

How Managers Learn in Work

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this research is to examine how various dimensions of context influence how managers learn in work and the processes and agents that facilitate this learning. Despite the importance of facilitating manager learning in work there is limited research addressing this specific question. In this study, manager learning in work is conceptualised as being distinct from the concepts of workplace learning and learning at work, as these concepts imply learning in a bounded, identifiable place whereas learning in work is considered as spatially and temporally fluid (Fenwick, 2008).

Learning for managers lies with the challenges of work itself (Berings et al., 2004) as managers are coping in a rapidly changing and chaotic work environment and may require learning strategies focused in work that is vital for changing situations (Buckley and Monks, 2008). A qualitative study was conducted among a sample of ten managers based in an innovative and successful entrepreneurial organisation in Ireland, engaged in the financial services sector. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out in conjunction with a learning diary which was completed by all ten managers. The diary facilitated self reflection and was reported to have benefits in terms of creating a focus on learning in work. Macro contextual issues were identified as the external context strategy, structure, culture and leadership. Micro contextual issues were identified as the team context and the manager's job together with agents that facilitate learning in work.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	II
Acknowledgements	III
Table of Contents	IV
List of Tables	V
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Thesis	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	14
Chapter 3: Research Methodology	48
Chapter 4: The Research Findings	87
Chapter 5: Conclusion	165
Appendix	194
Bibliography	210

List of Tables

Table No:		Page No:
Table 3.1:	Similar studies on learning on context with a qualitative research orientation	53
Table 3.2:	Research strategies summarised	79
Table 3.3:	Demographic and job related variables of the respondents	85
Table 4.1:	Key dimensions of conceptual framework for understanding manager learning in work	92

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Thesis

Modern organisations are characterised by complexity and exposed to continuous change. In such challenging business environments managers are expected to learn quickly and develop advanced competencies such as coping with change, improvising, innovating, reflecting, and thinking strategically. Organisations need managers who are quick to learn and can engage in reflection on their learning and experience to the extent that they generate new ways of coping with change and uncertainty (Raelin, 2001).

It is evident, however, that how managers learn in the work context is not very well understood and that a lacunae exists in our knowledge concerning the complexity of the learning process as it applies to managers (Fenwick, 2008). Very little published qualitative research has captured the complexity of this learning process. The purpose of this thesis is to enquire into how managers learn within a fast changing business environment. This chapter locates the research in terms of the theoretical and practical issues involved in understanding how managers learn at work.

Background to the Research

The situational nature of learning has become dominant in the field of management learning. This is an important development because it provides a valuable corrective to more traditional cognitive and behavioural views.

Learning processes have been studied for many years; however, the formal and rationalistic have taken precedence over the non-formal and informal (Eraut, 2000) and much of the literature has tended to dichotomise formal and informal learning processes. It is also evident that managers place more value on formal learning (Buckley and Monks, 2008) with Donaldson (2002) arguing that the research on the learning of managers has focused primarily on rationalistic theories and theories derived from classroom situations. Therefore these types of learning situations are ultimately divorced from reality.

The emergence of contextualism (Johns, 2006) has prompted researchers to seek much richer explanations and accounts of how managers learn, as it holds that researchers must be conscious of the complexity of context and must utilise research methods that capture that complexity and highlight the variegated nature of how managers learn in work. Furthermore, contextualism highlights the value of qualitative longitudinal research designs that focus on the use of multiple methods and capture the embedded nature of learning (Bamberger, 2008). For example, several learning theories view humans as embedded in and ontologically inseparable from the organisations in which they work. Learning occurs when individuals interact and collectively construct their understanding of the world; researchers such as Gherardi (2000) emphasise that learning results from experience as it is inevitably situated in a particular social context. Various activities of management are crucial in learning; with Elkjaer (2004) highlighting the important role of reflection in this process as learning is dependent on

reflective consideration of issues. In addition, Thursfield (2008) has highlighted the importance of the political context in influencing how managers learn in work and discovered that the dynamics of the organisation favour individual rather than collective learning.

Recently, a growing body of researchers (Ellinger, 2005; Ellstrom, 2001; Torraco, 1999) have advocated the need to explore how managers learn in work. They argue that learning from day-to-day work activities challenges managers to collaborate, to negotiate meaning, and to learn in situations involving continuous change. In attempting to establish why learning in work is a relatively under-researched area of enquiry, some theorists have pointed out that the concept is perceived as a haphazard and not highly conscious process (Marsick and Volpe, 1999; Marsick and Watkins, 1997). While extensive research has been carried out on issues such as manager's cognitive learning styles and on how managers learn in formal learning situations (Sadler-Smith, 2006), much of this research is de-contextualised and quantitative in nature (Sessa and London, 2006).

Exploratory research has been conducted on the learning strategies that managers use in their day-to-day work and useful typologies of learning strategies have been provided by Holman et al. (2001). However, these typologies while informative are based on quantitative designs, single methods and small samples. Therefore significant scope exists to investigate how managers learn in work using a richer and more contextually sensitive methodology.

Subsequently, a number of studies have been carried out on how professionals and employees in general learn at work (Bierema and Eraut, 2004; Ellinger, 2005) and several studies have investigated specific aspects of learning in the workplace (Eraut, 2000). However these have not specifically focused on finding out how managers learn in work. Similarly, the US literature has examined individual learning characteristics such as motivation to learn and self-efficacy as important learning issues for managers (Tannenbaum et al., 1991, Gist and Mitchell, 1992, Colquitt and Simmering, 1998), again with limited reference to learning in work. The preponderance of existing research, while useful, fails to engage with the more subtle and less conscious aspects of context such as culture, politics, organisational discourse and collective learning processes. The research presented in this thesis seeks to address these issues within a unique organisational context.

The Location of the Research

The nature of the organisation in terms of its environmental, cultural, and structural and change characteristics has implications for the nature of learning processes and for explaining manager learning in work. Managers typically inhabit 'swampy lowlands' (Buckley and Monks, 2008) that demand a more experiential, self-managed, haphazard approach to learning. These learning processes are inherently linked to changes occurring in the managers' immediate environment and their interactions with others.

The study described in this paper was conducted in an entrepreneurial organisation operating in the financial services sector. The context has several interesting characteristics that are challenging from the perspective of learning in work. First, it is evident that the external environment is highly competitive, dynamic, and unpredictable and again the extant research indicates that such environments demand particular learning processes such as reflection, rapid learning, and a capacity to address change (Lans et al., 2008). It is evident that learning and the possibility to learn lie at the heart of entrepreneurial activity: learning influences the opportunity and recognition process (Baron and Ensley, 2006; Hinrichs et al., 2004) Second, the organisation has an entrepreneurial orientation as it was established as a single-person venture. Over the years it has grown in an organic fashion and within its culture it has retained a number of entrepreneurial characteristics such as risk-taking, tolerance of mistakes, and experimentation. The organisation still possesses characteristics of informality and an ad hoc approach to business challenges.

Third, from a strategic perspective, it is apparent that the organisation has reached a crossroads. Over the years various business lines had developed relatively independently of each other with a tendency for those in each division to act as solo operators. As a consequence, they have found it difficult to synergise and collaborate in order to provide unique solutions for the marketplace. These strategic factors provide an interesting context in which to conduct research on how managers learn in work. Within such strategically challenging environments its managers are faced with increasing

ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity and therefore they will tend to rely on tacit and non-formal learning processes (Cope, 2005; Rae, 2006).

Fourth, because of the financial nature of its business the organisation in question is subject to a complex regulatory environment that prescribes how things are done and requires managers to be accountable for decisions they make. Ultimately, the managers' decisions are subject to public scrutiny and audit which increases the urgency to learn quickly and efficiently.

The Research Question

The research question that this thesis proposes to investigate has two parts. The first is to examine how various dimensions of context influence the way managers learn in work. The second is the processes and agents that managers use to learn in an organisation that is characterised by acute complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Managers typically utilise a range of processes such as reflection, questioning and collaboration with others, interpersonal help seeking, and sense making. These processes are difficult to capture and explain using more quantitative, rationalistic methodologies.

For the purposes of this study, the research context is understood at several levels that can be characterised as the individual, the team, the organisational, and the institutional. The first level of context focuses on the individual; it highlights characteristics of the individual manager such as learning styles, learning motivation, and self-efficacy. In this respect, the manager requires the confidence or self-efficacy to take major risks to learn

and demonstrate self-efficacy and self-esteem which is part of core self evaluation (Judge et al., 2002; Judge et al., 1998). Self-efficacy can often explain the risks that managers take in pursuit of learning and the confidence with which they approach complex tasks. Given the increasing complexity of work performed in organisations and the need to deal with the non-routine and non-programmed, the manager's level of self-efficacy may be significant. Managers vary in their learning styles. Though the concept of learning styles has been contested, research evidence shows that managers have a variety of learning styles: some managers are reflectors, others activists and others more theoretical in their approach (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). The concept of learning style helps to describe the unique ways in which individuals move through the learning cycle as they express preferences for various ways of approaching problems (Abbey et al., 1985; Honey and Mumford (1986).

An important theme running through the extant research is that managers' motivations to learn are driven by two dynamics: career progression and learning as a means of achieving self-actualisation (Thursfield, 2008). Both dynamics emphasise individual rather than collective learning because managers are concerned about furthering their own interests. These themes are also highlighted by Wlodkowski (1998) who argues that if individuals value what they do at work they will be more likely to want to be effective and want to learn what is needed to accomplish their goals. Similarly, career motivation, which has been defined as the desire to exert effort to enhance career goals, consisting of insight, identity, and resilience (Sessa and London, 2006; London, 1983; London and Noe, 1997) is related to learning motivation

in that insight is the spark that ignites motivation and resilience creates persistence in the face of barriers to advancement. As a consequence, the desire to be in a management position is directly related to career motivation and managers may be driven to learn in work as a means of enhancing their self esteem, gaining recognition from peers and senior management, achieving a sense of purpose, and improving the quality of their lives.

The second level of context is concerned with examining how working in teams can influence the learning of the manager and how these team characteristics can focus on both the formal and informal requirements of the job. They include the learning associated with leading a team and the team roles/duties assigned to the manager, and also the characteristics of the teamwork itself, such as the extent of routine, the extent of formality inherent in the team, the amount of interpersonal contact, the types of problems found within the team, and the time available to make decisions and complete tasks. Specific team characteristics are also examined such as the team's size, cohesiveness, and maturity, and the current levels of expertise within it.

Level three focuses on the impact of organisational characteristics or the DNA of the organisation; these include the influence of the founder and its culture, structure, and technology, and how all these factors influence the managers' learning. Researchers have found that the existence of a favourable learning culture and climate exuding warmth, support and a developmentally focused leadership style can assist the manager to learn in work (Belling et al., 2004). Level four focuses on the institutional context; this

context consists of normative, coercive, and regulatory influences that shape decisions and behaviours. As mentioned previously, the financial sector is highly regulated. It operates in an environment where compliance and standards of ethical behaviour are paramount. Managers interpret these various institutional influences and incorporate them into their behaviours and actions.

What Constitutes 'Learning at Work'?

The concept of 'learning at work' is contested in the literature as various terms are used to describe the field, such as 'workplace learning', 'learning at work' and 'non-formal learning'. Doornbos et al. (2004, p. 250) state that various classifications and typologies have been developed: learning on the job versus learning off the job, incidental versus informal learning, implicit versus explicit learning, and learning-controlled versus other-controlled learning (Candy, 1991; De Jong, 1991, Eraut, 2000; Marsick, 1987; Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Thijssen, 1988; Van Onna, 1985).

Researchers such as Fenwick (2008), however, have brought particular clarity to the field. She makes an important set of distinctions which inform the approach taken to understanding the concept of learning in work in this thesis as she argues that the concepts of workplace learning and learning at work differ from learning in work. The former concepts imply learning in a bounded, identifiable place with workplace learning perceived as a problematic term precisely because it limits learning to the confines of the

workplace, when in fact learning in work tends to be spatially and temporally fluid. The concept of learning in work can then be defined as learning that is “not centred in an individual’s head but distributed among activities, continuous interactions and relationships of people (and tools, texts, architecture) within a system” (Fenwick, 2008, p. 123). This type of learning involves formal and informal interventions yet is practice based and participative and involves action. Clearly there are difficulties associated with arriving at a definition of learning in work. Fenwick (2008) argues that the terms learning and workplace are also problematic. Furthermore she refers to the issues associated with differentiating between learning and knowing in situations where learning is associated with the context in which the learner is based and does not occur solely in the head of the learner. In essence, learning is associated with participation in context whereas knowing is dependent on doing, which requires practice (Anderson and Anderson, 2007).

The concept of learning environment has also been used to describe this type of learning which has been described as the “sociomaterial and cultural conditions of learning processes in social practice” (Warring and Jorgensen, 2002, p.187). The challenge to develop a clear understanding of work-related learning was addressed by Sambrook (2005) and she offers a distinction between learning in work, learning at work, and learning outside work by positing that learning at work is concerned with the existence of planned training and education and in this respect may be associated with the concept of workplace learning. Learning in work, in contrast, is focused on informal processes and the concept of learning outside work is concerned

with learning outside the boundaries of the work setting (Jacobs and Park, 2009).

It is evident that a manager's learning is not bound to the confines of the workplace as they have numerous opportunities to learn from clients, mentors, customers, and conferences and job assignments. Their roles can be challenging and ambiguous and require interactions outside of their own organisation in order to learn to cope with the vagaries of their jobs and business objectives. In fact, their learning is in effect socially constructed and unlimited. Managers have a tendency to take responsibility for their own learning and they come in contact with numerous challenges and problems that they must overcome in their everyday lives. This learning provides them with a means of survival and also gives them a competitive edge.

Contribution of the Research

The thesis makes a number of important methodological and theoretical contributions.

The research employs qualitative data collection and analysis and it focuses on the understandings and meanings held by managers. This is important because individual manager motivation is a prerequisite to learning and is governed by individual and organisational characteristics (Antonacopoulou, 2001). Learning is also linked to a manager's embedded understanding of context. To fully understand manager learning in work, it is important to

explore their understandings and meanings. Learning in work incorporates the organisational context and managers' personal experience. Examination of managerial understandings enables interpretation. Participants' understandings are elicited through qualitative interviews.

The study is based on a small sample of managers within a single organisation. The size of the sample enabled the researcher to capture detailed and rich descriptions of both context and process. The thesis also utilised a learning diary to counteract problems with self-report data. The utilisation of multiple methods over a significant period of time adds a longitudinal feature to the study, which captured managers' accounts of learning in work at different time periods. The study illuminates the concept of learning in work and it corroborates and supports Fenwick's notion of learning in work as something that is not confined to the boundary of an organisation.

Thesis Structure and Chapter Outline

This thesis has five chapters in all. Following this introduction which comprises Chapter One, Chapter Two presents a review of the literature and examines the theoretical and research issues related to the study. It provides an account of the recent literature on management learning and the contextual factors that influence how managers learn in work. It provides justification for the study of how managers learn in work and presents the conceptual context for this study.

Chapter Three describes the methodological approach and methods used to conduct the study and presents the research methodology and the qualitative data analysis process. It provides a justification for the research methods employed, as informed by the theoretical discussion in Chapter Two. Chapter Four presents the findings from the research activity undertaken and moves on to the interpretation and analysis of the data generated by managers. Chapter Five identifies the significant themes that emerge from the analysis. The chapter concludes with discussions of the study's implications for learning in work, its limitations, and future avenues for research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review/Conceptual Framework

This chapter focuses on the conceptual and theoretical issues that underpin the concept of learning in work. While the literature on learning is extensive it does not adequately explain which factors are relevant in understanding learning in work. This study assumes that, for managers, learning in work is situated in context. That is, a manager's ability to learn depends not only on her or his individual characteristics but also on the work environment. Theories of experiential social learning and situated learning share the understanding that a universal set of learning principles does not exist. Rather, it is the fit between individual manager characteristics and key contextual factors that explains how managers learn in work. This chapter will not seek to review the expansive and disparate literature on learning. Instead, given the qualitative nature of the empirical research undertaken for this thesis it will focus on several themes and issues that are relevant to understanding the study's findings.

Thus the chapter opens with a consideration of several broad theoretical perspectives that can help explain manager learning in work. It then analyses key aspects of context, given that the context of manager learning in work is not confined to the boundaries of the organisation. The dimensions of organisational context to be considered are the external environment; the strategy, structure, and culture of the organisation; the role of leadership; and its relevance to the manager learning in work. The next area of focus is the

team context of manager learning in work and the job context, in particular the characteristics of managerial work and how they may explain the context and processes of manager learning in work. Individual characteristics of managers and the agents and processes that facilitate manager learning in work will also be examined.

Understanding Manager Learning in Work:

Contextualism, Activity Theory, and Situated Learning Theory

This section focuses on three broad theoretical perspectives that have value for understanding manager learning in work.

Contextualism and manager learning in work

The study conducted for this thesis is built on a contextual view of learning. That is, learning is contingent on the context where it occurs. Learning is socially constructed in a particular context and it interacts with the contextual conditions, which have a significant bearing on the processes and the content of learning.

Therefore contextualism serves as a valuable overall theory for understanding manager learning in work. Contextualism is largely derived from the theoretical contribution of Johns (2006). Cappelli and Sherer (1991:56) defined context as “those surroundings associated with phenomena which help illuminate that phenomena (sic), typically factors

associated with units of analysis above those expressly under investigation”. Thus context is characterised as a type of process that has the potential to illustrate how various environmental factors impact on observed phenomena and on organisational characteristics. Johns (2006) views context as a critical driver of manager cognition and argues that context can be regarded as a multi-faceted concept. Context has the potential to have both subtle and powerful effects on managers. Therefore a single aspect of context may not explain behaviour. Context is important because it enables an understanding of situational influences to inform individual-level actions.

Research supports the idea that context influences learning as Sambrook (2005) found that factors at three levels of context were relevant in explaining learning in work: organisational, functional, and individual-level factors. Organisational-level factors included the culture, structure and the organisational leadership. Functional factors focused on how HRD was organised whereas individual factors focused on motivation to learn and the manager’s scope of responsibility.

Thus, contextualism is a broad theoretical perspective that provides significant scope to develop a theoretical perspective on learning in work. Three other points should be made about context. First, it can be understood in terms of occupational and task dimensions that influence learning in work. Second, it can be understood from a social perspective. This accounts for cultural features of the context, both formal and informal, that influence learning in work. Third, context can be understood from the when dimension:

when does learning in work occur and what particular contextual factors were at play? Seen from all these angles, then, contextualism helps researchers provide a detailed picture of manager learning in work. It has particular value in explaining the complex, shifting nature of learning in work.

Activity Theory and learning in work

Activity theory proposes a related but also unique perspective or theoretical lens through which to understand manager learning in work. The theory's basic premise is that learning occurs at a psychological level, through interactions between individuals and the social world and through artefacts, tools and socially derived areas (Engestrom, 2001). Learning is viewed as an activity which involves the interaction of the manager with the work environment and people. Several researchers have found that cooperation and interaction are the main words that employees use to describe learning in work (Collin, 2004; Eraut et al., 1998). Researchers must consider the human activity system, and individuals' behaviours and social relations, when analysing how people learn (Engestrom, 2001).

Activity theory invokes the term "knowing" to describe an active achievement as opposed to "knowledge" which could be regarded as a commodity and a passive concept. Knowing is an activity rather than a thing and is therefore contextualised rather than abstract and reciprocally constructed in an individual-environment interaction (Barab and Duffy, 2000). Individuals can do their knowing within a community that has shared concepts, tools,

technologies rules, and norms (Blackler et al., 1999). This activity system consists of a subject or agent, an object or actions, and the components or tools that mediate the relationship between subject and object (Sadler-Smith, 2006). Thus managers engage in a process of transformation when they translate their activities into new activities, and through this process they develop new expertise.

Engestrom (1987, 1999b, 2001), an advocate of the theory, proposes a seven-stage Expansive Learning Cycle which can be used to understand how the manager is prompted to learn in work. First, the manager experiences a crucial triggering action that leads her or him to question, by criticising or rejecting some aspect of the existing practice of wisdom. Dissatisfied with the situation, the manager needs to define the problem and the issues behind it, and to do so need to carry out some form of analysis which Engestrom describes as historical and in fact empirical. The third stage in the cycle involves modelling the new solution and the fourth involves examining and implementing the new model. This may provoke tensions between old and new ways of working, which may, in the fifth stage, have the capacity to create learning. The penultimate stage involves reflecting on and evaluating the process; here the manager has the capacity to learn from the act of learning. The final stage is focused on consolidation to create new ways of practice.

Some theorists have criticised this schema. For example, Young (2001) argues that contradictions may not always act as a trigger for learning as

managers may initially question but later learn that it is more politically correct not to challenge. Or they may experience cognitive dissonance, experiencing discomfort between the new information and what they already know and believe (Festinger, 1957). When learners are expected to learn something that contradicts what they are already committed to, they are likely to resist this new learning (Dechawatanapaislal and Siengthai, 2006; Crossan et al., 1999; Vince, 2002).

Activity Theory does have theoretical value in the context of this thesis because it proposes that contradictions that occur within activity systems may trigger the potential and need to learn. It postulates that managers will learn through social interaction. Activity theory does not examine the nature of these social capital relationships, but it does acknowledge that such relationships are important.

Situated Learning Theory

Situated Learning Theory represents another perspective that acknowledges the importance of context. Lave and Wenger (1991), who proposed the theory, argued that learning can be viewed as an ongoing social process, based on the notion of participation embedded in the social-cultural school of learning where managers can shape and transform themselves and their environment. The outcome of learning, however, is not determined solely by the learner but by the learner in interaction with the environment: the learner is using the context to learn. According to this theory the manager must

construct social structures and collaborative processes in order to create and develop knowledge. Thus the context may have a direct influence in either supporting or hindering this learning. A manager will construct a shared meaning through collaboration and interaction with others (Sadler-Smith, 2006).

The situated learning theory also involves the concept of a community of practice (COP), which is defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting as an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002: 4). These informal communities are made up of individuals who have common expertise and interests. COPs have the capacity to share knowledge and learning and put their shared knowledge into practice to solve real organisational problems. This notion suggests that learning is socially constructed in the work environment as people engage with real problems. Fenwick (2001) suggests that people tend to conserve and recycle knowledge without challenging or developing it. This creates the possibility of learning incorrect ways of doing things and may result in resistance to change (Tripp, 1996); power imbalances may also prevent some learners from participating in COPs. Further, the theory posits that learning takes place within a social framework of participation in which individuals construct their own meanings through collaboration and interactions with others. This view is echoed by Eraut et al (1998) who concluded that the most important dimensions of learning were learning from others and learning from the challenge of work.

The theory does have limitations, however, in its ability to explain the continuous learning of more experienced learners. It does not sufficiently integrate the individual learner's cultural and historical predilection toward learning and does not explicitly address the issue of power. On the other hand, it resonates to some extent with activity theory as it argues that learning occurs through participation which suggests that managers must create meaning from their context. Thus context will dictate what they learn and how they can learn. Managers learn through participation as they construct and reconstruct learning.

The three theories reviewed here will serve as a theoretical backdrop or lens for interpreting the empirical research. Together, they highlight the complex and shifting nature of learning in work, as context shapes learning in work. They raise doubts about the traditional stream of research on learning, which seeks to find universal principles of learning. They point to various aspects of context that are salient or relevant in gaining a rich understanding of manager learning in work. They are not particularly detailed in specifying the precise contextual factors and their dynamic relationships with learning. It is interesting to note that the contextual factors in studies of learning have generally been selected in somewhat arbitrary ways. This fact highlights the need to test the consistency of the contextual factors that are identified.

Contextual Influences on Manager Learning in Work

Several researchers have identified factors that influence manager learning in work. These include the learner's personal characteristics, among them their technical skills, learning orientation (Riding and Rayner 1998), and motivation to learn (Wlodkowski, 1998), along with their tenure in the job and the nature of the management position. Other researchers have identified contextual factors related to the team, such as its size and tasks, its processes and reflection, and the project type and perceived leader support (Druskat and Kayes, 2000; Ellis et al., 2003). Another stream of research has highlighted the significance of organisational and environmental factors. Among the particular dimensions of organisational context are the organisational structure culture, and learning climate, along with the leadership approach within the organisation, and the organisation's strategic focus. Factors external to the organisations are also highlighted, including the influence of institutional factors, competitive pressures, and environmental forces this partial list illustrates the complex content that is relevant to understanding manager learning in work (Jaffee, 2001). This section of the literature review will address several of these factors

Individual-level factors

A host of individual-level factors are relevant to this study; these include characteristics of individual managers and of the work they conduct on a daily basis. The discussion that follows is by necessity brief, but it will

highlight some of the more salient empirical findings. Four individual characteristics are given particular attention in the literature: the learner's readiness, motivation to learn, self-efficacy for learning, and cognitive style.

Learner readiness means how prepared a manager is to benefit from and learn from a learning situation (Sessa and London, 2006); it is considered to relate to individual differences such as learning orientation and self-efficacy. It may also be a function of a manager's level of moral assurance. Learner readiness provides the manager with a reflective capacity and openness to new learning situations (Davies, 2008). Learner readiness also reflects the individual's possession of fundamental capabilities for the task of management: managers must possess the basic skills to handle technical aspects of the job and build effective relationships before they can most benefit from the learning embedded in these relationships.

This learner readiness, however, is not sufficient in itself. The manager needs to be motivated to engage in the experience and to learn. Motivation to learn is defined as a desire to participate in learning activities; Colquitt et al. (2000) have argued that motivation to learn has a stronger influence on participation to learn than does cognitive ability. Tharenou (2001) found that a strong motivation to learn has helped learners to cope with potential barriers or obstacles in the work environment.

