Learning to Stay Ahead in an Uncertain Environment

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Abstract

As the work environment changes and careers become increasingly fragmented in contemporary society, workers need to ensure that they remain attractive hires to current and future employers. The advent of boundaryless careers, for example, in this era of turbulence has shifted the responsibility for career management and development from the organization to the employees. This research explores the careers of a cross-section of the Hong Kong (China) labor force and their attitudes and behaviors towards life-long learning, which is proposed here to be central to individuals maintaining their marketability and employability. The qualitative data collected in this study depicts these Chinese workers as being strongly self-motivated and possessing very positive attitudes towards learning. However, while most seemed to have a genuine commitment to enhancing themselves, stimulated by a consciousness of the growing and changing demands placed on them by employers in a dynamic knowledge-based society, the findings indicate that many interviewees were driven more by a fear of the consequences of not engaging in continuous learning, than by an intrinsic desire to learn.

Keywords: life-long (continuous) learning; careers; employability; Hong Kong (China) workers.

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Introduction

The twenty-first century has been marked by phenomenal technological advancements, such that societies around the world have been making the next major transition to knowledge-based economies. As a consequence, demands on the various actors have shifted yet again to accommodate this change. It is the impact on workers, and their responses to these socio-economic transformations, which are of interest in this paper. Within a framework of boundaryless careers, a phenomenon typified by increased job mobility and career progression which are not necessarily vertically linear, this study examines the attitudes and behaviors towards learning of a cross-section of Chinese workers in the labor market in Hong Kong (China). It explores these workers' concerns and their endeavors to maintain their employability in a highly competitive and turbulent world of work.

Hong Kong's suitability for such study lies in the fact that regardless of sovereignty issues, that is whether it was a British Colonial Territory up to 1997 or a Special Administrative Region under the People's Republic of China post the handover, the Government of Hong Kong has maintained until very recently a policy of positive non-interventionism. Testament to this laissez-faire philosophy operating in practice is the ranking of Hong Kong as the freest economy in the world for 11 consecutive years in 2005 by the US-based Heritage Foundation. Therefore Hong Kong provides a perfect arena in which to observe the behaviors and actions of the workers living in a fast developing and evolving society which only began industrializing in the 1950s, yet by the 1980s was deindustrializing, and is now currently undergoing the transformation to a knowledge-based society in line with other developed

countries around the world. More than any other, Hong Kong is a place to demonstrate how workers have risen to the challenges of dealing with boundaryless careers.

The Role of Learning in Boundaryless Careers

The introduction of the concept of 'Boundaryless Careers' in the 1990s was a timely explication of how workers' careers were no longer necessarily 'bound' to an organization for development and hierarchical progression, but rather pointed to the observation that contemporary careers were a reflection of the greater social phenomenon of disorder and chaos in the world of globalization (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). This theme was extended in 'The law of vocational chaos' which was proposed to "shed light on the characteristics of the very tumultuous career of adults in our Western societies" (Riverin-Simard, 2000:118), a context which was perceived to be "increasingly characterized by precariousness, flexibility, instability, intermittence, and insecurity." (Riverin-Simard, 2000:115). In essence, these researchers on careers argued that within this state of flux, sense could be, was and is being made by workers of their situations. Workers were perceived to be if not in control of their careers and proactively building career capital, at the very least reactively rising to the challenges in a shifting environment. In many respects this is true. Boundaryless careers in our lives, according to the proponents of this concept, have placed the "ownership of careers primarily [to] the hands of individual actors rather than institutions" (Peiperl and Arthur, 2000:6). Thus the onus of responsibility for career development has consequently been transferred to the workers, with the implication being that they now *need to be* in control of their own career destiny – whether they desired this or not.

