

# What are organisations even there for? A call for deeper double-loop learning

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Issue 4 reviews several perspectives of organisational learning touching on the positions organisations take in the current world and how they might adapt to contribute to society in the most effective ways. Since the global context and priorities are changing, and motivations of individuals are also undergoing transformations, companies need to reflect which of their practices and goals need keeping, changing or even dropping altogether and what is their purpose in the world. It is essential for organisations not just to invest in organisational learning (OL) but also think carefully what exactly needs to be learned, since bad, unsustainable and non-inclusive practices can also be learned effectively and actually limit transformational change (Hsu, 2021). There is a call for organisations to reflect on their nature and engage in deeper double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996) guided by values that contribute to solving global challenges (United Nations, 2015) rather than negatively impacting communities, even if financially successful. Some might call such learning “triple-loop”, but understanding and uses of that term differ and the concept might not add more to the potentiality of the original double-loop learning (Tosey, Visser, & Saunders, 2012; Fahrenbach & Kragulj, 2019). But a deep value-driven double-loop learning re-examining the purpose of each organisation in the current society is needed. This article summarises key implications for practitioners from articles included in this Issue 4, starting from double feature by Somaskandan, Arulandu, and Parayitam (2022a, 2022b) exploring individual learning, organisational learning and organisational commitment elements; Barbosa, Carvalho, Choo, Versiani, and Pedron (2022) exploring organisational memory in project-based organisations (PBOs); Acharya and Mishra (2022) interviewing Prof Eric Tsang on organisational unlearning; Rubin and Ohlsson (2022) investigating interim managers (IMs) impact on OL; Avby (2022) offering pragmatist perspectives on ambidextrous organisations and finishing with a study on US higher education institutions (HEIs) response to COVID19 early pandemic and how it affected their learning. This implications paper is structured around the themes of changing organisational commitment, organisational memory and the balance between different types of learning in times of change.

## Why do we stay in a company?

Current Issue 4 includes a longer contribution split over two articles (Somaskandan *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b) focussing on conceptual development of their model and its empirical testing in the context of South Indian hospitals, respectively. The papers explore the relationship between individual and organisational learning on the one hand and different aspects of organisational commitment on the other. Notably, the authors further explore the nature of



commitment through the model by [Allen and Meyer \(1990\)](#). Organisational commitment is a widely studied and impactful factor, which became even more complex with the advent of the COVID19 pandemic. With the volatile labour market and changing employee attitudes, managers can benefit from further understanding of commitment intricacies and how they relate to learning in companies. The three aspects of organisational commitment explored are affective, normative and continuance commitment. For example, an employee may feel a strong need to remain (continuance commitment), may feel like they do not enjoy it or do not want to stay (lack of affective commitment) and yet may feel they ought to (normative commitment), even though the aggregation of all these types is taken for organisational commitment. The study further highlights how individual learning opportunities together with the effects of organisational level learning impact employees' views of the costs and benefits of actually staying in the company.

But mere willingness to stay for pragmatic reasons, might not be enough to create a genuine contribution to organisational objectives. The articles highlight how affective and normative commitment affect the impact of learning on continuance commitment. Therefore, developing actual affective links to the company and feeling of loyalty are crucial for organisations who want employees who do not merely stay in the company because it is easier to do so. This means developing climates where employees are willing to develop themselves, contribute to organisational knowledge exchange and be innovative for organisational success rather than just doing the bare minimum to continue the status quo. The Part II article confirms the hypotheses proposed in Part I, by testing them in two South Indian hospitals. It provides an important message for all organisations on how important is creating a positive learning climate that enhances both individual and organisational learning and working collaboratively towards a shared vision. The continuance commitment might have been particularly prominent during the pandemic and uncertainty where people might stay in companies in order not to “make waves” since costs of going through another change might be too high at the moment. But what this might mean for the organisation if left only at that level definitely deserves attention by leaders who are thinking about development long term. Managers need to create a climate of encouraging individual learning and fostering commitment benefitting both organisations and individuals to tackle challenges present by the global pandemic and working within the “new normal” ([Goula, Stamouli, Latsou, Gkioka, & Sarris, 2020](#)). This includes recognising that employees might have different and changing values and motivations to even engage in work, which need to be acknowledged in formulating and rethinking organisational practices and values.