A third relevant characteristic of individual managers is self-efficacy, which Jones (1986) defines as a person's estimate of his or her capacity to

orchestrate performance in a specific task; it is also related to the individual's openness to experiment. High self-efficacy can lead to better performance and learning and individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy will be more likely to set higher goals for themselves (Salas and Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Bandura, 1997). If managers believe that they have the ability to learn, that will have an impact on their ability to learn in work. When self-efficacy is combined with external factors such as rewards (Sadler-Smith, 2006) managers are better able to believe that they can set and achieve their own learning goals.

Fourth, learning and cognitive styles are highlighted as important individual characteristics that influence manager learning in work. Managers differ in their learning styles, though the concept is not particularly well defined. Kolb (1976) and Honey and Mumford (1986) are two leading proponents of learning styles. Kolb argued that individuals learn to solve problems by going through a four-stage cycle from concrete experience to reflective observation to abstract conceptualisation and then active experimentalism. Honey and Mumford later took up Kolb's ideas and developed a typology of styles which they describe as activists, reflectors, theorists, and pragmatists.

It is surprising that few researchers have actually operationalised and used these concepts in research on manager learning. In fact, Sadler-Smith (2006) has highlighted the conceptual confusions between learning styles and cognitive styles. Riding and Cheema (1991) identified the concept of cognitive style, and suggested that cognitive styles are based on a stable set

of dimensions that interact with personality and two cognitive functions: the mode of representation and the mode of organisation. They suggested that managers may be either wholists or analysts. Riding and Sadler-Smith (1997) found that wholists process information simultaneously and have a preference for learning collaboratively; in contrast, analysts like to break down information and process it sequentially, and are less interested in learning collaboratively.

So far this discussion has focused on the types of individual-level factors that are characteristic of individual managers. Another set of individual-level factors focuses on the nature of the tasks that managers perform. Here, researchers highlight several specific dimensions. One is the nature of the problem one is addressing (i.e. project managers versus functional managers (Allen et al., 1988); another is the manager's skills in terms of technical and task knowledge (Andrews and Farris, 1967) and a third is the nature of the managerial work (Mintzberg, 1973). The breadth and depth of a manager's functional, technical, and task knowledge will either facilitate or inhibit the type of learning that takes place in work. Likewise, significant differences exist between managers who have project roles and functional roles. Typically, project managers do not have supervisory responsibilities and must work across the organisation to get things done, while functional managers must operate in more hierarchical relationships. The two work scenarios create different dynamics and opportunities to learn.

Managerial work is generally characterised as fragmented, dynamic, and interpersonally based. For example, Kotter (1988) and Mintzberg (1973) and Buckley and Monks (2008) and have found that managers do not work in a sequential or systematic way. They are pulled in many directions and much of what they do could be described as improvisation. Similarly, managerial jobs are considered to be learning-intensive, which Skule (2004) describes as characterised by strong feedback loops, strong networking, and demanding work conditions. These characteristics ensure that the manager is exposed to a variety of learning situations that are diverse and challenging.

Team-level context

Team-level contextual characteristics represent another important source of learning. The specific characteristics researchers have identified include subordinate experience and ability, task uncertainty, team isolation, and the nature of the work a team undertakes. Team structure is especially relevant to this study, as it focuses on patterns of collaboration and working within the team (Bunderson and Sutcliffe, 2002). Learning within teams is underlined as a form of collaborative learning: individuals learn by passing through the dynamic process of team development. Learning is traditionally conceptualised as process that occurs between individuals; however the team can be a major source of learning as people interact to accomplish a shared task. It is important, however, that the team be purpose-driven or intentional around the learning that occurs because there is no certainty that learning in a team context will pay off (Edmondson, 1999).

The creation of a collaborative social identity is an important source of learning if the team allows for different forms of learning to emerge; then, such collective processes can help managers to develop competence and capability. Wilson et al. (2007) found that individuals can learn in the context of the team, as they interact with peers and subordinates in interactions that are not intended to teach anything.

Organisational and environmental context

Within an organisation, a complex of interacting factors influence manager learning in work. These contextual influences are the organisation's size, structure, culture, strategy, and leadership. Because organisations are viewed as open systems, the organisation's external environment also influences manager learning in work. These five internal dimensions are reviewed in the next few pages, in addition to three environmental factors: the institutional environment, the competitive environment, and the general environment within which the organisation operates.

The size of the organisation is seen as an important influence on both the diversity of learning opportunities and the degree of formality and informality in learning. Large organisations are associated with greater complexity, more varied tasks, and more formalised procedures (Sessa and London, 2006). Managers also have to manage complexity and are likely to be exposed to a variety of novel learning experiences. Organisation size has important

implications for the structural features of the organisation and the extent of projects. Larger organisations tend to have more project managers to engage in more project-type work.

Next, the structure of an organisation can provide more space for managers to learn. It has implications for the size of teams, the extent of knowledge sharing, and the amount of task completion (Ellinger, 2005). Structure may act as either a barrier or facilitator to learning in work; Ellinger (2005) found that several salient structural features were relevant, including functional walls or divisions of labour, silos, divisional business units, strong competition between business units, and turf wars over areas of responsibility.

Salamon and Butler (1990) found that the type of structure had implications for learning opportunities. Structures with considerable hierarchy present opportunities for technical learning whereas structures that rely on matrices and divisions allowed more broad learning and matrices facilitated knowledge sharing (Daft et al., 2010). Similarly, various forms of structural change such as de-layering, outsourcing, and off shoring have significantly increased both the complexity of managerial work and workloads and Mumford and Gold (2004) suggest that these may either enhance or inhibit learning.

A third key characteristic is the organisational culture, based on the owners and managers because owner managers or entrepreneurs have such preponderant roles within the organisation, they will structure it in relation to their own individual characteristics, their values and beliefs, and their

managerial philosophy (Man et al, 2002). The characteristics of the owner or entrepreneur are likely to influence the organisation's level of risk taking, the nature of its decision-making processes, and the level of formality within the organisation (Baron and Ensley, 2006). Entrepreneurial ventures are typically associated with more innovative behaviours, greater levels of risk taking, less consistency in decision making, greater levels of ambiguity in managerial work (Lans et al., 2008) and more interaction with customers and clients.

The culture of an organisation determines what learning behaviours are rewarded and Sambrook (2005) argued that organisational culture can encourage learning in work yet equally it has the capacity to discourage it. Furthermore, Ellinger (2005) found that a positive internal culture focused on learning was influential in encouraging learning in work. An organisation perceived as actively valuing and encouraging learning has the potential to encourage employees to engage in a variety of learning activities.

One particular strand of research that focuses on the cultural dimension is the concept of a learning environment, which refers to both the culture and climate characteristics of the organisation where Baars (2003) identified five dimensions of learning climate that are important to learning in work. There are organisational purpose versus personal development, technical competence versus problem-solving competence, knowledge transfer versus learning from experience, organisational responsibility versus shared responsibility, and on-the-job versus off-the-job learning. Furthermore, Van den Berg and Wilderom (2004) suggested that five dimensions of

organisational culture facilitate learning: the level of autonomy, the external orientation of the culture, the organisation's human resource orientation, the extent of its interdepartmental coordination, and its improvement orientation.

One theory that draws heavily on cultural concepts is that of the learning network. Poell et al (2000) proposed a framework for manager learning environments, as they considered learning to be embedded in the everyday activities of managers. They postulated that managers are part of an organisational learning context, which includes values and climate dimensions. These dimensions shape what and how managers learn, as they are essentially responsible for their own learning. However, they caution that cultural factors may prevent learning.

Turning to the fourth area, namely business strategy, organisations that focus on innovation and quality tend to have stronger learning cultures. Specific learning cultures are also likely to be associated with the strategic positions that Miles and Snow (1978) term the prospector, defender, and analyser. Organisations that use the defender strategy tend to be more conservative, whereas prospector organisations are continually focused on seeking out new opportunities and innovations, and show a healthy attitude to risk taking. Organisations that pursue strategies that require significant interaction with customers will provide managers with greater networking opportunities, and a greater diversity of learning opportunities (Sias, 2009). In contrast, organisations that pursue strategies associated with niche markets, drawing

on the analyser strategy, will be more conservative in their approach to risk taking and learning.

Organisational leadership is the final key internal factor that influences how individuals learn in work, as it has the capacity to foster learning in work. Leaders play both a structural and symbolic role in this context. In addition, Honey and Mumford (1996) highlighted four structural roles for leaders in the context of learning: demonstrating role-model behaviour, acting as a learning champion, facilitating learning opportunities, and building learning into day-to-day work processes. Leaders also provide a symbolic dimension. They have the capacity to construct meaning from both positive and negative events and to learn from them (Bennis and Thomas, 2002). In such a context, leaders have the capacity to exercise a distinctive and compelling voice and to engage others in shared meaning, integrity, and a strong value set and adaptability that can transcend adversity.

Turning now to the external environment, three dimensions are fundamental in shaping what happens in the organisation; these are the general external environment, the institutional environment, and the competitive environment. The general external environment has been described as all the elements that exist outside the boundary of the organisation that have the potential to affect all or part of the organisation (Daft et al., 2010). It can include competitors, the labour market, stock markets, customers, ecommerce, recession, laws, and regulations. These factors may have a direct impact as whether or not the organisation can achieve its goals.

Environments are both complex and dynamic; complexity refers to the number of variables that managers need to interpret, while dynamism refers to the rate of change in the external environment. Managers who must work in highly complex and dynamic environments will have more opportunities for complex learning situations and diversity of learning; those whose environments are less complex but quite stable will have fewer such opportunities (Daft et al., 2010).

Turning now to the institutional environment, Scott (2001) has suggested that three institutional processes influence organisations: regulatory, cognitive, and normative processes. Institutional theory highlights local forces that influence organisational practices; for example, various legislative and regulatory influences may restrict the way an organisation operates, while management and learning practices are likely to be embedded in the values and behavioural norms shared by people in the environment. Moreover, local labour market characteristics may influence the development of institutional views about learning. Therefore cognitive and normative institutional views about learning enfolded in the local context play an important role in how managers perform their work. Thus organisations tend to become embedded in an institutional context through cognitive processes that develop into templates around which groups of organisations converge. These processes confer organisational legitimacy on the type of learning strategies employed (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999).

A third dimension of an organisation's external environment is the competitive environment, in particular the power of customers and suppliers. Organisations are often required to implement new practices or approaches that are more or less imposed by customers and suppliers. Thus customers' requirements for product quality and time of delivery are often opportunities for managers to engage in learning (Sias, 2009). Similarly, suppliers may mandate changes to organisational practices and systems that provide opportunities for managers to learn.

Manager learning in work: Processes and Agents

This review now turns to the various processes and agents that are inherent in manager learning in work. Here, an important distinction is made between learning process and learning agents. Learning processes refer to factors intrinsic to the individual that bring about learning in work. This review will focus on four such factors: mental models (Derry, 1996); questioning, reflection, and the development of technical skills (Marton and Booth, 1997; King and Kitchener, 1994); problem solving (Mumford and Gold, 2004), and learning through experience (McCall, 1988). Learning agents, on the other hand, are individuals who help the manager to learn; they include peers, mentors, coaches, supervisors, networks, professional groups, and communities of practice, along with clients and customers (McCauley and Douglas, 2004; Wenger et al., 2002).

Learning in work: Processes

The first of the learning processes outlined above involves the important concept of mental models, “mechanisms whereby individuals are able to generate descriptions of system purpose and form, explanations of systems functioning and observed system and states and procedures and future system states” (Rouse and Morris, 1986: 35). Mental models typically arise as individuals acquire and integrate essential information through experience. Managers may use visual aids and other heuristics to facilitate the development of mental models where individuals make judgements about complex and new situations by using schemas to filter through information so they can make decisions quickly, and managers may have hierarchically-arranged schemas for goals, roles, and various aspects of the work environment.

Reflection, the second of these processes, is a highly personal cognitive process and has been defined as “as the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently its meaning to the self through the development of inferences; learning is the creation of measuring from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behaviour” (Daudelin, 1996:37). Learning requires reflection on one’s actions. Individuals who participate in the work process will not develop their learning, because work merely involves action; they also need to engage in some kind of cognitive process to reconstruct their experience so they can learn from it. This ability to use reflection requires a shared language so that individuals

can engage in meaningful dialogue and purposeful enquiry (Sadler-Smith, 2006).

Individuals may also seek meaning by understanding what they are learning “through abstraction of meaning, seeing what is being learnt from different perspectives and experiencing change as a person” (Marton and Booth, 1997: 40). If managers are to learn from these experiences it is imperative that they have the opportunity to reflect on them by engaging in critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990a).

Reflection is viewed as a natural process that happens in work; it can be encouraged by using reports, performance review sessions, and problem-solving processes to enhance and analyse learning. Daudelin (1996) suggests that the individual learner can achieve significant insights while jogging, showering, or mowing the lawn. She cautions, however, that managers may not have the time to reflect critically because of the fast-paced nature of their work and they must be reminded to reflect on what they are learning from their modern work practices. Furthermore, Smith (2003a) has described reflection as the meta-cognitive learning strategy of cognitive monitoring, in which managers have the opportunity to think about, reflect on, evaluate, or direct their own thinking.

This type of self-reflective learning promotes an understanding of oneself in the work place and provokes questions about the manager’s identity and the need for self change (Mezirow, 1990a). Individuals who have an opportunity

to reflect can then change the way they perceive themselves and other relationships in work. Managers may not always be aware that they need to review how or what they have learned and may move on to the next project without internalising relevant and beneficial learning experiences. Thus the process of reflection provides managers with tremendous opportunities to learn. Mumford and Gold (2004:105) suggest that the need for conscious reflection about experience is a crucial part of the manager's technical enterprise and skills.

Mumford et al. (2000) proposed a skill-based model of leadership which sees two general skills in complex problem-solving and situation construction as central to leadership effectiveness. Managers use their work context to develop technical administrative and managerial skills, informational skills and problem-solving skills. They acquire technical skills or domain-specific knowledge in their specific areas, through application, observation and mistakes (Sadler-Smith, 2006).

Problem solving represents a third key domain of learning in work. Individuals learn in work by engaging in practical problem-solving strategies which can often be outside of their zone of comfort and areas of expertise. These opportunities may be challenging; sometimes managers are thrown in at the deep end and expected to sink or swim, on a completely new assignment. Managers are generally promoted because of their strong task focus and levels of expertise and some may be reluctant to get involved in work projects where they lack expertise. However, Ohlott (2004) found evidence

that challenging job assignments beset with difficult problems have the capacity to help managers learn in work. A manager can learn from a change in work role where the job responsibilities are informal and the manager must be capable of handling unfamiliar responsibilities (Ohlott, 2004). Challenging work situations have the scope to provide managers with opportunities to try out new behaviours and to reframe the way they look at issues. Work transitions or a change in a work role offer a positive opportunity to learn in work because the manager is exposed to a new situation which may require novel behaviours and different methods of dealing with problems (Nicholson and West, 1998).

Furthermore Stewart (1984) argues that the task-related characteristics of jobs focused on problems and dilemmas can also provide opportunities for individuals to learn in work. A change in the work environment can provide learning opportunities and starting something new can help motivate managers to learn. In order to cope with change, they may have to learn new skills associated with overcoming resistance to change and possibly helping others to do so. Managers can also learn from being given more responsibility; again they need to develop deeper levels of learning skills to cope in these circumstances. They may have to manage others which can be quite challenging or may have to influence upwards which again requires that they significantly develop their skill sets (Stewart, 1984).

An essential component of problem solving is asking questions. Managers need to face situations that do not match their experience and challenge their

own assumptions by asking questions as a tool for reflection and learning. Questions are the most fundamental and effective elements of the problem-solving and reflection process and can facilitate the process of learning from challenging work experience by opening up possibilities and clarifying meaning and can help structure the progress through the four stages of reflection. Another important tool is a learning diary that uses effective questions that have the capacity to prompt the manager to reflect on their learning.

Overall, then, skills are the outcome of experience. They are also time-contingent in that intentional resources vary in day-to-day work and skills may be of varied importance in different learning situations. It is obvious that differences in individual capability and motivation are important in explaining the extent to which managers learn technical and managerial skills in work.

The final learning process to be reviewed here is learning from experience. Researchers have found that some jobs are more developmental than others; different types of work assignments are associated with different kinds of learning (McCauley and Brutus, 1998). Some managers are particularly adept at learning from work experiences, but different managers approach learning from their experience in different ways. A particular dimension of the literature on learning from experience is the emphasis on learning how to learn. Knowing how one learns is based on extensive practice, experience, self-reflection and reflective judgement (Schwandt, 2005).

Gibbons (1990) proposed that learning how to learn is based on three kinds of learning (natural, personal, and formal) and on three aspects of the learning process (type of learning, source of content, and method of instruction). He defined natural learning as spontaneous interactions with the work content, and personal learning as self-directed. In the natural mode, which applies to learning in work, the source of the learning content is the existing work and the method of instruction is described as occurring between accidental influence and the inner state of the manager. In the natural mode managers need to acquire skills that help them learn by interacting with others, from exploring the environment and from practice.

The concept of vicarious learning is also useful in the context of learning from experience. Some people prefer to learn vicariously, that is by observing and copying others rather than through active experience (Manz and Sims, 1981). In situations that lead to learning in work such learning may be planned but is more likely not to be intentional. Bandura (1977) highlighted the importance of internalising the behaviours one observes and Manz and Sims (1981) highlight three learning effects that flow from observation: managers may learn new behaviours, or be inhibited from engaging in particular behaviours, or certain behaviours may be facilitated through observation. The value of observation will depend on the credibility of the model, the success or failure of the model, the vividness and detail of the behaviour that the model displays and how much the managers perceive the model as similar to themselves. Honey and Mumford (1985) found that observing a role model

may also influence the observer's identity; by engaging in identity merging, managers may develop beliefs like those they observe in the model.

Learning from experience also involves narrative, in this sense people learn from others' narrative accounts of their experiences or through fictional accounts of experience (Barry and Elmes 1997). Gabriel (2000) suggested that individuals can become so absorbed in a story that their thoughts and emotions become one with the narrative. Narratives may help to enhance self-awareness and promote teamwork among those making sense of new situations and perspectives. Narratives are essentially learning tools in that they aid memory, facilitate perspective and sense making and may result in changes in the manager's self-concept.

Learning in work: Agents

Managers have access to several kinds of agents, both within and outside the organisation, who can be sources of learning. These types, which include peers, supervisors, mentors, coaches and both external and internal networks (McCauley and Douglas, 2004) will be discussed below.

Glynn and Wrobel (2007) argue that individuals flourish in the domains of both work and personal life and that a person's experiences in one domain are influenced by and in turn influence experiences in most other domains. Thus it is worth considering how individual managers are agents.

As individuals, managers have a prime responsibility to capitalize on learning opportunities in work. The extent to which a manager is self-directed is largely determined by personality factors, motivation, career opportunities and the level of learning ability (Sessa and London, 2006). The self-directed manager will make valid, informed decisions and take appropriate actions in the pursuit of learning (Bateman, 2010). Self-directed learners select goals and make conscious choices about what dimensions of learning to focus on and what strategies and choices to implement. Dubrin (1992) suggests that some individuals undermine their own self-learning efforts by failing to act on things under their control or by acting in subliminal ways. He describes this as self-sabotage or acting against one's best interests despite the presence of other choices. Thus, knowing that one needs to learn new things but failing to do so would be an example of self-sabotage. Schneider (2001) highlights the role of goal-setting, optimism, realism and being proactive as important behaviours of a manager who is self directed.

This review now turns to other agents of learning in work, beginning with peers. Peer relationships provide a variety of functions for managers in the context of learning in work. Sias (2009) suggests three types of peer relationships, based on how they communicate with the manager. Information peer relationships are more superficial, usually showing low levels of intimacy, self disclosure and trust; the issues under discussion are confined to work-related topics. Collegial peer relationships involve moderate levels of emotional support, trust, intimacy and self-disclosure; individuals in this type of relationship will discuss a broader range of topics including work

and non-work issues. Special peer relationships are characterised by high levels of trust, intimacy, self-disclosure and support. Managers who have all three types of relationships will benefit considerably. Hill et al. (1989) found that individuals derived considerable benefits from such relationships, especially when they had all three types. The nature of the relationships will also influence the type of information shared with the manager; Sias (2009) found that managers who had higher proportions of information peer relationships reported receiving lower quality information than managers with a higher proportion of collegial peers. Collegial peers were more valuable because the information they provided was more accurate, useful and timely than information derived from more superficial and role-bounded information peers. Sias and Cahill (1998) found that work-related problems can bring peers into closer relationships with each other. Their communication about the problem will be more frequent and more intimate.

The second type of agent for learning at work is the supervisor. A manager's relationship with his or her boss has important implications for learning in work. This is especially true for new managers, who may experience uncertainty, misunderstanding and stress. However, long-serving managers also continue to experience various types of uncertainty and Weiss (1977) found that individuals learn managerial and supervisory behaviours from their bosses and tend to imitate these behaviours in their own roles. The boss is also important from the perspective of information exchange: Jablin (2001) found that individuals are more likely to provide information to those who are willing to provide information to them. Therefore, bosses are more likely to

receive quality information from subordinates when they also provide them with quality information.

Bosses are also the most important source of performance feedback for managers (Fedor, 1991). This may consist of day-to-day informal feedback provided in everyday conversation, or formal evaluation. In this context it is important that feedback be constructive. Ashford (1993) found that negative feedback led to more learning, but that managers are less effective in providing negative feedback. Providing destructive feedback, however, has no particular benefits as it undermines learning and creates problems with confidence (Steelman and Rutkowski, 2004).

A third type of agent for learning at work is the mentor or coach. These are specific types of relationships; the mentor or coach functions as a guide to promote learning. These relationships may be formal or informal. Formal relationships involve assigned pairings or relationships between an experienced and knowledgeable mentor or coach and a less experienced employee. Informal mentoring and coaching relationships, which are not formally assigned, may develop naturally between the parties. Kram (1985) suggested that such relationships last as long as the parties involved derive significant positive benefits. Three particular findings in the literature relate to informal mentoring and coaching relationships. First, such relationships are more likely to occur between managers who are visible to one another and engage in frequent regular communication. Second, managers who are coached and mentored experience significant benefits compared to those

who are not. Third, informal mentoring may have more value in the context of learning.

A fourth type of agent for learning in work is the customer or client. Such relationships represent a unique source of learning for managers, as they are defined by the boundary of the organisation. Typically characterised by instrumental exchange, they tend to form initially for more instrumental or utilitarian purposes and are unlikely to have affective dimensions in the initial stages (O'Toole and Donaldson, 2000). Relationships with customers or clients can be distinguished by their strength and whether they include trust, loyalty, information sharing, flexibility and adaptation. O'Toole and Donaldson (2000) identified a variety of customer relationships that varied in strength, which they define as loyalty and behaviour strength. Paulin et al. (1997) examined relationship strength and found four key dimensions or relational norms: role integrity, communication, flexibility and solidarity. Relationships that possessed these norms to a significant degree were more effective. Particular features of the organisation explain the impacts of customer relationships from a learning perspective. Martin and Bush (2003) highlighted the salience of organisational climate, in particular characteristics such as decentralised decision-making, job security for managers, open communication and extent of empowerment.

Evaluation and Synthesis of the Literature

The literature on manager learning in work is fragmented and underdeveloped; it suffers from a lack of empirical studies and is even weaker in theoretically guided research. Three particular observations can be made about the current state of the literature. First, research on learning in work and manager learning focuses almost exclusively on whether the learning resulted in improvement. Thus the dominant preoccupation is with performance rather than learning. These studies are not particularly sensitive to timing issues; often the measurements are taken so early that they may determine the outcome that is being studied. Second, the majority of research in this field is not based on clearly defined theoretical perspectives that are appropriate to the types of research being undertaken. Nor has the literature systematically addressed the emergence of contextualism as a significant perspective in research on organisational behaviour. Researchers find it difficult to capture context and context requires methodological approaches that are sensitive to its various dimensions. Third, little research is based on multiple methods or a longitudinal approach; cross-sectional designs cannot effectively capture context or the personal trajectories of managers.

Manager learning in work is persual as it may occur through radical discontinuous jumps as well as through gradual linear change. It may involve gains as well as losses; managers may have to let things go as well as preserve what is important. Thus research about manager learning in work

must be sensitive to potential boundary conditions. Organisations possess unique conditions that may be relevant to the extent to which results derived in one organisation can be generalised to another.

In order to conduct research on manager learning in work it is necessary to identify the issues to be investigated. First the three broad theoretical perspectives of contextualism, situated learning theory and activity theory will be used as a backdrop to interpret the findings of the study. These perspectives have several features in common. They highlight that context, social interaction and collective processes are fundamental to understanding learning in work. Context is multi-dimensional and operates on several levels including the operational and task dimensions, the social dimensions and the when dimensions. Contextualism focuses primarily on describing and theorising context. Activity theory, on the other hand, is a frame which argues that managers are socio-culturally embedded actors. The unit of analysis is mobilised activity directed at a goal. It acknowledges that cultural and contextual factors mediate human activity. Activities are viewed as goal-directed actions that people take consciously and such activity is highly dynamic and constantly changing. Finally, situated learning theory posits that learning is unintentional and situated within an authentic context and culture; therefore, learning must take place in authentic contexts, settings and situations that would normally involve learning, social interaction and collaboration and essential components of situated learning.