With regard to this aspect of control by individuals is the long-standing debate about the influence of structure versus agency in boundaryless careers, which remains a complex and

unresolved issue. The proponents of the agency and enactment argument (Weick, 1996), have been counterbalanced by the cautions of some critics who contend that within '*boundaryless* careers', boundaries do still exist, and structure continues to impose constraints to individualism and free will in shaping careers in contemporary western society (Pringle and Mallon, 2003). For the skeptics, it is not a matter of rejecting or accepting the concept of boundaryless careers, nor is it a denial of the role of free will and individual choice within constraints, it is instead a demand for scholars in this field to acknowledge the role of structural influences and contextual factors, which they argue influence and limit the extent and nature of control that people have in shaping their own careers (Pang, 2003; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). Fundamentally, from this more critical perspective, the workers' positions may be more appropriately considered to be that of circumscribed choice and compromise (Gottfredson, 1981) in their career behavior. Thus tempering the underlying optimistic and celebratory tones of many discussions on boundaryless careers (Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, 1999) is the argument that there are not only winners but also losers in this turbulent world, and that the actions of some workers, far from being opportunistic and progressive, are simply no more than that of rescuing themselves from further slippage in a deteriorating situation (Hirsh and Shanley, 1996).

This raises the immediate and conspicuous question: how does one endeavor to stay ahead in such a 'chaotic' and fast changing world? In the modern world of work, more and more jobs require multi-skilling, such that the challenge for workers is that they must acquire a broader and more flexible range of skills, demanding a wider base of understanding in order to become or remain a winner in such conditions of turbulence. For employees to stay competitive and be attractive to employers they must therefore continue to learn. They must be adaptable because the 'shelf-life' of work skills and knowledge is getting ever shorter

given the pace of technological change, globalization and increasing job mobility, and therefore the ability to learn is as important as the repertoire of skills or knowledge acquired. Arguably the successful people in a world of boundaryless careers will be those who have attained that ‘metacompetency’: adaptability (Morrison and Hall, 2002:205), and engage in continuous learning.

So whether a worker stays in an organization, moves on through choice or perforce, it is generally recognized that nowadays, there is a greater need to achieve ‘employability security’ as opposed to ‘employment security’ (Dany, 2003:823). The implications of this situation is that even if “People [do] not need to move between firms perpetually...they will need to take charge of their own learning agendas” (Littleton, Arthur and Rousseau, 2000:113; cf Peiperl and Arthur, 2000:6), since the development and management of careers have become the domain of the individuals. Watts (2000) has proposed that such a concept consequently requires a fresh approach to the concept of learning, which ought not to be perceived to simply precede work. The new perspective sees learning as going beyond formal education and training, to embrace informal forms of learning, in the workplace and elsewhere. Extrapolating further, Watts’ suggestion was that “Career should now be viewed as the individual’s lifelong progression in learning and in work” (Watts, 2000:261).

For some workers this shifting of responsibility for career management and development from the organization to the individual may be far from welcome. The ethics of this transfer of obligations from employers to employees have already been debated by Van Buren III (2003). Indeed for some workers these present conditions are an onerous burden, particularly as not all workers are motivated by challenge, and “Part of the debate comes back to human nature, and the capacity of people for change.”(Peiperl and Arthur, 2000:8). Conversely

there are those who may relish this opportunity, and who may pursue education and training with ‘pragmatic opportunism’ (Dany, 2003:831). One society which has been noted for its pragmatism and instrumentalism is Hong Kong and its working people (Leung, 1996). Demonstrating such attitudes are the observations of one scholar who noted that some Hong Kong workers “...motivation to pursue further studies after work are not articulated in moral tones, but are perceived as mundane, practical and related to....self-interest” (Lui, 1992:123). We now focus on presenting the socio-economic backdrop in Hong Kong to view more clearly how one society of people which appear to have embraced the growing need for life-long education with this pragmatic opportunism.