### **Organisational remembering, forgetting and unlearning**

Organisational memory is an important and particularly challenging aspect of OL. This challenge is particularly multiplied in the transient nature of PBOs where teams are short lived, reformed and projects rather than departments are the main unit of assessment and operation. The study by [Barbosa \*et al.\* \(2022\)](#) aims to aid practitioners facing this situation by exploring in what specific ways organisational memory does function through studying forms of acquiring, storing, retrieving and applying knowledge in PBOs. Practitioners should note the useful and thorough organisational memory framework for PBOs (see Figure 1 in [Barbosa \*et al.\*, 2022](#)) that helps understand all the different ways knowledge is retained and used in the volatile context of project work. One of the key issues is that PBOs might not even conceptualise something as an aspect of organisational memory explicitly, such as a common practice of contacting a previous employee or team member to help with a current similar project. The challenge of moving knowledge from volatile to more perennial

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and stable organisation memories are crucial if the company does not want to repeat the same mistakes or spend a great deal of resources for issues that they already solved in previous projects. Understanding the knowledge dynamics in this context can help managers plan a clear knowledge management system that does not try to replicate traditional more stable organisations approaches but utilise the specific dynamics of project work to make sure lessons learned do not get lost.

A notable recommendation of the study is highlighting the need to know where knowledge is, which we might call locative knowledge essential for learning from both successes and errors (Lukic, Margaryan, & Littlejohn, 2010). When an important expert from the past has been summoned to help with a project, who would even know that this individual exists? How would one know that the employee's knowledge is relevant? Mapping that knowledge is crucial, and the study suggest knowledge maps (or "yellow pages" as they might call them) to deal with this issue as structured guides to point where or with whom each type of knowledge is available (Govareshki, Hosseini, & Taghinejad, 2017). These knowledge maps might be used as planning mechanisms to identify relevant knowledge. To aid that, the study also suggest organising knowledge stored/shared by not just projects but also by type of knowledge so that organisations do not forget some of the key developments and ideas they had.

In addition to companies striving not to forget important knowledge, the issue of needing to "forget" a practice no longer useful or more broadly organisational unlearning (OU) is the focus of the article by Acharya and Mishra (2022) where they interview the history and development of the concept by Prof Eric Tsang. The paper highlights views that a full LO need to include both OL and OU, although OU might not always be needed if the routines are working and are beneficial for the company. Still, even though some of the practices that an organisation employs might be working, in the wider context of the need to rethink what organisation prioritises, how they affect the wider world and communities, many organisations should seek to examine and potentially unlearn some of the practices that used to work or even still work but only in the financial performance context. "This is how the things are done around here" mantra might be a cover for the unwillingness to change, transform and engage in double-loop learning where the underlying assumptions are examined. This might be a complex task and making both organisational and individual level unlearning work is an important reminder. Managers should be willing to critically examine functioning of their organisations and what purposes it serves, and not be afraid to undertake some conscious OU as part and parcel of OL perspectives.

A specific point between organisational remembering, forgetting and potentially unlearning is taken by the role of interim managers (IMs) and how they contribute to OL. The article by Rubin and Ohlsson (2022) problematizes the difficult role IMs have in OL, especially in terms of knowing what happened before them and making sure that their impact is not forgotten. Their role might be even more transient than PBOs and often takes place in times of heightened uncertainty, leadership gap or crises. How IMs can contribute to more stable and long term OL is a rarely studied issue and the authors review relevant literature through the OL concepts of shared mental models, dialogue, knowledge creation and organisational culture. The fact that an IM needs to balance between being perceived as an insider or an outsider (Inkson, Heising, & Rousseau, 2001) can be both a challenge from the organisational memory and knowing the context perspective, but also a benefit as it might be desirable to keep a certain distance to provide new insights, question enshrined routines and engage in organisational unlearning if needed. From a change perspective, it is important to allow the IM to engage in renegotiating shared mental models and challenge the status quo, working in double-loop learning perspectives and opening the potential for

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an organisation or units to reimagine and better themselves, rather than be used as only a temporary surface single loop learning band aid. What practitioners should note is the particular problem of organisations forgetting the lessons and insight an IM developed, because most of the effort post IM is on further legitimising the more stable next leader. All practitioners involved (senior management, IMs themselves, the following leaders, employees and wider stakeholders) need to make sure that the knowledge developed through IM operation and experience is turned into explicit knowledge and shared appropriately through a proper dialogue during hand over as well as a conscious effort to transfer the knowledge into wider organisational memory.

