LUT
Lappeenranta
University of Technology

LAPPEENRANTA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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INFORMAL LEARNING AND COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT DURING A MANAGEMENT TRAINEE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

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Title:	Informal learning and competence development during a management trainee program
Faculty:	LUT School of Business and Management
Major:	Management and Organizations
Year:	2015
Master's Thesis:	Lappeenranta University of Technology, 108 pages, 10 figures, 5 tables and 3 appendices
Examiners:	Professor Pia Heilmann Doctoral student Riitta Forsten-Astikainen
Keywords:	Individual competence, learning at work, informal learning, trainee program

The purpose of this research was to study how management trainee program participants experienced the program with respect to their learning and competence development. Additionally, the purpose was also to examine what the trainees learned and how the learning occurred. Furthermore, factors affecting learning in the workplace were examined.

The theoretical framework of this research was formed utilizing individual competence and informal learning frameworks. Research was conducted as a single case study and data was gathered by thematic interviews. The results of this research indicate that the trainees experienced the program as a good method for learning the overall picture of the organization and its business. Regarding competence development, especially knowledge- and cognitive competence categories were developed during the program. The best learning outcomes were achieved through learning by doing, in co-operation with others, and learning from others. The results indicate that the planning of the program and its structure have a significant effect on learning. Furthermore, a sufficient level of challenge was experienced as being important for the quality of the learning as well.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tekijä:	Ville Karhuviita
Tutkielman nimi:	Informaali oppiminen ja osaamisen kehittyminen management trainee -ohjelman aikana
Tiedekunta:	Kauppatieteet ja tuotantotalous
Pääaine:	Johtaminen ja organisaatiot
Vuosi:	2015
Pro gradu -tutkielma:	Lappeenrannan teknillinen yliopisto, 108 sivua, 10 kuviota, 5 taulukkoa ja 3 liitettä
Tarkastajat:	Professori Pia Heilmann Nuorempi tutkija Riitta Forsten-Astikainen
Hakusanat:	Yksilön osaaminen, työssä oppiminen, informaali oppiminen, trainee-ohjelma

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli tutkia millaisena management trainee -ohjelmaan osallistuneet yksilöt kokivat ohjelman oppimisen ja osaamisen kehittymisen näkökulmasta. Tämän lisäksi tarkoituksena oli tarkastella mitä traineet ohjelman aikana oppivat ja miten oppiminen tapahtui. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa oli käsitelty oppimiseen vaikuttaneita tekijöitä yksilö- ja työympäristötasolla.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys on rakennettu hyödyntäen yksilön osaamisen ja yksilön informaalisen oppimisen viitekehyksiä. Tutkimus suoritettiin tapaustutkimuksena ja aineisto kerättiin teemahaastatteluilla. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että traineet kokivat ohjelman hyväksi menetelmäksi saada kattava kokonaiskuva yrityksestä sekä sen liiketoiminnasta. Osaamisen kehittymisen näkökulmasta erityisesti tiedolliset ja kognitiiviset osaamisen osa-alueet kehittyivät ohjelman aikana. Parhaat oppimistulokset saatiin itse tekemällä, yhteistyössä muiden kanssa sekä muilta oppimalla. Tulokset osoittavat, että ohjelman suunnittelulla ja rakenteella on merkittävä vaikutus oppimiselle. Myös työn riittävä haasteellisuus koettiin merkittäväksi oppimisen kannalta.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An important milestone has now been reached. The work is finally done.

First I wish to thank my supervisor, professor Pia Heilmann for her valuable comments and guidance during this long, long process. You steered me patiently to the right direction when I felt lost in the stormy sea of academic research. I extend my gratitude also to doctoral student Riitta Forsten-Astikainen for providing helpful comments for improving the manuscript.

I would also like to thank Kirsti Leisio, Minna Gentz and Harri Puputti from Lindström Oy – your support and encouragement during this process was highly appreciated. I also express my gratitude to all of my interviewees for participating in this research. Thank you for spending time with me and sharing your personal thoughts and experiences; you made this research possible.

My sincere gratitude goes to my family and friends for obvious reasons. You provided support when I needed it. You gave me inspiration. You shared with me the moments of joy and excitement. You made my time in Lappeenranta a truly remarkable experience.

Finally and above all, I thank you Eeva, for everything.

Helsinki, 27.5.2015

Ville Karhuviita

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background

The phenomenon of novices learning from masters has existed for thousands of years under forms such as apprenticeships, internships (Hurst & Good 2010) and, more recently trainee programs. Management trainee programs in particular have emerged as a trendy concept for structured on-the-job –learning for high-potentials. They still incorporate the same idea where learning happens through doing the job itself in practice and learning from others who are more experienced.

Many graduates have experienced internships as part of their early career, but the usefulness of internships as providers of beneficial learning experiences has been questioned by recent research (Holyoak 2013). Internships are structured and career relevant work experiences offered to students before graduation (Taylor 1988). This means developing skills and competencies specifically for the requirements of work; whereas academic programs focus on building generic knowledge and fostering analytical thinking. Developing work related competencies can be seen as the common goal for both internships and trainee programs. However, there is surprisingly little research about trainee programs as a method for competence development. This study aims to address this research gap.

Trainee programs have become common, especially within industries such as professional services, banking, finance, and retail. The target group is university graduates with academic success who also have the potential for leadership positions. It is known that experience and on-the-job learning are important for leadership development (McCall 2010). In Finland trainee programs have been regarded mainly as “boss schools”, but this image is beginning to change as these programs are being used simply to train new employees (Virtanen 2008).

Leadership development is still an important aspect of almost all trainee programs. Leaders need to have high levels of knowledge and skills in order to achieve performances that meet the requirements of continuously changing environments and the increased requirements in today's competitive market (Yukl 2005). Leadership can be developed in many ways, but the trainee programs are often designed specifically for generic skill acquisition, which is important especially for professionals in their early careers.

Trainee programs commonly include elements such as fast paced job rotation, stretch assignments, international exposure, mentoring and coaching. With these kinds of investments into personal development at an early career stage, employers typically aim to accelerate learning of key competences and knowledge so that the individuals' full potential can be harnessed earlier than through conventional career development. Trainee programs are said to have come to Finland via Central Europe and Sweden. In Finland, organizations such as Kesko, S-Ryhmä, Hartwall, Outokumpu, Blue1, YIT, TeliaSonera, Wärtsilä, McKinsey and the many professional services firms offer trainee programs. The programs typically last from 12 to 24 months. Trainee programs bring various benefits to employers such as an increased commitment from prospective employees, the organizations receiving up-to-date knowledge, plus fresh ideas and increased visibility for the organization in the labor markets. (Virtanen 2008)

1.2 Research problems, objectives and limitations

Training and development at work have been extensively studied, but structured and work-based training programs such as trainee programs have not been studied as much. Research conducted in a Norwegian context (Torp 2008; Dysvik et al. 2010) validates training and development literature findings that participation in training has a number of beneficial outcomes, such as knowledge and skill acquisition (Colquitt, LePine & Noe 2000; Arthur et al. 2003; Collins & Holton 2004), increased individual performance (Hall 1996), and organizational productivity and performance (Maurer, Weiss & Barbeite 2003; Tharenou, Saks & Moore 2007; Jacobs & Washington 2003).

The effectiveness of training outcomes is established, but formalized trainee programs and their effectiveness have not been studied as extensively as regards how they affect trainees work performance (McDermott, Mangan & O'Connor 2006). This is unfortunate considering the popularity of trainee programs among organizations and the amount resources invested in increasing individual trainees' and organizational performance (Dysvik et al. 2010). This calls for further research on the topic of trainee programs and their effectiveness.

There are many options as regards how to study the effectiveness of these programs. Two common methods have been monitoring trainee reactions (e.g. Tan, Hall & Boyce 2003) and the trainees' subjective evaluations about their training experiences (e.g. Sitzmann et al. 2008). Dysvik et al. (2010) argue that investigating trainees' reactions to the trainee programs indicates the extent to which these programs actually enhance trainees' work performance. Recently in a Finnish context, Kattilamäki (2009) studied how effective a tool job rotation is for developing managerial competencies within a trainee program, however, this the most recent research on the topic in Finland.

The research goal of this study follows a similar philosophical approach as the examples cited above. The focus is on the trainees' interpretations and perceptions of the program, as it is believed to provide in depth knowledge of the selected case and therefore contribute to the existing research on the topic. This study is qualitative in nature and focuses on a single case: an organization and its trainee program. The focus is to evaluate the program itself and then more precisely the dominant learning outcomes and learning methods of the trainees participating in the program. The concept of competence is used to categorize learning outcomes. The main research question is:

How did participants experience the management trainee program as a method of learning and competence development?

And the sub-questions:

- *What types of competencies were developed during the program?*
- *How did the learning occur?*
- *What factors affected learning during the program?*

This research also aims to provide practical insight into how similar programs could be developed so that the trainees' learning and competence development would be enhanced.

There are certain limitations to this study. As this is a single case study, broader conclusions should be made with care. The results are applicable to certain group of individuals with certain background and although the trainees came from diverse cultural and sociological backgrounds they shared educational backgrounds that had a similar character.

1.3 Research methodology

This research is conducted with qualitative methods and is exploratory by nature. The data was collected from a single case study, which was the case organizations international trainee program and its participants from 2011-2013. The data was gathered with thematic interviews and analyzed with content- and narrative analysis. Qualitative methods were selected because they best suited the solving of the research questions. The single case study and limited number of target group individuals also favored the selection of qualitative methods rather than quantitative, as it was better suited for in depth analysis of the case. In total ten individuals were interviewed for the study. All the interviews were recorded by consent, transcribed, sorted thematically and analyzed - in this order. Selecting the interviewees was straightforward as they were individuals who had participated in the trainee program. The CEO of the case company was interviewed for additional background information regarding the program and for a management perspective.

1.4 Theoretical framework and key concepts

The theoretical framework used to answer the research questions of this Thesis consists of two distinct, but complementing streams of research: individual competence literature and informal learning at work literature.

The goal of this research is to really understand and make sense of the trainees learning in the context of a structured management trainee program. Therefore, theories related to learning and especially learning at work was selected. Even though research on learning at work provides some insight regarding learning outcomes (Eraut 2004), research and literature on individual competences and competence management in organizations clearly provides more specific and mature tools (e.g. competence models) to understand and categorize learning outcomes. Thus, learning at work is complemented by competence management literature when examining what the trainees have learned during the program. A holistic model of professional competence was selected as it incorporated all the aspects of individual professional competence from different types of knowledge and skills to obscure but extremely important behavioral competences. The concept of individual competence is examined in detail to understand what constitutes competence at work. As individual competence development is examined in an organizational context and the purpose with the trainee program is to ultimately develop competence for use in the organization, a broader competence management discussion and models of competence management processes are briefly reviewed. This provides a backdrop and a framing for examining individual competence in an organizational context. Factors affecting learning in the workplace were selected as an additional framework to help an understanding of the context and how it affects the learning and competence development. Even though the implications are practical by nature and aid in developing the trainee program within this context, some general conclusions can be drawn regarding contextual factors affecting learning with similar type of trainee programs.

The alignment of the theoretical framework with the research goal is elaborated in Figure 1.