The research presented in Chapter 4, the results, will focus on how the managers describe learning in work in terms of processes and agents. Descriptions of the individual work, team and organisational context will be utilised to understand those processes and agent influences. The overall research is influenced by a social constructionist theory of research, which conceptualises reality as socially constructed and dynamic, involving human behaviour and human interaction. It seeks to find out how managers socially construct their organisational context and realities such as performance expectations and strategic priorities. Social constructionist theory has the potential to broaden conceptualisations of learning in work (Berger and Luckmann, 1996).

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the study's philosophical and theoretical stance and to explain the logic for choosing the research approach. The key objective of this research is to investigate how dimensions of context can influence the ways that managers learn in work and the processes that facilitate this learning. The research design is described in order to show how the methodological strategies being employed are relevant to the objective.

Research Question

This study examines two key dimensions of the way that context influences learning in work. First it investigates how various dimensions of context can influence the ways that managers learn in work. Second, it explores the processes and agents that managers use to learn in a financial organisation which is continually exposed to complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity. This focus was derived from the need to better understand the influence of context on learning in work.

Qualitative Research Methodology: Theoretical justification

A qualitative research paradigm was chosen for this study because it allows for the interpretation of the thoughts and feelings the study respondents

expressed in their learning diaries and interviews. The main focus is on interpreting their perceptions rather than seeking quantitative proof (Silverman, 1993; Sinclair, 1997; Mason, 2002). As this study seeks to capture context, it does not aim to test any detailed pre-formulated hypotheses; it sets out to examine the reality of the world from the perspective of the individual respondent and aims “to describe social systems, relations or social events” (Sarantakos, 2005: 10). Therefore it was considered unsuitable to adopt an objectivist/positivist lens which would emphasise logical empiricism; a major disadvantage of empiricism is that it fails to take into account the impact that context has on organisational behaviour (Johns, 1991).

Furthermore quantitative researchers may be so desperate to achieve generalizable results that they view context-free research as more scientific (Blair and Hunt, 1986), but what is pivotal for this study is analysing the effects of context. There are major dangers inherent in denying the importance of individual subjectivity (McGrath, 2008). Furthermore, to understand interactions between persons and situations it is also important to understand those situations (Johns, 2006); therefore it is impossible to develop insights into how managers learn in work without first understanding the context in which the learning takes place. A great strength of qualitative research is that it cannot be neatly pigeon-holed and reduced to a simple prescriptive set of principles; that is, it offers the researcher the potential to explore issues in greater depth (Mason, 2002).

Qualitative methodologies have the capacity to “celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity rather than being embarrassed or inconvenienced by them” and they can have the capacity to put forward explanations as to “how things work in particular contexts” (Mason, 2002: 1). Criticisms of qualitative research allude to its being unsystematic, causal, anecdotal, or even illustrative, but these negative labels are based on a lack of understanding of the logic behind the approach which is focused on explaining the overarching significance of context.

Furthermore the selection of a qualitative design for this research offered a “theoretical lens to facilitate inquiry in a natural setting which in turn allows for sensitive inductive data analysis which has the potential to combine the voices of the participants with the reflexivity of the researcher” (Creswell, 2007: 27). It allows the researcher to begin with assumptions that facilitate what Creswell calls an inquiry into human problems and to examine the character or nature of things without focusing on quantity. Creswell’s (2007) epistemological stance of social constructivism in conjunction with interpretivism (Mertens, 1998) is relevant here as it asserts that the multiple realities created by individuals influence the understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In this sense it follows that managers have the capacity to construct meaning by engaging in the work context and to make sense based on a historical and social perspective by engaging with others.

Similar studies using qualitative methodologies

Several researchers have conducted similar qualitative studies on the influence of context in informal learning and workplace learning; they are summarised in Table 3.1. Such studies have become reasonably commonplace since the late 1990s, with an increasing surge of interest in the concept of context and its impact on learning. There is an increased interest in the role of organisational context on learning and researchers such as Ashton (2004) and Skule (2004) suggest that there is a need to develop and understanding of the ways in which context shape and interact with learning. This is particularly important in relation to how managers learn. There is a paucity of research which focuses on how managers learn in work and these studies are focused on learners in general. However it is evident that the manager's job provides a rich source of learning in work and this area is significantly under researched. The methodological tools vary, with a preference for semi-structured interviews, generally complemented by organisational documentation and focus groups.

Leslie et al (1998) identified the fact that contextual factors played a key role in encouraging informal learning yet did not define or identify contextual factors. Sambrook and Stewart (2000) examined factors influencing learning in work yet did not define these influencing factors or the effect of these on formal and informal learning (Ellinger, 2005). Furthermore, Ashton (2004) examined how organisational structure affected learning in work yet did not define structure. Ellinger (2005) argues that it is vital to examine

organisational contextual factors in a more comprehensive manner. Sambrook (2005) proposed a framework to examine influencing contextual factors in work related learning by integrating findings from two empirical studies and proposed a framework of contextual factors influencing work-related learning at organisational, functional and individual levels (Sambrook, 2005). However, as mentioned previously there is a need to conduct research on how managers learn in work as this is an under examined area of enquiry. Lohman (2000) explored the inhibitors of informal learning in the workplace and Eraut (2004) described work context and the main factors that influenced learning within that context. Ashton (2004: 51) investigated the impact of organisation structure and practices on workplace learning and skills formation by examining how the “learning processes embedded in the workplace shaped organisation decisions and precedence.”

Ellinger's (2005) study on contextual factors that influence informal learning in a learning-oriented organisation identified several positive and negative organisational factors and used 13 semi-structured interviews with key respondents in one case company. In addition to identifying context as an influence in work-related learning, these works also identified the facilitators and inhibitors of learning. One of the main deficiencies in these studies is their inability to extrapolate data at a more general level; they do, however, do provide valued and relevant information.

Table 3.1 Similar studies on learning on context with a qualitative research orientation

Author	Country	Methodology	Topic
Sambrook and Stewart (2000)	UK	Qualitative, interpretative paradigm interviews	Research factors that influence learning in UK context
Lohman (2000)	US	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative interpretive paradigm • 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews 	Inhibitors of informal learning in the workplace
Eraut (2004)	UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative interpretative design • Semi-structured interviews 	Factors inhibiting learning in the workplace
Ellinger (2005)	US	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative interpretive design • Case study with small sample size • 13 semi-structured interviews 	Contextual factors influencing workplace
Lans et al. (2008)	Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical incident interviewees recalling a business opportunity pursued in the business • In-depth semi-structured interviews 	Influence of environment on entrepreneurial learning among small business owners

Framework for research design

Research design has been described as the interplay between the purposes of the research, the theory behind the research, the questions employed, the approach to the data analysis and the sampling strategy (Robson, 2002). Yet the focus of this research is primarily exploratory; although pre-structured research designs are generally considered too confining for this type of enquiry, Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend a conceptual framework for the less experienced researcher. A conceptual framework is described as

presenting a “theory about what is going on, what is happening and why,” and is “particularly useful when expressed in diagrammatic form” (Robson, 2002: 63).

The key challenge for this research was to devise a robust conceptual framework in order to support an appropriate methodological approach for the investigation of how managers learn in work. While learning has been examined in the literature in detail, it is a very broad topic and quite generic in nature, also it is difficult to locate a clear definition of managerial learning. Initially, consideration was given to using social capital theory and various individual learning theories such as cognitive learning theory, experiential learning theory, social learning theory and informal learning to examine this concept. However there is a strong notion of acquisition centred on these psychological theories of learning which are based solely on the outcomes of learning and they fail to take into account the impact of context on learning. The literature uses numerous terms to describe the work context as an important site for learning and concepts such as workplace learning, work-based learning, and work -related learning and on the job learning abound, yet these terms were viewed as being too physically limiting to describe entrepreneurial learning (Lans et al, 2008).

In order to address these theoretical challenges, it was appropriate to examine a number of pertinent theories in order to create a robust theoretical lens to gain an insight and understanding of learning in work such as Contextualism, Activity Theory, and Situated Learning. These theories were

deemed to be of key value because they took a contextual view of learning where the manager uses social processes to collaboratively develop expertise to transform work practices and activities into desirable learning outcomes. The theory of contextualism is pivotal to any research of this nature as its basic premise is that all human enquiry occurs within contexts (Johns, 2006) therefore it is reasonable to assume that managers may absorb learning as they interact with the context of the work environment and external macro environments. In this study, it is argued that an individual's learning in work is influenced by context and it is not possible to understand how managers learn without taking the work context into account.

Activity theory was deemed suitable as a theoretical lens to examine how managers learn in work as it conceptualizes learning as derived from the cultural-historical school of psychology where learning is viewed as an essential part of human activity and is based on the notion of learning through the process of construction (Vygotsky, 1978; Leont'ev, 1978, 1981). This Vygotskian-derived constructivist theory is championed by Billet (2002a) who argues that learning is derived through interactions between individuals and the social world, including others. Learning in this respect is viewed as an activity which involves the interaction of the manager with the work environment and people. In fact, a number of researchers discovered that cooperation and interaction are the main words used by employees to describe learning in work (Collin, 2004; Eraut et al., 1998). Therefore there is a need to take the human activity system, the individual's behaviour and their

social relations into account when analysing how people learn (Engestrom, 2001).

The emerging view of learning is that it is stimulated by social interaction and can be shaped by both the learner and the environment in this respect. Situated Learning Theory was considered relevant to this research as it posits that learning is generated through interaction with significant others in the work context (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Learning is viewed as an ongoing social process based on the notion of participation where managers can shape and transform themselves and their environment. However the outcome of learning is not based solely on the learner it is also based in the environment in which the learner is based. The manager must construct social structures and collaborative processes in order to create and develop knowledge and context may have a direct influence on supporting or hindering this learning. This theory has direct links to contextualism and to activity theory in that it argues that learning occurs through participation yet learning also has the potential to occur when the manager needs to adjust and even transform the environment in which they work. In this sense Managers are required to acquire knowledge in work by participation and construction by constructing and reconstructing learning.

While these three theories may not offer an overarching explanation of how managers learn in work they do offer a way forward in the analysis by offering the argument that contradictions that occur within activity systems may trigger the potential and the need to learn.

Qualitative approaches can generate large amounts of data which have the potential to overwhelm the researcher. This challenges them to process and analyse the data into a coherent pattern; if the research design involves a conceptual framework, it can serve as a robust qualitative methodological guide to support the researcher in distilling the essence of the data (Robson, 2002; Creswell, 2007).

The Setting

The organisation in which the research is based is a financial services company, headquartered in Ireland. Founded in 1981 by an entrepreneur and started with ten people, it now has 910 employees in Ireland and almost 1,300 worldwide. In addition to Ireland and the UK, the organisation operates offices in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the Middle East and Hong Kong. It also manages several contact centres. The organisation is closely involved with the community where it is located and has been an integral part of regional development since its inception, with 800 employees currently based in the region. The organisation fosters a culture of making things happen quickly whilst building solutions and partnerships that last. This approach is important in a fast-moving business world where technology, processes and systems are constantly changing and improving.

The organisation has seized business opportunities by scanning the environment for partnering opportunities and has experienced and managed quick growth and has become diverse and experienced as a business. It has

continually risen to business challenges and has pioneered state-of-the-art technology which it manages in-house. The organisation espouses the values of Commitment, Community and Innovation; to make it agile enough to respond quickly to business opportunities, it is made up of nineteen different business units.

Sampling Strategy

The researcher had access to the organisation in this research study because she was engaged to work on various projects related to change management and performance management. This organisation was interesting because of its strong entrepreneurial approach and the fact that it had limited exposure to formal management development initiatives.

The researcher approached several senior-level managers, including the human resource director and the chief financial officer, to seek their interest and agreement to partake in the study. After indicating their commitment to the study, these two managers agreed to work with the researcher to agree on selection criteria for respondents. The key issue was to identify managers who had accumulated experience of learning in work through working in the organisation over a period of time and who actively seek out learning opportunities in work. These managers would be seen as people who had contributed greatly to finding and developing innovative business opportunities for the organisation. The respondents represented various business units in the organisation and their extensive experience working

with the organisation gave them a robust understanding of how the organisation worked and a rich tapestry of learning experience to draw on. The researcher agreed a protocol of full confidentiality and agreed that none of the information would be shared with any other person in the organisation.

In order to ensure access to respondents and in response to acute issues of cost and time, respondents who met pre-specified criteria were sought intentionally (Domegan and Fleming, 2003). The decision was made to use a subjective, non-probability sampling strategy focused on complementing the interpretivist nature of the work undertaken (Bryman, 2004). Initially, 30 managers from different business units within the organization were selected. This sample was narrowed down to ten to ensure that the sample chosen was reflective of the organization structure; gatekeepers within the organisation were consulted on this choice and on the numbers and the stratification of the sampling strategy. The managers chosen for this study were those individuals who demonstrated the propensity to learn in work. When work challenges required new skills sets and competencies these managers were willing to push themselves outside their zone of comfort to learn. McCracken (2004) examined the concept of propensity to participate in learning activities which explores the likelihood to managers partaking in learning which goes beyond the basic notion of capability or capacity to learn. His model identifies intrinsic factors (perceptual, emotional, motivational and cognitive) and extrinsic factors (organisational culture, management development, culture and physical resource factors). The entrepreneurial nature of this organisation viewed learning as part of everyday work and

learning is viewed as a side effect of the work activities undertaken by these managers (Doornbos et al 2009). These managers demonstrated a propensity to learn in the recent past and had been involved in projects that necessitated the learning of new skills and competencies in work. These learning opportunities varied from setting up and running overseas projects on the Middle-East and Europe to managing redundancy programmes, acquisitions and setting up new businesses. The managers scanned the environment for interesting work assignments and the entrepreneurial nature of the organisation created these learning opportunities on a regular as the organisation culture was learning orientated out of necessity.

The managers were invited to participate in the study and were profiled in terms of their age, work experience, educational background and the length of time they had been in a management role and the time worked in the company. It was important to ensure that the sample size was small and manageable, taking into account constraints such as time, stress and money (Cohen et al., 2000). The data used to complete this study was gathered in the organisation over a period of 18 months and the researcher was granted a high degree of flexibility in terms of access to the site. High levels of access were vital and it was important at the outset to secure agreement on this from the relevant gatekeepers (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2000). The managers regarded as high potential employees and these were deliberately selected because it was felt that they had increased exposure to learning in work. However, on reflection it might have been more appropriate to interview a cross section of managers to establish how they accessed opportunities to learn in work.

Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were chosen in combination with solicited diaries as methodologists recommend using more than one strategy for collecting data (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). Consideration was given to using observation in conjunction with the interview and the learning diary as there are limitations to using these tools as the research focuses solely on what the respondent reports. Patton (1990) suggests that direct observation of the phenomenon under investigation may be the best research method. He describes the advantages of direct observation as follows: the researcher is better able to capture and understand the context, has less reliance on prior conceptualisations and has the capacity to observe things that may escape the awareness of the individual combined with the opportunity to learn things about the respondent that they would be unwilling to talk about at the interview. Interviews report on the respondent's perceptions yet observation allows for the researcher to contribute their own perceptions to the data and can allow them to arrive at a more comprehensive view of the setting being studied and avoid second hand reports of interviews.

There were major advantages to using observation for this research as the researcher is a highly trained observer. However this option was discussed with the relevant gatekeepers and they believed that the manager would become self-conscious and that there was a distinct possibility that the manager would behave differently under these conditions. The organisation in question is fast paced and entrepreneurial in nature and there was an

objection put forward that these managers could resent being observed as it had the potential to interfere with their work practices. The managers would not be familiar with observational research tactics and may be wary or distrustful which could also lead to blocks to participation. While the managers responded well to the notion of being interviewed, it was assumed that observation would be regarded as intrusive and invasive. Senior management in particular were anxious to ensure that the managers working time was not interfered with in any way.

Interviews have the potential to generate detailed insights into how the respondent learns in the context of their work (Mason, 2004) as they can capture the respondents' meanings and interpretations in a natural setting (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Sarantakos, 2005; Mason, 2004) and provide the researcher with the opportunity to probe their answers. Interviewing also makes it possible to generate knowledge, by gaining insights into the respondents' perceptions of reality in order to elicit evidence of how they understand the topic being researched (Easterby-Smith et al., 2001). Equally, the solicited diary has the potential to allow respondents time to reflect on their learning.

The semi-structured interview

Interviews are particularly useful in helping researchers to gather data on the participants' perspectives, as individuals can construct very insightful language and meanings; less structured interviews give the respondents

freedom to express their views (Baker, 2003; Gill and Johnson, 2001; Mason, 2004). The purpose of qualitative interviewing “is to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn their terminology and judgements and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences” (Patton, 2002: 348). This approach made it possible to gain insight into the managers’ perspectives on how they learned in work; this made the interviews an effective instrument for capturing these views.

Various types of interview have been described, including the structured interview, the semi-structured interview and the unstructured interview (Silverman, 2006; Kumar, 2005). The structured interview was deemed too formal as it is used predominantly to collect quantifiable data and requires the use of standardized questions which may have been too restrictive for this study. The unstructured interview is described as informal (Robson, 2002); while it can be extremely useful for exploratory research of this nature, it requires that the researcher has in-depth skills to guide the respondents.

Having examined the types of interviewing strategies available, the decision was made to use the semi-structured interview approach in order to ensure that the lines of enquiry were standard across all interviews. The advantage of this approach over the other interview types is “that it makes sure that the interviewer /evaluator has carefully decided on how best to use the limited time available in an interview situation”; it also “increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection methods somewhat systematic for each respondent” (Patton, 2002: 343). It also allows

the researcher to anticipate and close logical gaps in the data and allows the interview process to remain conversational and situational (Patton, 2002). This approach can provide a guide in relation to specific topic areas and can give the researcher the opportunity to explore issues and probe for more detail where relevant. This strategy was useful in that it offered respondents the opportunity to respond in their own words and express their own personal perspectives (Patton, 2002; Zikmund, 2000; Bryman, 2004).

Knowledge can be interpreted as contextual, situational, or interactional and the researcher must gain an in-depth understanding of how respondents learn in work by getting their situated and contextual accounts and experience (Mason, 2002). Because of its wider scope, the semi-structured interview allows respondents some flexibility to describe experiences rather than subject them to the rigidity of a sequence of questions. It also provides them opportunities to further develop ideas they might not have taken into account in a pre-devised schedule (Denzin, 1970; Silverman, 1993). The researcher using a semi-structured interview has the flexibility to probe further and to really “explore what the other person thinks (Patton, 2002). The objective of the interview is to find out from respondents about things that cannot be observed directly. The qualitative researcher simply cannot observe everything; this makes it important to ask the respondent questions to determine their perspective on how they learn in work. In this study, the interviews were not rigid; each theme was introduced in an open-ended way (Maylor and Blackman, 2005) and each theme had a subset of questions for

probing to improve clarity and better understand the respondents' responses (Bryman, 2004; Jankovicz, 2005).

Interview guide questions

The approach of using a general interview guide was applied in the interviews. Patton (2002) describes the advantage of the interview guide as providing topics for exploration to be examined in detail. This approach facilitates a more comprehensive and systematic analysis of the knowledge being accumulated by limiting the issues to be explored (Patton, 2002). This approach offered an advantage in this study as it provided a framework for developing and sequencing questions in order to more deeply analyse the issues that managers raised. The challenge was to ask questions in a clear open-ended way that would let the managers respond appropriately without causing confusion (Robson, 2002; Bryman, 2004; Kumar, 2005). The questions were based on the themes identified in the literature review and were divided into five sections.

Section one focused on biographical and demographic questions to provide more detailed insights into the research. The questions focused on age, role and levels of education and training and development history, together with career history and promotion opportunities within the organisation.

Section two aimed to find out two things: how the organisation assisted or prevented managers from learning in work and whether the organisational

culture and climate facilitated that learning. This was based on research conducted by Sambrook (2005) and Ellinger (2005) on the contextual factors that facilitated and impeded learning in work. In Section Two, then, the first question focused on the circumstances that facilitate learning at work, the second on examples of useful learning experience at work and the third on how the manager's job created opportunities to expand learning. As the organisation was undergoing serious change initiatives, questions four focused on the importance of the culture in terms of encouraging learning and question five focused on the impact that this organisation change strategy had on the managers' learning.

Question six of Section two focused on how the managers felt when they were plunged into circumstances outside of their zone of expertise and control and how they learnt from these situations. Question seven asked whether the organisation provided opportunities to allow managers to learn in work by providing work-based assignments, cross-functional team projects, promotional opportunities, or other strategies called acting up or shadowing. Question eight focused whether they had been promoted in the job. Question nine asked how issues in the organisation inhibited learning.

Section three focused on gaining insights into the developmental relationships that assisted managers in learning in work. Questions one through seven focused on how managers learned from others in the job. How did they approach others to learn from them in the work environment and

how did they use their peers, coaches, mentors and direct boss to learn in the job?

Section four focused on how the managers used self-regulatory learning strategies to learn in work. Among the key issues here were how managers coped with stressful circumstances at work and how they learned from them. Moreover, how did they control their emotions and deal with failure and how and what did they learn in these different circumstances? What motivated them to learn in these situations and how did they maintain their motivation?

All the interviews were conducted at the research site, partly to facilitate scheduling and also to capture their responses in a naturalistic setting. A suitable environment was arranged to host the interviews and recording equipment made it possible to pay full attention to the respondents (Cresswell, 2007). The interviews were typed up by the researcher and the transcripts were given back to the managers to make sure that the material had been recorded accurately.

Limitations of the semi-structured interview

The main challenge for qualitative researchers is to ensure that they avoid inventing data or misrepresenting the participants' perspectives. Mason (2002) states that a transcription is only one part of the interaction and that it is not possible to record non-verbal aspects of the discussion. Even the most effective transcriptions do not lead to complete objectivity so it is imperative

that the researcher operate with a moral practice throughout the process (Mason, 2002).

Once again these managers were offered complete assurance that all their views would be kept confidential and that no other member of the organisation would have access to the outputs of the data. Qualitative interviewing is not an easy approach to conducting research as it is difficult and complex and poses intellectual, practical, social and ethical challenges; it can, however, be a useful method of identifying the central anthropological components of social reality (Mason, 2002) and some see it as the gold standard of qualitative research (Silverman, 2006).

In this study, every effort was made to maintain ethical standards in relation to implementing this research strategy and the research instruments were designed by adhering to strict guidelines with an emphasis on maintaining the professionalism and the neutrality of the research process.

Solicited research diaries

Semi-structured interviews have the tendency to focus on immediate perceptions rather than changes over time; to provide a different perspective, solicited diaries can elicit narratives about how people learn in context within their work. They also have the potential to reflect the respondents' perceptions of learning in work and to show how these develop and change

over a given period of time. A study on risk perception contrasting the findings from diaries with data gained through interviews, suggests the need to use a multi-method approach to achieve a more rounded picture. Solicited diaries were used in this research because they allowed the respondents time to reflect on how they learned in work (Corti, 1993).

Diaries have been used in research on time-use (Juster and Stafford 1985) on consumer expenditure and on health (Hyland 1993; Coxon 1993; Stone et al., 2003; Alaszewski, 2006). They were also used to examine the foot and mouth disease crisis in Cumbria in conjunction with in-depth interviews and focus groups. Otherwise, diaries have not been used commonly by qualitative researchers (Elliott, 1997). Compared to the information gleaned from a questionnaire, however, diaries let respondents offer a more comprehensive view of their activities, as they can record their learning events as they happen in the work context; this is especially important as that context is not often directly accessible by the researcher. In this study, it was difficult to get direct access to the work context so the diary was useful as it gave the respondents the flexibility to record their observations on their own time. The diaries are also a means to foster reflection and self assessment.

Diary keepers can approach the task in different ways depending on their learning styles; some take time to reflect and others just focus on recording events (Elliott, 1997). It was apparent that some respondents enjoyed the opportunity to use the diary to reflect on their learning in work and wrote interesting accounts of how they learned in work; others, however, were less

eloquent and made rushed and perfunctory comments without offering much thought or analysis. Diaries may be beneficial for less articulate people in that they may offer the advantage of time to reflect on issues but diaries are only useful when compiled by respondents who have reasonable standards of literacy.

This study focused on the analysis of solicited dairies which Bell (1998: 72) defines as “an account produced specifically at the researcher’s request by an informant or informants”; they “are written knowing that others will have access to them and are therefore negotiated between the researcher and the respondent.” In this study, the respondents discussed this process in advance and agreed to engage in it; this encouraged some of them to invest the time to fill them out because they knew that their thoughts would reach a wider audience. The longitudinal approach of the diary allows for flexibility and variation in the research process.

Once initiated, the respondents were invited to keep a diary over a six-month period, to record their views on how they learned in work. The diarists/respondents were given a prepared diary, including a guide to keeping it and a diary directive which provided a series of questions or prompts designed to elicit their thoughts on how they learned in work. According to the diary- keeping protocol developed by Corti (1993), respondents were advised that they were free to complete the diary in a way that was most comfortable for them. The diaries span the period between August 2008 and January of 2009.

The unique characteristics of the diary data was that it allowed the managers to generate information that was descriptive and reflective in nature and gave them an opportunity to record events as they occurred in work. These contributions offered insights of a temporal nature as they were written over a period of time (Alaszewski, 2006b). The semi structured Interviews used in this research on the other hand took place as once off events and in this respect the longitudinal nature of the diary offered flexibility and variation in the information being generated. Equally, the interviews had the potential to be limiting and restrictive in nature because they had the propensity to suffer from focusing on a particular angle or line of response from both the researcher and the respondent (Hawkes et al, 2009). The interview could also suffer from retrospective censorship and they rely on memory and may elicit false construction whereas the diary can offer more complete and accurate data collection (Elliott, 1997) and can document change over time.

