

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Making a
difference

The practitioner's part in making a difference through organizational learning

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This issue of the *Learning Organization* journal exposes the topic of making a difference through organizational learning. In his editorial essay in this issue of the *Learning Organization* journal, George Huber provides readers an in-depth overview of what he describes as a void in the organizational learning literature – ecosystems and intelligence. For a practitioner, the implications to business become increasingly clear through the reading of each of the diverse articles. The implication is most apparent in how George Huber describes in his editorial introduction a common idea (or assumption) that learning occurs when the organization's members act in a way to improve the organization's performance. As various authors suggest throughout this issue of the *Learning Organization*, organizational learning theories are increasingly important to corporate success in an ever-changing, technologically driven environment where information must flow across levels quickly. Alternatively, as Huber contends, organizations must monitor and act on their ecosystem, which is becoming more complex and faster moving. As a practitioner, this issue can help you uncover ideas to make your difference.

These two topics (ecosystem and intelligence) act to align the organization toward success. Alternatively, as Huber states, "organizations must today, and in the future, more quickly and effectively assess the need for and nature of survival-facilitating actions, and that to do this they must proactively engage in intelligence gathering about the state of the ecosystem" (p. 4). Starting with Huber's article offers practitioners with clear visions into what is to come within the issue.

In the first article of the special issue, Brix (2019) in "Innovation capacity building: an approach to maintaining balance between exploration and exploitation in organizational learning" presents the innovation capacity building (ICB) framework as a method to "how" an organization and its members can build capabilities to make a difference. His conceptual framework aims to solve the ambidexterity dilemma of exploration and exploitation by understanding the behaviors of management and employees in the context of the work environment. For practitioners, this article is particularly impactful because as the author describes:

The ICB framework proposes how individual and organizational capacity building processes can be used by managers to empower the employees to make appropriate judgements between exploration and exploitation to reach both their own individual goals and to work towards realizing the organization's intended strategy. (p. 14)



To support his model, Brix provides a conceptual study focusing on the links between contextual ambidexterity and capacity building. For practitioners, the author offers new methods beyond structural or sequential management of ambidexterity, both of which limit the full organizational capacity. At the basis of Brix's argument is the development of a bottom-up approach within the organization to build and support contextual ambidexterity. He proposes ICB as a process that will enable employees to learn and take actions to balance exploitation and exploration. This conceptual article can be easily envisaged in applicable steps, which could become a case study for the future and clearly could illustrate how the learning organization can make a difference.

Next, [Engström and Käkälä \(2019\)](#) in their article "Early steps in learning about organizational learning in customizing settings: a communication perspective" provide practitioners an understanding of how to create a customer-centric view as markets move from the "one size fits all" context with focus on cost advantages toward a customer-based specialization context with focus on customer adaptation. As the authors state, the shift toward customization demands enhanced customer understanding, communication and ultimately learning from a customer-centric perspective. They point to an integration of research areas from the early 1990s by [Lampel and Mintzberg \(1996\)](#), [Senge \(1990\)](#) and [March \(1991\)](#) as the origin of the customization and learning discussion. This article truly does point to Huber's earlier mentioned focus on the ecosystem and a rather important element of that ecosystem – the customer.

Engström and Käkälä outline an empirical study of five very different business-to-business companies whereby they analyze methods to customize. From workshops and in-depth qualitative interviews, the authors ascertain four aggregate dimensions of communication between the organization and the customer as delineated in their Figure 3: 1) identification and confirmation of existing knowledge, 2) identification of knowledge gaps and creation of new knowledge, 3) communication to define relations and procedures and 4) communication to evaluate and learn (p. 38). After identifying the four dimensions, the authors explain how categories 1 and 2 integrate with learning between customers and suppliers by communicating existing knowledge and challenging each other. These steps align sensemaking across the organizations. Then, categories 3 and 4 provide the "more abstract level and represent communication that creates conditions for learning" (p. 40). As they conclude, suppliers aware of the important roles of communication and learning can win as markets move toward customer customization.