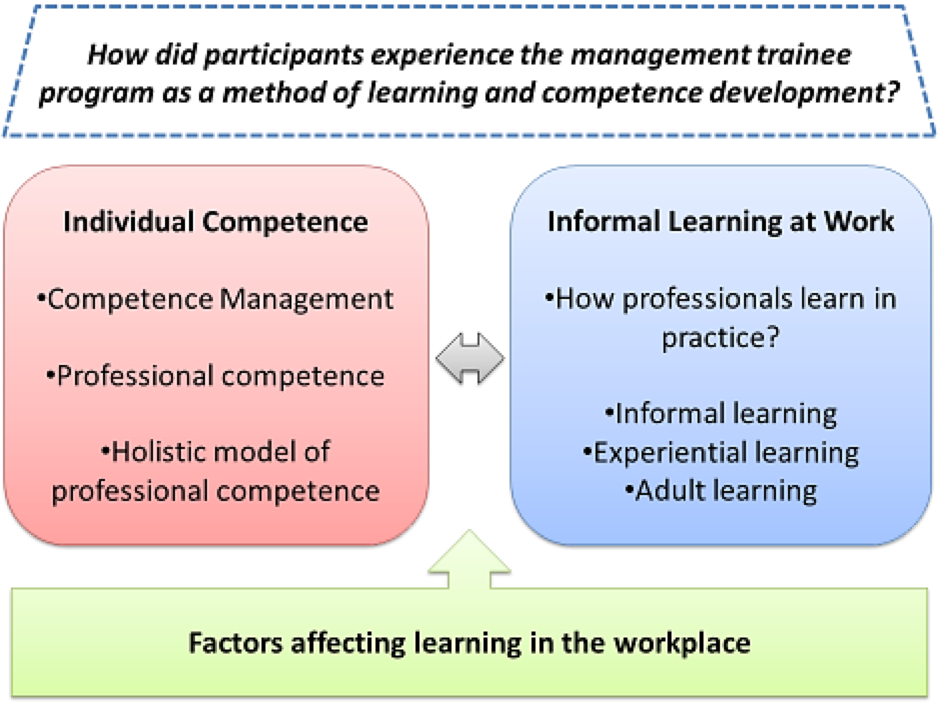

Figure 1. Alignment of the theoretical framework with the research goal

Individual Competence is a multidimensional concept and has its roots in human resource management, education, and psychology. Individual Competence is defined here as an effective overall performance within an occupation, which may range from the basic level of proficiency through to the highest levels of excellence. **Professional competence** is the possession of the range of attributes necessary for effective performance within a profession, and the ability to marshal these consistently to produce the desired overall results. (Cheetham & Chivers 2005, 54-77)

Competence Management is a process for developing organizational competencies to achieve high performance and competitive advantage. Competence management targets both individuals' and organizations' competencies as well as their ability to co-operate while taking the strategic goals of the organization into consideration (Hyrkäs 2009, 5).

Individual competencies are at the core of competence management in many organizations (Hong & Ståhle 2005).

Workplace learning or **learning at work** is learning which takes place in the context of work. Workplace learning is mostly informal, contextual, and focused on tool use and mental activities. It produces implicit- and tacit knowledge and situation specific competencies, but with less predictable learning outcomes (Tynjälä 2008). Workplace learning is typically directed towards requirements and needs of the particular workplace (Billet & Choy 2013). The majority of learners in workplaces are adults, which means that specifics related to adult learning should be noted when examining workplace learning.

Experiential learning is not a theory, but a combination of various approaches and methods. It is based on the notion that ideas are continuously formed and reformed by life experiences. Experiential learning methods are typical when designing professional development schemes such as job rotation programs in trainee programs. Experiential learning theories can provide hypotheses on how the process of learning works – providing practical application to some cases in the context of adult learning. (Cheetham & Chivers 2001, 255)

A Trainee Program is defined here as structured on-the-job training schemes for recent graduates. **Trainees** are high-potential university graduates who are participating in a trainee program. Trainee programs last typically 12-24 months and include placements in different functions, units, and countries within the same organization. The purpose of trainee programs is to provide broad, holistic and practical experiences for the trainees to accelerate and foster induction to the organization and develop competencies and business understanding, which are important for the organization and for the trainees to become effective and successful new professional employees, managers, and leaders of the organization.

2 INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCE

Competence-based human resource management has gone from a novel technique to a common practice in the last 40 years, since McClelland (1973) first suggested competencies as a critical differentiator of human performance (Boyatzis 2008). Competencies have been in the limelight also beyond the domain of human resource management. Strategic management, education, and psychology have also embraced the concept. Thus defining of what competence means is pivotal, as the definitions change depending on the context and purpose.

In this study, competence is regarded predominantly from an individual perspective and the definitions are drawn from competence-based human resource management- and educational psychology literature. To understand why the studying of competences has become so popular and to understand the backdrop of this study, the competence management process in organization is briefly reviewed.

2.1 Competence management – how individual competences are linked to the organization’s strategy

What is competence? It can refer to the collective learning, diverse production skills, and the integration of multiple streams of technologies that exist inside the organization (Prahalad & Hamel 1990, 64). Others define firm competencies as the skills of employees that comprise the competency (King & Zeithaml 2001; Leonard-Barton 1995), and that employees must engage in behavior that executes the competency (Leonard-Barton 1992). Individual competence has been defined as the underlying characteristics of people, which are causally related to superior or effective performance in a job (Boyatzis 1982), and as the ability to perform activities within an occupation (Nordhaug & Grønhaug 1994). From these definitions, it appears there is some difference in terminology. For example, strategy researchers such as Prahalad and Hamel postulate the link between an organization’s collective competencies (groups of competencies that work together) to the creation of competitive advantage. Behavioral researchers (such as HR theorists), on the other hand, suggest that individuals possess different competencies (Wright et al. 2001) or skill sets that will be applied differently in a range of circumstances depending on the quality of learning (Murray & Donegan 2003). Firms develop a portfolio of competencies and shared mindsets to outperform their competitors (Nordhaud & Grønhaug 1994). (Murray 2003)

When applying competence-based approaches it is important to distinguish between organizational- and individual competences (Murray 2003). Otherwise there is a great risk for conceptual ambiguity. In recent competence management (CM) literature, the focus has shifted from individuals as the prime competence carrier to more collective learning entities such as organizations and networks. Each view offers different answers to the question: what is competence? Hong and Ståhle (2005) have categorized the literature of knowledge- and competence management as follows:

- **Individual competence**
    - Individual or employee competence (e.g. Boyatzis 1982; McClelland 1973; Spencer & Spencer 1993)
- **Corporation-wide strategic competence**
    - Core competence (Prahalad & Hamel 1990)
    - Capabilities-based competition (Stalk et al. 1992)
    - Competence-based strategic management (Heene & Sanchez 1997)
    - Dynamic capabilities (Teece et al. 1997)
    - Absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal 1990)

How is competence management executed in practice? One common means of understanding CM is to view it as an organizational process (Sydänmaanlakka 2002), where the actual organizational CM process encompasses several of the above mentioned perspectives. It starts with defining the organization’s core- and other important competencies, which are based on the company vision, strategy, and objectives. Compared to training and development literature, competence management thinking adds a strategic dimension to the process. The model includes the environment as it affects the demand and supply of competence. According to system theorists, an organization should always try adapt to its contextual environment. The next phase of the process of CM includes an evaluation of how the present competence level compares with the target level of competence: what competence are needed in the future so that the implementation of strategy is possible on order to achieve competitive advantage and high performance. The next step in the process involves transforming the competence development needs into practical competence development plans. Based on the competence gap-analysis, competence development plans at the unit level are implemented and transformed into personal development plans for the individual employee level. The model is illustrated in Figure 2. (Sydänmaanlakka 2002)

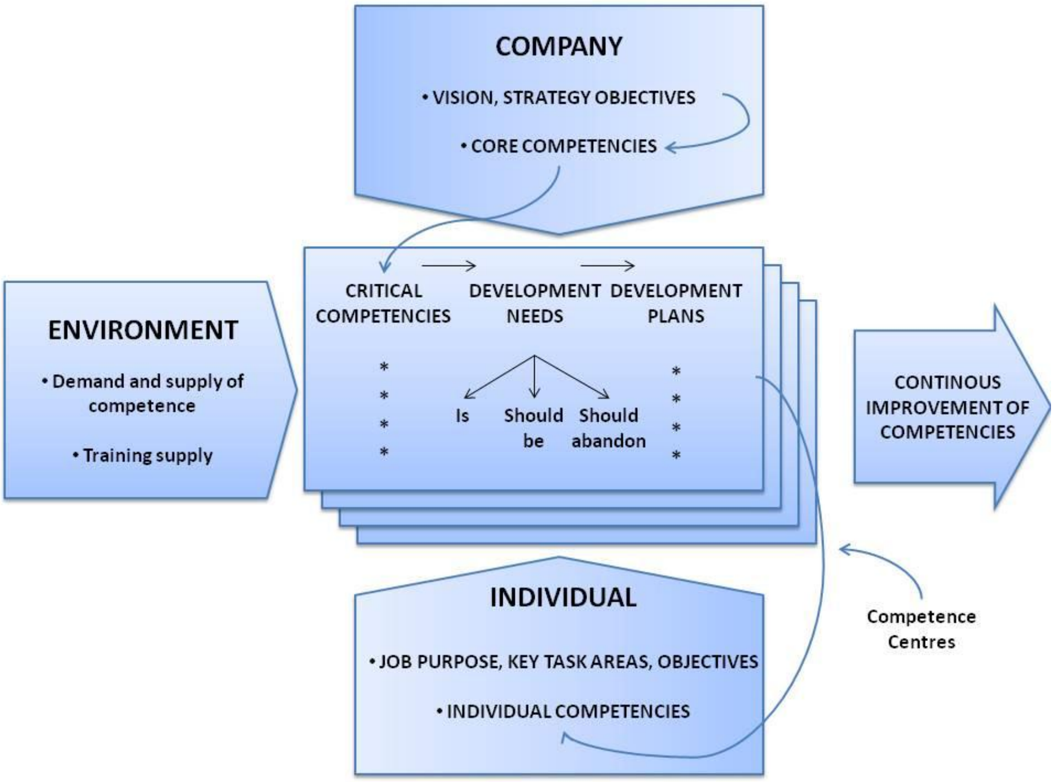

Figure 2. Framework of competence management (adapted from Sydänmaanlakka 2002, 98)

The framework elaborates how the company’s vision, strategy, and objectives should, through various phases, affect and determine the competence requirements of a single employee. The competence management process should be dynamic and continuously evolving, manifesting on all levels in the organization. The goals and purpose of the process and the critical or core competencies should be clear and supported by top management. Without the support of the top management, high performance or competitive advantage is not likely to be achieved (Viitala 2005).

2.2 Competence movement

Contextual factors affect competence and thus performance of an individual in any given job. Boyatzis (1982) argues that an individual’s performance at work is maximized when his or her capability is consistent with the needs of the job and the organizational environment. Effective performance in a job is defined as “the attainment of specific results (e.g. outcomes) required by the job through specific actions while maintaining or being consistent with policies, procedures, and conditions of the organizational environment.” (Boyatzis 1982, 12). To depict the relationship between the individual, the job demand and the organizational environment, Boyatzis (1982; 2008) formulated a simple contingency model of individual performance at work, elaborated in Figure 3.

An individual’s talent is formed by his or her values, vision, personal philosophy, knowledge, competencies, life and career stage, interests, and style. Job demands include job role, responsibilities, functions, and tasks that need to be performed. Aspects of the organizational environment that are predicted to have an important impact on the demonstration of competencies and/or the design of the jobs and roles include: organizational culture and climate, structure and systems, maturity of the industry, strategic positioning, core competences, and social contexts. (Boyatzis 2008)

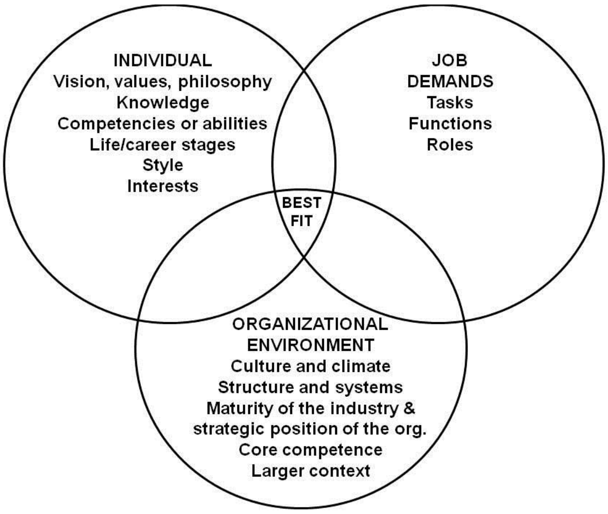

Figure 3. Theory of action and job performance: best fit (Boyatzis 2008, 7)

Certain characteristics or abilities enable the person to demonstrate the appropriate specific actions or behaviors which are required to meet the requirements of a job. These characteristics or abilities can be called competencies. The implications of this model are to point out that competencies are affected by various factors and should not be examined out of context. Job performance is therefore affected by the individual but also the demands of the job and the organizational environment - and how they fit together. (Boyatzis 1982; 2008)

Boyatzis (1982) was one of the first authors to extensively study individual competences in an organizational context, but the notion of competence has a long history and it has no single point of origin. Its idea can be traced back to medieval guilds where apprentices learned skills by working with a master and were awarded credentials as they reached the standards of workmanship associated with and set by the trade. The industrial revolution paved the way for the more precise study of work and the skills needed to do that work. Scientific management in the 1910’s, and the human relations school of management in the 1930’s, turned academic and practitioner interest towards how to organize work and how to motivate workers. Sandberg (2000) argues that the academic roots of the modern competence movement can be traced to the writings of Taylor

(1911), as he was one of the first authors to address the problem of what constitutes employee competence at work. Taylor's idea of the one best way of completing a task, thus improving efficiency and increasing production along with his functional view of management, ultimately led to the development of the modern competence movement. (Horton, 2000; Garavan & McGuire 2001)

The first measures of competence were initially developed in the United States to aid in recruitment, since traditional tests of cognitive intelligence were seen as poor predictors of work performance (White 1959). Instead of testing for intelligence, competency-based evaluation aimed to identify those psycho-social attributes of individuals which were associated with superior work performance (Winterton 2009). McClelland (1973) is commonly credited as the founder of the competence movement. In his seminal paper "Testing for Competence Rather than for Intelligence" he criticized the validity and usefulness of intelligence- and aptitude tests (e.g. the Scholastic Aptitude Test) in predicting an individual's success and performance in working life (McClelland 1973). He argued that traditional notion of cognitive intelligence is a poor predictor for success in various jobs because the tests that measure cognitive intelligence do not tap abilities which are crucial in the world of practice. McClelland (1973, 9) argued that "tests should assess competencies involved in clusters of life outcomes", meaning that in addition to the traditional cognitive competencies, like reading, writing or calculating, a number of personality variables such as communication skills, patience, moderate goal setting, and ego development should be also taken into account. McClelland especially emphasized the role of personality variables, which are later defined as underlying characteristics of individuals, play a major role in an individual's success in life. Much of the latter research is based on this line of thought.