Prevailing environmental conditions in Hong Kong

Culturally the industriousness and strong work ethic of the Chinese in Hong Kong has been well-documented (Redding, 1993; Lau and Kuan, 1991). The recognition that “Together with educational achievement, hard work is considered the most critical personal factor for success” (Wong and Levin, 1995:54) highlights also the important role of education for the Hong Kong Chinese in their pursuit of success. Indeed education in traditional Chinese society historically served as a mechanism for social stratification, and scholars held positions at the apex of Chinese society (Wang, 2002; Weber, 1964). In modern times, education continues to be the method by which the Chinese achieve socio-economic mobility. However, it has been argued that the culture has been modified to better suit the sometimes hostile environmental conditions, particularly for the Overseas Chinese emigrants (Pang, 2003), exemplified by the rising popularity of vocational studies in modern times to the extent that they have been elevated to the position of being *the* preferred fields of study, which is a complete reversal of the times when such commercial or mercantile connections were once considered ‘vulgar’. In spite of the fact that contemporary Chinese have

approached education not as an end *per se* but rather as a means to an end, nevertheless does not deny the pivotal role education still plays. But what are the attitudes of the contemporary Chinese workers towards learning in a turbulent world of work? And to what extent do the Chinese continue to engage in learning after their formal education is completed? These are some of the questions which will be addressed in this research study.

In spite of its stance of positive non-interventionism until recently, the Hong Kong Government from both a human resources planning and socio-economic developmental perspectives has been conscious of the need for its workforce to adapt to the economic restructuring. With regard to the latter, since the early 1980s Hong Kong had begun the process of de-industrialising as a result of China opening her doors to foreign direct investment, which was especially targeted at overseas Chinese. Hong Kong manufacturers took advantage of this immense cost savings in terms of labour, land and tax incentives, and so began the mass relocation of factories from Hong Kong into the Special Economic Zones in China. Thus the Hong Kong economy and labour market shifted from one being primarily industrial to one which became increasingly and predominantly services sectors oriented over the next 25 years. At the peak of manufacturing's dominance in the labour market by the late 1970s, approximately 75% of the total Hong Kong workforce were employed in manufacturing. By 2005, there was a complete reversal of this trend with approximately 75% of workers in Hong Kong being engaged in the services sectors.

In response to these structural changes, the Hong Kong government has focused on investing in education to train or retrain its workforce to meet the demands of the labour market. In the early 1980s vocational education was established in Hong Kong. Then throughout the 1990s the Hong Kong government expanded tertiary education. Several semi-government bodies

were established to oversee the drive for the greater availability and quality of continuing education and training, and financial support was provided too in terms of tax incentives and a Continuing Education Fund to encourage people to acquire further skill sets.

While the Hong Kong government has been sending encouraging signals to its people to engage in (continuous) learning for the past few decades there remain a strong voice of critics who have been scathing in their attacks on the Government's complacency. One such review commented that "The energy of [Hong Kong] people, and their enthusiastic embrace of learning opportunities, gives the SAR marked advantages. But policy lags behind the people" (Holford, 1998:149). Nevertheless, the priority placed on education by the Hong Kong government is undeniable since spending in education accounted for 23% of total government expenditure in 2005. Clearly the Hong Kong Government realizes the imperative nature of this task of ensuring a sufficient supply of educated and trained workforce for the maintenance of a healthy economy and the smooth transition towards a knowledge-based society. According to the Hong Kong Government Education Commission Report (2000) it stated that its people must prepare themselves, and be equipped with more knowledge, be ready to venture into new domains of knowledge, make more efficient use of knowledge, and devise novel means to solve problems.

A separate Hong Kong Government Report on the employment concerns and training needs in Hong Kong had highlighted specifically the qualities employers sought in their employees as being: greater flexibility, skillfulness, and deeper knowledge in using basic information technology (Census and Statistics Department of the HKSAR, 1999). Conversely, from another angle, Figure 1 shows the employed persons' responses to the question regarding the changes in job requirements that they had experienced in the past three years. Notably the