[Fannoun and Kerins \(2019\)](#) in "Towards organizational learning enhancement: assessing software engineering practice" look more internally to the organization as they focus on the design of a tool to help small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with knowledge acquisition and learning. The authors create the empirical study with SMEs in the technology space because as they state, "despite SMEs' economic contribution, they lack KM and LO resources and this paper serves the field by proposing a lightweight, web-based systems to support KM and OL without placing onerous demands on practitioners' time" (p. 45). Although internal, their study illustrates how the changing ecosystem can be more quickly extended within the organization learning system. Alternatively, as the authors describe the system, "the system focuses on projects to encapsulate emerging knowledge and know-how" (p. 52).

Following Fannoun and Kerins' study of KM and LO within SMEs, [Linden, et al. \(2019\)](#) in "Contribution of knowing in practice to dynamic capabilities" conduct a case study within Brazilian public hospitals as they evaluate the firm's ability to learn quickly from the ecosystem. The authors use a healthcare setting as they state, "healthcare organizations are

becoming increasingly aware of the importance of improving quality and patient safety” (p. 60). This leads to a need for effective and creative learning strategies.

The authors provide practitioners an informative case study illustrating how dynamic capabilities manifest themselves through an organization learning approach. Their concluding paragraph outlines four practical implications important beyond that of their case study. The learnings from this article clearly help the practitioner understand how to make a difference through organizational learning.

In a similar view, Brix’s study of the CBT where communication within the organization is of prominence, [Morland et al. \(2019\)](#) in their article “Building better homes: developing a multi-level learning framework for UK housebuilders” point to communication as one of their three inter-related factors that influence learning as information moves across the organizational levels. The authors describe an empirical case study at a large home builder with regions spread across England as they aim to “shed important light on the context surrounding why, when, and how layers of learning synchronize within multi-level organizations” (p. 115). They build on [Crossan, et al. \(1999\)](#) 4I model of learning as a socialization process and focus on the underlying synchronizing steps to feed-forward and feedback. For practitioners experiencing learning difficulties across individual, team, group, and organizational levels, this article shines some light on how to synchronize the learning process.

Morland *et al.*’s empirical study uncovers the key inter-related dimensions of time, communication and trust as the influencing factors in an organization’s ability to synchronize across levels. As the author’s describe, without the feed-forward and feedback across levels meshing the organization, the result is halt to sharing across levels as the organizations falls out of synch. Or, as the authors describe the system, “by synchronizing collective sensemaking through a two-way link, both feed-forward and feedback is facilitated leading to each cycle at different levels becoming entrained, like metaphorical cogs” (p. 84). To illustrate, they develop a model in their Figure 1.

For practitioners, the article is jam-packed with metaphorical examples that illustrate how time (or speed), communication and trust all intertwine in synchronizing the organization. The coupling concept between the levels elucidates the process where many organizations stumble.

The final article in this issue presents an argument challenging the history of the learning organization and organizational learning debate. In “Regenerating the learning organization: towards an alternative paradigm”, [Pedler and Hsu \(2019\)](#) describe how learning organizations and organizational learning ideas have not achieved what was hoped for. The results to date are narrower than the much broader original aim with the primary focus being economic attainment. As a result, the authors call for a revival and posit that the need for a new view of organizational learning has never been greater. As they describe, the need stems from developed economies struggling with low productivity and innovation plus developing economies faced with shortage of skilled and educated workers.

As a second wave, Pedler and Hsu propose learning organizations focus more broadly on economic, ecological, social and political challenges. They assert that the next wave might want to incorporate ancient ideas from Buddhism and Taoism. These ancient theories provide broader context and incorporate mindfulness in action to restrict the narrow economic focus.

For practitioners, Pedler and Hsu’s article may be elusive in its immediate applicability. However, the argument illustrates areas where faults in learning can appear. In addition, it is the areas of learning organization failures that may be most useful in practice. One may not be able to adjust an organization quickly using the Pedler and Hsu article; however, after

reading the article, one can reflect on how learning occurs with spaces of fault, which may be just as influential as immediately acting.

This issue of the *Learning Organization* is full of content to help practitioners think more deeply about how the learning organization can make a difference. The case studies and empirical research provide examples and ideas of how the ever-changing ecosystem impacts the organization and how learning within the organization creates positive change. Hopefully, after reviewing the content in this issue, practitioners have a better understanding of how best to proceed in a journey toward making a difference through organizational learning.

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