Following on from McClelland, another major contributor to individual competence research in the US has been Richard Boyatzis (1982). He was interested in the characteristics, or competencies, of managers which were related to effective and superior performance in a variety of management jobs across a variety of organizations. He aimed at finding a generic model of managerial competences. According to results of his research, managers shared 12 common competences that led to superior performance and 7 additional competences, which were considered as threshold competences. The outcome of his research was a generic model of management competence, illustrating 12 competences which successful managers shared. Boyatzis (1982) defined competence as an unconscious aspect of the person or underlying personality variable; something that cannot be clearly expressed, described, or measured. Thus it is more than just skills, knowledge or know-how. In other words, individual competencies are concerned with the fundamental personality characteristics, like standards, values, views on life and on oneself and others, and are often essential for responsible and complex tasks (Bergenhenegouwen et al. 1997). Spencer and Spencer (1993) studied superior performers in over 200 occupations and concluded that superior performance at work is usually a result of a specific sets of competencies combined in a distinct way (Sandberg 2000).

2.3 Competing definitions of individual competence

Individual competence discussion has been dominated by two distinct approaches (e.g. Woodruffe 1991; Hoffmann 1999; Horton 2000; Garavan & McGuire 2001; Le Deist & Winterton 2005):

- The input-based, behavioral, US approach
- The output-based, functional, UK approach

Winterton (2009) calls this a competency-competence –debate. *Competency* has been associated with the American research stream, described as an input approach, meaning the attributes which an individual must possess in order to perform competently. *Competence* is associated with the British output approach and focuses on the demands of the occupation or results of training (Woodruffe 1993; Hoffmann 1999).

The main differences between these two approaches are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences in definition of competencies: the UK versus the US approach (adapted from Garavan & McGuire 2001, 150)

Basis for difference	UK approach	US approach
Purpose	Assessment and certification of employees	Development of competencies to enhance performance
Focus	Focus on job/individual characteristics and skill accumulation	Focus on individual behavior and attributes
Procedure to develop	Produce performance standards for job functions and professions	Produce descriptions of excellent behavior and attributes to define standards
Role of organizational context	Context is not as significant as professional area and specific job functions	Context defines the behaviors and traits required
Conceptualization of work/individual	The characteristics of work are the point of departure	Greater emphasis on the individual rather than specific tasks
Methodological approach	More multi-method and quantitative	Rationalistic and positivistic
Scope	Competencies are specific to professions and job functions	Competencies are specific to organizations
Measurement	Documentation of evidence of work activities and experience denotes evidence of competency	Quantitative measurement and identification of a correlation between possession of attributes and work performance
Role of assessor	Formally assessed by external assessor to determine level	Assessment of performance by job supervisors and job incumbent
Perspective of learning advocated	Constructivist perspective of learning	Cognitive perspective of learning

The Input approach can also be referred to as a worker-oriented approach, because the starting point of analysis is the worker (or employee), not the work or task to be completed. The focus is on the KSAs (knowledge, skills and abilities/attitudes) of an individual and the 'underlying attributes' (Boyatzis 1982; Spencer & Spencer 1993) of the person. This approach is predominantly led by American authors. The Input approach is descriptive and analytical, rather than something aiming towards purposive action. This approach has been popular when determining the content of learning programs and has been utilized when defining the inputs necessary for behavior leading to competent performance (Hoffmann 1999).

The output-based, functional, UK approach is more extensive, perceiving competencies not only as attributes of job-holders, but including also a range of guidelines and personal effectiveness issues required to complete a work task. The demands of the task or occupation are the starting points in this approach. Competence is seen primarily as an individuals' observable performance in a job, a standard or set of standards to be attained by a worker in a job. The purpose of this approach is to make competence something that can be measured and evaluated. This approach has been advocated by mostly English authors, who have proposed that competence should be used as a measure of learning (Hoffmann 1999).

Within the UK approach, competences are viewed as standards for work functions and professions, whereas in the US approach, the behavior of excellent performers is considered the basis for the development of tests of relevant competencies. However, both US and UK perspectives view competencies as being related to the characteristics of individuals. However, the approaches differ substantially in their pedagogical perspective and assumptions concerning how individuals learn. The US approach emphasizes the cognitive perspective to learning, whereas the UK and the European variants emphasize a constructivistic approach to learning. The approaches also differ in how they perceive the context of competencies, their interaction with work, and their measurement. Cognitive approaches highlight objective measurement, whereas constructivist approaches emphasize the motivational and subjective dimensions of competence. Cognitive and constructivist approaches to learning are elaborated in detail in Chapter 3.1. (Garavan & McGuire 2001)

Defining what competence is depends on the approach to how it is understood. As a reflection of the input and output approaches, three distinct approaches to defining competence have been recognized: The worker-oriented, work-oriented and multidimensional approaches. The definitions of these are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Some common definitions of competence found in the literature (Adapted from Garavan & McGuire 2001, 150)

Worker-oriented definitions

1) The behavioral characteristics of an individual that are causally related to effective and/or superior performance in a job. This means that there is evidence that indicates that possession of the characteristic precedes and leads to effective and/or superior performance on the job (Boyatzis 1982)
2) An underlying characteristic of an individual that is casually related to criterion referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation (Spencer & Spencer 1993)
3) A High performance or H-competency is relatively stable set of behaviors which produces superior workgroup performance in more complex organizational environments (Schroder 1989)

Work-oriented definitions

4) Occupational competence (is) … the ability to perform the activities within an occupation or function to the level of performance expected in employment (Management Charter Initiative 1990)
5) The ability to perform the activities within an occupation (Nordhaug & Grønhaug 1994)
6) An action, behavior or outcome which the person should be able to demonstrate (Horton 2000)

Multidimensional definitions

7) The ability to apply knowledge, understanding, practical and thinking skills to achieve effective performance to the standards required in employment. This includes solving problems and being sufficiently flexible to meet changing demands (NCVQ 1997)
8) The skills, knowledge and understanding qualities and attributes, sets of values, beliefs and attitudes which lead to effective managerial performance in a given context, situation or role (Woodall & Winstanley 1998)

Sandberg and Pinnington (2009) have recently distinguished three broad concepts related to different definitions of competence:

- **Competence as a prerequisite**, such as the specific education and training requirements necessary for permission to practice within a particular occupation
- **Competence as an outcome**, that is, performance to set standards
- **Competence as a capability** exercised in accomplishing specific work tasks, which Gherardi (2000) called competence as a practical accomplishment.

Winterton (2009, 684) has argued that there is a point to separating competence in terms of input > output, but notes that one can also identify separate input > output measures for psycho-social ‘competency’ as well as functional ‘competence’: “intelligence > knowledge (cognitive competence); dexterity > skills (functional competence); attitudes > behaviors (social competence)”. Therefore, competences should be understood more as a holistic concept. Grzeda (2005) noted that increased ambiguity has been caused because the term is used as both an independent and dependent variable, or in other words describing both the attributes that an individual must acquire and the demonstration of those attributes in performance.

The implications of these theories for competence development of newcomers are that the ideal work situations should allow apprentices to consolidate their competence through practice over a period of time, while also expanding their competence through a combination of coaching and peripheral participation. However, what is deemed as competence, even for experienced or senior members of the organization, will change over time as work practices change and the quality and speed of work improves. Therefore, from the learning point of view, competence is a moving target. (Eraut 2004)

2.4 Structure of individual competence and competence models

2.4.1 Hierarchical models of professional competence

A wide variety of competence models exist in the literature but despite the variances in the models and different contexts where they exist, some generalizations can be made. Many models form a continuum from personal-related competencies to work-related competencies. One common type of model is the iceberg- or pyramid model of professional competence. An example of the iceberg model of individual competence is presented in Figure 4. It is useful for depicting the visible and non-visible elements, and the hierarchical structure of professional competence. (Garavan & McGuire 2001; Viitala 2005)

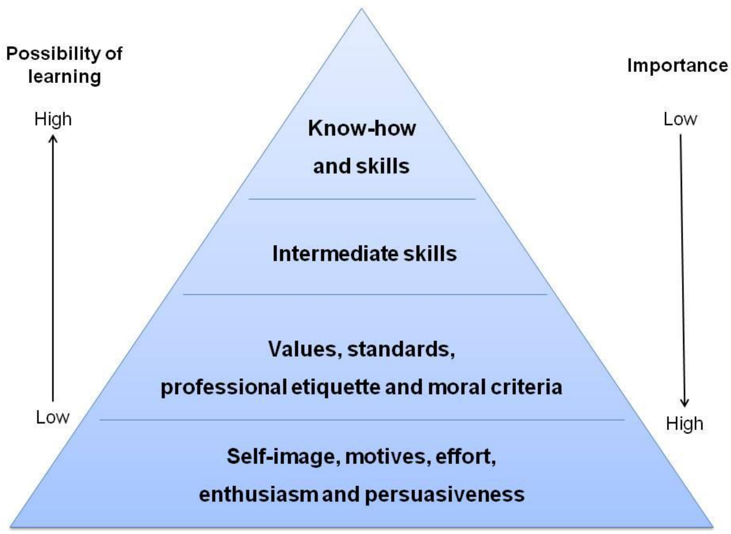

Figure 4. Human competence in the form of an “iceberg” (Bergenhenegouwen et al. 1997, 57)

The idea behind the iceberg model is that only the top layer of human competence can be easily observed from the outside; the important majority of overall competence remains hidden from direct observation. The visible peak of the iceberg consists of the individual’s explicit knowledge, know-how, and skills. Below the visible surface lie personal attributes such as self-image, social role, traits, and motives which control the surface level behaviors. The competences at the top of the iceberg are easily visible, whereas other competences are not as straightforward to observe. From the individual's perspective, self-image and social roles exist at a conscious level, whereas the individual's motives and traits lie deeper below the surface at an unconscious level. Assumedly, the more complex and demanding a job or role is, e.g. leadership or managerial position, the more likely it is that successful performance is driven by the attributes existing at the bottom of the iceberg. This model has some important implications for workplace learning. The skills and knowledge at the top are generally easier to learn and develop, whereas those attributes at the lower levels are more difficult, time consuming or even impossible to consciously develop. (Garavan & McGuire 2001; Bergenhenegouwen et al. 1997)

The top layer of the competence pyramid includes the observable and instrumental knowledge, skills, know-how and behavior which are related to performing the key tasks in an occupation. The individual must have these basic competences in order to hold that position and to achieve necessary performance. These competencies are task-specific, easy to learn and learned through professional and vocational training. The second level includes intermediate skills, which are applicable to more broad range of situations and professions. Sometimes these are also referred to as starting qualifications and include aspects like social and communication skills, general technical and vocational insights, managing skills, and basic approaches to work and situations. Developing intermediate skills are important for an employee's flexibility and employability, but it requires time, supervision, and feedback. Development of these is time consuming and possibly expensive. Regarding the context of this study, a trainee program and job rotation can be seen as a means of developing exactly these type of competencies more efficiently and more cost-effectively. (Bergenhenegouwen et al. 1997)

The third level in the competence structure includes an individual's morals, values, standards, and ethics. These have been internalized by the person's experiences and education. Values and standards are expressed by the personas mentality, a specific view of the world and/or other people, specific opinions about culture and traditions. This level consists of a personal and professional frame of reference, in which values, preferences, standards, and criteria are given a specific place and by which the personality marks out its identity. Adopting these types of values and standards (once again) is an extremely individual and lengthy socialization process that can be compared with maturing into a professional group. The fourth and lowest level of the human competence structure consists of deeper-lying personal characteristics, such as self-image, motives, and the source of the enthusiasm and effort that goes into (professional) actions. These aspects of individual competence, which are barely visible, determine very much how an individual acts in a specific (professional) situation. In addition, because these aspects are practically invisible, they are also difficult to identify, develop, or teach. It is therefore better - as Spencer and Spencer (1993) demonstrate - to involve these characteristics before the selection process because subsequent training in this area can be practically impossible. (Bergenhenegouwen et al. 1997)

According to Viitala (2005), organizational-specific knowledge and business knowledge should also be considered as competencies. Viitala (2005) has placed them with intermediate skills in her own hierarchical pyramid-shaped competence model, and posits that these are beneficial for all employees regardless of the context. These competences are concerned with knowledge about the organization, its structures, internal networks and how to get things done and who to contact in different situations.