Hong Kong workers' experience and perception of the economic environment was that it was becoming increasingly more demanding and competitive. They felt that they were expected to work harder, longer hours and at a higher intensity, with preferably the ability to be multi-skilled (cf Watts, 2000). More specific skills, such as computer and equipment usage, higher academic and linguistic knowledge, were also perceived to be necessary.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Indications from these statistics and other sources (Enright, Scott and Dodwell, 1997), suggest that the Hong Kong citizens are aware of and responsive to these environmental shifts and expectations, and the workers in Hong Kong are under implicit pressure to engage in (re-)training and updating of skills and knowledge. With regard to those employees who were asked about their intentions towards attending (re-)training and skills upgrade courses, the most popular ones appeared to be information technology courses, followed by management training, and then job-specific classes (see Figure 2). Communication and linguistic skills also featured as being one of the respondents' priorities in their plans to enhance themselves. This corresponds to, and is a reflection then of the Hong Kong employees' consciousness and (re-)actions to changing market and work conditions demands.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Against this background of cultural and institutional support for education, this present study establishes the attitudes and motivations to continuous learning of a cross-section of workers in the Hong Kong labour market, and explores to what extent they are actually engaging in continuous learning.

Methodology

The method of data collection for this study was by telephone interviews which were conducted between November 2001 and January 2002. It should be noted that this was a time of flux in Hong Kong, the economy which has barely recovered from the recession caused by the Asian Financial Crisis, was almost immediately plunged into another economic downturn as a result of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the USA in 2001.

Quota sampling was utilized and all of the 72 respondents had a minimum of 10 years work experience and were at the time of data collection all employed in a full-time job. These 72 interviewees were also drawn proportionately to reflect the labor force distribution in the various industries in the Hong Kong economy, as shown below in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

The questionnaire used in this study was a modified version of the original developed by Michael Arthur to better suit the circumstances of the Hong Kong society. The interviewees were asked to provide details on the jobs and career they have held in the past ten years of work. The questions would elicit information about the interviewees' job history, and actions in acquiring the knowledge and skills needed for the jobs, and if they had a support system that helped them seek job opportunities. Two interviewers conducted these telephone interviews in Cantonese, the Mother Tongue Chinese dialect of the interviewees in Hong Kong. The interviews were semi-structured in design to allow for richer information to be gained from each respondent, and enabled the experienced interviewers the flexibility to obtain clarification as necessary during the interviews. NVivo software was used and all 72 interviews were coded independently twice. The demographic profile of the interviewees included 100% ethnic Chinese; 43% males and 57% females; 54% married respondents, and overall 69% had dependents (i.e. spouse, children or parents).

Findings and Discussion

The first issue to be addressed is to determine the extent to which a condition of boundaryless careers may be considered to exist in Hong Kong according to the career histories and mobility of the interviewees in this study. It was found that in the past 10 years, 40% of the respondents had only held one job, while almost one-third (31%) had been engaged in only two jobs, 14% had experienced three jobs, and 15% had been engaged in four jobs or more in the past 10 years. These statistics concur with another study on manufacturing workers (Pang, Lang and Chiu, 2005), which also found that approximately 40% of workers stayed with their first employers for 10 years or more, and even if the workers were forced to change jobs because of de-industrialization and job displacement, there was strong evidence to indicate the existence of involuntary boundaryless careers (Pang, 2003), that is workers changing jobs out of necessity (industrial restructuring or economic downsizing) as opposed to choice and maximizing opportunities.

At the opposite end of the labor market with tertiary-level educated workers, the statistics in this present study do not fully support the condition of job-hopping behavior (defined as the changing of jobs at least once a year) as depicted by Lau and Pang (1995) in their study of fresh graduates in their early careers. This present study indicates that while there is a reasonable level of job mobility, it is not a phenomenon of the well-educated, who tend to be relatively stable. Indeed the indications here are to the contrary, that it is the less educated who tend to be more mobile, as they move from one job to the next in search of better opportunities in the labor market. In the present study the educational levels of the interviewees included around 18% who had attained tertiary levels of education, while

slightly above three-quarters of the respondents (77%) had finished secondary levels of education, and around 5% had only completed secondary levels of education. Highly educated people were found to be more unlikely to change jobs frequently (62% of respondents who have attained tertiary level qualifications did not change jobs at all or changed jobs only once in the past 10 years), while 76% of the workers who had changed jobs more than two times in the past 10 years had only finished secondary school levels of education. The results of this present study reflect better the findings of Topel and Ward (1992), who reported a very high level of job mobility in US high school (ie secondary school) graduates (approximately 7 jobs in 10 years)..