The diaries in this research study gave the managers time to reflect and an opportunity to give a more in-depth view of how long they learn in the context of their work. These diaries did allow the managers the opportunity to structure their thoughts despite the fact that they reported them as being time consuming. It was found that the diary did demand commitment from the manager and was not an easy method of gathering information. The questions in the diary differed in some ways from the questions in the interview and this posed certain challenges for the analysis of the data. On reflection it may have been more appropriate to allow the diary questions to reflect the interview questions yet the researcher was keen to ensure that the

respondent would not be overwhelmed by the number of questions in the diary. It was considered appropriate that fewer questions would encourage the respondent to spend more time on reflection and elaboration.

Data analysis of the solicited diary

The diaries were submitted in handwritten form and were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All the respondents completed the diaries in their own way; they described their perceptions of learning in work, what triggered opportunities for learning in work, the impact it had on their working lives and how it changed and developed over time.

The framework used to guide the diary writing included three elements. The first was the trigger or causative element that helped them learn in work. Many respondents described learning situations in work and what triggered them and how their approach to work had changed and developed over time. The second element was the learning itself and how it benefitted them. The third was the impact of this learning: associated changes in behaviour reported as results of the learning incident.

Diary questions

The first question in the learning diary asked the respondents to identify the significant learning that occurred as a result of learning in work. The organisation was quite demanding of its managers and expected them to

work outside their zone of comfort and expertise; thus this question sought to understand their perspective on the learning that had accrued from involvement in challenging projects by giving specific examples. Question two challenged them to provide a specific description of their learning. The focus here was to find out how they learned in collaboration with others. Question three asked about their reactions to the learning situation. Questions four asked them to identify the processes they used in order to learn and develop in the job. Question five asked them to give specific examples of learning from mistakes. Questions six focused on what they learned about themselves as solo learners. Question seven asked them how they learned from peers in work. Question eight asked them if they used mentors to learn in work. Question nine asked them to reflect on the culture of the organisation and how it facilitated learning in work. These diaries were hand written by the respondents and typed up by the researcher to ensure that all information was legible.

Limitations of the diary

The learning diary has some disadvantages. First, it relies heavily on the respondents' interpretations; this has the potential to distort the purity of the outcome as it relies on recall after the event. Second, it has the potential to be regarded as a time-consuming burden (Barclay, 1996); some respondents could regard it as a major imposition and not be disposed to filling it out. Barclay also suggests that respondents with certain learning styles may have

different attitudes to filling it out, with activists and pragmatists less likely to see the value of the diary than reflectors or theorists.

In order to limit the overreliance on interpretation, it was decided to structure the diary by using specific questions. However, Cohen et al (2000) argue that this structuring process can lead to bias by its very nature and that the learning diary can be selective and lack objectivity and that its validity is not always obvious.

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method was employed to generate a list of first-order concepts associated with how managers learn in the job. Patton (2002: 491) describes constant comparative analysis as constituting “a central feature of grounded theory development. Making theoretical comparisons systematically and creatively engages the analyst in raising questions and discovering properties and dimensions that might be in the data by increasing researcher sensitivity.” Maykut and Morehouse (1994) say the researcher must understand more about the phenomenon under investigation and describe what was learned with a minimum of interpretation; thus it is important to stay close to the participant’s feelings, thoughts and actions as they broadly relate to the specific focus of enquiry. These researchers argue that the constant comparative method of data analysis devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and refined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is a robust way to conduct an inductive analysis of qualitative data. Furthermore Patton (2002)

argues that the researcher should become an expert in the substantive area, in order to integrate new incidents through constant comparisons and thus be able to modify the theory in order to integrate a new property of a category.

The constant comparative method offers a flexible and adaptable approach to data analysis. It affords the researcher the opportunity to listen to what the managers say, how they say it and how they interpret what they say. The researcher can also sort through the data to find categories of meaning in order to arrive at significant themes and patterns and to identify themes that stand alone and those that form salient relationships and patterns. Thus the approach used in this study was based on “illumination and extrapolation rather than causal determination, predication and generalization” (Patton, 1990: 424) which allows for in-depth analysis of the data.

The first step in analysis was to transcribe the audio-taped interviews and to type up the learning diaries, which were largely hand-written and difficult to decipher. Maycut and Morehouse (1994) recommend that researchers photocopy all the data and pre-code each page of the data by including a code for the type of data, the source of the data and the page number of the particular data set, such as pages of the transcript, on the corner of each page. This approach was very useful in the analysis and prevented confusion and replication of the data.

The audio-tapes of the interviews with the managers were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Some thought was given to using Nudist 6, a

software package, to analyse the information. However, because the sample was relatively compact and manageable, the manual method of cutting and pasting was considered more user-friendly and appropriate. Although this hands-on method was more time-consuming it gave the researcher an opportunity to engage with each subject and provided a degree of personal control over the data.

The next stage was unitizing the data, a process of identifying the chunks or units of meaning in the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is a method of culling meaning from the words of the study participants, framed by the process of enquiry (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). It was necessary to identify the broadest categories of meaning initially and then to identify categories and subcategories, while being careful to keep conceptually related categories together. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that each unit of meaning identified in the data must be capable of standing by itself except for knowledge of the researcher's focus of inquiry. Using the "look-and-feel alike criteria" of Lincoln and Guba (1985) made it possible to combine overlapping ideas and examine the relationships and patterns across categories. When broad categories were identified, for example learning from peers and respected role models, all transcripts were analysed and every word relating to this category was cut, coded and numbered for easy reference. This refining process continued until all sources were exhausted and all the categories seemed to be positioned to create a foundation for theory-building (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The first stage of the data analysis focused on developing a set of narratives composed of raw data including quotes from interviews, learning diaries and field notes. This approach was based on a similar approach used by Maitlis and Lawrence (2007). A data reduction process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was then used to develop a set of categories broad enough to capture issues related to how managers learn in work. This process made it possible to develop a list of themes or situation-specific factors directly connected to the managers' perceptions of how they learn in work (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). These themes were used to write brief descriptors of situations commonly described by the respondents, which were the first stages in aggregating the data. These themes represented more abstract and robust descriptions of the conditions associated with how managers learn in work.

Each of these categories included several subcategories; they were concerned with how managers think they learn in the job and the patterns of their interactions in the workplace.

As the analysis progressed, it became apparent that the original research objectives continually changed and evolved. At first, the study had a narrow focus on how managers used learning strategies to learn in work; over time it became clear that this approach was too narrow and that it was necessary to respond to the new realities of the situation. Through this process of discovery, other patterns gradually began to emerge. It was considered appropriate to devise analysis tables with brief descriptors of the situations described by the respondents. The themes focused on the macro contextual

factors that influence how managers learned in work. A sample of these tables are presented in Appendix 3 on page 198. These tables identified the associated first order themes, for example the leadership style of the organisation and supporting questions were presented in the tables. Once the analysis was completed, the next stage was writing up the research. This is also an important part of the analytical process, during which researchers should ponder the substance and sequence of the report; this may require rethinking the data which has a propensity to yield new insights and understandings of the research topic (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994).

Issues of validity and reliability related to this research

The main issues associated with qualitative research are claims about the objectivity and rigour of the approach (Yin, 2003) and the validity and reliability of the findings. However, Angen (2000) offers two methods of validating a piece of research to ensure that it is trustworthy and effective; these are described as ethical and substantive validation. Validity is defined as “whether an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure” (Sarantakos, 2005: 83). This study employed two instruments, the semi-structured interviews in conjunction with the solicited diaries, which made it possible to gather evidence from multiple sources. Yet the goal of this research is not to achieve mass generalisation but to gain an insight into how respondents learn in the work context in this specific case. Reliability is focused on assessing whether the research activities are replicable, that is, whether they can be operationalised (Kumar, 2005). Ethical validation is

focused on ensuring that moral assumptions must be questioned and substantive validation requires the researcher to clearly understand how they conceptualise the topic and to engage in self-reflection on the process.

Table 3.2 summarises strategies that qualitative researchers use to validate their research and shows how they were applied in this study.

Table 3.2
Research strategies summarised

Strategy	Requirement	Researcher's experience
1. Prolonged engagement in the field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build trust with participants • Learn the culture • Ensure distortions are dealt with 	Worked in the organisation for a period of time and therefore had thorough knowledge of the content.
2. Triangulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make use of multiple methods, investigations and theories. 	Used semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries in the research.
3. Peer review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present ideas to experts on methodology; change and modify interview questions and diaries. 	Presented ideas to colleagues working in several universities to get their ideas on the process.
4. Researcher bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the implications of bias and ways of avoiding it. 	Undertook all relevant procedures to avoid bias.
5. Checking the credibility of the findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present the data to the respondents so they can corroborate it. 	Allowed respondents to review the data in the transcripts of interviews and diaries.

Ethical issues associated with the choice of a qualitative approach for this study / The extent to which the findings can be generalised.

A common approach to judging quantitative research is the generalizability of the findings yet the objective for qualitative researchers is to assess the extent to which the findings can be theoretically replicated or applied to other contexts. The key to achieving this transferability is the generation of thick descriptions and purposive sampling. These thick descriptions have been described by Byrne (2001) as richly described data that provide the research consumer with enough information to judge the appropriateness of applying the findings to other settings. The number of interview samples in this research study may be considered relatively small particularly by those who approach research from a positivist perspective yet the exposure that these managers had to learning in work and the in-depth nature of the interviews helped to generate a rich and descriptive data set. Despite the fact that the sample was limited it is accepted to take this approach by researchers conducting exploratory research from a qualitative interpretive perspective.

The use of semi-structured interviews in this research can contribute to the threat of respondent bias which may provide inaccurate reflection of the manager's experience of learning in work however the use of learning diaries offered a longitudinal perspective which contributed to a more in-depth understanding of this phenomenon. While social phenomena are too variable and context bound to allow for significant generalisations (Cronbach, 1975) there is a need to do a good job of particularization before looking for

patterns across cases (Stake,2000). However a research design which balances depth and breadth can permit reasonable extrapolation (Cronbach, 1980) and in this sense it is possible to use this research and go beyond the narrow confines of the data set to think about other applications of the findings. This research yielded high quality data that was systematically analysed and carried out by a credible and experienced researcher. Therefore this study could be replicated in other organisations using the same or alternative research process. Yet reproducing social phenomena may be difficult because it may be impossible to replicate original conditions as it is difficult to control the variables.

Criticisms of qualitative research cite issues of subjectivity coupled with difficulties of replication and generalisation which contribute to a lack of transparency (Mason, 2004). Because of this subjective bias, such research has a tendency to yield contradictory information implying opinion rather than fact (Bryman, 2004); the challenge associated with qualitative interviewing is that the interviewer's bias may influence respondents to tell the researcher what they think he or she wants to know.

The respondents in this research study were familiar with me from my work as a management development consultant in the area. It is reasonable to assume that interviewees may be influenced by the researcher and that a sense of personal connection between subject and researcher may lead to issues in relation to transparency, fairness and balance. Furthermore respondents may be subject to recall distortions and may report past events

in a skewed way. The respondents in this study were regarded as managers who sought out challenging learning opportunities in the organisation so they may have a propensity to “talk up” their experiences of learning by living up to their reputations.

In an effort to adhere to high ethical standards while carrying out qualitative research, a useful approach is to remain aware that the interviewer is in effect the instrument and must demonstrate competence, credibility and professionalism. While Patton (2002) argues that the human factor may be a strength or weakness in the approach, the researcher must be able to remain neutral and work on demonstrating trustworthiness and authenticity in order to achieve balance and fairness (Patton, 2002). It was deemed necessary to assure the respondents that the research material would remain confidential and that no one in the organisation would have access to it; the managers’ exploration of learning concepts can be quite personal if they have identified development issues they do not want to discuss with others.

In order to address the ethical issues inherent in this research the researcher had to strive to remain neutral and commit to understanding the respondent’s perspective without having an axe to grind. This neutrality was achieved by using coherent data collection methods that have the scope to stand up to scrutiny. In order to achieve this, the researcher designed robust interview guides with focused questions based on the literature and extended the process by using solicited diaries to increase the understanding of the topic. The key challenges were to allow the respondents to reveal themselves

through their words and actions, to capture the interrelatedness of these revelations despite their complexity and diversity and to create an interpretive justice based on their responses (Bryman, 2004; Patton, 2002). Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocate the need to maintain an attitude of scepticism as a means of maintaining objectivity. There is also a need to be aware of the term insider research where the researcher has a direct involvement with the research setting (Robson 2002). Yet if the research process is transparent, honest and professional then it is possible to reduce bias. This chapter described the methodological approach taken in this research, which focused on a single organisation over an 18 month period. We have outlined the background of the respondents as follows:

The Sample: Backgrounds of Respondents

An overview of the demographic and job related variables of the respondents are presented as follows and summarised in Table 3.3. The managers in this study are heavily engaged in technical roles and their teams vary in size, from 5 to 20 direct reports. The nature of their roles also varies, from supervising labour-intensive contact centres to engaging in finance, information technology and marketing. Three of the managers joined the organization straight out of college and had worked in no other organization; all three had been working with the company for over 20 years. Four managers had joined the IT department; two of these had since joined other business units within the company. Three of the managers had a background in finance and two had qualified as chartered accountants and had been in

the company for over ten years. One manager only joined five years ago and only one of these managers had remained in the pure finance area.

One manager, who left school before completing a leaving certificate and had not engaged in any third-level education, had been in the company for over 18 years; she had left to set up her own business in retail and then rejoined the organization. Another manager, a civil engineer, had worked in the company for over 10 years; another, with a degree in the humanities, had worked in the company for four years. Six of the managers were male and five of those six were married. Of the remaining four female managers two were married and one had two children; the two single female managers had no children. The managers ranged in age from 34 to 45, with five of them aged between 40 and 45, four aged between 37 and 40 and one aged 34. Table 3.3 summarizes this information on the respondents.

Table 3.3**Demographic and Job Related Variables of the Respondents**

Manager	Age & Gender	Business Qualifications	Business Experience	Years in this business	Characteristics of Business	Direct Reports
A	40 Male	Diploma in I.T	Worked in company since leaving college.	20	Head of I.T in business unit	10
B	42 Female	Left school at 15 with no formal business qualifications; worked in finance in US. Developed expertise in money transfers.	Ran her own convenience store for 5 years; was then recruited to work with the organisation in the UK.	15 years in various businesses	Business development manager. Works in currency conversion division and builds strong customer base in UK, NI and Ireland.	25
C	37 Female	Primary degree in engineering; master's in project management	Worked in 2 start-up businesses and as IT engineer with multinational for 7 years before taking up her job.	12	In charge of implementing special projects in the business	5
D	34 Female	BA in political science	Air hostess, equality office, HR advisor in Australia; HR advisor in multinational company	4	Training and development manager	3
E	38 Male	Degree in Commerce. Chartered accountant; trained with Ernst & Young. 4 years in HP as finance manager	Worked as partner in a multinational accountancy organisation for 3 years. Offered position of finance manager in HP and worked there for 4 years.	11	Second in command in tourism section/ Gulliver	10
F	40 Male	Degree in IT	Worked in the organisation since leaving college; started in IT dept. and worked in 2 different business units within the organization.	20	Assistant director	20: 2 managers 2 assistant managers and team

Table 3.3 *continued*

Manager	Age & Gender	Business Qualifications	Business Experience	Years in this business	Characteristics of Business	Direct Reports
G	44 Male	Primary degree in Business Studies	Worked in a telecommunications business in UK and Ireland.	12	Assistant manager	20
H	44 Male	Chartered accountant	Worked in the US for 10 years & in food company for 4 years.	10 years in specific bus. unit in organisation	Finance	10
I	38 Female	IT engineer	Worked in the company from the beginning	17	IT Support for Business Units	5
J	40 Male	Business development analyst	Worked in France and UK in multinational organisations	5	Call centre	10

Conclusion

This chapter explained the theoretical and philosophical foundations of this research, which espouses an interpretivist methodological stance. The data, collected through semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries, were analysed using the constant comparative method. Finally the reliability and validity issues were discussed and the ethical implications of this study were addressed.

CHAPTER 4

The Research Findings and Discussion

This chapter begins by presenting the key findings that emerged from the study on how various dimensions of context influence the way managers learn in work. These macro and micro contextual dimensions are outlined in the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 4.1. The macro context includes the external environment, as well as the organisational structure, strategy and culture and the leadership of the organisation. The micro context consists of the team context, the job context and the processes and relationships that facilitate manager learning in work. This chapter is organised in a way that highlights the personal nature of learning in work for each manager in the study.

Key Findings

The theoretical framework provided a way to analyse how managers used context to learn in work. While many elements of the context were found to contribute to managers' learning, nine key findings emerged from the research and are presented here.

1. The external environment provided opportunities for learning, particularly in the interactions with customers and clients and temporal conditions such as mistakes, losses and regulatory conditions. High level demands for service, products and complex IT solutions from customers stretched the managers to learn in work. They described the learning as reciprocal which involved not only the development of

content specific, financial and technical products but also served to develop robust relationships between the customer and manager. Many of these managers were experts in their fields and learning to manage acquisitions, redundancies and other work challenges expanded their learning in general management.

2. The structure of the organisation was arranged in silos as a means of achieving flexibility in response to customer needs. This led to a lack of encouragement to share learning across the organisation as the fear existed that individual business units would lose valuable knowledge. In addition to this senior management were reluctant to encourage their talented managers to seek promotional or even cross functional project opportunities in case they would lose valuable employees. However these managers reported that this did not prevent them accessing relevant subject matter experts in the wider business community to learn and acquire knowledge in work and this was done in spite of lack of encouragement from senior managers. Managers located in central business units such as HR and IT reported greater access to learning because of the cross functional nature of their jobs.
3. The strategy of the organisation provided learning opportunities because of its entrepreneurial orientation and propensity for risk taking. A number of managers described how they thrived in this environment as it constantly challenged them to move outside their zone of expertise and indeed mentioned that this was why they were attracted to and

remained in the organisation. However the disadvantages of this strategy were that some managers may be risk adverse and less likely to survive in the environment.

4. The culture of the organisation was proactive in terms of facilitating learning in work however this approach was unstructured and ad hoc in nature and based on a paternalistic approach. There was a perception that useful learning opportunities were given to managers who were seen as successful in the past. This automatically limited new managers from gaining access to worthwhile learning opportunities and as the organisation was expanding it became more difficult to ensure that all managers were benefiting from access to useful learning in work.
5. The leadership style in the organisation demonstrated a strong entrepreneurial orientation and was supportive of manager learning in the initial stages of growth. They acted as role models and guides for managers and fostered learning opportunities for managers by ensuring that new entrepreneurial projects were available on a regular basis. However the growth of the organisation was reducing visibility and access to these entrepreneurial leaders which in turn was impacting on managers and reducing their exposure to learning in general.
6. Team work was reported as contributing greatly to facilitating manager learning in work. Managers who worked in teams in their own business

units reported worthwhile learning opportunities. However they found that the new initiative of cross functional team working was highly beneficial in terms of encouraging learning in work. This gave them exposure to challenging cross functional projects and also an opportunity to view the strategic mechanism and direction of the wider organisation. However even though senior management offered surface level agreement to the operation of these cross functional teams, the manager believed the real commitment was not forthcoming because of fears of losing talent and tacit knowledge.

7. The manager's job provided valuable learning opportunities because their roles were flexible and the boundaries of the job changed on a regular basis because of the entrepreneurial nature of the organisation.
8. Agents or developmental relationships were reported as offering support, guidance and learning for managers in work. Peers were reported as being particularly useful and these managers valued access to subject matter experts and were more likely to seek feedback from their peers than their boss. Mentoring was an integral part of the patriarchal culture and was reported as being effective for assisting managers to learn. The boss was also described as useful in terms of facilitating learning. The managers reported that they also learned what to avoid doing from their boss. Developmental networks were very effective as managers were expected to access complex knowledge in

short time frames to develop solutions to real work issues. These relationships were not proactively initiated by the managers but evolved in response to business needs and the requirement for learning support.

9. The managers used learning processes to help them learn in work however they did not use these in a conscious or structured way. Reflection was regarded as beneficial yet because of the difficult and fast paced nature of the work it was difficult to engage in the process in a planned manner. Problem solving was cited as a beneficial learning process particularly collaborative problem solving. Resilience was a useful process for helping the manager make sense of their emotions and survive in adverse and chaotic business conditions.

Table 4.1 Key Dimensions of Conceptual Framework for Understanding Manager Learning in Work

1. Macro Context: The Organisation	
(a) Environment	
What factors in the external environment trigger learning opportunities in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer / client demands • Temporal conditions such as major mistakes, loss of a major client • Regulatory influences
(b) Organisational Structure	
How does the organisational structure facilitate or impede learning in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of silos that may prevent learning • Knowledge sharing • Flexibility or rigidity in the structure
(c) Organisational Strategy	
How does the organisational strategy facilitate learning in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propensity for risk taking and innovation • How emergent is the strategy?
(d) Organisational learning Culture	
Is there a learning culture in the organisation and does it help managers to learn in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the core values that drive learning in work? • How much does the organisation facilitate learning in work?
(e) Organisational Leadership Style	
What impact has the leadership style on learning in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouragement to show initiative, flexibility and openness to change • Empowerment of managers to make decisions and take managed risks • Entrepreneurial leadership style
2. Micro Context	
(a) Team Context	
How do teams contribute to the managers learning in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction of teams and extent of knowledge sharing • Team ethos in the organisation • Types of teams in the organisation
(b) Job Context	
What aspects of the managers role assists them to learn in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complexity of roles • Task variety within roles • Boundary spanning within the role • Role ambiguity and role conflict • Role definition
(c) Processes	
What processes do managers use to learn in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection • Self-resilience /learning from experience • Problem solving
(d) Agents	
How do managers use agents/developmental relationships to learn in work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning from peers • Learning from the boss • Learning from mentors • Learning from networks

Research findings and discussion

The major section of this chapter presents the findings in more detail, beginning with the macro context.

The Macro Context

The macro context, as mentioned earlier, includes the external environment, as well as the organisational structure, strategy and culture, and the leadership of the organisation.

External environment

The external environment includes a range of situations in which managers must work with others outside the organisation boundary, especially customers and clients. It also includes short-term conditions such as mistakes and losses of clients and the regulatory environment. The first element of the external environment examined is clients and customers, and here a key finding emerged: the external environment provided many opportunities for managers to learn in work, as the demands of external customers and clients continually forced them to focus on meeting customers' needs. The organisation depends heavily on these relationships as it is engaged in strategic partnerships with government agencies, banks and large multinational organisations to which it provides financial services and solutions. Therefore its capacity to be responsive to customer demands

and maintain good customer relations is pivotal to its success. Managers absolutely must collaborate with clients to develop business strategies, for both technological and regulatory reasons; therefore they must be agile learners in order to provide appropriate and timely solutions. The managers in this study appeared to make good use of their customers as drivers of their learning because they must regularly refine and adapt their procedures to meet these customers' needs; through these interactions they gain access to new ways of doing things and thus expand their knowledge.

Several managers explained that they needed to learn from customers, particularly when the organisation was in the initial stages of development because they lacked sophistication in their processes and technology. Manager F described how helpful their customers were in sharing their expertise on the basis that they were helping a fledgling business to get established:

It was great starting off with this organisation...as the emphasis was on conquering the marketplace and punching above our weight. Our challenge was to convince big organisations to do business with us. We were not sophisticated in terms of our technology and we had a lot to learn. In that sense we used our customers to learn and used each other's contacts to learn... if we needed any advice on technical issues we just explained our requirements and they tried to access the relevant help.

This approach worked because the parties exchanged knowledge and learned in a reciprocal way that benefitted everyone. It also helped them build close relationships with customers, not only to get accurate feedback on products, but also to garner business referrals from them, as this manager also explained:

You are constantly learning from your customers because they are regularly requesting modifications and adaptations of the product... and our job is to go out there and check to see if it can be done... banking partners or technology suppliers or whatever... you are getting feedback and response from them more or less immediately and you have a better chance to perfect the product and the service as a result. The better you look after them the better your relationship and the greater your chances of getting referrals. That part of learning is really important and it used to annoy me and one customer was so picky and demanding that you felt like clocking them because I used to regard their demands as nitpicking and disruptive but after a while I copped on that they were perfectionists and had high standards.

These high-level demands forced managers to learn new strategies to satisfy customer needs. Manager A supported this assertion about the learning inherent in constantly striving to improve their processes with customers. He described how, even though the customer's requirements might seem extreme, they could result in the organisation improving and refining its products or services:

Our customers instigate a lot of our learning ... Some of the tasks seem impossible and sometimes it would be easier to land a man on the moon but people think that it is just a matter of pushing a few buttons and produce a bit of software to get a system going. We push the boundaries with our customers and bend over backwards to help.

Manager G supported this assertion about learning from clients and explained that the knowledge he accessed from them contributed to his learning in work. He recognises the need to learn from the customer contact and believes that he is quite skilled in this respect, as he stated in his learning diary:

They have the advantage of knowing the detail of the product so therefore it is crucial to be able to get as much information from them as possible.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that despite some variations in the amount of exposure to the external customer, managers did find these relationships most beneficial as a mechanism for increasing their learning in work. This happened because these customers and clients had in-depth knowledge of their own organisation's processes and systems and were predisposed to sharing it. These interactions provided a rich breeding ground for developing managers' learning in work.

The second element of the external environment is temporal issues, which can also trigger learning. For example, Manager J described how losing a major contract provided him an important learning opportunity. The whole organisation felt devastated when they had to reduce their staff in their business unit from 100 to 40 employees. This was quite an emotional issue as the organisation is located in a small town, with limited employment opportunities, where people know each other quite well. He is an accountant and at that stage his skills were firmly rooted in the financial arena. He described how learning to implement this redundancy forced him to learn legal and human resource knowledge very quickly. His biggest challenge was becoming comfortable with using interpersonal skills such as active listening and demonstrating empathy, to allow people the opportunity to express their frustration and fear about losing their jobs.