2.4.2 Holistic model of professional competence

Cheetham and Chivers (1996; 1998) have created a holistic model of professional competence. Existing models had useful insights, but these models lacked a comprehensive and holistic perspective which would be beneficial for practitioners when analyzing development of professional competence in a wide range of contexts. Their aim was not to produce a hybrid model, reconciling every conflicting approach, but to seek the coherent elements within these different approaches and draw on them to build one holistic model. The key approaches influencing the model were the reflective practitioner approach by Schön (1983), functional competence approaches (output), personal competence approaches (input) (e.g. Boyatzis 1982), meta-competencies, and ethics and competence. (Cheetham & Chivers 1998)

This holistic model of professional competence is based on four core components, which are supported by a set of overarching meta-competencies and influenced by various external context factors related to these, and also the individuals' internal factors such as motivation. The core components are illustrated in Figure 5. All the elements are interlinked and also interrelated, as performance often requires a combination of many competencies and need to work in sync. The model is based on four core components, which include various sub- or constituent competencies (Cheetham and Chivers 1996).

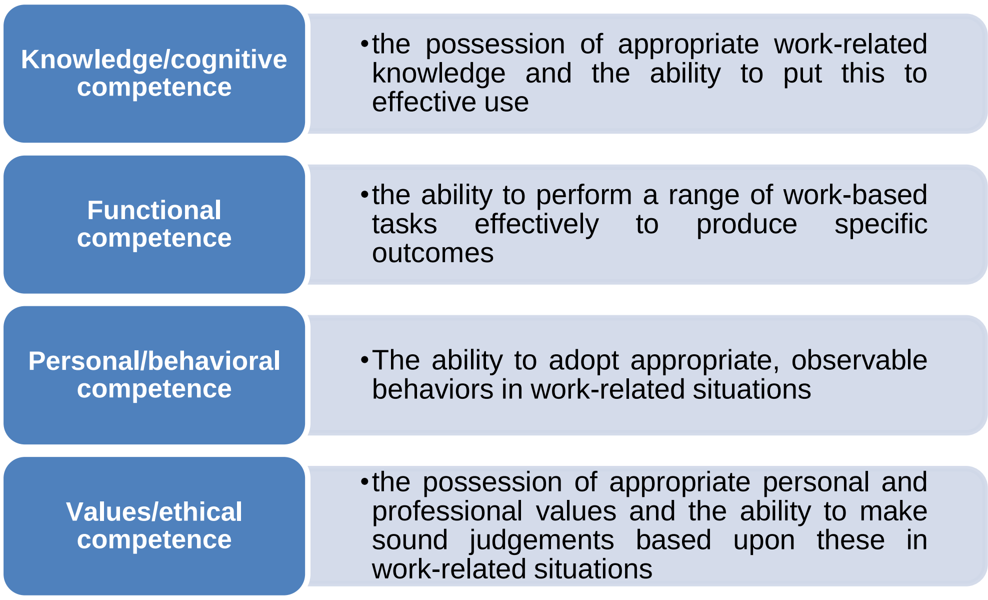

Figure 5. Core components of professional competence (Cheetham & Chivers 1996, 24)

Overarching these four core components are a number of meta-competencies, which include e.g. communication, creativity, problem solving, learning/self-development, mental agility, analysis and reflection. Meta-competencies play a role in assisting in the development of other competencies (e.g. self-development) or are capable of mediating or enhancing competence in any or all of the core component categories (e.g. creativity). Each core component is made up of a number of constituents, which are sub-groups of individual competencies that are of a similar nature to each other. The whole holistic model is illustrated in Figure 6.

To elaborate on the model, the core component of knowledge/cognitive competence includes the following constituents: (Cheetham & Chivers 1996)

- Technical/theoretical (underlying knowledge base of the professions, consisting of principles, theories, etc. but also their application, synthesis, transfer, extrapolation, etc.)
- Tacit/practical (knowledge linked to, and embedded within, specific functional or personal competencies)
- Procedural (consisting of the how, what, when, etc of the more routine tasks within professional activity)
- Contextual (general background knowledge which is specific to an organization, industry, sector, etc.).

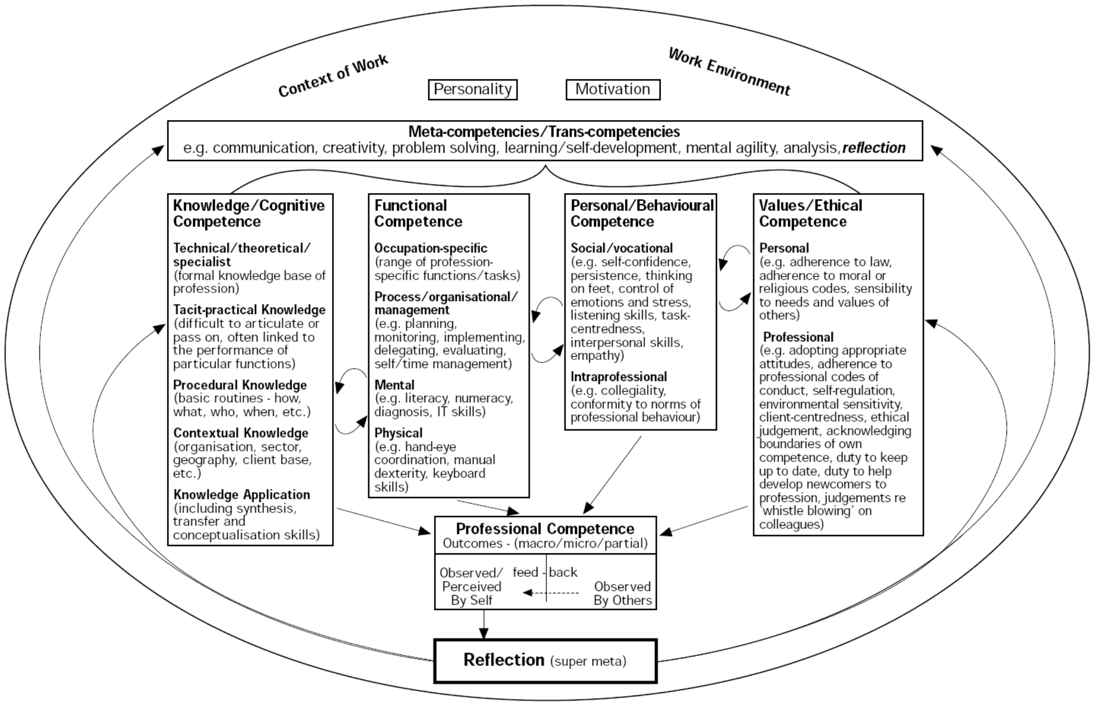

Figure 6. Revised model of professional competence (Cheetham & Chivers 1998, 275)

The four core components, their constituents and meta-competencies all interact together to produce specific outcomes. These outcomes may be observed, or otherwise perceived, to act as a proof of an individuals' professional competence. These outcomes can be macro-outcomes or micro-outcomes. Macro-outcomes have been defined as broad, overall indicators of professional performance. Macro-outcomes are typically achieved over time through combination of elements of competence and are the ultimate indicators of professional competence. Micro-outcomes have been defined as outcomes which are very specific activities and may only indicate proficiency in a single competence under the functional category or a narrow range of personal competencies, such as a specific task. In addition to these main outcome categories, the possibility of partial outcomes (result of partially-completed activity) has been recognized. All of these outcomes can be observed/perceived both by oneself and others, though not perfectly by either. Perception of the self is supported by feedback from others. Self-perception of a competence should lead to reflection. An individual may reflect on any of the core components (or their constituent competencies), or on any of the meta-competencies, or about his or her overall professional competence. Reflections may be based on macro-, micro-, and partial-outcomes or during the activity itself. Reflection should drive competence development. Reflection is a meta-competence itself, but it also plays a pivotal role in improvement of other competencies, as results of reflection should have the potential to provide feedback into any of the core components and their numerous constituents, or into any of the meta-competencies, thus completing the cycle of continuous improvement. (Cheetham & Chivers 1996)

After receiving feedback and development proposals, Cheetham & Chivers published a slightly revised version of the model (1998) to further clarify the presentation itself graphically, and to further emphasize the role of reflection as meta- and super-meta competence. The revised model also includes the context of work, the work environment, and the individual’s personality variables as well as motivation.

3 INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

Learning is traditionally linked to formal education and its use in the context of work is a somewhat new phenomenon. However, interest towards workplace learning and its mechanisms has grown steadily since the early 1990s and the research has become interdisciplinary and wide-ranging (Tynjälä 2008; Griffin 2011). One reason for this grown interest lies in the rapid changes of society and working life as it challenges organizations to enhance their employees learning to ensure that their competence stays up-to-date. Workplace learning should be studied also because research about outcomes of education has shown a gap between knowledge and skills required at work and the knowledge and skills produced by formal education system. This increases the pressure for employers to expand the learning boundaries of the workplace (Tynjälä 2008). Another reason is that even though it has been recognized that the majority of adult learning happens in the workplace (Billett & Sommerville 2004; Billett 2007), transferring that learning into improved job performance has not been so effective (Kontoghiorghes 2004; Velda et al. 2007).

Before continuing with the methods for learning and competence development, it should be understood how learning happens and which factors contribute to a stimulating learning environment. Employees increasingly value and also expect possibilities for personal development. A stimulating learning climate is also an important factor in predicting employee retention (Kyndt et al. 2009). Employees who experience stimulus to learn and who are offered learning opportunities are more likely to remain with their current employer (Kyndt et al. 2012). Attracting and retaining talent is therefore affected by the kinds of learning possibilities that the employer can provide.

Just as organizations are forced to constantly innovate and reinvent themselves to keep up with the competition (Burke & Ng 2006), employees themselves are seen to have more responsibility in continuous learning and career adaptability (Hall & Mirvis 1995). Professional competence is a moving target, not a static trait (Eraut 2004). Employees need to understand the demand that they need to be active themselves to enhance their employability. Learning and development issues are also increasingly included in HR policies because of their critical contribution to the overall competitiveness of organizations (Kyndt et el. 2012).

3.1 Theories of learning

This chapter examines theories of learning and their implication for competence development in organizations.