With regard to learning, the data supports a very positive attitude amongst the respondents as anticipated. However, as the data indicates, the attitude towards learning may not be borne out of a quest to satisfy curiosity or for personal and professional enhancement but is rather driven by instrumentalism, pragmatism and opportunism akin to the descriptions and discussion by Dany (2003) earlier.

Almost two-thirds (65%) responded positively when questioned about their attitudes towards continuous learning. In terms of learning within the organization, almost all respondents (99%) in our sample had experienced “On-the-Job learning” in the past 10 years, while about 15% found the process so significant to them that they even declared “learn[ing] skills or knowledge” to be one of the best aspects of their job or work life over the last decade. Apart from demonstrating such enthusiasm towards the notion of continuous development, these respondents also recognized the onus was on them to be proactive in their learning and to approach learning in its broadest sense, exemplified by the comments of these interviewees:

“I learnt how to solve problems, to enhance myself, to withstand the changes in my work and the society... I cannot be ‘outdated’. I always strive for improvements. I

keep on learning. I learnt that I should be attentive in my job. I took part in voluntary activities. I am quite outgoing and active.” (Supervisor, Transportation)

“I keep on learning from my work; these include how to communicate with different people and knowledge about products. I always update myself with new information about products.” (Sales Manager, Telecommunications)

This strong sense of self-motivation is coupled with a sense of opportunism towards learning too (cf Dany, 2003). Further illustrating this is the group of workers (15% of respondents) who have developed competencies in their job through informal channels, particularly in relation to the use of information technology (IT). Corresponding to the findings of the Government survey discussed above (see Figure 1), this research strongly suggests that not only do many jobs in Hong Kong demand IT skills and knowledge, but that workers are conscious of this fact, and subsequently rising to the challenge and absorbing information by whatever methods they can. Numerous interviewees mentioned how they had learnt: “PC/IT/computer knowledge”, “to write the programmes”, and gained so much “Particularly...*from the computer department of the company*” (our italics). Besides on-the-job or informal training and learning, companies in Hong Kong do appear to be providing more formal in-house training too for their employees, as reported by some interviewees:

“There are a lot. We have courses on language, computer skills and interpersonal skills. It depends on what post you have got. There are courses held every day. There is a training section responsible for internal staff training.” (Supervisor, Transportation)

“There are many training courses in our company...” (Building service engineer, Construction)

However, there were those who still seemed to maintain a clear delineation between their work time and personal life, regardless of the perceived benefits of training to them personally and professionally, as one respondent stated that:

“There are many training courses in our company. If they are held between office hours, I support those. I do not prefer training in non-office hours.” (Building service engineer, Construction)

Such an attitude was rare as most interviewees relished any opportunity to learn, especially as training was not offered by many or most companies, for most business operations in Hong Kong comprise of small and medium sized enterprises (98% of all local enterprises), the majority of which cannot afford to and do not provide structured (in-house) training. Yet, in spite of this general enthusiasm towards learning and training, employees did not in general have expectations or made any demands on employers, judging by the responses of the interviewees. Instead, while the corporations were bypassed in any such criticisms and released of this obligation towards their workers, several interviewees did express negative sentiments about the role of the Government, and how they thought the Government of Hong Kong should do more for the workers, exemplified by these opinions:

“The government should provide more opportunities and training courses for different people in Hong Kong. Our environment has changed. In the past, knowledge learnt from secondary schools was already sufficient. However, it seems that people currently have to go to university in order to learn enough knowledge. Lifetime learning should also be encouraged.” (Business owner, Catering)

“The government should use more resources to provide more training opportunities, not only to unemployed people but also the employed. Everyone who is interested should have training opportunities” (Clerk, Electronics)

Yet as mentioned earlier, the Hong Kong Government has never traditionally been a paternalistic one, and its stance has until recently been one of non-interventionism. It is therefore ironic then that local workers in Hong Kong look not to their employers for more training to be provided, but to the government. Nevertheless in the past 25 years or so, the Government of Hong Kong has significantly stepped up its involvement and investment in education at all levels, and has been proactively expanding tertiary level education, for example, in order to better prepare the workforce for employment in a knowledge-based society. Furthermore, the government has also established an Employees Retraining Board responsible for retraining workers displaced from declining industries with the economic restructuring in Hong Kong, such as manufacturing; and more recently the government has

tried to promote and encourage continuous learning by offering the Continuing Education Fund as well as tax incentives for Hong Kong workers to update and broaden their skills and qualifications.