One thing I learned here was the importance of being as open and as honest as possible. We let them talk and kept an open communication policy and let them book meeting rooms and they could rant and rave at you and get it off their chests.

The manager can learn important lessons from mistakes and losses by eliminating the tendency to move on to the next challenge without looking back. Evaluating learning from these situations can prevent issues from reoccurring.

Regulatory issues situated in the external environment also created learning opportunities for some managers. For example, Manager E explained what happened when the company bought a business from the government that was seen as a national asset. Because of competition legislation, the purchase raised issues about possible dominance in the marketplace. As his expertise was in finance and not law, he explained how being embroiled in a contentious legal battle helped him to see all the ramifications and learn valuable legal knowledge and skills:

...there was a huge groundswell of resistance from the public.... we were seen as usurpers. They basically lodged an injunction against us and we got tied up in all sorts of legal issues. It was a baptism of fire for me... as I had never come across that type of situation before. Up to then everything was logical and commercial for me but now I see the ramifications of everything. Our legal department was heavily involved in sorting it out and I learnt a lot from them and from external legal people.

Recognition of the role that the external environment plays on manager learning in work is crucial if managers are to harness these opportunities in a positive way. Respondents saw worthwhile learning opportunities here and pointed out that the organisation needs to also see them as valuable.

Organisational structure

The structure of the organisation is a contextual issue that has the potential to influence how managers learn in work. Ellinger (2005) found that the existence of a silo mentality, or what she calls functional walls, can be a structural inhibitor to informal learning. The organisation under study here is arranged in silos; it consists of 19 separate business units as the founder of the organisation believed that smaller business units can be more flexible and responsive to market demands. While this approach may be appropriate, the managers saw these silos as inefficient as they fail to provide wider learning opportunities and knowledge of the business as a whole. People in the central services units such as IT, Finance and HR could gain access to learning in different business units, but the managers in specific business units reported that the silo structure perpetuated barriers to their learning.

For example, Manager J said that the new CEO was tackling the silo mentality, as he recognised the limitations inherent to learning in this approach. This links with Ellinger's (2005) contention that reducing a silo mentality may help promote collaboration and cross-fertilisation of ideas around processes. The CEO implemented a continuous improvement process which promoted cross-functional teamwork and helped diffuse learning across all business units. Manager J saw the value of this strategy as a way to gain a strategic understanding of the entire business and to gain access to expertise and opportunities across the business:

The setting up of high-level cross-functional expert teams... has been good learning for us.... People won't be happy but it will force them to be less complacent.... Some people are massively capable and this will motivate people to look for promotions across the divisions. I was stuck in the same business unit for nine years and never had a performance review. Because I got exposure on a project I finally got the chance to get out from under my senior manager. I made his life relatively easy and he wanted to hang on to me...

He recognises that some people still resist this approach, particularly heads of business units who want to safeguard their talent, but felt he that this strategy could challenge talented individuals to look outside the narrow focus of their jobs at the wider organisation, with positive results for the organisation. Manager D also saw the benefits of working across business units and felt she could have developed much more quickly had she been involved in just such a process at the start of her career. She also believes this approach can create fusion between business units and build stronger working relationships.

It would have been very useful for me if I had an opportunity to work across the business units when I came into the organization and after our success in getting this contract senior management we are suddenly realizing the benefits of combining the expertise from across the organization and breaking down barriers. But I was always a great one for checking what other people at my level were doing in other

business units under the radar and have built up contacts over the years. I find that these are great ways of finding out what is going on and avoiding reinventing the wheel.

She said, however, that she believed that her peers were open to sharing information despite the lack of encouragement from senior managers.

On the other hand, not all managers believed that the new CEO has entirely succeeded in breaking down the silo mentality. For example, Manager A highlighted the lack of cooperation in sharing learning, knowledge and people across business units, which has led to duplication and inefficiency. He suggests that business units tend to keep some distance from each other to protect their knowledge base, which in turn leads to a great deal of competition between units. Yet he has managed to access information from other business units despite cooperation issues:

There isn't a huge amount of cross-functional support.... at present there is no appetite for cross-functional working because the different business units like to mind their own territory, including their own people and as a result the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. I work with other people outside this business unit because I know through the grapevine that they can help me and I can help them. You have to take that approach, otherwise you would get very little done...you find out what other people are doing on the bush telegraph or in the canteen and this is a small town, even in the pub...

Manager F described the perception that cross-functional working has resulted in some business units attempting to recruit talented individuals from other units. This competitive element contributes to the perception that the organisation is not united and lacks a cohesive spirit:

In fact there have been a number of attempts to poach our good people by enticing them with interesting job opportunities and my boss has fought this vigorously. He has the perception if you release your stars to work on a cross-functional basis, you are likely to lose them.

Manager E also commented on the competitive element which inhibits promotion and ultimately reduces the managers' opportunity to learn from the challenges of a new role in a different business unit:

I suppose that the concept of cross-functional promotion was a bit foreign to us as the business units traditionally had a silo mentality and the business unit heads did not encourage it. There was a certain amount of competition between them and it was difficult for someone working in one business unit to get a job in another business unit. This is a massive pity as you can get bored doing the same thing and you lose out on the chance to see what the other business units are doing.

This view was echoed by Manager B, who reinforced the perception that limited promotional opportunities across the business units impeded the

managers' learning despite the clear benefits of encouraging such opportunities:

There is a lot of resentment if managers try to look for positions across the business. There is a perception there that no other business unit would approach me for instance as it would seem that they were poaching me yet if I moved to another business unit I'd have a fresh pair of eyes. The business units are like tiny kingdoms who won't share their people.

Overall, then, the managers perceived that while the silo structure impeded learning in work it did not prevent it and that the lack of communication between business units limited the flow of information and learning between the units. They also described how more access to cross-functional promotion would have the benefit of enhancing learning opportunities. However managers reported that they did work with their peers across silos and used contacts with other experts to increase their learning in spite of a lack of encouragement to do so. While managers located in central service units reported useful learning by gaining access to others they described how the rigidity of the structure reduced opportunities for learning and contributed to duplication and inefficiencies.

Organisational strategy

The organisational strategy is focused on risk taking and innovative practices and espouses a strong emergent strategy. Because of its entrepreneurial focus its strategy is not planned in advance, but is a by-product of the daily work and interaction that goes on inside the organisation, in its industry and in the entire global environment. This organisation depends for its survival on its markets and on its ability to be reactive, to take risks, to cope with uncertainty, and to expand quickly. Its strong prospector orientation requires a high tolerance for risk taking and the managers in this study appeared to thrive in this environment and reported that it provided numerous opportunities for learning. Therefore the need to be capable of taking risks comes with the territory.

They describe instances of tackling difficult tasks that seemed insurmountable at the time, from designing technological solutions to challenging overseas projects with very little back-up from the parent company. Manager F feels he generally demonstrates the capacity to take risks and that this has helped his career progress:

I feel that this “can do attitude” helped my progression... because I was always willing to take on the impossible.... I learn best when I am thrown in at the deep end and getting exposure to complex technologies was worthwhile in terms of my career progression.

This ability to take risks and work in a completely different culture presented Manager A with major personal and learning challenges: he had worked in the same business unit for over 15 years and had limited exposure to what was happening in other parts of the business. He described how he deliberately sought to move from a job in a narrow specialist field to a general management role which involved international travel, relocations and constant interactions with external customers. This was a major learning curve for him; it forced him not only to develop a wide range of work skills but also to learn Spanish:

I got the opportunity to work with the company in Spain and I deliberately looked for the job. Maybe it was a midlife crisis? I don't know. But I suppose there was no walking away from the situation. I knew very little about finance, marketing or even pure selling and I had to learn as I went along. I am also quite shy and suddenly I was travelling all over Europe and meeting customers and clients from all walks of life. I had to sharpen my interpersonal skills and really had to push myself to build relationships.

This experience forced him to build his confidence levels and to develop the ability to become comfortable taking risks; the process pushed him outside of his zone of comfort where he saw that he was competent in this role. This example does provoke questions about how the organisation allowed people like him to stagnate in one area for such a long period without recognising and harnessing their potential.

Manager I described a similar experience when she had to take charge of an overseas project and was forced to confront the preconceptions of herself she had developed while working in the same job and the same section for 17 years. The project was regarded as a high-risk venture and the organisation had very little exposure in the Middle East. She was highly apprehensive and ill-prepared for the experience and mentioned that senior management gave her a book on the country as a means of giving her an insight into the culture. Still, she commented that taking that risk made her confront her negative preconceptions of herself. She realised that she had strong leadership capabilities, an insight that was crucial to her succeeding with the project:

I can't explain why I looked for the job in the first place, it must have been a sudden rush of blood to the head or that I was losing the will to live doing the same job over and over again ...I think that when I was in charge of the project in the Middle East I had no choice.... You see maybe deep down I called my bluff and I realized that I had more ability than I thought I had. Maybe it was because I was away from the place where everyone knew me and I could be different.... I developed a great deal of expertise and kudos because it was such a high-profile project and my star started to rise.

Her fear of risk taking was directly related to what she perceived as a lack of confidence and a natural reluctance to operate outside her area of expertise.

Yet again this manager had to look for this assignment proactively and would not have benefited from this opportunity to learn if she had depended on the organisation to identify it. This poses further questions about how the organisation develops its talented managers.

Eight of the managers in this study were experts in the fields of finance, technology and engineering, and were relatively new to the area of management; several of them were naturally reluctant to operate outside their areas of expertise. For them, it was very important to be perceived as subject matter experts and the prospect of not being able to fully understand every issue related to the subject created major issues for them. Yet those who pushed themselves to take risks benefited, both in their personal learning and in the way others saw them within the organisation. They were clearly afraid of not having the expertise to perform well in their roles, but by working in a new role and learning by doing these managers managed to overcome this fear which could be debilitating to their career progress.

The organisation did offer opportunities to learn in work through challenging and highly risky assignments; while some managers relished these opportunities because it suited their own philosophy, others who were more risk averse took some time to benefit from them. The strategy of the organisation did encourage risk taking and innovative practices by expecting and allowing managers to work in knowledge domains outside of their experience and expertise where they must climb steep learning curves and learn on the fly. While managers saw this approach was worthwhile as it

helped the organisation identify and follow up on business opportunities, they also point out an inherent danger in this approach: managers who are intrinsically risk averse may not get exposure to valuable learning opportunities.

Organisational culture

The culture of an organisation, which consists of its norms, beliefs, values and practices, is pivotal to encouraging learning in work and can determine how much learning occurs (Leslie et al. 1998). This view is supported by Ashton (2004) who argues that the learning approach is embedded in the workplace and shaped by organisational decisions and practices. On the other hand, an organisation's culture can both encourage and discourage learning: Ellinger (2005) found that a positive internal culture where people were committed to learning was influential as it encouraged informal learning in a work place setting. Conversely, a negative culture can impede learning.

The implicit philosophy on learning espoused by this organisation is that a culture committed to continuous learning in work can support its emergent business strategy. The core values that drive this are innovation and proactivity, so it must respond quickly to market demands and this drives an informal approach to learning in work. The business depends on managers continuously learning new skills and knowledge in order to pull in new business. Managers reported that the organisation did not initiate learning opportunities in any formal sense and that instead they tended to happen in a

subliminal way as a result of everyday work challenges. Once an appropriate business opportunity was identified, then the relevant manager or team of managers was assigned to implement the initiative. Some believed that individuals were selected based on the premise that they have demonstrated potential and expertise or have performed well in similar projects in the past.

Manager C believed that the organisation provides many learning opportunities because of its reactive attitude to pursuing business opportunities. She described how she had access to these learning opportunities as she was considered to have high-level project management skills; still she felt that it was important to actively solicit these learning projects as the organisation did not have a proactive formal approach to allocating these projects:

I have learned to keep a sharp eye out for opportunities because for a long time there I was stuck in a rut and I just was lucky enough to get the opportunity to work on this project. When you are up against it you realise that you have major reserves that you can tap into to help you cope. These chances have to be grabbed when they come along.

The need to identify learning opportunities in work was also articulated by Manager G:

I have to say that the opportunities have been always forthcoming and there's never been any hesitation in encouraging me to go and identify

my own needs. If you sit in the corner behind a desk you are likely to rot there.

This comment indicates how much managers are responsible for soliciting their own learning opportunities. This view was supported by Manager J who similarly believed that managers were responsible for managing their own learning and had to look out for relevant opportunities to further their careers and increase their learning:

You are expected to survive and thrive yourself and demonstrate initiative. The culture of this organisation is quite entrepreneurial, so therefore you need to seek out learning opportunities for yourself. Nobody gives them to you.

He did point out, however, that this situation suited his natural style; by its very nature, he said, the organisation regularly offered new learning opportunities. He also felt that managers were not confined by their roles and could get involved in business opportunities outside their areas of expertise, particularly within their business units. He stated that accessibility to senior management was the single factor that attracted him to work in the organisation. This in some sense gave him the opportunity to approach senior management in order to access organisational learning experiences. Yet, while Manager H was enthusiastic about the opportunities for learning that existed in the organisation, he described the need to influence senior management to get access to them:

There were major plusses landing a job here because there were lots of opportunities in that the company was constantly expanding. The more frustrating side of things was it was more difficult to make changes and that was most frustrating at the beginning. I have realised that [to be] more effective in ... influencing my peers,... I needed to be better at getting buy-in from senior management. It is not an easy thing around here and while I had no problems in the states I just had some difficulty here, don't ask me why.

In the absence of an organisation-wide structured approach to facilitating learning, Manager F describes how his business unit had to improvise in order to avoid losing knowledge. Managers there developed their own culture of knowledge management and learning in order to retain expertise:

We had to create our own learning culture as we're constantly learning different processes. When we are bringing new recruits into the area, you've got to put them sitting with somebody to make sure that they don't lose out on the golden nuggets of knowledge ... This is great from a business perspective as it means we that we've less risk if somebody leaves the company .. so it's all about kind of sharing the knowledge at that level.

This view was echoed by Manager G, who felt that constant change created learning that needed to be captured and that the nature of the organisation

was to move on to the next challenge without examining how to harness the knowledge and skills developed on the last project. He believed that the organisation needed to assess and analyse the learning generated by change, but he recognised that the culture of the organisation was focused on moving on to the next project without looking back to evaluate what they had learned. He described how a particular business project gave him the opportunity to develop this insight and he was surprised that the culture of the organisation was not concerned with reflecting on learning. He saw the organisation as in danger of losing out on valuable learning and felt it would benefit from taking a more cohesive approach to knowledge management through learning management, as he wrote in his learning diary:

It is clear that the organisation is very much in a situation where change is very necessary in order to grow going forward. It is critical that learning from this change is assessed on a more regular basis ... I was aware of this before this process started, but the projects of the team helped clarify this more for me. It is interesting to note the apparent lack of openness and willingness to address this gap in the wider management team.

Similarly, Manager J stated in his solicited diary that the organisation is not focused on capturing, analysing, or documenting learning in work. He attributes this to a lack of understanding about the need to harness and exploit past learning:

I feel that there is a lot of duplication going on and we should be capturing this learning because we keep wasting time reinventing the wheel. We never seem to revisit and analyze the past, we just keep firing on regardless.

These statements from managers may be indicative of the type of core values that drive the organisation, especially innovation and pro-activity. These create a need to respond quickly to market demands and limit the opportunity to analyse learning. In his diary, Manager F reiterates this view and attributes it to a lack of time:

I know the value of capturing the tacit knowledge ... Yet we make no attempt to do it in this business unit. Maybe it is because we are a new business and we just don't have the time to look back.

All the managers in the study were aware of the need to value learning and while they felt they did so, they did not see the organisation as making a concerted and structured effort to encourage learning. Instead, learning was often a by-product of pursuing work goals. The organisation automatically creates stretch learning assignments because of its entrepreneurial nature; however, Manager D cautioned against this haphazard approach to managing this kind of learning. He suggested that the manager may not always be exposed to a suitable learning environment that can provide appropriate learning opportunities in work:

The culture is very important in terms of helping people learn... everybody new starting in an organization does the sitting by Nellie thing... you are lucky if you are put sitting beside the right Nellie and they are capable of helping you learn and they are at the right skill level.

Manager G described an incident when they were pursuing a business opportunity and pulled the relevant experts together very quickly to tackle the project. These managers had to suspend their current roles and put all their energy into getting the new business. He found that they put a great deal of hard work and energy into the proposal but did not succeed in that instance. Instead of analysing where they went wrong, the company just went onto the next challenge without learning from the incident:

It can be a real pain when you are dragged away from your own job to work on a new business project and you do not succeed. This has happened on a number of occasions lately and we have failed to get business, yet nobody goes back to find out where we went wrong. This company has a habit of this and it is quite frustrating.

In general the culture of the organisation does encourage learning in work, as the manager has to deal with numerous challenges created by the entrepreneurial nature of the business. However there is little or no formal support for developing learning and managers are expected to be self-sufficient learners and capable of accessing their own learning opportunities.

While this approach tended to work for some managers, others found it difficult to access the relevant support.

Organisational leadership style

The leadership style of an organisation can foster learning in work (Sadler-Smith, 2006) as it is reasonable to assume that when a leadership cadre is committed to learning it provides many opportunities for such activity. Furthermore, it follows that leaders who have been exposed to learning will see the value of engaging in and providing such learning opportunities. The organisation in this study exhibits a strong entrepreneurial leadership orientation and its founder has a strong influence on its leadership style and strategy. Indeed, he casts a long shadow on its growth and progress. When the company was young, the leadership took a scaffolding approach to developing its managers; Manager B described how the leadership cadre supported her when they started up their first venture in the UK. She was given the task of setting up the business from scratch and was nervous about taking on the project. She described how the senior management team supported her on a relay basis: one would travel over and spend some time with her and then travel back only to be followed up by the next senior manager. This process exposed her to several different leaders with different management styles and areas of domain knowledge, as she described:

The senior management team used to babysit me, as I was really thrown in at the deep end... I have been getting promotions since on

the strength of that project and I have very good memories of how we started in the business.

This support not only increased her learning but also reduced any anxieties she had about tackling this difficult assignment. It also gave her insights into how the senior management team operated and access to the strategic direction of the organisation. However, she also understood the dangers associated with this approach because the organisation was expanding rapidly and the leadership team had less time to engage in this supportive role- modelling strategy. This rapid expansion was creating communication problems between the leadership and other areas in the business. This supportive approach is supported by activity theory, which states that learning is situated, collective and tentative and that such proximity to leadership allows managers to pass through the expansive learning cycle (Engestrom, 1999b, 2001) guided by the expertise of the senior management team.

Manager C also described how the supportive leadership style allowed her the freedom to tackle assignments without close supervision; she feels this form of trust enhanced her learning by empowering her. She explains that this happens because of her flexible job:

These learning opportunities land at my feet because of the nature of my role. I don't even have a job description and I suppose they know what I can do and just let me get on with it.

She values this leadership style which enhances her confidence when she is dealing with other business units. This view is supported by Manager J who described himself as a relative newcomer to the organisation and was impressed that the leadership gave him plenty of time and flexibility to develop an understanding of the organisation:

I got the freedom to go off and find out more and learn how things tick around here. Coming from a business analyst background I think the best approach was to talk to people before looking up data and looking up numbers.

He valued the fact that he was trusted to make his own judgements about the organisation and found this approach empowering and beneficial; since he was not being micro-managed he could be more entrepreneurial in his approach.

In addition, some managers described how senior managers were prepared to share sensitive information with them. For example, Manager E said this experience added to his sense of trust:

I found that some individuals are very good at giving you access to information with the proviso that if it is sensitive that you don't disclose where you got it from. One of our managers has been invaluable in

this respect and has given us confidential reports and relevant information to help us.

While some managers described this hands-on leadership style as supportive and empowering, others described the dangers inherent in depending on the good graces of the leadership cadre for opportunities to learn. As Manager D pointed out:

I think we are very dependent on the support of senior management to assist us to get buy-in. I feel that we did not get enough support from them in the early stages of a business project and as a consequence this demotivated our team. Senior management were not fully committed to the project and to be honest I felt that they didn't really understand it and as a result our idea— which was excellent by the way— withered on the vine.

Manager A agreed with this view that some senior managers took a controlling approach to setting up new projects and tended to micro-manage proceedings, a kind of interference he saw as disruptive and politically motivated. He described how his team implemented a very successful project because they were given the freedom to get on with it; he also cited instances when senior management interfered in a negative way with earlier projects and had a tendency to stay too close to the business:

We were probably left to our own devices a lot more with this one. We had less outside interference, from senior people. Not knocking them, but I feel that if you are close to a situation and you have got the pulse of the situation, senior management can get involved and mess everything up and they can deliberately get involved for the wrong reasons.

While the leadership style espoused in this organisation does provide support and encouragement for learning and the majority of managers benefitted from this approach, some managers expressed a note of caution about the tendency of some leaders to micromanage which resulted in negative learning experiences.

The micro context

Having examined the macro context, it is time to turn to the micro context which includes two areas of context, the team and the job. These will be examined in conjunction with processes and agents that help the manager to learn in work.

Managers can learn in teams from observing each other's behaviour and by giving each other feedback. In this way they can become "synergistic in the integration of each other's efforts, ultimately accomplishing more than the sum of their parts" (Sessa and London, 2006: 155). Managers can especially learn from their job if they are exposed to changing circumstances.

Processes can assist the manager to learn how to manage difficult circumstances in work. Agents can create learning opportunities in work by sharing knowledge and allowing the manager to approach real work problems from a number of perspectives.

Team context

The team context can provide valuable opportunities for managers to learn in work, as much of their working lives involve working with or within teams and helping themselves and others to make sense of their experience of team processes. Learning in teams can occur through observation and interaction with others and lead directly to the development of new behaviours (Anderson, 2000; London et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Such learning can improve the performance of both the team and the organisation (Wilson et al, 2007). Managers can learn about the characteristics of teammates and about interpersonal relations and models for solving difficult problems that require collaboration and feedback skills (Cannon-Bowers and Salas, 1997).

This organisation did not have a formal approach to developing teams, but the respondents' contributions make it clear that team work did contribute to their learning in work. A number of managers described the benefits of working in teams in their own business units. Manager G described how working in teams allowed individual team members to aspire to improve their own skills by giving them the opportunity to observe effective and skilled individuals in action:

By learning in a team you get different perspectives, something you would not get from solo learning. You also can identify strong traits in other members which you may feel are weak in yourself, and seeing other members use these skills gives you motivation to strengthen these skills in yourself.

Manager B gave an example of learning how to develop her facilitation skills from observing a highly effective team leader over a long period of time. She recognised that her lack of skills in this respect was preventing her from managing her own team effectively. She described how she used this individual as a role model and asked them to observe her in action in her team by co-facilitating team meetings with her:

I could see that he was great at getting buy-in and commitment from the team and could handle some pretty difficult and egotistical people. He was very good at dealing with objections and could even handle one particular guy who was a pure maverick as most people found it very difficult to deal with him basically because he was so well educated and was full of himself. It was amazing how he managed this fellow by appealing to his ego and reining him in when he went off piste. I learned some very useful skills here that I even use when handling difficult senior managers and customers.

As mentioned in the section on structure, the new CEO had recently introduced the concept of cross-functional team work in an effort to create efficiencies and increase learning and cooperation across the business units. Manager A was enthusiastic about this approach and stated that it gave the managers the opportunity to share knowledge and better understand the organisation as a whole. Writing in his learning diary, he realized that he had a narrow focus on his own business unit, but now he understood the value of working within cross-functional teams in other parts of the organisation:

This team process has given me a wider and more in-depth view of the organisation. I was only concerned with what was happening in my business unit but now I realise that I need to look outwards and work with others to make the group stronger as a whole.

For him, this learning was invaluable, as it forced him to expand his confined view and develop a more strategic insight into the functioning of the organisation. Manager H also described the benefits of co-operation and team work across business units:

Barriers to progress can be dealt with much faster so as to get things analysed and understood. The ability of different team members to access different knowledge resources across the organisation [leads to] learning and growth is a key benefit. Being challenged and challenging others helps you to learn.

He also described how these teams contributed to enhancing communication between departments and stated how beneficial this was:

They can bring learning from different regions to the company, so we can be aware of what is happening everywhere else. I can see the benefit of cross-functional teams to help build the business.

Manager E developed an insight into the benefits of such teams: using them may make the organisation more competitive. He explained how the success of some of these teams has made people aware of their benefits across the organisation:

These cross-functional teams are a great idea and because that one was so successful they are intending to use them more. There is still some resistance and this company is slow to change but it is starting to realize that if it doesn't change it will not remain competitive. As individuals I think we were all competent in our own specific areas and compared to other projects we had a stronger team than we had before.

He also described the benefits of working on a cross-functional team of financial experts and the importance of harnessing this level of expertise. He explained that they managed to reduce the financial reporting deadlines in the organisation from a week down to two days. They had been told that

such an outcome was impossible. In fact, achieving this objective helped his career prospects and also helped him learn that he could not refuse to do it:

We identified the bottlenecks and were able to put systems in place to reduce them. It was no big deal and now we have 75% of the company coming in on time by identifying and addressing all the issues.... We also learned that [we can't] accept that it can't be done and [to] challenge the status quo.

Manager D explained a different benefit of such teams, as the opportunity to work in one helped her to build effective networking relationships across the organisation:

I was invited to work on the new project and that was a very useful learning experience because I was exposed to all the high fliers in the company and I got the opportunity to learn how they operated in a team. Working on the team gives you an opportunity to build relationships across the business units and get an insight into what they do and how they tick.