Behaviorists see learning as a straightforward mechanism: the result of a behavioral response to some form of stimulus. Reinforcement, repetition, punishments and rewards can be used to shape human behavior. Early behaviorists disregarded the relevance of feelings, thoughts or motives – only those elements of behavior which can be monitored from outside are relevant and behavior itself is seen as a set of conditioned responses. Utilizing behaviorist principles has been common when teaching low level psychomotor skills, but used also in some higher-level training. Bandura's (1977) theory of behavioral modeling, self-reinforcement and goal setting have been used to help people gain the characteristics of a competent role model, overcome fears, and develop interpersonal skills (Bandura 1977; Latham and Frayne 1989). Behaviorist tradition can be seen in concepts of learning through repetitive practice and learning by observation (Myers 1988). Behaviorism encourages a simplistic and somewhat positivistic perspective to learning. Though behaviorist models are rather simplistic, some elements of behaviorism can still be valid. (Cheetham & Chivers 2001)

Cognitivists are more focused on what is happening between the stimulus and the following behavioral response. In other words, the mental processes involved in learning, reasoning and problem solving. Cognitive approaches are focused on how individuals absorb information from their environment, how it is sorted mentally and applied in everyday activities.

Behavioral and cognitive approaches have also been combined (Tolman 1959; Bolles 1972): individuals do not just simply respond to stimuli but also act on beliefs, express attitudes and strive towards goals. In addition to behavioral modeling, Bandura (1977; 1986) presented a theory of social learning where learning is seen as a continuous, dynamic, and reciprocal interaction between individuals emphasizing values, attributes, and behaviors. The learning environment plays an important role in learning. (Cheetham & Chivers 2001)

In contrast to behaviorism and cognitive approaches, constructivist learning theories (Wells & Chang-Wells 1992; Driver et al. 1994) advocate that the construction of knowledge is largely an individual process and that different learners interpret the world in their own unique way. Individuals form and test their own hypotheses, based on their senses and previous experiences. Constructivism has been used to support discovery learning methods, but it has been criticized for overestimating the capabilities of the learners and risking critical gaps in what is learned. For example, Hodson and Hodson (1998, 35) argued that "it is absurdly naïve to expect them [learners] to be able to invent for themselves the abstract notions such as gene, molecule and magnetic field that scientists have developed over many years." (Cheetham & Chivers 2001)

3.1.1 Adult learning

The psychology of adult learning restricts what can be achieved through training and development in workplaces (Cheetham & Chivers 2001). Adults receive, interpret, and abandon information according to their existing internal mental models and schemata. Internal schemata act as a filter through which new information is processed and stored and it makes every learner unique. Learning can be described as selective because new information has to go through a layer of previous life experiences. (Viitala 2005, 135; Sydänmaanlakka 2001, 15)

According to Knowles (1980, 1984) adult learners can be described as self-directed and autonomous, learning best through experiential methods, being aware of their own specific learning needs generated by life or work, and they are keen to apply newly acquired knowledge or skills to their immediate circumstances. Learning should be seen as a partnership between teachers and learners, where the learners' own experiences should be used as a resource. However, some adults pursue lifestyles where self-directed behaviors are noticeably absent, and where behaviorist approaches might be more suitable (Brookfield 1986, 93). However, for the majority of adults and especially those in professional vocations, intrinsic motivation and accurate self-knowledge are very important drivers for learning. Cultural differences also affect how acceptable and suitable learners are for self-directed learning methods. Individual learning style research (e.g. Honey & Mumford 1986; Smith & Kolb 1985) has shown some drawbacks in the universality of adult learning theories. This research had indicated that adults display significant differences on how they learn, even if they come from similar backgrounds. There is indeed considerable evidence that different people learn in different ways and this brings challenges for those seeking to offer general guidelines on how to design learning activities. (Cheetham & Chivers 2001)

3.1.2 Informal learning

Learning is typically seen as formal, occurring at schools and education institutions. However, the majority of adult learning happens in workplaces, where learning is mainly informal (Marsick & Watkins 1990). Nevertheless, all forms of learning, formal, nonformal, and informal, can occur at work. This chapter presents the differences between formal, nonformal, and informal learning.

Formal learning occurs in a structured and organized environment and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). It is always intentional from the learner's point of view and it often targets validation and certification (Cedefop 2008). Formal learning has a clear purpose: the acquisition of certain knowledge, skills and competences.

Typical examples of formal learning are schools and structured training programs or courses. Marsick and Watkins (1990) found that only 20 percent of employees learning comes from structured and formalized training. (Werquin 2010)

Nonformal learning can be placed between formal- and informal learning. It is learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). It can be intentional or in some cases completely incidental. Nonformal learning takes a wide variety of approaches, which makes a consensus regarding the definition harder to reach. While activities leading to nonformal learning may not necessarily be specifically defined or denoted as learning activities, they may not constitute informal learning either. The advantage of this concept is to meet the potential need for an intermediate concept between formal learning and informal learning. To clarify, nonformal learning can occur alongside other activities, which may or may not have other learning objectives. An example might be a project management course in the workplace (formal learning), in which the students incidentally learn something about themselves such as their punctuality or initiative taking ability, or about teamwork and problem solving skills (nonformal learning). Therefore in this example, nonformal learning is incidental compared to other activities which have an educational objective. While participation in the main activity is intentional, the nonformal learning that comes as a byproduct from it may not be. It can be difficult to perceive directly, which makes recognition of learning very difficult for those who are unaware of these nonformal learning outcomes as a byproduct. A further example can be people who deliberately decide to teach themselves with very clear aims in mind (such as proficiency in using new software), yet without any funding or scheduled time. (Werquin 2010)

Informal learning is not organized, has no set objectives in terms of learning outcomes, and is not intentional from the learner’s point of view. Informal learning is learning that results from daily activities related to work, home or life in general. It is often referred to as learning by experience or just as experience. The idea is that people are constantly exposed to various learning situations. This definition, with a few exceptions has reached a fair degree of consensus. (Werquin 2010)

Conlon (2004) summarized that informal learning takes place when employees take time to question, observe, listen, read, and reflect on their work environment. The majority of learning in the workplace is informal and involves a combination of learning from personal experience and learning from other people (Eraut 2004). Informal learning is typically incidental and often a byproduct of other activities, such as social interaction, accomplishing tasks, experiencing organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or formal learning activities. As informal learning is happening all the time, it should be noted that it can be supported and leveraged by the organization. Informal learning can be incidental, which means that it takes place so that the learners are not aware of it (Marsick & Watkins, 1990).

Table 3 presents Eraut's (2004) typology of informal learning. The columns distinguish between three levels of intention. Implicit learning refers to independent knowledge acquisition without conscious attempts to learn and without explicit knowledge about what was learned (Reber 1993). Implicit aspects are especially common with learning from experience. Learner's conscious effort and awareness of explicit learning do not exclude implicit learning from happening. Reactive or opportunistic learning is spontaneous by nature: learning can be intentional, but if it occurs in the middle of action there is little time to think. Thus that particular type of learning is reactive, not deliberate. In deliberative learning, time is allocated for learning and achieving some work-related goal. This is done with purpose to acquire new knowledge and to engage learning activities such as problem solving or planning. Because these activities are common in working life, they are rarely considered as learning activities even though they often lead to increased learning. The top rows relate to possible temporal relationships between learning episode and the experience that caused it. Schön (1983) describes these as reflection during action and reflection after action. In this typology the context where learning occurs is always in the present, but the focus of the learning can be in the past, present or future. While the planning of future learning opportunities is commonly informal, the opportunities themselves can be either informal or formal. (Eraut 2004)

Table 3. A typology of informal learning (Adapted from Eraut 2004, 250)

Time of focus	Implicit learning	Reactive learning	Deliberative learning
Past episode(s)	Implicit linkage of past memories with current experience	Brief near-spontaneous *reflection* on past episodes, events, incidents, experiences	*Discussion* and *review* of past actions, communications, events, experiences
Current experience	A selection from experience enters episodic memory	*Noting* facts, ideas, opinions, impressions; *asking* questions; *observing* effects of actions	*Engagement* in decision making, problem solving, planned informal learning
Future behavior	Unconscious expectations	*Recognition of* possible future learning opportunities	*Planning* learning opportunities; *rehearsing* for future events

3.1.2 Experiential learning

Experiential learning is actually not a theory, but a combination of various approaches and methods of experience-based learning. Experiential learning is based on the notion that ideas are continuously formed and reformed by life experiences. Experiential learning methods are commonly used when designing professional development initiatives such as job rotation programs. They can be also used when explaining how employees learn from experience gained outside formal learning environment, and to provide hypotheses on how the process of learning works – providing practical application to some cases in the context of adult learning. (Cheetham & Chivers 2001, 255)

Kolb (1984) published his seminal learning styles model and experiential learning theory in 1984, which has acted as a foundation for current research on the topic of experiential learning. He believes that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb 1984, 38). According to Kolb, experiential learning is:

- learning which is best conceived as a process, rather than in terms of outcomes;
- a continuous process grounded in experience;
- the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world;
- an holistic process of adaptation to the world;
- involves transactions between the person and the environment;
- the process of creating knowledge. (1984 26-37)

The learning circle has four stages and encompasses the idea that learning by experience occurrs when the learner moves from one stage to another and ultimately finishes the cycle (Kolb 1984). The cycle is elaborated in Figure 7. Concrete experience is the first step, where the learner experiences an activity. The second stage, observation and reflection, is where the learner consciously reflects on and thinks about the experienced activity. The third stage is generalization and abstract conceptualization, where the learner attempts to form a conceptualized model or theory of what was observed. The fourth stage is active experimentation, where the learner tries to plan how to test the model or theory. Honey and Mumford (1986) presented a modified version of the learning circle in which the learner moves from “having an experience” to “reviewing the experience” to “concluding from the experience” to “planning the next steps”.

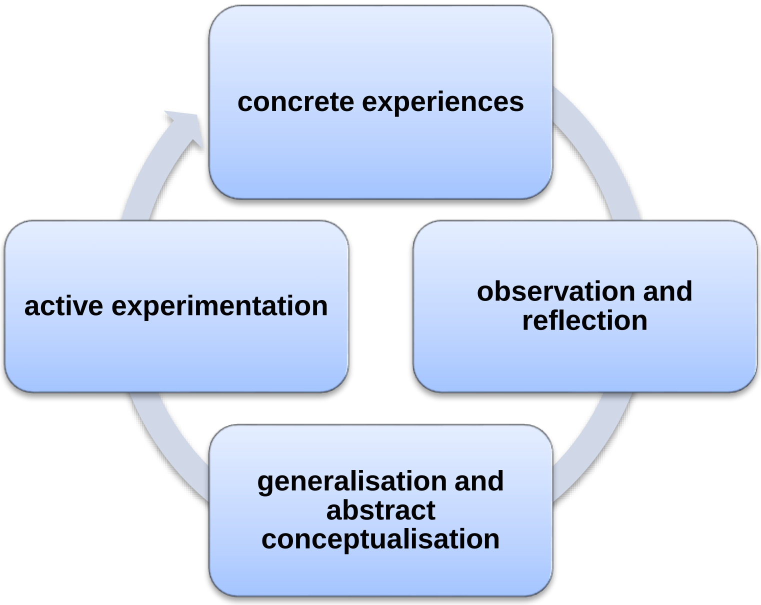

Figure 7. Kolb's (1984) learning circle

However, the question are: what does learning from experience really mean in practice? What counts as experience? Eraut (2004) notes that 'experience' should not be thought of as a single episode or incident as it often is, but preferably accumulated learning from a series of episodes. This is because when we talk about learning from experience, it is quite often more than just learning from a single incident. We as individuals are in a continuous flow of experience throughout our lives. Single discrete experiences are distinguished from this flow if given attention and reflected upon. Thus reflection brings experiences, which would otherwise simply be lived through, into the level of conscious thought, where it can be treated from actual comprehension to merely noticing or hardly noticing. (Eraut 2004)

The importance of learning from experience has particularly been emphasized in the context of leadership development (McCall, 2010). McCall regards experience as the primary source of leadership competence, thus weakening the merits of genetics, training programs, and business schools for creating successful leaders. Following McCall's (2010) line of thought, Meyers et al. (2013) argue that talent management should focus on experience based learning in development programs. The effects of experiential learning are said to be greater when the experience is challenging enough, when it is provided in the beginning of an employee's career, and when an employee faces adverse conditions (McCall 2010). Other experiences that are particularly beneficial to successful managers' development are short-term assignments, either very good or very bad supervisors, and major line assignments. McCall (2010) argues that improving opportunities for experienced-based learning is efficient and inexpensive, as it does not require deployment or investment from the organization. However, the top executives should be committed to sponsoring these sort of learning experiences, and it requires some consideration to know what kind of assignments and situations are proper, valuable, and to understand what lessons they can teach to whom. (Meyers et al. 2013)

3.2 Learning at work

What is known about learning at work? According to Tynjälä (2008, 132) workplace learning can be characterized with the following statements: 1) The nature of workplace learning is at the same time both different from and similar to school learning, 2) Learning in the workplace can be described on different levels. 3) Workplace learning is both informal and formal and 4) workplaces differ widely as to how they support learning.