### Learning for change

Following on the multiple forms of learning an organisation might need to engage in for innovation and change, [Avby \(2022\)](#) offers a pragmatic perspective of looking at the Plan-Do-Check-Act model (PDCA) with the much discussed perspectives of exploratory and exploitative learning represented by ambidextrous organisations. The article provides a relevant model that combines these approaches to help managers understand which type of learning needs to be engaged in at which time, and often simultaneously. Avby also proposes a deep-level approach to innovative learning and change in organisations to reimagine what an organisation is or should be doing in a given global context. The proposed approach is guided by crucial questions and steps:

- How do we work today?
- Why do we work as we do?
- How can we work instead?
- Proposing a new way of working
- Trying the new way of working
- Following up the new way of working
- Deciding on how to continue working

One of the most useful contributions of the study for practitioners are the clear potential challenges at each of the phases of integrated learning (See Table 1 in [Avby, 2022](#)). Managers should also note that although the model is presented with numbers, it is by no means linear, and decision making on where the organisation is and what type(s) of learning they need to engage in needs to happen throughout the process, as overemphasizing either explorative or exploitative learning might have detrimental effects on the company success. The study highlights the need to have in-depth reflections during the planning period, which is often underrepresented or even skipped in many organisational change approaches, yet is needed as a sound base for implementing stages.

A particular situation where planning for change was severely affected is the impact of the global COVID19 pandemic on a rapid response and implementation needed in HEI. This is the case in [Islam \*et al.\* \(2022\)](#) article which investigates US HEIs crisis learning during the early period of the COVID19 pandemic in 2020. Although crises can facilitate organizational learning by signalling serious deficiencies and prompting a search for new knowledge, this process is often met with various challenges and likely remains superficial on a single-loop learning level. Although universities focus on educating, studies have showed that HEIs are often not very agile and are resistant-to-change with limited organisational learning ([Miller, 2021](#)). This was heightened by the particular duration of the pandemic since longer term integration of knowledge that often happens post-crisis was not possible and the crisis

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continued beyond what was imagined. The way most investigated HEIs dealt with this was learning vicariously through other experiences and being in close contact with other institutions and colleagues. This stresses the need for collaborative and partnership approach between organisations, crossing the organisational boundaries to deal with global issues which is often lacking even in the educational context due to rigidity of structures, regulations and competition. Therefore, lessons learned for practitioners is preparing organisations for future crises, as evidence shows that organisational cultures valuing innovation, flexibility and diversity of information and views may be better positioned to accommodate crisis-induced learning and change. This exemplified when universities had to address the impacts from COVID19 and Black Life Matter movement and events. Some of the successful cases of learning HEIs from the study used this as an opportunity to change the ways they work by acknowledging the need to have more diverse views and sources of knowledge in their crisis response teams, which might be signalling longer term more double-loop perspectives of using organisational learning to examine what an organisation is doing and should be doing rather than relying only on what its tradition and habitual routines offer.

Similar perspectives on diversifying knowledge, acknowledge global cultural perspectives and changing are portrayed in the book review by Soule (2022). Soul reviewed the book “Connecting adult learning and knowledge management - Knowledge management and organizational learning 8” (Fedeli & Bierema, 2019). As indicated by the review, the book gives overviews of adult learning methods, knowledge management in education, case studies and best practices. In addition to multidisciplinary efforts to connect theory and practice in adult learning and knowledge management, the review also mentions call for doing things in a new way through reflecting on global and intercultural perspectives of knowledge management, as well as inclusion and diversity as crucial for contemporary knowledge management, for example book chapters Cseh, Crocco, and Safarli (2019) and Greer and Egan (2019).

### Conclusions

The articles in this issue continued exploring relevant concepts with a particular attention to how these can further impact practice in the ever changing global context. What is clear is that for an organisation to be called a contemporary LO it does not only need to learn things efficiently at individual, group and organisational level but also need to learn the *right* things guided with values that contribute to society and communities rather than take from them. In the evidently very interconnected world, conducting OL which might be even double-loop learning in terms of changing how the company operates might not be enough if new practices maintain negative impacts on the wider environment. For example, companies might undergo full transformations that might fit the original definition of double-loop learning, change the underlying assumptions and become more successful in traditional terms, yet still damage the environment, treat their employees and their families unfairly or affect global health. Will employees continue to support them? Will people’s commitment to contribute their learning to organisational levels continue if organisations maintain the global status quo that prioritises constant growth and still mostly financial indicators of success, at the expense of wider and longer terms impacts on the world? It might be time for organisations to unlearn some of the very deeply engrained ideas and practices that are detrimental to the common good and engage in a much deeper double-loop learning that can ensure long-term sustainability and fairness for the whole world. It might sound idealistic, but it is actually absolutely vital, urgent and can be done!

Many organisations around the world are paving the way and introducing responsible ways of operating, and others need to learn from each other, pick up the pace or seize to exist.

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#### **Further reading**

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