Manager D also learned leadership skills from peers who were involved in a business project. She felt she had become more diplomatic and confident and more effective at delegating tasks. She developed assertive leadership skills from having to deal with the CEO on a particular matter. She described these in her learning diary:

By nature my team were a quiet, reflective crew and therefore I learned the following in equal measures: Diplomacy: I definitely learned to appreciate quieter personality types—learned to let them talk and give them space to air their views before I dived in!!! Delegation: We alternated the leader role between us every month. I had to assert myself during my tenure as I was on the Christmas watch and we dealt with the CEO issue during that time. Confidence: I am not too sure if confidence really falls into the ‘skills’ category nevertheless my self confidence developed immeasurably.

Thus, these managers reported a range of positive learning experiences from their involvement in team work in general and cross-functional teams in particular. It is evident, however, that some business units actively discouraged this approach because of fears about losing their star performers. They did feel that the winds of change fanned by the CEO were encouraging a more proactive approach to cross-functional teamwork. These cross-functional teams have the potential to span the boundaries between parts of the organisation and can increase knowledge transfer between and within organisations (Argote et al., 2003). They also have the capacity to increase innovation within the organisation (Hargadon, 1998), to increase organisational learning and effectiveness (Carlisle, 2004; Edmondson, 1999) and to ultimately reduce the negative impact of competition and turfism in this organisation.

Job Context

The second micro area is the impact that these managers' jobs have on their learning in work; the job can provide a wide range of learning opportunities, especially if they are exposed to a variety of tasks within the roles. The boundary of the job may change through extra responsibilities or challenging tasks or involvement in cross-functional assignments. Managers can learn through job transitions that lead to a change in their work role, job content, levels of responsibility and location. Major learning challenges are associated with handling new and different responsibilities and the managers provided several examples of this, from taking on a co-ordinating role in a project team, to managing a completely different department, to having to influence upwards and laterally. These managers were also involved in creating and managing change where they had to deal with ambiguous situations. While this made them more visible, which could generate pressure and stress, they developed strategies to deal with those stressors and doing so provided valuable learning experiences. They pointed out the pivotal importance of challenging assignments which offered substantial learning opportunities in work. They also highlighted important examples of learning from changing jobs and getting promotion opportunities.

Promotions can offer the job challenge that managers need to learn in work as the transition from one job to another can provide major opportunities for learning (Ruderman et al., 1995; McCall et al., 1988). The basic skills of learning to manage others and understanding a new management team

require them to learn to get others to co-operate in order to complete tasks and assignments. Manager B described how she had been promoted several times within her own business unit and had resisted looking outside to the wider business because her manager would have regarded doing so as disloyal. She did, however, build up the courage to apply for a job in another area and was surprised and apprehensive when she got it:

I didn't think that I had a chance and in a way that's why I applied for it and I had to force myself to accept it. My old boss was none too pleased and was most unhelpful in the transitioning process. It was quite difficult starting the new job because I was promoted over someone who was minding the role. I had the challenge of having to deal with him as his nose was out of joint and the new team who felt that I knew nothing about their business unit. I was determined to succeed but it required long hours and working to build credibility and get buy-in.

Getting to know how the new team operated was quite difficult and then winning over the current guy and getting to know how the business operated all took time. I looked for help everywhere I could and in the end got there.

Manager C described how she had limited experience of managing others and was promoted to managing a team of five with limited people management skills. This forced her to engage in a process of learning by doing:

I went into it blind and assumed that because I was managing a team of professionals that they were all the same as myself. So I managed them the way I like to be managed myself. I like a hands-off approach and I am allergic to micro management and while this worked for me it certainly didn't work for my team. It took me a long time to realise that people are different and require different management styles. I was surprised when HR approached me with complaints from my team that they didn't feel supported. I learned the importance of avoiding making assumptions about others and worked hard to engage with them and to ask them for feedback on how I managed them and to tell the truth and this worked.

Manager H described the challenges associated with being moved from finance where he had no direct reports to an accounts management position where he had a large team reporting to him. His manager had spotted his potential and offered him the job yet had little time to prepare him for the role, so he learned management skills on the fly:

My promotion to accounts manager was a great learning opportunity because suddenly I had 20 people reporting to me located in offices throughout the States. Our IT infrastructure was fairly basic then so I spent a lot of time travelling in order to build up relationships with my employees and to get to understand their roles. I had to learn how to implement effective performance management from scratch and read

a lot of how-to books on planes. I learned how to coach them and basically because I had no other choice I learned the value of giving honest feedback and the need to offer a few kind words in terms of encouraging commitment and motivation from people.

Several managers cited the experience of learning to manage people as a valuable learning opportunity and Manager A agreed with Manager H on this issue:

When I was promoted I had more skills on the technical side rather than on the soft side. So it was really learning these people management skills on the job. I don't think I got any kind of formal training as such. It was like one morning someone would come and say now you are the manager and you are responsible for x, y and z and also for bringing on new staff and sometimes it kind of happened that I was doing the job anyway and then they said we will give you the title with it. The promotions were fairly informal around here. I don't think I ever did formal training in managing or soft skills. I think I am a reasonable people manager at this stage but again it was through trial and error. I could not have done it without the support of HR, particularly in relation to dealing with specific performance issues. While I would take risks with technical problems I always think twice about the people side of things.

Manager D described the difficulties associated with trying to learn in a job that required influencing without any formal power and with trying to learn about a new domain area:

I was offered a job as training and development manager for the entire organisation yet there was little support for this role and management saw it as a cost as opposed to a benefit. My background was in HR and I had no training in Training and Development so I had to go and try and learn as much as I could about the discipline and try to influence senior management accordingly. I am still in the role and while we have achieved some benefits it is a long hard slog. There is no real appetite for it particularly with the senior management team.

In general, then, the managers saw the benefits of learning from the job context. The roles in this organisation are quite complex as managers are expected to be responsible for people and tasks and this requires flexibility and strong levels of responsiveness. The managers saw the benefit of learning to manage others and learned these skills by observing others in action. They were also able to use the resources around them in the wider organisation to develop their skill levels.

Learning processes

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 suggests that managers can learn in work through a variety of processes; clearly, significant learning occurs in

work within the context of the work practice and, as adults, managers do drive their own learning. Still, they need to use several processes to determine what else they need to learn to succeed in their roles. Learning processes refer to factors intrinsic to the individual manager that bring about learning in work. Experience alone is not sufficient to develop learning; to learn in work, managers must use processes such as reflection, self-resilience and problem solving.

Reflection is a highly personal cognitive process (Daudelin, 1996) and managers who want to learn must reflect on their actions. That is, it is not enough to merely participate in the work process; they must engage in some kind of cognition to reconstruct their experience and then learn from it (Nadler et al., 2003). The manager must have an open mind and be able to engage self-critique strategies and solicit feedback from others. This ability to use reflection requires a shared language so people can engage in a meaningful dialogue and purposeful enquiry (Sadler-Smith, 2006). Kransdorff (1999) points out that in busy organisations it may be too much to expect that managers take the time and space for reflection; therefore they must be given time to reflect. Furthermore there is a requirement for collective reflection to avoid the propensity for “corporate amnesia with concomitant repetition of mistakes” (Karnsdorff, 1999: 13).

The comments that Manager D made in her learning diary reflect exactly these points. She described how difficult it was to engage in reflection on the

job due to time constraints and said that walking in the evening helped her in this respect:

I am so busy at work that I just have to hit the ground running and move from one meeting to another or solve one problem after the next. You don't have time to close the door to your office and put a do not disturb sign up. My manager would not be too impressed with that approach. Sometimes you get overwhelmed and find that if I can get out and go for a walk in the national park that I can examine the issues that occur during the day and learn from them. This period is vital for me and if I don't do this I get agitated and find it hard to move on with my home life otherwise.

Daudelin (1996) believes that people must get away from their jobs in order to reflect; she says the challenge for managers is to find occasions for reflection when they are so closely linked to the dynamics of work. Some organisations use a formal strategy of allocating reflection time in work, but she sees it as contrived and artificial; in any case, it would not fit with the culture of the organisation being studied here.

Manager G did get away from his work to reflect; he used his learning diary to reflect on his practice and described how his tendency to challenge others during meetings was having a negative effect on the way others perceived him. One meeting ended in turmoil and no issues had been resolved in the process. He had a tendency to blame others for this because they failed to

come up with solutions when put on the spot. He began to reflect on his behaviour and gained some insight as a result:

This time, however, I began to think it might have been my fault and I took time out to examine how I was behaving and instead of being assertive I realised that my behaviour could be seen as aggressive and that it could be damaging my relationships at work. People were inclined to switch off when I began to question them and I noticed that I was not requested to attend important meetings. I checked this out with a few trusted colleagues and they had the honesty to lay it on the line for me. I did try to change this approach and have noticed improvements and at times I slip back to the old behaviours, but at least I am getting there.

Manager D learned something quite different from the reflective process. She explained that she had become heavily dependent on her manager for advice in work and tended to see her as friend with whom she could share her thoughts and feelings. She had come through a difficult period in her personal life where her relationships had broken down and she found it very hard to cope with work and life in general. She was horrified to discover that others in the organisation had been told about her personal problems and she knew she needed to confront her manager on this:

To be honest I felt betrayed and felt like quitting yet I knew that was not an option for me as I thought people in other departments would

think I was a basket case or something and would not touch me. So it took time to think what the best approach to handling her was so I just changed my approach to being all sorted out and together. She kept probing to see if she could find the gaps and I just put up a guard against her. After a while she gave up and accepted that I was back to normal. I was still in bits inside and make every effort to avoid getting upset at work anymore.

Manager I described how valuable reflection would have been after a difficult experience. His unit had tendered for, and received a big contract and found that they were being pressured to deliver more to the customer than the contract was worth. They had had a similar experience in a previous tendering process and could have benefitted from capturing the learning there:

It was like a déjà vu experience if you like. I could see all the same old issues resurfacing again and all it would have required was for a few of us to get together to document our learning from the last experience.

Thus, as these passages show, managers in this study saw the value of reflection as a learning process. While some engaged in reflection in a proactive way, others did not engage actively in critical reflection, but were still able to describe instances of using reflection to enhance their learning.

A second specific learning process is described as resilience: managers are required to manage difficult situations (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001), manage rapid change (Daft, 2004), and embrace failure in a constructive way (Sonnenfeld and Ward, 2008), by perceiving these experiences in a positive manner (Coutu, 2002; Mallak, 1998). Managers must be able to use resilience to learn in work because they must be able to move on from failure and disappointment and learn from these situations. Specific job assignments can foster high levels of learning, especially those with a high degree of exposure and risk of failure. Learning from mistakes and failures can be very effective, especially if the organisational strategy includes a tolerance for making mistakes.

Then managers can benefit from reframing the way they see their mistakes (Gardner, 1997) and find ways of learning from them by transcending or replacing a loss with a gain (King et al., 2003b). Managers can learn from mistakes if they develop acceptance that mistakes will be made and take responsibility for managing them; they must also reframe the experience in a positive light that allows them to reflect and learn and ensure the mistake does not happen again.

Coutu (2002) lists three personal qualities crucial for self-resilience as being able to accept and face reality, to find coherence and to develop the capacity to innovate. In fact, the organisation can develop a mistake-management system that avoids allocating punishment for perceived failures and that makes both the cause and the effect of the mistake clear to everyone.

This organisation, however, does not demonstrate a high tolerance for making mistakes. Manager F described a particular incident when his credibility was shattered in the organisation: he was blamed when a senior manager left and took large amounts of intellectual property with him. After this it took him some time to rebuild the trust of the senior management team. He had to learn to be more assertive and confident and work actively to clear his name:

I mentioned that I was very much associated with a senior manager who left in unusual circumstances and this was a very difficult time for me. I felt that in some way I had lost my credibility and was being excluded from the effort to pick up the pieces, so to speak. A lot of intellectual property left as a result of this and I was in some way blamed for not making stronger efforts to retain this. However that individual was a very strong personality and you would not dare to challenge him. I did discuss leaving the organisation with my wife but our children are settled here and we love the place so I put my head down and soldiered on. I knew that I had to clear my name and gradually built up the trust levels with the senior manager who was sent in to clear up the mess. It was not an easy time for me yet I had to push myself to be more assertive. I also learned that there was no point in waiting for the situation to blow over. I had to proactively go in there and make my case.

This experience required high levels of resilience and it was his ability to recover from failure that helped him to become a more effective manager. However this manager was lucky in that he possessed this valuable ability to manage his emotions. Yet the absence of this ability can lead to crushing failure and derailment for other managers. Therefore the organisation could benefit from developing a more positive approach to learning from mistakes and failure particularly as they are entrepreneurial in nature and are more likely to make mistakes.

Manager D described how she made the mistake of taking too much time to complete a project in a team situation, and it had a negative impact on the way people saw her in the organisation. A senior manager told her that her team was not delivering and that the project would be reassigned to another team. This was a high-profile project and it was embarrassing for the team to find themselves in this position. When she carried out a debriefing session with the team to find out why they had failed, she discovered that they were uncomfortable because they were working on issues outside of their collective expertise:

...As the project progressed the knowledge increased and therefore the confidence level also rose. However it was too late then because the project was reassigned which was mortifying. However we took time to examine why we failed and that in itself was worthwhile. If I was putting a team together again to handle such an issue I would make sure that we have the relevant level of expertise on board.

Thus, the managers in this study provided several useful and varied examples of how they used the process of resilience and learned from mistakes and failures. For all of them, the key to learning from mistakes is to take time to examine what they can do to avoid such mistakes in the future.

A third process that managers can use to develop effective learning in work is problem-solving. They can learn a great deal when faced with inherently challenging situations in which they do not have the competence to function well (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984). In fact problem-solving in work can be seen as a way of constructing knowledge; managers face problems at varying levels of difficulty, ranging from structured and easily solved problems to equivocal ones (Weick, 1995) that offer no single solution. These problems can range from managing difficult employee issues to coping with change. Work can provide tangles of problems that need creative solutions, as much of our knowledge is socially constructed. Managers can learn in work by engaging in practical work-based learning problems that are not related to their areas of expertise. Here, Ohlott (2004) found that challenging job assignments beset with difficult problems can in effect help managers learn in work. Managers may be motivated by dealing with problems because doing so effectively allows them to prove themselves to their peers and their managers.

The managers in this study clearly learned from their experiences of solving problems in work. Manager A saw the learning benefits in problem solving,

particularly when his team had to develop new technological platforms to support its projects in other countries. He described the huge and sometimes apparently insurmountable, problems related to realigning technology infrastructures. However the problem he experienced implementing a new system in Spain became tangled with the employees' resistance to using the new technology. He described how he developed problem-solving skills by bringing people through a change process:

We needed to implement a new accounts management system and there was outright resistance to using it and it would have been a disaster for the company if they refused to take it on board... I had to gradually break down the barriers and build their trust and make them realize that we weren't trying to replace or take their jobs and that we were trying to make everybody's job easier. I had to build the trust with them and that was not an easy job.

He learned that it was important to engage in collaborative problem solving with his team and get their buy-in before imposing a new system. He also learned never to make assumptions about people's reactions to change and has learned how to be more aware of political situations within the organisation.

Manager J had a different perspective on problem solving, as he said it made his job more interesting. In fact many of the managers seem to thrive when

confronted with work challenges and again the entrepreneurial nature of the organisation created these challenges:

I relish the challenge that problems provide in the job and I enjoy the prospect of solving them. I feel that here is a buzz associated with a new project where you are presented with the unknown and you have to handle things. If I'm not learning I feel that I am wasting my time. That is why I moved from accountancy to general management: because I felt I had learned everything I needed to know from that discipline.

Manager B described a different kind of problem solving situation when she was given the assignment to turn around a business unit that was losing money. This was an extra project in addition to her own busy job managing a business unit and a large team. Her initial reaction was to feel overwhelmed by the prospect, but she remained calm and engaged robust problem-solving strategies to determine the capabilities of the workforce and to engage with them to come up with collaborative solutions to the problem:

I had to spend at least two days a week in the Southgate unit and I found that the extra travel, a 200-mile round trip, was putting major pressure on my health. Yet I knew if I didn't spend that time there I would not be able to assess the capabilities of the team. I worked hard to develop one of the managers [there] and built up a relationship of

trust with him. Again they wanted to make the business viable and this spurred him on to perform.

She understood that she would be unable to solve this problem on her own and worked to engage in collaborative problem solving strategies with both teams and empowered them to take responsibility to solve issues. The processes of reflection, resilience and problem-solving yielded considerable learning for managers in work. They gave useful examples of using resilience in a culture that demonstrates limited tolerance for failure, and problem solving was a worthwhile process for coping with difficult work place challenges. The company has scope to encourage its managers to engage actively in these processes in order to foster continuous learning for the manager and the organisation. It is also vital to develop a tolerance for failure in an organisation that is dependent on taking risks because of its strong entrepreneurial nature.

Learning from agents

Finally, specific micro-level relationships can have an impact on how managers learn in work. The term agent refers to the interpersonal relationships in which managers engage as they perform their job. Four types are discussed here: those with peers, with mentors, with the boss and with networks.

First, the relationships between managers and their peers present many opportunities for learning in work. According to Sias (2009), limited research has been conducted on peer relationships, because of the authoritarian nature of organisations where most research has been focused on the supervisor-employee relationship. In this study, the term peer relationship refers to peers at the same hierarchical level with no formal authority over each other. Managers reported that relationships with peers and respected role models provided a safe environment for learning and can offer the main components of learning such as support and assessment and the opportunity to be challenged. The managers in this study were more likely to seek developmental feedback from peers and respected role models than from bosses or mentors. Such relationships are on a more equal basis and managers are likely to assess themselves against respected peers because they are more likely to observe them closely and on a day-to-day basis.

Manager C described the value of learning from peers when she started work with the company. Her previous job had been with a Japanese company where people tended to keep their distance from peers, but her experience in this organisation was completely different:

It was a very exciting time because we were in a start-up situation here and everyone was energised and up for it. We got plenty of scope for experimentation and knowledge sharing and we had free access to the people you need to get things done. People were very open to helping out and you were encouraged to ask for help. I think

that a supportive boss and lots of like-minded people can help me learn.

Manager H also described his relief when he came to work in the organisation and discovered that his peers were open to helping him learn and develop an in-depth knowledge of the organisation. He feels that this helped him build good relationships, even friendships, with his peers and if he ever needs assistance it is always forthcoming. He also worked with peers across the organisation and never had difficulty accessing the relevant people:

It is a much more positive environment with people anxious to help each other out... If I ever get stuck or need information or help I can always go to them; this makes life easier. I have good friends there that are always the first to offer a helping hand or offer a listening ear.

This collegial relationship offered emotional support and honest feedback. Moreover, he has learned the value of asking other people for help, something he would have been quite reluctant to do before because his previous company was quite bureaucratic:

... in my first stint in another company, I felt that I was over my head and I found it very hard to get information from others and would be very reluctant in terms of asking for help. I got better at it around here

because you are dependent on others to learn and I see the wisdom of that approach now.

Manager G gave an example of learning project management skills from a highly experienced peer. He recognised that he had limited facilitation skills and watched this individual closely in terms of managing the team process. He described how he attended team meetings and observed his peer closely and in this sense reflected on his own practice and improved his own skills:

I did learn from the project leader that team management skills were crucial and he seemed to be able to get the best out of everybody. He was very methodical and focused in on getting all the facts and used the correct questioning strategies to get to the root of the problem.

Manager H had a high perfectionist trait and this factor prevented him from being effective as he believed that as an expert he had to be correct at all times. He found it very difficult to admit to making mistakes yet he has learned the value of being able to do this from one of his fellow managers. He realised that, far from diminishing one's credibility, this approach gains respect from others:

... I watched one of our managers ... and discovered that his core skill was his ability to think clearly and have the confidence to stick to his decisions and admit that he was wrong... That takes a great deal of courage and I thought that it was all about saving face. But people

admire you when you are prepared to admit that you have feet of clay...

Manager J described how he learned from HR and used them as sounding boards when one of his employees was experiencing bullying in his department:

...One of our very effective performers was having issues with another employee in the [business unit] and came to me citing numerous incidents of harassment... HR was quite helpful and I am always inclined to consult with them before making serious decisions about employee issues.

Manager B described that her lack of third level qualifications had a serious impact on her confidence levels and she felt intimidated by her highly educated peers particularly those working in legal and financial areas. This was preventing her from being effective in her role and she gave examples of getting specific information from a peer who explained some legal matters to her. She saw the benefits associated with asking for assistance from others:

...I used to be nervous around professionals such as lawyers and accountants but my experience in England changed my attitude to that. In fact our solicitor in Southbank was extremely helpful and I didn't mind saying to him that I didn't have a clue and he took it upon himself to educate me in legal matters. I now have no problems approaching

others in work and I find if you are open and honest people are generally happy to help you...

And Manager I was quite apprehensive when she was given responsibility for implementing a new overseas project. She received limited assistance from senior management and was reluctant to ask for their help in case she felt that she was not capable of doing the job. She found that her peers were most helpful and they assisted her to bring the project to a successful conclusion:

I suppose to be honest with you the strongest learning from my peers would have been the other managers that were out there on that overseas project, that were there building the business from the beginning. I depended a lot on them and they were very generous in terms of giving me help through the project. They knew the operation backwards and were always at my shoulder to clarify issues and give me feedback.

Manager C described her experience of learning from a peer as reciprocal and found it to be a very important part of her development. She explained that she worked most effectively in an environment where others were willing to share knowledge and expertise and that this approach was very evident in this organisation and had shaped her decision to remain in the organisation:

... You can actively consult with your peers and they generally will respond. I believe that this is based on reciprocity and if you scratch my back I will scratch yours... It is a type of bartering of skills...

Manager J gave an example of learning how to manage political issues in the organisation by using a peer for advice and guidance. He recognised that this individual was effective in terms of influencing senior management and he helped him to gain acceptance for some of his business ideas:

He was able to build bridges to other people in the organisation and paved the way for me because he had been in the organisation for so long, practically from the start. It was also useful that he had the ear of the CEO, particularly when no one was sure what I was doing in the organisation...

Manager E also described this process of learning about the organisation and the benefits this had for her career:

One of my peers was brilliant as she was also a business analyst the same time as me and she helped me build networks in the business and gave me the heads up on every business unit in the place... success in my role is dependent on knowing what is going on...

Manager G developed the skills to influence senior management through receiving feedback from his peer that he was too passive in his influencing

style, which was not helping him his career progression. This peer helped him to develop strategies to handle difficult managers by helping him to role play difficult situations; he also offered him advice and guidance which was very beneficial:

I remember that I used to have to deal with a very arrogant senior manager who spent his time trying to undermine the work of our department and constantly put us down... I just didn't know how to handle him. I will tell the truth that I was in despair. Then I started to notice that one of my peers was well able to handle him and asked for his help. He actually sat down with me and gave me feedback that I was too passive and helped me put together a plan of action...

The managers gave many instances of how their relationships with peers were very important in terms of helping them to learn in work. They described the reciprocal nature of this learning approach and the benefits of this for the wider organisation. It was evident that these peers served as information, collegial and special peers (Kram and Isabella, 1985) and offered effective role model behaviours, information exchange and social support. It was interesting to note that while the organisation did not encourage peer relationships across the business, it did happen because managers needed to access learning from other subject matter experts. The organisation has scope to implement strategies to harness this type of learning as it can offer significant learning for managers.

The second category of agent from whom managers learn is the boss. The manager's boss generally has the responsibility of developing the manager's skills and abilities in work; this kind of development offers clear benefits as it gives the boss more scope to delegate. When bosses help their managers to develop they are often perceived as developing the organisation's human resources, in addition employees are attracted to working for a boss who is concerned with developing others. Here the direct boss can act as a role model for the manager who can pick up knowledge, skills and behaviours from them through observation and feedback. The boss has the responsibility to actively seek opportunities to help the manager to learn in work and to build the learning into the system so that it is integrated with normal work processes (Mumford and Gold, 2004).

In addition the boss has the scope to push the manager outside of her or his zone of comfort and to offer challenging assignments; management scholars have noted that the boss can act as a dialogue partner by pushing and challenging the individual and questioning their underlying assumptions (McCauley and Douglas, 2004). In this respect the boss can also use the performance management system to decide on challenging development goals and objectives. Several authors see the boss-employee relationship as central for development (McCall et al., 1988; McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002; Morrison et al., 1992); support from the boss has also been associated with employees participating more in development and learning activities (Noe, 1996; Tharenou, 1997).

Direct bosses are naturally in an ideal position to encourage managers in learning on the job, given their daily close proximity and their position supervising managers' activities. However, not all bosses provide positive learning opportunities and some managers learn more about what not to do and how to keep going in difficult situations (McCauley and Douglas, 2004).

Manager G provided an example of a supportive boss who was a highly effective coach. His boss recognised his natural reluctance to take the limelight and pushed him into work situations that forced him to develop these skills. He also taught him how to build relationships with clients and customers, to negotiate and to build trust. He says their relationship is still beneficial to him:

He made sure that I worked on building relationships with our vendors and pushed me to become better at interacting with our customers. I was quite shy and he would bring me to all the customer meetings and put me in situations where I had to push myself into the limelight...

Manager B also talked about her manager's coaching style and explained how she now uses this approach when developing her own employees:

He made a huge impact on me because he was like a father figure and he took me under his wing and I learned how to manage employees and the customer and other general business skills. If I was having difficulty he would be over from Ireland in a flash. It was a

bit awkward that he was not on site in the UK. Funny, I never minded admitting any insecurities or weaknesses to him because I knew that it would not come against me in the job...