Resnick (1987) has analyzed the differences between school and workplace learning and argued that learning in school is based mostly on individual activities, whereas learning activities outside school are mostly socially shared. Activities in workplaces commonly require collaboration and the performance of each individual is to some degree dependent on the performance of others in an organization. Tool use (mental and physical) is also more common in workplaces, whereas in schools many activities are only based on a narrow set of cognitive abilities, such as memory. Learning at work is also characterized by contextualized reasoning and contextual knowledge, instead of symbol manipulations such as in algebra. Lastly, learning at work aims commonly at developing situation specific- or contextual competencies instead of general skills and knowledge. The differences are summarized below in Table 4.

Workplace learning can be concluded to be mostly informal, implicit, unplanned, highly contextual, and collaborative. The learning outcomes are unpredictable. Organized on-the-job training and school learning is often formal, planned, and mostly explicit, focused on individual learning with predictable outcomes (Hager 1998). These different attributes can be seen simultaneously as strengths and weaknesses. Formal education can be said to produce mainly transferrable and widely applicable general skills. However, the skills and competencies that are needed in working life are often highly contextual and learning these type of skills and competencies is only possible in authentic work situations and activities. However, situation-specific learning is also somewhat limiting. What is learned in one situation or context cannot be transferred always to a different context. (Resnick 1987; Hager 1998; Tynjälä 2008).

Table 4. Learning in the workplace, from formal to informal (adapted from Hager 1998; Resnick 1987; Tynjälä 2008, 133)

Learning in formal education	Learning in the workplace
Intentional (+unintentional)	Unintentional (+intentional)
Prescribed by formal curriculum, competency standards, etc.	Usually no formal curriculum or prescribed outcomes
Uncontextualized – characterized by symbol manipulation	Contextual – characterized by contextual reasoning
Focused on mental activities	Focused on tool use + mental activities
Produces explicit knowledge and generalized skills	Produces implicit and tacit knowledge and situation-specific competences
Learning outcomes predictable	Learning outcomes less predictable
Emphasis on teaching and content of teaching	Emphasis on work and experiences based on learner as worker
Individual	Collaborative
Theory and practice traditionally separated	Seamless know-how, practical wisdom
Separation of knowledge and skills	Competences treated holistically, no distinction between knowledge and skills

To summarize, learning in the workplace is mostly unintentional, but as with trainee programs, learning is also the goal of working. Therefore learning per se is intentional in trainee programs. However, planning the work activities which produce most learning is difficult, and the outcomes are hard to predict as the learners make their own interpretations of the learning according to their internal schemata and mindsets (Viitala 2005).

The only way to develop expertise and construct one's competence related to expertise is to gather experiences in authentic work settings (Eteläpelto 1998). Research on individual learning in the workplace have focused on questions such as: What do people learn at work? How do they learn? What conceptions of learning do employees have (Tynjälä 2008)? Even though there are no theories focusing purely on workplace learning, the existing literature provides a range of empirical findings and theories that can also be applied to a workplace context. Work-based learning encompasses elements such as nonformal on-the-job training provided as part of the orientation process, various placements provided as part of higher education degree, or it simply includes the various different informal learning experiences to which employees are exposed throughout their careers. (Cheetham & Chivers 2001, 265)

Even though workplace learning has received attention in with practitioners and the academic press, learning is still mostly associated with formal education and training (Eraut 2004). Researchers have been able to detect different forms of learning processes and different kinds of learning outcomes. (Tynjälä 2008)

3.2.1 Learning outcomes

Eraut (2004) argues that a broader and more flexible approach to outcomes of learning should be taken if we are to consider the wide variety of different types of expertise and the holistic nature of performance at work. Similar to Cheetham and Chiver's (1998) holistic competence model, Eraut has also distinguished knowledge, skills and competences in his interpretation of learning outcomes of work. Based on his research, Eraut (2004) presents the following typology of learning outcomes at work:

1. Task performance
2. Awareness and understanding
3. Personal development
4. Teamwork
5. Role performance
6. Academic knowledge and skills
7. Decision making and problem solving
8. Judgment

Although presented as a typology, it should be viewed as a heuristic device for use in research and consultancy as a reminder of the possible aspects of learning present in different contexts. The model is not intended to be conclusive, but rather a starting point for research and practice. Comparing his findings with competence literature, Eraut (2004) notes that competence is more complicated concept since the input approach of the US and output approach of the Europeans are so different: “individual-centered definition refers to a personal attribute or quality, while elsewhere it has a social-centered definition and refers to meeting social expectations.” (Eraut 2004 264)

Learning has mostly positive outcomes, but negative learning can also occur. This was shown in a study by Tynjälä and Virtanen (2005) in which the response of vocational students was that they had also learned negative things such as bad practices, disadvantages of the field and how to shirk their duties. Therefore, it is worthwhile remembering that learning does not always lead to desirable results but may also strengthen existing negative features of the workplace (Tynjäjä 2008).

3.2.2 Learning mechanisms

On the basis of recent studies on how people learn at work, Tynjälä (2008, 134) summarized that learning occurrs:

1. by doing the job itself
2. through co-operating and interacting with colleagues
3. through working with clients
4. by tackling challenging and new tasks
5. by reflecting on and evaluating one's work experiences
6. through formal education and
7. through extra-work contexts

Tynjälä's (2008) summary has utilized as an example Eraut's (2004, 266-267) findings. Eraut (2004) argues that participation in group activities included teams working towards a common outcome, and groups set up for a special purpose such as an audit, development or review of policy and/or practice, and responding to external changes. Working alongside others allows people to observe and listen to others at work and to participate in activities, and hence to learn some new practices and new perspectives, to become aware of different kinds of knowledge and expertise, and to gain some sense of other people's tacit knowledge. Tackling challenging tasks requires on-the-job learning and, if well supported and successful, leads to increased motivation and confidence. Working with clients includes learning about the client, from any new aspects of each client's requests or problems and from any new ideas that arose from their joint consultation.

Cheetham and Chivers (2001) found 12 general types of learning mechanisms in their research when they studied how professionals learn in practice in the workplace. They focused especially on informal- and experiential learning. The full typology is presented in appendix 2. Each learning mechanism encompasses a series of learning events or experiences.

As mentioned above, collaboration and teamwork is one way of enhancing learning. Working in group in one way or another is a factor which seems to promote sharing of expertise and knowledge exchange, and thus to enhance individuals' learning in organizations (Eraut 2004b; Heikkilä 2006). Marsick and Watkins (1990) presented double loop learning of groups, meaning a learning process where groups reflect not only on their actions but also to the assumptions and goals on which they base their actions. The ability to learn in collaboration with others both within and outside one's organization often makes the difference between success and failure. Those individuals who cannot network with others to share and construct knowledge will fall short of their peers who have these type of abilities (Slotte & Tynjälä 2003). (Tynjälä 2008, 135)

Interaction between novices and experts is critical in workplace learning. Billet (2004) has distinguished between close or direct guidance and indirect guidance. The former is suitable for knowledge that would be difficult to learn without the support of a more experienced and knowledgeable person. Learning processes or concepts that are more tacit in nature require closer interaction with more experienced colleagues who can make these practices or concepts more visible and accessible. Indirect guidance is more related to how tasks are undertaken and completed. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991) describes how newcomers are socialized into the practices of a social community, such as a workplace. In the beginning novices work in peripheral, less critical, areas of practice, and gain more responsibility as their competence develops. Working and interacting with and under the guidance of more experienced and competent workers, observing how they do the job, and participating in the communities of practice, is crucial for the learning process. This model describes the learning processes at work mainly as an activity where the seniors or more competent employees have a role of a teacher, facilitator, or coach. (Tynjälä 2008, 135)

The majority of research cited in the previous chapter deals with informal workplace learning and learning outcomes that come about incidentally, as a side effect of work (Marsick & Watkings 1990). Recently, an increasing amount of attention has also been paid to the ways in which learning can be intentionally promoted in the workplace. Poell (2006) and Poell, Van der Krogt and Warmerdam (1998) proposed a model of learning projects through which employees learn by solving work-related problems. A learning project is organized by a group of employees who participate in a set of activities focused on a work-related problem with a specific purpose to learn and to improve their working at the same time. These activities inside a learning project include different kinds of learning situations: both on-the-job and off-the-job, facilitator-directed and self-organized, reflection-based and action-based, individual-oriented and group-focused, externally and internally inspired, and pre-structured and open ended. (Tynjälä 2008)

To sum up, individual and group learning at the workplace can be described as a highly social activity which 1) requires interaction and dialogue 2) requires the kinds of challenges that make learning necessary, and 3) involves reflection on past experiences and the planning of future activities. (Tynjälä 2008)

3.3 Factors affecting learning in the workplace

Workplaces differ in many ways, but also how they support learning and to what extent they provide learning opportunities for their employees. As learners, employees are also different: they come from different backgrounds (educational, work experience, social, etc.), are from different age groups, and have unique motivational drivers and learning styles. Thus workplace learning is always an interplay between the learner and the workplace. (Tynjälä 2008)

Presuming that workplaces and workers are different, can generally applicable learning enhancing factors be found? Exhaustive conclusions have not been reached, but some level of consensus over some widely applicable general factors has been identified (Eraut 2004). However, the relative significance of these factors and the way in which they interact will differ greatly from one context to another. Eraut's (2004) model of factors affecting informal learning in the workplace (Figure 8) consists of two triangles, depicting learning factors and the context factors. The left apex of each triangle represents the work itself, the lowest apex the individual worker and the right apex relationships at work.

Tynjälä (2008) follows Eraut's (2004) findings in the sense that learning comes from a reciprocal interaction between the individual and the workplace. The quality of interaction determines learning but how the work is organized sets the context and conditions for the learning to happen in the first place. Billet (2004) argues that the disposition of an individuals' participation in workplace learning depends both on the degree to which workplaces provide opportunities for such participation and on the extent to which individuals choose to seize those opportunities. Thus, even if possibilities for learning are created by the workplace, it is the individual's responsibility to participate, interact and take advantage of those opportunities. Knowledge is co-constructed through social practices and interaction within organizations.

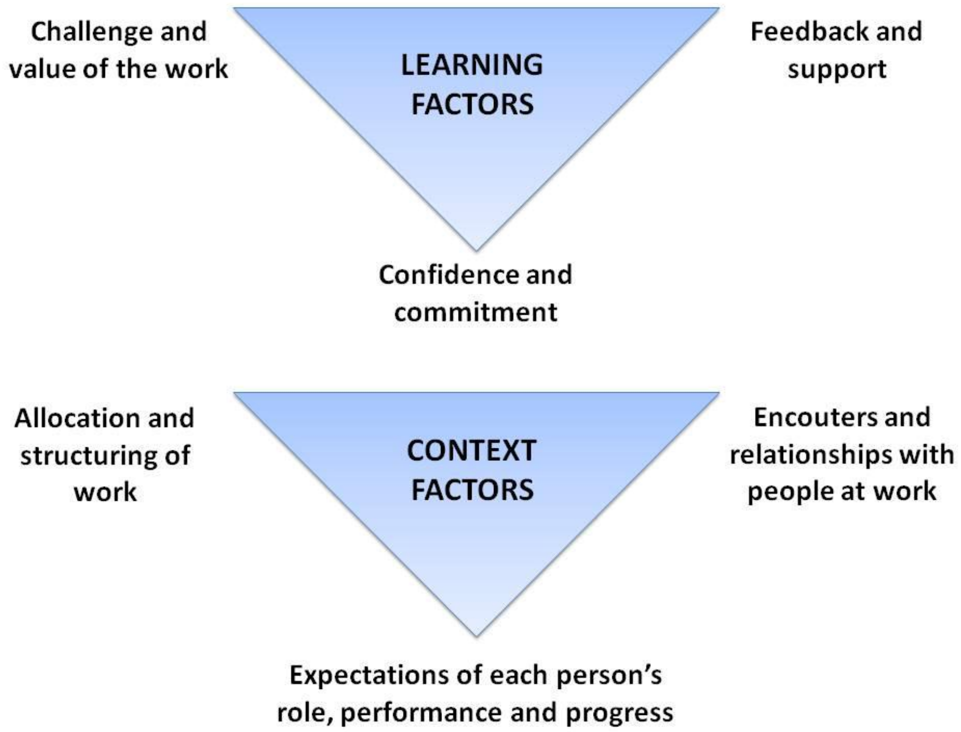

Figure 8. Factors affecting learning in the workplace (adapted from Eraut 2004, 269)

