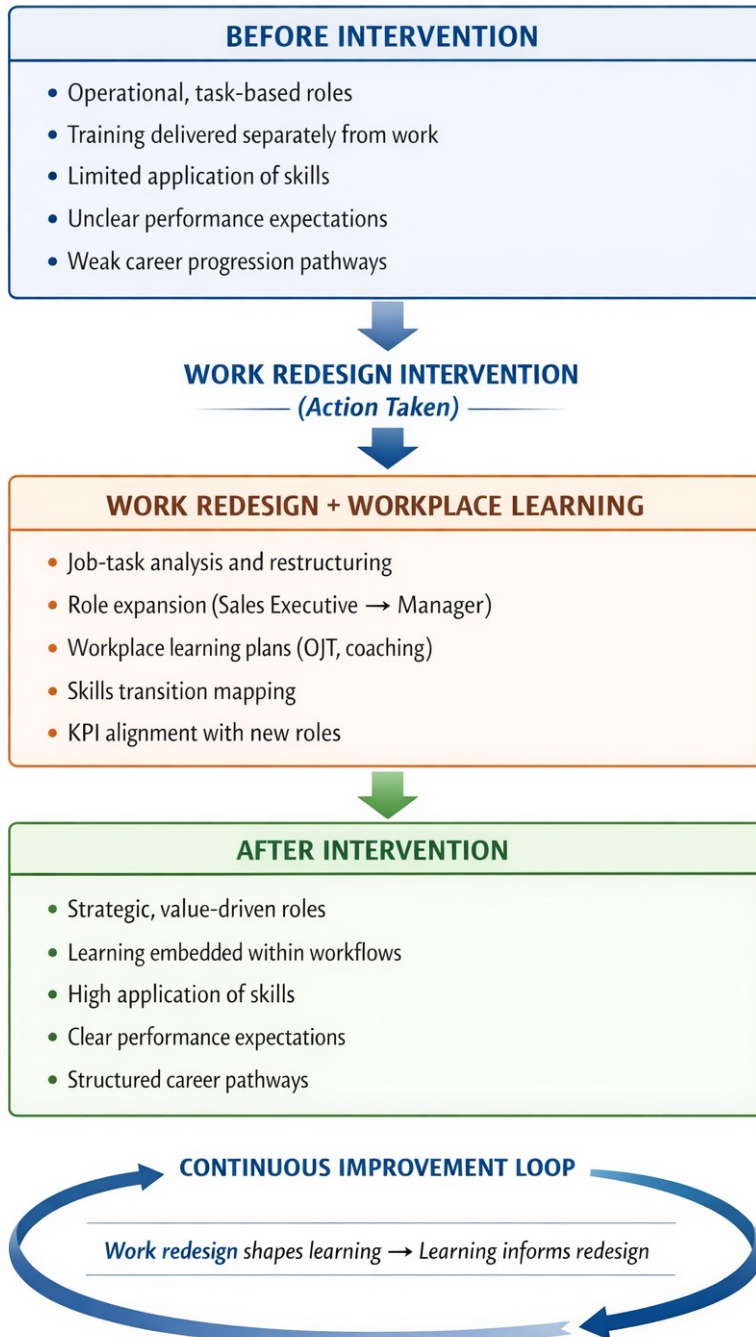


Figure 1 illustrates how work redesign enables the transition from training-centric practices to embedded workplace learning, thereby improving skills utilisation and organisational performance.

8. Practical Implications

Organisations seeking to implement similar initiatives should begin by aligning business goals with workforce capability requirements. Job roles should then be analysed and redesigned to reflect these needs.

Workplace learning should be embedded in redesigned roles and supported by coaching and performance systems. This ensures that learning is directly linked to work and organisational outcomes.

9. Limitations and Boundary Conditions

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the intervention was conducted within a single SME context in Singapore.

Organisational size, resource constraints, and leadership dynamics may influence the approach's transferability to larger organisations or to different institutional environments.

Second, the findings are based primarily on qualitative data and descriptive performance indicators. While these provide practical insights, future studies could incorporate more rigorous quantitative measures (e.g., longitudinal performance data, validated engagement surveys) to strengthen empirical generalisability.

Third, industry-specific factors may shape the effectiveness of work redesign. For example:

- Sales-driven environments may more readily demonstrate performance improvements
- Operational or regulated sectors may face constraints in redesigning roles

Finally, organisational culture plays a critical role. The success of the intervention depended on:

- Leadership openness to redesign roles
- Willingness of employees to adopt new responsibilities
- Support for continuous learning and coaching

These boundary conditions suggest that while the framework is broadly applicable, its implementation must be adapted to the organisational context.

9. Conclusion

This practice brief demonstrates that workplace learning is most effective when integrated with the design of work. The Crestar case shows how work redesign can bridge the gap between learning and performance.

For organisations pursuing skills-first transformation, the focus must shift from training delivery to work design. Learning should be embedded within workflows to ensure that capability development translates into meaningful outcomes.

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