Manager F also spoke of the way his boss helped him develop, both his business acumen and his ability to impress customers. This was a symbiotic relationship, as he was able to teach his boss some technical skills. Like Manager G, he described being shy and needing confidence, so he modelled his behaviour on what he saw his boss doing:

It tends to be a cost centre and I was a bit naive in terms of business acumen. I had to get wise about controlling costs and generating profits and keeping an eye on the bottom line. My boss was very useful in this respect as he had a great business head on his shoulders...and while I was absorbing all the business knowledge he was picking up the technical details from me. I attended all the senior management meetings with him as his second in command and sat in with him on customer meetings and watched every move that he made...

Manager I described a slightly different relationship as his boss tended to act as a guide for him, giving him a strategic broad picture of the organisation:

My boss gave me free rein to find out about the organisation; however, they did guide me in terms of what was happening in the organisation in the long term outside of my own business unit.

What Manager H learned from his boss was the importance of sharing information. At first he was reticent to do so but now he sees the value of this approach:

I have learned a lot from my current boss and I learn things from him on a daily basis. He is a great man for sharing information and believes in the greater good of the company. I would have been inclined to hold my cards very close to my chest as I had picked up this habit as a protective measure. I think as you go through life you pick up bits and pieces.

Manager I learned yet another lesson, the value of trusting employees from his boss and through first-hand experience:

...She trusted me and did not look over my shoulder and was open to my suggestions which can be rare in a boss. In fact this trust mechanism can be very useful in terms of helping people learn, as you know you are going to be given the chance to try things and you know that you are going to get the support if you get stuck or if things go wrong...

Similarly, Manager E described the advantages of a trusting boss and described how this has the capacity to enhance learning on the job because it has the effect of empowering the manager to become confident and take charge of their learning:

... he was great because he gave me free rein to develop the projects office. So I suppose I felt I had to create a role for myself and I did. Yet the bottom line was that he trusted me and let me liaise with the relevant people in the organisation and was always there to back me up and give my role credibility. If he had not given me my head I would not have learned as much as I did and I would not have developed the confidence to liaise with senior management. I unconsciously used him as a role model.

Manager E learned something slightly different from her boss: the importance of creating a motivational environment:

I had a great boss who created a great sense of enthusiasm about work. He encouraged us all to learn from each other and to learn from him and you never felt that you were imposing when you asked him questions.

In contrast, several managers commented on negative aspects of their relationships with their managers. Manager D learned the value of

maintaining confidentiality as she described her boss as “being too loose with his counsel”:

It got out that he exposed the weaknesses of one of the senior management team in that he found out he claimed more qualifications than he had, in fact he had not finished off his degree. I felt that I was tarred with the same brush and found it very difficult to get the support from that senior manager again.

And Manager I described another negative experience, having to develop herself as her boss did not have people skills:

The good thing about my boss is that he lets you off to do your own thing and he does not go out of his way to develop you, he lets you develop yourself and it is up to you. I suppose you could say that I learned to be independent, you know, like if I didn't make my own way I would not be around today. He is a real technical specialist and is not good with people.

Manager J sees his boss as having a mix of helpful and less helpful attributes:

He sees things in a broad way, he has the ideas and is an out-of-the-box thinker with a huge tolerance for ambiguity, yet he is not always practical and that is where I come in. I have a tendency to be the

practical and see things in black and white and I have to put the parameters on the ideas and operationalize the pure out-of-the-box and left-of-centre thinking.

In addition, he recently discovered that the boss had kept him from learning about several promotional opportunities and was shocked that he had allowed this to happen.

From these examples, it is clear that bosses play an important role in helping managers to learn in work and a number of managers reported how they had benefitted from being given generous amounts of time to learn and develop. The learning centred around becoming more effective in managing the customer relationship, acting as a sounding board and learning effective influencing, coaching and general business skills. Conversely some managers reported that while their boss did offer some benefits in terms of learning in work, they also learned what not to do as a manager.

Mentors represent a third kind of valuable developmental relationship for managers. Managers tend to seek out mentors to help them navigate the culture and politics of an organisation; this relationship can develop when a more experienced superior establishes a relationship with a less experienced manager and helps them to learn how the organisation functions. The mentoring relationship may be initiated by the mentor or the protégée; the mentor assists the protégée to build networks and social alliances. This offers a useful learning opportunity for the manager because it provides a

protected relationship in which experimentation, exchanges and learning can occur and skills, knowledge and insight can be developed (Mumford, 1993). An employee's direct manager cannot act as mentor; since they are responsible for managing the employee's performance, the employee is less likely to divulge any weaknesses or insecurities.

The mentor may develop a "protected" relationship with the protégée and focus solely on their development. This is advantageous for the manager: as they develop a long-term relationship, the mentor can take a long-term view of the protégée's development and can focus on developing the protégée's career potential, looking generally at their performance rather than at details. They can also encourage their personal growth, as they have the scope to take an interest in the individual's life. Another advantage is that they can offer distance, independence and greater clarity of thought about issues and maintain a professional perspective (Mumford and Gold, 2004). The mentor can perform several roles, including performance improver, career developer, counsellor and sharer of knowledge. Thus mentoring is concerned with the broader development of the manager.

The mentor may also have power within higher levels of the organisation to sponsor the protégée's career development: they can give the manager-protégée opportunities for sponsorship, coaching, protection, exposure and visibility and challenging work (Kram, 1985). The mentoring relationship can also offer psychosocial support such as role modelling, counselling and friendship. Some individuals are exposed to bosses who do not have a

developmental focus; when this happens mentors can be very useful in breaking this negative cycle. They can also be useful in offering an objective and alternative view on managerial problems and can offer objective feedback on the protégée's reported or observed behaviour. Further, mentors have the capacity to act as door-openers and ensure that their protégées have the opportunities to get involved in challenging jobs and assignments. Research on the career success of first-line managers highlighted the benefits of mentoring.

The story that Manager A tells about his mentor draws on several of the points above. He describes how a mentor helped him define a career path and get a worthwhile promotion; he feels that without this individual to help him he would have left the company:

...He was very useful to me when I was trying to figure out what to do with my life after the overseas project. At the time I felt that he made this opportunity for me... If I didn't have this senior manager to confide in and argue my case for me I think I would have slipped through the net and left the company. I can certainly see the benefit of having friends in high places.

Manager D had a slightly different experience and she took a very challenging job because she knew that she would be able to use a particular mentor:

... I took the job... because there was a guy at the top of the room who really made me feel that I could do the job and said that he would give me all the help he could. This guy basically was my lifeline in terms of coming to grips with my role.

Manager B also described specific learning from a mentor where a senior manager helped her become more strategic in her thinking and encouraged her to develop both a general management perspective and her confidence levels:

... He always had a different angle and could see the big picture and at the time I was quite detail focused and I think that he helped me take a wide-angled view on issues. He made sure that I was exposed to all aspects of the business and got to do every single thing to do with the company...

Manager J described other elements of the mentoring relationship, mentioned in the literature, including the reciprocal nature of the mentoring relationship and the political advantages of such an arrangement:

He was like me in the beginning, a pure accountant and I suppose that I mirrored him in terms of my progression and found that he was really approachable and gave me his time in terms of bouncing off ideas and helping me negotiate the political minefield around here. He has amazing political savvy and I admire this and respect this in him.

Manager C referred to a point also mentioned in the literature when she talked about her natural reluctance to seek out mentoring relationships as she did not want to be seen as sycophantic or disloyal to her own manager:

...The new CEO, however, is quite approachable and lately I notice he is making himself available to me in order to allow me to pick his brains. I think that he was impressed with my achievements abroad [an overseas assignment]. He has been quite useful in terms of helping me develop a cohesive approach to developing service-level agreements and I know that I can go to him if I need any kind of help at all. Generally I am not a great woman for sucking up to senior management.

Clearly the mentoring relationship provided opportunities for learning from the psychosocial to the political, as the mentor demonstrated the capacity to act as a guide for the manager and did assist them with their career advancement. Typically these relationships seemed to be unidirectional, though several saw them as reciprocal. While most of the managers saw the benefits of mentoring relationships, one resisted making these contacts. The organisation can benefit from taking a more proactive approach to encouraging mentoring in the organisation.

The final type of relationship to be discussed here is the developmental network. Networking is probably the most useful form of learning in work for

these managers as they are continually presented with challenges outside their areas of expertise and experience and in effect benefit from discussions with others who can provide help and advice. These networking relationships can be lateral or hierarchical within an organisation or spawning organisations and can be on-going or specific to a particular job transition, or job- and career-related (Eby, 1997).

Manager E described the value of using a developmental network in that it can give access to specific expertise in a very short time frame:

Learning is permanently in the job and if something new comes up that you can't handle, you just pick up the phone and get onto the relevant experts. If it's a people related problem you contact HR or if it is a technical problem you just find out who or what can help you put the pieces together... We used a group of consultants and a network of call centre managers to set up our contact centre here and we needed their help because we had no expertise in this area at all.

Manager J used external networks in order to get recognition from senior management because he was finding it very difficult to influence them. He used his learning diary to examine this approach:

I ensured that the company got recognitions and awards from international networking conferences and suddenly senior management started to appreciate the work I was doing. To be honest

sometimes I felt like giving up yet I knew if I kept focused I would succeed. Achieving industry standards and getting international awards and recognitions for the call centre made them realise the advantage of these awards in terms of winning customers.

Manager A described the value of both internal and external networks. When he had to take up a new role with people management responsibilities he found it quite challenging as he was used to working on his own and felt that managing others was too complex. He had built up relationships with a number of people and would pick their brains on various personnel issues. He used his learning diary to explore this:

I was allocated a team of five people who were knowledge matter experts and hard to handle. They were relatively young graduates yet thought they knew it all... I used a number of people to help me deal with them by asking for advice and running my ideas by them. This was a great help.

Manager G also described the value of contacts across the business, which he had developed through his role as an IT expert. He could access knowledge and expertise as he had built up extensive relationships over the years:

This gave me an insight into what was happening in other parts of the business and I was aware of the different business opportunities that

were coming up and had an opportunity to research the relevant IT platforms required for these. I had the chance to talk to other senior managers in the business units and this helped me get across to different promotional opportunities.

Manager I described a network as helping her in a different way: providing feedback. Once she understood that her business unit was not delivering a high enough standard to the business, she was able to learn through the process of solving the problem:

I was shocked that there was a very poor perception of the service that we provided to the business. They felt that we were too slow and not responsive enough. We went out and worked with them to improve our processes and we changed our approach and made every effort to work with them to avoid problems occurring. We learned a technique of paired programming from some of our contacts and this is guaranteed to deliver and get results.

This networking opportunity allowed her to examine the standards of service that her department was providing and then work to improve relationships across the group.

Manager C used networking to build her knowledge base. Her expertise was in the engineering arena yet her work in the projects office gave her exposure to all kinds of learning disciplines and she took advantage of that:

I think in a supportive environment people are open to offering help and advice and of course I ensure that this is reciprocal because if you don't give you won't get. The projects office gives me a carte blanche to move between all the business units and I felt that I have built good contacts here.

For her, the network was a valuable tool for career advancement as it gave her access to resources and helped her expand her power and ability to implement her agenda.

It is evident that a network of high quality relationships has the potential to produce positive learning outcomes for these managers as they are not dependent on one source to develop their knowledge base in work. However Dutton and Ragins (2007) highlight the need to carry out more research on developmental net work structures and again organisations can benefit from developing insights into fostering developmental networks as a means of developing managers in work.

SUMMARY

Overall, then, this chapter has laid out the many kinds of influence that both the macro and micro contexts exert on the ways managers learn in work. Both contexts present many opportunities for learning and the managers take good advantage of them, as shown in both the description of key findings and

the statements about individual influences. It appears that while context is a vital source of learning for managers in this study limited attempts have been made to exploit this in terms of enhancing manager learning in work. The final chapter will deal with these findings in more detail and examine ways in which we can learn from this research.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to weave together the threads of the research to provide an overview of the research findings, what they contribute to the literature and their implications for practice. This chapter will also examine the limitations inherent within the current research with a view to providing suggestions for future research.

The findings of this study will be analysed in the context of the research question and the conceptual model through a synthesis of the literature. An analysis of how the current research advances our understanding of context on manager learning in work is also presented.

The findings should provide practical strategies for organisations to help them develop methods to exploit organisational context for customised and relevant learning opportunities for managers. The findings may also have the potential to guide managers to examine the rich and varied learning opportunities inherent in the work context. It can also assist managers to develop awareness of how to identify access and evaluate learning opportunities in work.

The research presents a number of limitations and these will be examined within the context of the research, design issues will be examined in detail as well as analysing the problems that may arise as a result. Finally, the chapter will examine possible future directions of the research and will propose strategies for improving the current research design and also possibilities for future developments and advancements.

Discussion

The overall research question posed in chapter 1 was:

How does context influence managers learning in work and what agents and processes facilitate this learning.

Within this broad question the research investigated the following sub questions:

1. What factors in the external environment facilitate learning in work?
2. How does the organisational structure facilitate manager learning in work?
3. How does the organisational strategy contribute to manager learning?
4. Is there a learning culture in the organisation and does this encourage manager learning in work?
5. What impact does leadership style have in terms of helping managers learn in work?
6. How do teams contribute to manager learning in work?

7. How does the manager's job facilitate their learning in work?
8. What processes do managers use to learn in work?
9. What agents/developmental relationships do managers use to learn in work?

The discussion of the sub questions is framed within three sub headings: Macro contextual issues, micro contextual issues and processes and agents. These key findings were presented in chapter 4 and are summarised in detail here.

Key findings

The key findings that emerged from the analysis were context did provide numerous opportunities for learning.

External Environment

The managers reported that the external environment provided rich and valued learning experiences particularly opportunities for interacting with customers and clients and they highlighted the importance of these relationships for the financial survival of the organisation. The experiences reported were based on legitimate business transactions and the most useful learning emanated from challenging demands from these customers. Specific challenging requests had the advantage of both strengthening the relationship and leading to the development of valuable and innovative

knowledge and processes which served to be mutually beneficial. This links with Sias's (2009: 156) description of the customer relationship as an "ongoing dyadic entities in which the partners engage in repeated and patterned interactions". This finding contradicts the contention of Lans et al (2008) that interactions with customers and clients in an entrepreneurial environment can be described as a double edged sword, where issues of power, trust and reliability have the potential to restrict and inhibit relationships.

The managers in this study did not report negative outcomes from their relationships rather they viewed the challenges associated with these relationships as opportunities for learning. Research has focused on the financial outcomes of customer relationships (Chang and Tseng, 2005; Croteau and Li, 2003) and researchers such as Sias (2009) and Dutton and Ragins (2007) see customer relationships as a promising new area of scholarly enquiry because of their potential to foster learning in work. This is particularly relevant to this study because managers in this organisation had substantial access to clients.

The managers also described useful learning as coming from managing acquisitions, implementing redundancy programmes and dealing with acute regulatory issues. Some described their lack of comfort when presented with work challenges where they felt that they did not have the relevant expertise. Four of the managers worked in IT and described how they coped with challenges particularly in relation to managing others and building

relationships with customers. However it was precisely these interventions that contributed to the managers learning in work. They spoke of coping with a sense of apprehension where they had to develop interpersonal skills or deal with general management situations where they felt that they did not have the expertise. Two accountants also described how they learned to manage others in the job in difficult circumstances and while they found this challenging at first they realised the value of this approach which focused on learning by doing.

Organisational structure

Several researchers have examined the impact of organisational structure on learning and skill formations (Ashton, 2004; Fuller and Unwin, 2004). A number of structural issues were found to impact on learning from the hierarchical structuring of relationships, the design of jobs, organisational decisions and the decisions about the systems of rewards. The main issues that emerged from this research in relation to structure is that the organisation is arranged in silos and has the propensity to reduce communications and ultimately to create blocks to learning.

However a number of managers reported that expertise does not always exist within their business units and they have developed the capacity to scan the environment across the organisation in order to identify and partner with subject matter experts to develop solutions to problems. They also reported on issues of competition between the different business units which

resulted in lack of cooperation in terms of sharing information, resources and people. However the fact that these managers are resourceful and for the most part highly skilled may indicate that they will be more likely to pursue these learning routes. This finding indicates those managers lacking these characteristics may find it more difficult to access these opportunities.

Organisational strategy

The organisation strategy had a strong entrepreneurial orientation and managers were expected to take risks and tackle challenging business opportunities as part of their everyday work. A number of managers described how they thrived on these challenges where they learned to recognise these as opportunities for development. While this entrepreneurial approach is highly beneficial for managers who enjoy risk taking it is not useful for managers who may be less adventurous.

Two managers with an IT background remained in the same business unit for several years before progressing in the organisation. They took opportunities to take up international assignments in general management positions. This involved taking a step into the unknown without support from the organisations in terms of offering transition strategies. These managers reported significant learning from these assignments however if managers have the tendency to be risk averse they will be less likely to learn effectively in this type of entrepreneurial environment.

Researchers have identified factors inherent in the work environment that have the potential to encourage entrepreneurial learning as the existence of guidance and support, external interactions, internal communication and task characteristics. Furthermore, they suggest that learning can be encouraged by creating a culture that views entrepreneurial tasks as working (Lans et al, 2008). These activities should also be viewed as learning opportunities and these should be harnessed and evaluated to foster further learning opportunities for managers in work.

Learning culture

Learning takes place within social and cultural contexts and these determine what managers know and how they learn. The managers in this organisation collaboratively constructed a shared set of beliefs and understanding when they engaged in the practice of work and in this sense their learning takes place within a culture of practice. The accepted practice in this organisation is that there is a culture of helping each other to learn particularly within business units. The learning culture in the organisation was informal, with managers reporting that learning occurred in everyday work practices.

The senior management approach to developing managers was based on a paternalistic and informal approach and this strategy was quite useful in the initial stages of development, with managers reporting positive learning experiences. However as the organisation expanded, these relationships had

become diluted because the management population had increased and the potential for supported learning in work diminished as a result. Managers reported that they felt that they had to proactively scan the environment for business opportunities and to be seen as proactive in order to access these opportunities.

They also reported a tendency to give opportunities to those managers who were seen as having demonstrated potential in the past. It was apparent that support was required from senior managers in order to facilitate learning in work. This view is corroborated by researcher such as McCracken (2004) and Sambrook and Stewart (2000) who found that managers would be more likely to get involved in learning if the organisation developed a learning orientated culture involving greater support from senior management.

The managers reported that the organisation could benefit from taking a more structured approach to knowledge management. They cited instances when they lost out on vital learning from business projects because they lacked a disciplined approach to evaluation and document key learning. This would assist them to avoid making mistakes in the future.

Leadership style

Leadership in the organisation had the potential to foster learning opportunities for managers because of its propensity to foster vision, innovation and organisational change (Bass, 1985) which distinguishes it

from management. The leadership in organisations had the potential to pull organisations through crises and have significant positive effects in the overall performance of the organisation. It follows that the leadership attitude to learning will impact on how managers learn in work. The managers reported positive benefits of working in an environment where they used the leadership team as role models for innovative and entrepreneurial behaviours. This resonates with the strategy and culture of the organisation where senior managers were reported as supporting learning in work.

However a number of managers highlighted that the support of the senior management team is often required in order to get access to interesting business projects. If this is not forthcoming these managers will not benefit from valuable learning opportunities. Again there is a perception that manager who has achieved success in past business projects are more likely to be selected for future business challenges thus closing off opportunities for other managers in the business. One manager reported that he found it very difficult to get the respect of the senior team because he was from a different culture and had to use his peers to get access to learning opportunities.

Learning in Teams

Learning in teams is a form of collective learning where team members can work together to find new and innovative ways to learn from each other and the business environment. The literature views teams as critical mechanisms for improving performance within the organisational context. Effective teams

produce robust outcomes yet unhealthy teams can be dysfunctional and non productive and engage in convergent thinking (Nemeth, 1995). Teams provide a way for organisations to bring a range of expertise to bear on achieving business objectives.

This organisation uses teams in some fashion in that managers reported strong levels of learning from their involvement in teams both in their own business units and in cross functional teams. The concept of team work is relatively new to this organisation and it has only limited formal strategies for team development. While groups of managers worked together to develop business opportunities, limited attention was paid to the theoretical and practical dimensions of team development. The new CEO recognised the benefits of cross-functional teamwork and he encouraged this concept by introducing a continuous improvement process which brought diverse teams of managers together across divisional boundaries to work on specific cross-functional business projects. This process was described earlier, along with issues related to the limiting effects of the silo structure in the organisation.

The manager's job

Skule (2004) suggest that managerial responsibilities with high level exposure to change, customer demands and extensive professional contacts, all contribute to creating conditions for learning in work. It was evident from this study that the respondents had exposure to these conditions. They were middle managers with a generalist orientation and had responsibility for

multiple ranges of tasks within their role. They were required to manage a variety of employees and needed to be conscious of the dynamics of the wider organisation and needed to demonstrate a wide range of both managerial and leadership skills.

The managers reported that the job itself did provide numerous learning opportunities, especially when they were exposed to challenging projects. This learning increased when the boundary of the job changed as they were handed extra responsibilities or became involved in cross-functional assignments. Major learning challenges were associated with handling new and different responsibilities and the managers provided several examples of this, from taking on a co-ordinating role in a project team, to managing a completely different department, to having to influence upwards and laterally.

These managers were also involved in creating and managing change where they had to deal with ambiguous situations. While this made them more visible, which could generate pressure and stress, they developed strategies to deal with those stressors and doing so provided valuable learning experiences. They pointed out the pivotal importance of testing assignments which offered substantial learning opportunities in work.

Having access to opportunities for promotion also contributed to the managers learning in work and again exposure to and support from senior management was seen as key in terms of facilitating and enhancing learning in this context. The role of the manager offers numerous opportunities to

learn in work because the very nature of the role requires complex competencies from the middle management cadre in this research study.

Agents

Agents were described as being extremely important in terms of helping the manager to learn in work. These work relationships are vital for the survival of the organisation and for the individual managers well being (Dutton and Ragins, 2007; Sias, 2009). Access to relevant co-workers can increase the manager's capacity to learn and four types of relationships were examined in this research: those with peers, with mentors, with the boss and with networks. The relationship between the manager and the peer was reported as a useful resource for learning in the absence of more formal structures for learning in the organisation. They described these peers as sounding boards and subject matter experts. While they learned from their peers in their own business units they also accessed relevant experts across the wider business in order to increase knowledge and learning. Not only were they challenged to widen their domain knowledge they also developed the interpersonal skills required to cope with the difficulties associated with adverse work situations.

The managers in this study reported that relationships with peers and respected role models also provided a safe environment for learning and offered the main components of learning such as support and assessment and the opportunity to be challenged. They were more likely to seek

developmental feedback from peers and respected role models than from bosses or mentors as the former kind of relationships are on a more equal basis and managers are more likely to assess themselves against respected peers because they had opportunities to observe them closely and on a day-to-day basis.

The managers also gave examples of how they learned from their mentors on how to manage the customer and employees. Mentors were described as being very important for the development of these managers as they provided not only information and feedback but also acted as guides for the learning and career advancement of these managers. These mentoring relationships for the most part were not formally instigated but developed naturally.

However Ragins and Scandura (1997) caution that there are dysfunctional aspects to some mentoring relationships which can lead to negative outcomes for the managers such as limiting self esteem and decreases in job satisfaction. Therefore Ragins et al (2000) recommended the need to develop quality mentoring relationships to avoid career sabotage issues. Mentoring was prevalent in this organisation was because of the patriarchal nature of the culture. However one manager described that she resisted developing mentoring relationships because she feared being perceived as being disloyal to her boss. Again there is a need to raise awareness of the benefits of developing mentoring relationships. However managers also need strategies to help them cope with dysfunctional mentoring relationships.

The boss

The boss was seen as an important source of information and knowledge for these managers and was regarded as a key role model. They also provide feedback on job performance and while there was no formal performance management system in place, managers did describe the value of receiving feedback as a way of learning to be more effective in work. The boss in this sense was prepared to give both positive and negative feedback and the need to give negative feedback is viewed as vital for employee development (Sias, 2009).

However despite considerable research on the boss-employee relationship there is a need to examine the problematic aspects of these relationships in more detail. One manager reported that she learned to be more effective by observing the mistakes that her ineffective boss made. One manager described the positive learning aspects in his relationship with his boss in that he developed strategic skills; however he also discovered that his boss prevented him from getting a number of very good promotions in other business units.

The organisation can benefit from developing a talent pool and encourage promotion across business units as a way of breaking down barriers and creating a more cohesive culture. This would also contribute to increasing levels of learning across the organisation.

Developmental networks have the capacity to create learning opportunities for managers in work and these were described by Kram (1985) as constellations of people that managers rely on to support them to develop a learning lens to apply in work. The literature identifies high density networks comprised of developers who know one and other and low density networks which are more diverse in composition (Kahn, 2007). Diverse networks have the potential to provide variety of information and contribute to the cognitive flexibility of the manager (Higgins, 2001). Research has indicated that networks with the capacity offer developmental assistance are of considerable importance to helping the individual learn in work and also advance in their careers. The managers in this study described the advantages of these networks in terms of getting access to expertise quickly and getting acceptance for ideas from senior management. One manager described his difficulties in influencing senior managers and how he counteracted this by getting awards for his international professional network. Higgins (2007) again states that there are limited longitudinal studies on developmental networks with the exception of Dobrow and Higgins (2005). This kind of research could analyse the effectiveness of these relationships in terms of helping the manager learn in work.

Processes

Researchers have demonstrated an increased interest in understanding the processes that help managers learn by reflecting on their learning or recover from adversity which is referred to as demonstrating resilience. This has

been described as a dynamic process that can assist the manager to control emotion and manage failure. Rothstein and Burke (2010) view resilience as a process of self development that evolves over a period of time. The research on resilience is mostly based outside of the management field in social research in children and families however current studies have analysed organisation resilience (Cameron and Caza, 2004; Luthans, 2002). There is scope to examine this area in the field of management research as it is a core process for assisting managers to manage adversely in the work context.