Learning factors

Employee confidence was found to be very important to learning, as much learning comes from concretely doing things and being proactive in searching for learning opportunities. Confidence is also boosted by successfully overcoming challenges in one's work. However, confidence to take on challenges also depends on how the learners feel supported by the organization (supervisors, colleagues, clients) to take on challenges. Therefore, there is a triangular relationship between confidence, challenge and support. If there is no challenge or sufficient support at work, confidence and motivation declines. Commitment was seen as a complementary factor to confidence, because commitment affects how keen learners are in taking advantage of the learning activities available to them. The target of commitment varied from colleagues, clients, work group or organizations and these important factors should not be taken for granted. Commitment is created through social inclusion in work teams and also by value of the work for workers themselves and for the clients. The value of the work was seen as an additional motivational factor. Finally, feedback was seen more than just one form of support, and feedback is often given by people who do not necessarily have any support role. (Eraut et al. 2000; Eraut 2004)

Context factors

The second triangle mirrors the first one but focuses on broader contextual factors. Allocation and structuring of work plays a key role, since it affects the difficulty or challenge of the work, and opportunities for meeting, observing and working alongside people who have more or different expertise, and for forming relationships that might provide feedback, support or advice. For early-career professionals especially, the majority of their works should be sufficiently new to provide enough challenge but at the same time not be too daunting so that it endangers their confidence. Learners' workload should not be too high, so that they do not succumb to it, preventing them from reflectively responding to new challenges. Expectations of performance were often poorly communicated and found to be precariously weak in some organizations. Constructive feedback on performance was also found to be poor in the majority of cases studied. Summarizing as regards both early-career and mid-career workers, Eraut (2004, 270) argues that learning at work is either facilitated or constrained by the organization, the allocation of work, relationships, and the social climate of the workplace. In addition, the informal role of the manager is more important than their formal role, when considering their role in facilitating learning. The managers' personalities, interpersonal skills and learning orientation had a considerable impact on employees learning at work. (Eraut, 2004)

Sambrook (2006) has identified that work-related learning is affected by organizational factors, functional factors, and individual factors. Organizational factors include organizational culture, organization of work, top management support, and pressure at work. Functional factors refer to the size of the organization, expertise, amount of information, need for learning and incorporating learning into strategy. Individual factors include employee confidence, skills, motivation to learn, and employees and managers responsibility for learning.

Fuller and Unwin (2004) presented a typology of expansive-restrictive work communities. This typology presents how work communities can either foster or hinder its members learning. To create expansive learning environments, three types of learning opportunities were found to be beneficial:

- The opportunity to engage in diverse communities of practice in- and outside the workplace,
- The organization of jobs so as to provide employees with opportunities to co-construct their knowledge and expertise, and
- The opportunity to deal with theoretical knowledge in off-the-job courses (Fuller & Unwin, 2004)

Understanding the factors affecting learning is especially important in this research, as the trainee program is deliberately designed to enhance learning. Trainees, or early-career professionals, are also especially sensitive and usually need more attention and support than seniors. Designing learning activities is also important so that the full learning potential of individuals is harnessed.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research process and methodology of this thesis. Questions as to why certain methodological choices were made and how this research was conducted are answered and elaborated.

4.1 Research process and methodology

The research process started in January 2013 when the author joined the case company's HR function and started to assist in coordination of the trainee program, among other tasks. The management trainee program proved to be a fruitful target for research as it had not been studied before and the planning of a new round of the program was underway. It was felt that research could help in developing the program. Gathering data for the study would be easily organized because the majority of the graduate trainees still worked for the company. Research was approved by the case company, but it should be noted that the company had no influence on the research process or forming of the research questions. All the work was done in the author's spare time, excluding the interviews which were conducted mainly during working hours and in the office premises.

The research process began by independently studying the applicable literature and by having informal conversations within the company HR managers about the subject and scope of the research. Background information was gathered by informal and unrecorded interviews and a review of miscellaneous internal material regarding the trainee program and its history. Trainee interviews began on August 2013 and lasted till April 2014. The theoretical framework was adjusted and focused during and after the interviews.

The research objective of this thesis supported the selection of qualitative research methods. Qualitative research aims at finding or revealing facts and solving mysteries rather than proving existing claims (Alasuutari 2011). Qualitative research sees real life as inherently complex, intertwined and something that cannot be sliced arbitrarily into independent parts. Events in real life mold and affect each other continuously forming complex relationships. Thus, qualitative research aims to depict the research objective as holistically as possible. The underlying values or contexts cannot be excluded from the research completely, as they affects the understanding and construction of the studied phenomenon. The environment and interpretations of the interviewees have to be taken into consideration. Qualitative research typically operates by analyzing single cases, such as interviews or real life events as it is the case also in this study. Qualitative research analyzes the single cases either from the perspective of participating individuals or by the meanings given to the cases by the individuals. The research progresses inductively and qualitative research favors naturally occurring empirical evidence instead of evidence which is produced by the researcher. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2007).

Gathering material holistically from real situations is common to qualitative research. Humans are preferred as the instrument of data gathering, in contrast to making precise measurements. The researcher trusts his/her own observations and the discussions with the objects of the research. (Koskinen, Alasuutari & Peltonen 2005).

Yin (2003) has described a case study as an empirical enquiry investigating a modern phenomenon in a real life context. Gathering in-depth information from a deliberately chosen single or multiple case(s) is also typical with case studies. The case can be an organization or its part, such as a department or function (Koskinen et al. 2005). An internal process or structural feature within a company can also be a case. The goal of a typical case study is to describe deliberately chosen phenomena with as much detail as possible. A case study is appropriate when the subject of the research needs to be understood in depth while also taking the context such as the background and surrounding circumstances into account. (ibid 130-131; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006)

Because the purpose of this thesis is to study learning and competence development in a defined context within one company, it is justifiable to select a case study as the method of qualitative research.

4.2 Collecting the data

Thematic interviews were chosen as the main method of data collection because this allowed the interviewees to speak freely about their experiences, express feelings, and tell stories which the interviewees perceived as important or relevant from their point of view. The purpose was to build an understanding of how the trainees themselves experienced the program.

In total 10 interviews were conducted and duration varied from 45 to 90 minutes. A list of themes and questions (appendix 3) was prepared and sent to the interviewees by email before the interview. The themes and questions were discussed rather freely and not always in the given order. The interviews started with broad questions and then progressed towards more precise ones such as “please could you tell more about that particular incident, how did it make you feel, what were your interpretations, what do you think”, etc. Usually the discussion flowed from one question to another without having the need to ask the theme questions themselves. The amount of time between the questions varied from one interviewee to another, but this was not seen as an issue since this enabled the interviewees to focus on the issues they felt important. The two last interviews were held without prior knowledge of the questions to test if this would affect the answers, although the general topic of the research was revealed. This had no effect on the quality or depth of answers. The interviews were conducted in the office premises in quiet meeting rooms to ensure privacy. The interviews were recorded, listened to several times by the researcher and the relevant parts transcribed verbatim.

Some interviewees also made personal notes, learning summaries, and improvement ideas during the program which were in the form of documents and PowerPoint presentations. These notes were also used to support the data gathered in interviews, where the researcher received permission to read and utilize these notes. Notes and learning summaries made by the interviewees for the organization during and after the trainee programs were also utilized.

Early in the research process, it became clear that gathering the data through interviews would not be straightforward. Finding out exactly which competencies developed or how learning took place would be challenging. When interviews were commenced, interviewees expressed some level of anxiousness or frustration when asked to describe what elements of competence they think developed.

> *”the deeper into the depths of mind concrete things [of what was learned] go, the harder it is to bring them back to the consciousness: like what they were…”*

> *“It is hard [to recognize competence development], and really I can’t say or pinpoint how much I really learned these kind of softer and fuzzier things because of the trainee program”*

The problem with informal learning is that it is largely invisible and therefore it is not recognized as learning or the learning is taken for granted (Eraut 2004, 249). Thus the interviewees did not always necessarily know what counts as learning and what they had actually learned. A great deal of learned knowledge was either tacit or seen as belonging to the individual’s general capability, rather than something that was learned. The questioning was adjusted if needed and interviewees were asked to describe some memorable incidents or best experiences from the program. Remembering and reflecting on incidents, experiences and feelings was easier, though it made the interpretation and analysis of the results harder for the researcher.

4.3 Analysis of the data

The main methods of analysis have been theory-based content analysis, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis.

Preliminary data analysis was done after each interview by listening to the recordings and making rough level 1 transcriptions (Koskinen et al. 2005). The purpose was to gain a general understanding of the interview, its content, and to find the essential sections which would be transcribed and analyzed later in more detail. When the last interview was done and similarly transcribed at level 1, all of the transcriptions were reviewed and sorted into themes mirroring the research questions. The interview recordings were then listened to again as a whole to supplement the existing level 1 transcriptions and make adjustments to the sections selected for deeper analysis. Finally, a rudimentary physical structure of the whole research material was formed.

The following examination was conducted as theory-based content analysis (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006). The selected sections of the interviews were listened to once again and transcribed verbatim. This data was then sorted more precisely to match the selected theoretical models, such as the core components of professional competence (Cheetham & Chivers 1996; 1998) and the different learning mechanisms at work by Eraut (2004).

Narrative analysis was selected as a supplementing analysis method, because the interviewees commonly expressed their experiences in a narrative form. After the preliminary analysis and level 1 transcription, it became clear that certain common narratives could be found from the data. The trainees shared many similar experiences and had similar expectations regarding the program. Hence, three different narratives aiming at depicting the differences between the interviewees were created. The characters behind the narratives are purely fictional and thus cannot be linked to any particular individual. In fact, all the interviewees expressed characteristics from the three trainee archetype characters. The trainees' backgrounds were rather similar – university degree education, a young age and limited work experience but high enthusiasm and motivation to learn. They came from different social and cultural backgrounds, but considering the goal of this research, the cultural and social background was excluded from this investigation.

4.4 Reliability, validity, and objectivity

Evaluation of the reliability, validity, and objectivity are standard steps in every research process. However, the concepts in their purest form fit rather poorly with the tradition of qualitative research (Koskinen et al. 2005). True objectivity is difficult to achieve in qualitative research, because the researcher who knows about the phenomenon, and what is known, are seamlessly intertwined (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 157). Qualitative research also typically produces results that are conditional descriptions restricted to a certain time and place. Thus caution should be taken before making broad generalizations of the results of any qualitative research. (Koskinen et al. 2005).

Evaluation of the reliability of qualitative research is often done by evaluating the reliability of the whole research process (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 210) and making the process transparent and easy to follow by the reader, so that in theory the research process can be repeated with the same variables. Seale (1999) argued that instead of evaluating reliability and validity, it might be more accurate to evaluate the overall quality of the qualitative research. To improve the overall quality of this research, the research process and context was described as accurately as possible in the previous sections. The purpose is to describe the decisions, the process and context as well as possible, so that similar research could be redone with the same specifications, producing similar results.

Regarding objectivity, the researcher's role as a member of the organization and also external researcher should be reviewed, as the researcher was also working for the case company while conducting the research. This has clear benefits as well as some risks. The benefit was that making the initial contact with the interviewees was somewhat easier, the discussion flowed more freely and the atmosphere was perhaps more relaxed than if the researcher would have been an outsider.