The organizations in Hong Kong appear to have maneuvered themselves into an advantageous position then and absolved themselves unobtrusively from their responsibilities to provide training for their workers without any form of resistance or criticism. Besides the relatively recent demands on the government to do more, the workers in Hong Kong are generally quite prepared to study for further qualifications at their own expense, so that when informal learning, on-the-job and in-house training were not available in the workplace, many of the respondents arranged to take courses externally, to upgrade their skills in languages and computer knowledge, for example, which they consider to be relevant and applicable to their current job. Therefore, these respondents clearly demonstrated a very proactive stance, and did not expect or rely on the company to provide internal training, making the commentary by Van Buren III (2003) on the ethical responsibilities of organizations in an environment of boundaryless careers rather redundant in this context of Hong Kong Business and society.

What is also particularly interesting is the contingency approach adopted by some respondents, who took courses and learnt new skills and competences in the hope and anticipation that the newly-acquired knowledge or skills may ‘one day’ in the future become useful and applicable to their job. Such an attitude is encapsulated in the words of one respondent who explicated the situation thus:

“I am waiting for a time to use it [the skills]. Even if I cannot use it right now, I believe I have the chance to use it in the future, as long as I stay positive about it. It will never be outdated.” (Image director, Personal Services)

In fact this approach of treating learning as an investment, or an accumulation of capital in the terminology of Human Capital Theory, seems to have served many of the respondents well, as 85% of interviewees claimed to have been able to apply their past learning, which they found ultimately to be useful in their current job, as expressed in the words of one respondent who stated:

“Past knowledge can help solve the problems faced presently in my job...” (Property Manager, Real Estate)

Therefore with such an optimistic, ‘can’t lose’ attitude, it comes as no surprise to find that more than half of the respondents in this sample had kept up their professional and self development over the years by either taking courses and training outside work (36%) or engaging in other forms of continuous learning (15%) and “preparation” (8%). It was this foresight and planning which the respondents believed had led them to arrive at their current position in their career. From this perspective continuous learning is considered beneficial and therefore ultimately worthwhile.

Looking into the future, 53% of these interviewees declared an intention to continue to upgrade themselves particularly with regard to improving their core and technical knowledge related to their immediate post besides peripheral skills, as strategy to promote and enhance their careers, exemplified by:

“I will keep on observing the changes in society and look for new business opportunities so that I can have a better job. And I will take some courses in Mandarin, Chinese law and accounting.” (Supervisor, Transportation)

“I am taking a secretarial course now. In the future, I may learn more on taxation. It depends...” (Secretary, Accounting)

But again there are echoes of earlier sentiments of workers wanting to prepare themselves for the unknown. These interviewees seemed prepared to study courses and acquire competencies which may only potentially pay off in future. However, the following

quotation also highlights the pressures propelling and underlying the pursuit of continuous learning in many Hong Kong workers. One interviewee said:

“If I lose my job, I have to find a new one. And I have to further my study and learning in, for example, courses on environmental protection and social skills.”
(Clerical Worker, Services)

Thus against a backdrop of an economy just emerging from the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s only to be plunged into another economically dark period following the September 11th 2001 Terrorist Attacks on the USA, two-thirds of the respondents in this study expressed such feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future, and the tenuous positions of their jobs. They worried naturally about further organizational downsizing and company closures. Quite simply the respondents said:

“I fear that the company will close down.” (Supervisor, Catering)

“I am afraid of unemployment. I fear that the economy will deteriorate and I will lose my current job.” (Silk Printing Worker, Manufacturing)

To reiterate, this lack of job security was very prevalent and real in Hong Kong at the time of data collection when Hong Kong was officially in recession and experiencing record highs in the local unemployment rates (peaking at 6.3% in 1999). In fact 58% believed the economic situation would worsen, and this environmental stimulus and pressure gave the respondents an added sense of impetus in investing in continuous learning, in order to remain competitive, marketable and employable.