King and Rothstein (2010) describe the difficulties experienced by managers in their careers as; disappointment, failure or loss which can lead to a loss of self confidence. They suggest that because managers are coping in chaotic circumstances they require the capacity for resilience to survive in turbulent and changing circumstances. Failure has been described as the best way to learn yet if the manager does not use resilience as a process of learning then they may not survive the experience. The manager's levels of resilience can determine success or failure and the managers in this study gave examples of mistakes and failures and how they used resilience to cope. They explained that interpersonal relationships and support helped them to develop resilience yet there were occasions where they had to dig deep into their own personal emotional bank to survive in adverse circumstances.

Few treatments of management learning focus on the processes that managers use to learn in work. Certain events in work may trigger learning where the manager learns from retrospective reflection which has the

potential to transform their perspectives and helps them come up with new insights. The process of reflection has the capacity to help the manager “to challenge the standard learning underlying our habitual response” (Raelin, 2001:14). A focus on reflective practice has the capacity to encourage the manager to shift from single-to-double-and triple loop learning (Mumford and Gold, 2004). However this much saluted critical reflection process is rarely allowed to penetrate organisational values (Fenwick, 2001).

Reflection is necessary in order to help the manager transform experience into learning, yet often the managers in this organisation did not actively engage in reflection and most importantly did not have the time for reflection. The tendency to move quickly from one business challenge to the next limited the opportunity that these managers had for reflection. They are required to tackle complex problems effectively and move on, leaving them little time and space to reflect on what they have learned. Managers must be allocated time if they are to reflect and Karnsdorff (1999) highlights the fact that in addition to personal reflection being vital, collective reflections can help people avoid repeating mistakes. The managers reported that this is a serious issue for the organisation.

Problem solving is also an important learning process for managers and Dewey (1938) suggested that learning occurs from the relational thought required to question assumptions and solve problems on specific situations. The expansive learning cycle (Engestrom, 1987, 199b, 2001) sheds light on how the manager engages the problem solving to learn in work. However

Clawson (2010) cautions that problem solving can lead to a decline in the problem yet this in turn can lead to less focus in the problem and this leads to a possibility for a resurgence in the problem. He suggests that a manager needs to develop a creative focus to solving problems in order to achieve complete resolution. Some managers described the effective learning that occurred through collaborative problem solving strategies that allowed them to affect change management strategies.

Synthesis of the Literature

The impetus for this research study emerged from a need to understand the influence of context on manager learning in work and while a number of studies have been conducted on this topic (Eruat, 2004; Ellinger, 2005; Sambrook and Stewart, 2005; Leslie et al, 1998; Skule 2004) limited efforts have been made to analyse the concept of context and this appears to have been approached in an arbitrary fashion (Ellinger, 2005; Johns, 2006.). The theoretical lens of contextualism, activity theory and situated learning theory were used as a theoretical backdrop for this analysis. The overall research was influenced by social constructionist theory as learning in work is grounded on social processes and can be viewed as socially constructed and socially contested. This occurs because organisations in which managers are situated are constricted by the interactions of all employees (Sias, 2009). The basic premise of social construction theory is that the organisation exists in the interactions of its members. In this sense organisations are not

repositories of learning rather they facilitate learning by creating opportunities for learning in the act of employees carrying out work on a day to day basis.

The key argument propounded in this study is that learning in work is not confined to the boundaries of the organisation and that it occurs in context. Context for the purposes of this study comprises of macro and micro organisational contextual factors which include the external environment, the strategy, structure, culture and leadership of the organisation and the team and job context. Consideration is also given to the agents that help managers learn and these consist of relationships in the work context such as peers, bosses, mentors and general networks. Managers spend most of their time in work and these agents or work relationships can provide a generative source of learning and support that can help the manager make sense of their environment (Dutton and Ragins, 2007; Sias, 2009). However they also have the potential to be toxic and dysfunctional and managers have to utilise processes to help them learn from and cope with adversity and challenges which have been described in this study as reflection, resilience and problem solving.

It appears from the literature that context has a powerful influence on learning in work yet its influence on how managers learn is relatively under researched. This may be due to an absence of a robust taxonomy of situations on which to base context (Johns, 2006) combined with a dearth of refined language in which to operationalize context (Gladwell, 2002; Johns 1991). Coincidentally, Johns (2006) argues that researchers also have the

tendency to focus on the disproportional causes of behaviour and overlook the situational (Johns, 2006; Gladwell, 2002; Johns, 1991). Therefore research on context and its influence on learning had a tendency to be ad hoc and one dimensional and can benefit from a consideration of numerous dimensions of context. For this reason it was deemed appropriate to consider a wide range of macro and micro contextual issues in this study. This had the potential to elicit a more comprehensive insight into the impact of context on learning in work. This can contribute to an understanding of the situations in work that trigger learning for managers.

Activity theory was useful in this analysis as its basic premise is that learning is derived through interactions with others and the work environment and supports the view that manager learning is triggered by the need to address contradictions that occur through their practice. The manager is confronted with problems that need to be addressed in work and the expansive learning model can be used to understand how the manager is prompted to learn in work.

A further theory used in this study to understand how the manager learns in work was the situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The key argument here is that collaboration with others is fundamental in terms of developing learning in work as learning is socially constructed in the work environment where people engage in real work problems. The managers in this study gave many examples of the benefits of working with others either

in a one to one or team basis and were able to offer clear examples of the benefits of enhancing their learning in work.

These theories concur that learning can occur through interaction with context and others in work yet it is evident that learning in work is complex and multi faceted and needs careful consideration from the research. Therefore it is important to challenge the propensity of researchers to identify universal principles of learning as being too simplistic and reductionist. A conceptual model was developed to reflect these themes as identified in the literature.

The impetus for carrying out this research was the paucity of existing knowledge and understanding of the influence of context on how managers learn in work. A thematic review of the current literature was carried out and a conceptual model was developed (Figure 4.1, Chapter 4) to reflect the key themes in the different literature bases. Several themes and sub themes were identified. A qualitative study was selected to investigate this research question as it offered the opportunity to develop detailed and rich descriptors from managers through the use of in-depth interviews and learning diaries to garner accounts of how context influenced their learning in work. Each of these methods had inherent strengths and weaknesses and these have been addressed in more detail in Chapter 3.

The manager's role is complex, dynamic and interpersonally based and managers are required to make sense of and control a dynamic and complex

work environment. It is evident that the learning that occurs through work can be highly significant and in this respect organisations can be regarded as myopic in terms of their approach to identifying and harnessing this learning. Traditional ways of developing managers address only the tip of the iceberg as most learning to manage and managing to learn occurs in tacit and culturally embedded ways (Fox, 1994a).

How managers learn in work is an important area of research and Ohlott (2004) concurs with this view and cited numerous research studies based on retrospective accounts from managers, supporting the notion that job experience was considered a primary source of learning (McCall et al 1998; Morrison et al 1992; Wick 1989). However these vital ways to help managers learn are not used at all or, at best, haphazardly. Learning in work can provide benefits for both managers and the organisation that extend beyond achieving task objectives.

Managers are motivated to learn when they are propelled to tackle real life work problems and Buckley and Monks (2008) argue that traditional management development strategies with the focus on knowledge possession are not as useful as the ability to adapt or innovate in unfamiliar situations. Therefore there is a need for both researchers and practitioners to identify the nature of how managers learn in work and understand how and why learning took place in order to facilitate such learning in the future.

In an effort to understand how managers learn in work the conceptual framework (Figure 4.1, Chapter 4) was applied to the data elicited from the research questions and several themes and sub themes were analysed based on the accounts of the managers in the study.

Limitations of this research

This research has explored a number of important and theoretical findings on how managers learn in work. Methodological issues associated with a small sample size makes it difficult to generalise these findings across other organisational contexts. The fact that these managers were selected on their propensity to seek out effective learning opportunities may also have skewed the results.

These managers were selected in conjunction with other senior managers and their perception of these managers may be biased. It may have been more appropriate to select a range of managers across all business units in order to get a more comprehensive view of how managers learn in work.

Another limitation to the research sample was that nine out of the ten managers had received third level education and as a result may be more likely to seek out learning opportunities in work. Those managers who may not have benefited from third level education may not engage in such activity.

Method bias is also a consideration in that given the fact that the use of a qualitative research design based in the use of semi structured interviews and learning diaries may provide inaccurate reflections of their experience based on the fact that these are self report and subjective instruments.

The information gathered was subject to the respondents own interpretation of situations so there is no opportunity to check the validity of the information. The questions in the interviews and the diaries focused on eliciting information on how managers learned in work and other researchers argued that information on this topic can be implicit and difficult to access (Eruat, 2004). The learning diary was a useful data collection method but some respondents filled it out well and others contributed very little information. If diaries were used in future research it would be more effective to email respondents and give them specific time lines in which to fill it out.

The fact that the researcher worked for the organisation as an external consultant and had an in-depth knowledge of the culture of the organisation could be viewed as advantageous in some ways as this allowed the respondents to become comfortable and open to engaging in more in-depth discussion with the researcher. However the difficulty here is that this relationship could lead to a blurring of boundaries which again can lead to allegations of invalidity in the research. Yet it is argued that it is difficult to maintain objectivity in any kind of research because there will always be an element of subjectivity (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The issue of insider research and ways of managing this is dealt with in the methodology chapter.

Implications for practice

There are important implications arising from this research for both theory and practice as clearly managers learn effectively in the context of their work and organisations need to examine ways of harnessing these valuable learning opportunities and this need to be identified, planned, orchestrated and evaluated by HRM in conjunction with line management.

Organisations can create awareness around the value of learning in the work context by ensuring that the manager understands these learning opportunities and actively pursues them. This can reduce the tendency of managers to view formal management development activities as more marketable in terms of their career progression.

Organisations can benefit from identifying learning opportunities in work and recognise and reward them by integrating them into the performance management and reward process. This will improve the credibility of learning in work as an appropriate developmental strategy.

All line managers should be trained to understand their roles of facilitators of learning in work. They should be equipped with the skills to identify, implement and evaluate learning opportunities in work. This process can be facilitated by HRD specialists in conjunction with HRM.

Organisations can develop and expand the competencies of all managers to become effective coaches and mentors and equip them with the skills to develop the learning of their employees.

Organisations should develop a return on investment evaluation strategy to measure the benefits of learning in the work context and HRD can sell the value of learning in work by offering evidence of the benefits of this type of learning.

HRM should implement a module of learning in work in the organisation's induction programme to ensure that all new employees are aware of the value of this learning strategy to the organisation.

The customer relationship provides valuable learning for the manager and this should be harnessed as a developmental opportunity.

Implications for future research

The findings raise important questions for further research. The conceptual framework is based on the premise that context influences how managers learn in work. Further research should examine ways of harnessing context to provide proactive strategies for helping managers to learn in work. The current literature suggests that context does provide opportunities for learning in work particularly in relation to informal learning opportunities (Ellinger, 2005; Sambrook, 2005). The research needs to examine the

advantages of exposures to job challenges that can be used as levers for learning and job advancement.

Developmental relationships are also important in terms of facilitating manager learning in work yet most of the research has centred on supervisor-subordinate relationships with scant analysis of the peer and developmental networks relationships as these were reported in this research as being most valuable in encouraging manager learning at work (Dutton and Rains, 2007).

Current research thinking implies that the measurement of context because of its esoteric nature is better achieved through qualitative methodologies because context is difficult to explore and understand. However it is precisely because of this complex nature that researchers need to think more effectively in how to combine both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to ensure that the complexity of context is captured and analysed effectively.

The research setting was limited as it focused on one entrepreneurial organisation which has an ad hoc informal approach to facilitating learning in work. Therefore it could be useful to implement a similar research project in larger multinational organisations with a culture of structured formal management development. There is scope to conduct further research on how to encourage entrepreneurial learning for managers in organisations using the work context. This could be based in encouraging managers to add to a learning lens to examining their work practices (Lans et al, 2008). There

is a requirement to “build bridges of scholarship across silos of practice on the topic of work relationships and a need to put these relationships at the fore ground of organisational studies”, (Dutton and Ragins, 2007: 10) as they are clearly a vital component of manager learning in work

It was evident from this research that external customers provided valuable learning opportunities for managers yet current research tends to focus in the financial outcomes and attitudinal metrics of the customer relationship (Chang and Tseng, 2005; Choteau and Li, 2003). There is scope to conduct research on how to harness the customer relationship in order to yield worthwhile learning opportunities for managers in the work context.

Relationships with peers were found to offer emotional support and balanced feedback for managers in work yet limited research has been carried out on how to develop these relationships to increase learning in work. Sais (2009) argues that this is because of the hierarchical nature of organisations with the major focus on the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

While research centres on the positive aspects of developmental relationships limited research had been carried out on how to manage adverse relationships with their potential to damage the self-esteem of the manager. This would be a worthwhile research area particularly in relation to managing these relations in work in a proactive manner.

Concluding remarks

The purpose of this study was to examine how context influences managers learning in work and the agents and processes that facilitate this learning. There is evidence that work can provide robust learning opportunities for managers. Managers need to learn quickly and effectively to deal with complexity and change. The study has implications for HRD and management research fields because there is a gap in the research on how to capture organisational context as learning ground for managers in work.

It is evident from the research that learning does not occur in a vacuum but takes place in the context of work and relationships at work. The work context can increase the capacity for learning, growth and resilience in managers because of the inherent development opportunities in everyday practice. The results have demonstrated that learning can occur through a series of macro and micro contextual factors and in processes and developmental relationships.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Learning Diary

Name: _____

Return to: Full contact details of the author was included in the diary.

How to complete your diary

- Please complete an entry when you have a specific example of a learning situation in work.
- Try to describe as clearly as possible how you learned in work.
- There is no correct or incorrect manner on which to fill in your diary – please simply detail your own experience.
- Any other comments are welcome.
- Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.
- Thank you for taking the time to complete the diary.

1. What significant learning has occurred in work?
2. Give a description of this learning situation?
3. Describe your reactions to the learning situation encountered?
4. What processes do you use to learn in the job?
5. What learning strategies did you use to address mistakes?
6. What have you learned about yourself as a solo learner?
7. How have you learned from peers in work?
8. Have you used mentors to learn in work?
9. Does the culture of the organisation facilitate learning in work.

Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview questions

How Managers Learn In Work Questions for PhD Interview

Section 1: Biographical and demographic questions

Background of individual manager

1. What is your current role in the organisation?
2. Please indicate your level of education and briefly outline your educational background?
3. What other companies did you work for before coming to work in this organisation and what type of roles had you there?
4. How long are you working with this organisation?
5. Your age?

Section 2: Context: The Organisation

1. Can you describe the circumstances that help you to learn in work?
2. Can you give an example of a useful learning experience in work that stands out in your memory?
3. What learning opportunities has your current job offered you (is your role useful in terms of creating opportunities for learning)?
4. How important is the culture of the organisation in terms of encouraging/facilitating learning in work.
5. What is the impact of this organisation's change strategy on your learning?
6. Have you ever operated outside of your levels of expertise?
7. Do you ever get the opportunity to work on cross functional team projects/ work based assignments / projects / acting up / shadowing?
8. Have you been promoted in the job and how has that affected your learning?
9. Can you give an example of an incident that prevented/inhibited your learning at work?

Section 2: The Individual Manager

Behavioural Learning Strategies/Interpersonal Contacts.

1. Do you actively seek out other employees in order to learn in work?
2. Have you specific examples of how you learn from others in work?
3. Please give an example of how your direct boss has helped you to learn in work?
4. Have you ever used informal mentors to help you learn in work?
5. Can you give some specific examples of how your peers offered to help you learn in work?
6. Have your clients /customers been helpful in terms of augmenting your learning in work?
7. Have you used networks across the organisation to help you learn?

Section 2: Self Regulatory Learning Strategies

Emotion control

1. Are there specific circumstances that increase your anxiety levels in terms of learning at work? (What strategies do you use to cope?).

Motivation control

2. What motivates you to learn at work?
3. Can you give an example of how you stay motivated to learn in difficult situations at work?

Appendix 3: Learning Diary

Associated First Order Concepts	Supporting Interview Quotations
Leadership Style	<p><i>The senior management team used to babysit me, as I was really thrown in at the deep end... I have been getting promotions since on the strength of that project and I have very good memories of how we started in the business.</i></p> <p>(Manager B) interview</p> <p><i>These learning opportunities land at my feet because of the nature of my role. I don't even have a job description and I suppose they know what I can do and just let me get on with it.</i></p> <p>(Manager C) interview</p> <p><i>I got the freedom to go off and find out more and learn how things tick around here. Coming from a business analyst background I think the best approach was to talk to people before looking up data and looking up numbers.</i></p> <p>(Manager J) interview</p> <p><i>I found that some individuals are very good at giving you access to information with the proviso that if it is sensitive that you don't disclose where you got it</i></p>

	<p><i>from. One of our managers has been invaluable in this respect and has given us confidential reports and relevant information to help us.</i></p> <p>(Manager E) interview</p> <p><i>I think we are very dependent on the support of senior management to assist us to get buy-in. I feel that we did not get enough support from them in the early stages of a business project and as a consequence this demotivated our team. Senior management were not fully committed to the project and to be honest I felt that they didn't really understand it and as a result our idea— which was excellent by the way— withered on the vine.</i></p> <p>(Manager D) interview</p> <p><i>We were probably left to our own devices a lot more with this one. We had less outside interference, from senior people. Not knocking them, but I feel that if you are close to a situation and you have got the pulse of the situation, senior management can get involved and mess everything up and they can deliberately get involved for the wrong reasons.</i></p> <p>(Manager A) interview</p>
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Associated First Order Concepts	Supporting Interview Quotations
Learning from the boss	<p><i>He made sure that I worked on building relationships with our vendors and pushed me to become better at interacting with our customers. I was quite shy and he would bring me to all the customer meetings and put me in situations where I had to push myself into the limelight...</i></p> <p>(Manager B) interview</p> <p><i>It tends to be a cost centre and I was a bit naive in terms of business acumen. I had to get wise about controlling costs and generating profits and keeping an eye on the bottom line. My boss was very useful in this respect as he had a great business head on his shoulders...and while I was absorbing all the business knowledge he was picking up the technical details from me. I attended all the senior management meetings with him as his second in command and sat in with him on customer meetings and watched every move that he made...</i></p> <p>(Manager G)</p> <p><i>My boss gave me free rein to find out about the organisation; however, they did guide me in terms of</i></p>

	<p><i>what was happening in the organisation in the long term outside of my own business unit.</i></p> <p>(Manager I) Interview</p> <p><i>I have learned a lot from my current boss and I learn things from him on a daily basis. He is a great man for sharing information and believes in the greater good of the company. I would have been inclined to hold my cards very close to my chest as I had picked up this habit as a protective measure. I think as you go through life you pick up bits and pieces.</i></p> <p>(Manager H) interview</p> <p><i>He made a huge impact on me because he was like a father figure and he took me under his wing and I learned how to manage employees and the customer and other general business skills. If I was having difficulty he would be over from Ireland in a flash. It was a bit awkward that he was not on site in the UK. Funny, I never minded admitting any insecurities or weaknesses to him because I knew that it would not come against me in the job...</i></p> <p>(Manager B) interview</p>
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She trusted me and did not look over my shoulder and was open to my suggestions which can be rare in a boss. In fact this trust mechanism can be very useful in terms of helping people learn, as you know you are going to be given the chance to try things and you know that you are going to get the support if you get stuck or if things go wrong...

(Manager I) Interview

He was great because he gave me free rein to develop the projects office. So I suppose I felt I had to create a role for myself and I did. Yet the bottom line was that he trusted me and let me liaise with the relevant people in the organisation and was always there to back me up and give my role credibility. If he had not given me my head I would not have learned as much as I did and I would not have developed the confidence to liaise with senior management. I unconsciously used him as a role model.

(Manager E) interview

I had a great boss who created a great sense of enthusiasm about work. He encouraged us all to learn from each other and to learn from him and you never felt that you were imposing when you asked him questions.

(Manager E) interview

It got out that he exposed the weaknesses of one of the senior management team in that he found out he claimed more qualifications than he had, in fact he had not finished off his degree. I felt that I was tarred with the same brush and found it very difficult to get the support from that senior manager again.

(Manager D) interview

The good thing about my boss is that he lets you off to do your own thing and he does not go out of his way to develop you, he lets you develop yourself and it is up to you. I suppose you could say that I learned to be independent, you know, like if I didn't make my own way I would not be around today. He is a real technical specialist and is not good with people.

(Manager I) interview

	<p><i>He sees things in a broad way, he has the ideas and is an out-of-the-box thinker with a huge tolerance for ambiguity, yet he is not always practical and that is where I come in. I have a tendency to be the practical and see things in black and white and I have to put the parameters on the ideas and operationalize the pure out-of-the-box and left-of-centre thinking.</i></p> <p>(Manager J) interview</p>
Associated First Order Concepts	Supporting Interview Quotations
Mentors	<p><i>...He was very useful to me when I was trying to figure out what to do with my life after the overseas project. At the time I felt that he made this opportunity for me... If I didn't have this senior manager to confide in and argue my case for me I think I would have slipped through the net and left the company. I can certainly see the benefit of having friends in high places.</i></p> <p>(Manager A) interview</p> <p><i>I took the job... because there was a guy at the top of the room who really made me feel that I could do the job and said that he would give me all the help he could. This guy basically was my lifeline in terms</i></p>

	<p><i>of coming to grips with my role.</i></p> <p>(Manager D) interview</p> <p><i>... He always had a different angle and could see the big picture and at the time I was quite detail focused and I think that he helped me take a wide-angled view on issues. He made sure that I was exposed to all aspects of the business and got to do every single thing to do with the company...</i></p> <p>(Manager B) interview</p> <p><i>He was like me in the beginning, a pure accountant and I suppose that I mirrored him in terms of my progression and found that he was really approachable and gave me his time in terms of bouncing off ideas and helping me negotiate the political minefield around here. He has amazing political savvy and I admire this and respect this in him.</i></p> <p>(Manager J) interview</p> <p><i>...The new CEO, however, is quite approachable and lately I notice he is making himself available to me in order to allow me to pick his brains. I think that he was impressed with my achievements</i></p>
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	<p><i>abroad [an overseas assignment]. He has been quite useful in terms of helping me develop a cohesive approach to developing service-level agreements and I know that I can go to him if I need any kind of help at all. Generally I am not a great woman for sucking up to senior management.</i></p> <p>(Manager C) interview.</p>
Associated First Order Concepts	Supporting Interview Quotations
Learning Culture	<p><i>I have learned to keep a sharp eye out for opportunities because for a long time there I was stuck in a rut and I just was lucky enough to get the opportunity to work on this project. When you are up against it you realise that you have major reserves that you can tap into to help you cope. These chances have to be grabbed when they come along.</i></p> <p>(Manager C) interview.</p> <p><i>I have to say that the opportunities have been always forthcoming and there's never been any hesitation in encouraging me to go and identify my own needs. If you sit in the corner behind a desk you are likely to rot there.</i></p> <p>(Manager ,G) interview.</p>

	<p><i>You are expected to survive and thrive yourself and demonstrate initiative. The culture of this organisation is quite entrepreneurial, so therefore you need to seek out learning opportunities for yourself. Nobody gives them to you.</i></p> <p>(Manager J) interview</p> <p><i>There were major plusses landing a job here because there were lots of opportunities in that the company was constantly expanding. The more frustrating side of things was it was more difficult to make changes and that was most frustrating at the beginning. I have realised that [to be] more effective in ... influencing my peers,... I needed to be better at getting buy-in from senior management. It is not an easy thing around here and while I had no problems in the states I just had some difficulty here, don't ask me why.</i></p> <p>(Manager H) interview</p> <p><i>We had to create our own learning culture as we're constantly learning different processes. When we are bringing new recruits into the area, you've got to put them sitting with somebody to make sure that they don't lose out on the golden nuggets of</i></p>
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	<p><i>knowledge ... This is great from a business perspective as it means we that we've less risk if somebody leaves the company .. so it's all about kind of sharing the knowledge at that level.</i></p> <p><i>(Manager, F) interview</i></p> <p><i>It is clear that the organisation is very much in a situation where change is very necessary in order to grow going forward. It is critical that learning from this change is assessed on a more regular basis ... I was aware of this before this process started, but the projects of the team helped clarify this more for me. It is interesting to note the apparent lack of openness and willingness to address this gap in the wider management team.(Manager ,G)learning diary</i></p> <p><i>I feel that there is a lot of duplication going on and we should be capturing this learning because we keep wasting time reinventing the wheel. We never seem to revisit and analyze the past, we just keep firing on regardless.</i></p> <p><i>(Manager J) learning diary</i></p>
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	<p><i>I know the value of capturing the tacit knowledge ...</i></p> <p><i>Yet we make no attempt to do it in this business unit. Maybe it is because we are a new business and we just don't have the time to look back.</i></p> <p>(Manager F) interview</p> <p><i>The culture is very important in terms of helping people learn... everybody new starting in an organization does the sitting by Nellie thing... you are lucky if you are put sitting beside the right Nellie and they are capable of helping you learn and they are at the right skill level.</i></p> <p>(Manager D) interview</p> <p><i>It can be a real pain when you are dragged away from your own job to work on a new business project and you do not succeed. This has happened on a number of occasions lately and we have failed to get business, yet nobody goes back to find out where we went wrong. This company has a habit of this and it is quite frustrating.</i></p> <p>(Manager G) interview</p>
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