As China continued to open up her economy to the rest of the world, some even mentioned strong competition from the Chinese workers from the Mainland as being one additional problem. Their perception was that:

“One day, those [workers] from the Mainland [China] may come to Hong Kong and take my job. They have better knowledge but ask for lower wages.” (Accounting Manager, Banking)

This fear provided one of the strongest incentives and motivations for the interviewees to better prepare themselves in a competitive and tight labour market. The language used by the interviewees reflects their endeavors to maintain or enhance their employability security, as some interviewees said:

“I try to enhance my competitive edge and further my study.” (Assistant, Government Services)

“[I would] add value to myself. I would like to study. Maybe I will attend some courses about computers.” (Financial agent, Finance)

“I will continue learning in order to consolidate my position.” (Clerk, Wholesale)

Thus the *modus operandi* of these respondents appears to be to achieve employability security through continuous learning and upgrading of one’s knowledge and skills, and so ensure that they are flexible enough to react to the changing and growing demands of employers in an increasingly challenging environment.

Conclusion

This study has shown that employees in Hong Kong are proactively engaging in continuous learning, whether informally or formally, within and outside of their organization, in recognition of the changing demands in the contemporary workplace. For most of these employees in this study, they held a very positive attitude towards life-long learning borne out of a consciousness that they must be updated and competitive in their knowledge and skills sets, in order to maintain or enhance their employability security and marketability within the organization or in the labor market. Even though on occasions the learning or training may not be immediately and directly relevant or useful to the interviewee’s current job, there was the anticipation that the occasion would arise in future to utilize such skills and knowledge. This contingency approach to learning was also fueled by a fear of the consequences of not keeping up with the need to be flexible and mobile, especially in a non-

supportive environment of economic recession, and proximity to a Motherland with a large supply of willing and cheaper labor.

Regardless of the forces propelling workers in Hong Kong towards life-long learning, the conspicuous and stark reality is that in the modern world as the developed economies make the transition to knowledge-based societies, it is becoming increasingly obvious that those employees who refuse to engage in or not do see the importance of continuous learning will eventually get left behind. With the nature of work shifting as rapidly as it is, workers cannot do otherwise than to endeavour to keep abreast of the changes, and flexibility and the ability to adapt by learning and acquiring new knowledge and competencies will be the key to survival in the very competitive global environment.

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Figure 1

Change in job requirements in the past three years

Change in job requirements in the past three years#		
	No. of persons ('000)	%
More flexible/longer working hours	789.6	26.9
Increasing use of computer and machinery/equipment	589.2	20.1
Higher intensity of work	562.9	19.2
Skill upgrading	425.7	14.5
Job straddling/ multi-skilling	416.1	14.2
Higher academic qualification	327.6	11.2
Higher/multiple language skills	169.4	5.8
Others	32.1	1.1
No change	632.2	21.6
Do not know	8.4	0.3

Multiple answers were allowed

Source: Thematic Household Survey Report No.1 – Employment Concerns and Training Needs

Figure 2

Percentage distribution of economically active persons by whether they had planned to attend job-related training/retraining course in the coming 12 months and type of job-related training/retraining course to be attended.

Multiple answers were allowed

Source: Thematic Household Survey Report No.1 – Employment Concerns and Training Needs

Figure 3

Percentage and distribution of interviewees as a reflection of the economic sectors in Hong Kong.

Industry	Percentage of Interviewees
Manufacturing	15.3
Construction	6.9
Wholesale, retail, import/export trade, restaurants and hotels	26.4
Transport, storage, and communications	12.5
Financing, insurance, real estate and business services	22.2
Community, social and personal services	13.9
Other	2.8