Some topics related to organizational structure and culture were omitted as the researcher was also familiar with the basics of the program and the organization. The interviewees could also answer in more detail and focus on the essentials. The obvious risk here was that the interviewees would not consider the researcher as truly objective. To counter this challenge, objectivity was deliberately discussed and emphasized in the beginning of every interview. It was explained that although the researcher was working for the company, the company had no influence on the research process, topic or its goals. Even though the researcher helped in the coordination of the latest round of the program during the research process, the majority of the interviewees (7 out of 9) had already graduated from the program when the interviews were conducted and thus the researcher’s position could be considered neutral from this standpoint. Overall, the researcher was left with a feeling that the interviewees were honest and did not try to hide anything or not say something because the researcher was also working for the company. There was a fair balance of criticism but also positive comments. As anonymity was guaranteed, the interviewees had the possibility to express how they really felt. The interviewees in general did not seem to be anxious in the interview situations, but actually they were rather confident.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Case description

The Lindström Group is a Finnish multinational Business to Business textile services provider. Established in 1848, it is one of the oldest privately held companies in Finland. Today, Lindström operates in 24 countries in Europe and Asia and it has over 3000 employees globally. Lindström offers comprehensive and tailored work wear solutions for organizations of all sizes both in the service industry and exacting industrial environments. In addition to work wear services, Lindström's service line includes mat, personal protective equipment, hygiene, restaurant textiles and shop towel services. Lindström's operations are guided by its values: profitable growth, long-term customer relationships and sustainability as well as enthusiasm and a joy of learning. The group turnover in 2014 was €313 million. (Lindström 2015)

Lindström launched its first International Management Trainee Program in 2009 and six rounds have been organized before the research was conducted. Trainee programs have been offered in Finland, China, Russia and India. To date, twelve individuals have participated and also graduated from the program. The duration of the program is 12 months, during which the trainees are familiarized with different organizations within the Lindström Group by participating and observing diverse roles from operations, sales, and customer care to head office support functions. This is done in practice by a fast paced job rotation. The trainee program consisted of 4-5 different placements, but this structure varied between rounds and also individual tailoring. The basic structure of the trainee program is elaborated in Figure 9. The placement length varied from 2-5 months. Trainees' performance was regularly followed and each trainee has a named mentor to provide help and support in challenging situations. The purpose of the program according to Lindström was to "*prepare the next generation of internationally and future-oriented key players*". (Lindström 2014)

Figure 9. Basic structure of the Lindström Management Trainee Program

To really understand the purpose and goals of the program, the head of HR and the CEO of the Lindström Group were interviewed for this study. According to the CEO of Lindström, Juha Laurio, the program plays an important role in Lindström's strategy of fast paced international growth. Strengthening the talent pool of future leaders is an important aspect of the program. Why the trainee program is seen as important for Lindström's growth was described by Laurio (2014) in the following manner:

> *"[The trainee program] is something that contributes to our aspiration of being a continuously growing company. As we continue our growth, we want to have those specific persons who can fill the demanding positions."*

> *"Many of those who have succeeded in our organizations have been in various different positions and the growth and development has in fact happened within the company"*

> *"They would already know our culture, our way or working, and the specific business logic and -concept of our services. [Finding those people] should not be taken for granted; since we are quite often the pioneers when we enter new markets."*

The goal of the program is to provide 360-degree view of the firm. The program is designed to promote cross functional experiences, which are highly valued experiences also from a management point of view. Laurio (2014) heavily emphasized that *“having the cap in your head”* and *“breathing the same air”,* meaning personally experiencing and in fact personally doing the job itself is the only way to learn the work and understand the work. To incorporate cross functional experience, the program was built on the principles of job rotation.

The trainees were not directly assigned a task, but rather came to the organization as an observer with the possibility to do some tasks or duties within that organization. This was seen as positive in the sense that it enabled the trainees to form a more holistic view of different organizations and functions.

The trainee program was also deliberately planned so that it would enhance exposure to a wide range of people with different type of expertise, experience, and responsibilities, and to maximize the learning of tacit knowledge by enabling knowledge sharing from seniors to juniors. The following quote from one interviewed trainee elaborates this aspect of the program:

> *“We had the chance to see so many real cases and situations while doing joint visits, being in the laundry, doing the regular work”.* (Trainee)

5.2 Trainees’ expectations as narratives

Alex the ambitious

Alex is a recent university graduate with the drive and passion to succeed. He aims to obtain a leadership position and knows that it can only be achieved through hard work and not settling for average performance or mediocre quality. He lives to go the extra mile.

"So that is surpassing the expectations and I try always to do that, achieve what you are supposed to and while you are at it, try to go the extra mile."

Alex's strength lies in his perseverance and his proactive as well as enthusiastic character. Trainee programs are first and foremost learning experiences and possibilities to gather as much experiences as possible. Alex is determined to get the most out of it by being active himself.

"And that is my strength, I take up things voluntarily. I am enthusiastic, inquisitive, I take initiative, and that has really helped."

He expects the program to be tough and challenging, but rewarding in terms of learning and competence development.

Christina the curious

Christina applied for the program because she did not know what she wanted to do after graduation. She wanted to see what kind of possibilities exists and to test in practice what type of job or function might especially interest her.

"[The program] was a good option in the sense that I did not have a clear idea of what I wanted to do after graduation."

"Internationality was a clear motivational factor."

The size of the company and international placements were an important motivational factor for her. She is aiming towards an international career, and trainee programs are also a good starting point for gaining that sort of experience. Moreover, in a company of this size, there are certain to be interesting career options to choose from. Finally, what made her apply in addition to the internationality and size of the company, were good recommendations from friends who had participated in similar trainee programs

Peter the pragmatic

Peter had already graduated and he was looking for new challenges to get ahead in his career. Peter thinks that this program was an investment for his employability even if he would not stay with the company after the program.

> *”I felt that this could be beneficial in the long run […] I think that these trainee programs do look good to other employers as well.”*

Regarding expectations about the tasks and duties in the program, he expected to see different functions and jobs within the company and to *“really understand the big picture: what does the company do.”*

Then after the trainee year, he would have the chance to pick and chose something that he would be interested in within the boundaries of what would be available for him. However, it is necessary to gather experiences first and start from the bottom.

> *“First you would have to learn the ropes of the company and then after one year you would get to do the ‘actual work’.”*

5.3 Learning outcomes and competence development

Learning outcomes in this research are categorized utilizing Cheetham & Chiver’s model of holistic professional competence (1996; 1998) and its core components: knowledge/cognitive-, functional-, personal/behavioral-, values/ethical- and meta-competences. This model is complemented by Eraut’s (2004) typology of learning outcomes in the workplace, presented in chapter 3.2.

The goal of the program was to provide learning in all competence categories, but the emphasis was on learning basic professional skills gaining awareness and understanding of the organization, its culture and people. In other words, the purpose was to provide foundations for future learning after the trainee period.

5.3.1 Knowledge/cognitive competence

Knowledge/cognitive competence refers to possessing appropriate work-related knowledge and the ability to put this to effective use (Cheetham & Chivers 1998). The learning outcomes in this category were perhaps the easiest to recognize by the interviewees. The trainees were supposed to learn the basics of many different jobs and tasks of the organization during the trainee period. Based on the results, learning in this category was shallow but broad. This means that the trainees acquired a basic understanding of a great number of tasks, but did not have time to gain profound understanding, not to mention expertise in any. Production related- and some clerical tasks were perhaps the exception, as some of them were rather straightforward to learn.

The most significant learning outcome was gaining a holistic understanding of the organization. This learning outcome was mentioned by all interviewees. Deeper knowledge of some key process areas, such as customer relationship management was acquired and mentioned by the majority of the interviewees.

> *"In general it was beneficial to see the big picture, to really understand what different people do, what their jobs contain and how the processes work."* (Christina)

> *"Knowledge related to Lindström's customer relationship management, and of course all Lindström related facts such as when it was founded etc..."* (Peter)

Additionally, a great number of technical skills and procedural knowledge was learned – skills how to operate different systems and tools – which were prerequisites for many jobs. As Bergenhenegouwen (1997) has argued, these types of know-how and skills related to work can be learned through training rather easily. Learning was evident in this category and also clear to articulate and recognize. This category overlaps with functional competence. The results here seem to correspond with the typical workplace learning characteristics, that learning is not just a mental process but a combination of using a variety tools and thinking at the same time (Resnick 1987). Theory and practice are combined into practical wisdom, just as knowledge and skills are also molded together. This can be compared to Schön’s (1983) knowing-in-action.

> *“Certainly this knowledge kind of competence grew a lot, for example knowledge regarding how to use the CRM-system. We did not have that before, but that was learned during the year.”* (Peter)

Deepening understanding of distinct parts of the business processes can be translated into learning tacit-practical knowledge, which is knowledge linked to or embedded within specific functional or personal competences (Cheetham & Chivers 1996). This learning came from interaction with colleagues. Aggregated learning from different tasks led to better overall process understanding also in very practical matter, such as better understanding of how business processes flow from one function to another. The trainee program taught something extra to the trainees in this sense compared to regular employees. This type of contextual knowledge is unique to the organization (Cheetham & Chivers 1996), but it was regarded as very valuable by the interviewees.

> *“That placement [production] was pretty good. I noticed afterwards that I knew things about the process which the customer care people really did not. […] That was eye-opening.”* (Peter)

> *”Those moments when you are sitting next to someone and you really in practice see how the work is done, but then you – more than others who have been just doing their own work – can connect the dots for the whole process. Those are the ’Aha!’ moments, like now I understand why it was so important that the previous guy did this in the certain way, because of how it affects the rest of the chain.”* (Christina)

The interviewees also gained understanding of how complex decision making processes work. This can be regarded as procedural (understanding certain routines) and also contextual knowledge of this particular organization. This category also overlaps with the personal competence category of intra-professional competence (Cheetham & Chivers 1996), which relates interaction with other professionals and understanding certain professional norms, such as decision making in this context.

> *"During the trainee year you got the picture of how the decision making processes go, like what's the right channel and who makes the final decision and how to get there."* (Christina)

Building up a professional network and getting to know people from different parts of the organization was a clear learning outcome, which the interviewees saw as beneficial. These networks would also be useful after the trainee program. Networking competence and interpersonal skills are addressed more thoroughly in the following chapters. This finding however highlights the social aspects of learning.

> *"Networking has been really beneficial because I got to know people; it helps you no matter what your job is then after [the trainee period]."* (Christina)

Understanding the differences between units was another learning outcome, which came only through personally experiencing the differences while working in different units and countries. Even though Lindström's operations are highly conceptualized, there is a great variation in operations depending on the context of the particular unit or subsidiary. Experiencing the discrepancies between what is taught in formal trainings compared to how it is actually translated into action in the field was educational, as was seeing how the work could be done in many different ways.

> *“Perhaps the most tangible thing was seeing how subsidiaries do things, to learn the difference how things are done in subsidiaries compared to Finland.”* (Christina)

> *”First you heard those eloquent phrases during the orientation on how it should work, but then got a bit different interpretation of the same situation from a sales rep or someone else who was doing that work in practice. That was very educational.”* (Peter)

5.3.2 Functional competence

Functional competence is the ability to perform a range of work-based tasks effectively to produce specific outcomes (Cheetham & Chivers 1998). Performing professional jobs requires cognitive as well as functional competences; tasks must be understood before they can be executed. The importance of functional competence was especially evident in placements focused on the customer interface. Some of the trainees had studied B2B sales for example in school and now due to the program, they had the chance to turn that theoretical knowledge into practical, functional knowledge. Tynjälä (2008) calls this extra-occupational transfer.

> *“We observed what the job was like and how they [sales- and customer representatives] handled the clients… and you might have done some of their office tasks yourself as well for them, like reports and stuff.”* (Peter)

> *“A lot was learned about working in the customer interface; what it really means in practice that we are in B2B-business, and really what B2B actually is in practice […] Like these are exactly the things you read about and studied in school, but it’s different to really see how it manifests in practice and what it is, at least in this particular company.”* (Alex)

In addition to assistant type of duties, some trainees also had the chance to do actual tasks which required collaboration with the customers. Some cases were small, but one trainee had an example of organizing a larger event for a client and being responsible for coordinating the work of others as well. This was seen as a beneficial as it included being accountable for the results and what was delivered to the customer. Development assignments were another significant contributor to learning functional competence. Even though many trainees felt that the learning assignments were useful, there were also those who felt that their management competencies did not develop as a result of the program.

> *"I can't say that my project management or organizing skills would have developed that much… the projects we did here were small-scale in the end and I have done bigger projects before."* (Alex)

5.3.3 Personal/behavioral + values/ethical competence

Personal/behavioral competence refers to the ability to adopt appropriate, observable behaviors in work-related situations, and values/ethical competence refers to the possession of appropriate personal and professional values and the ability to make sound judgments based upon these in work-related situations (Cheetham & Chivers 1998). To simplify the analysis, these categories have been combined in this chapter.

According to the results, at least self-confidence and confidence in communication and interpersonal skills were positively affected due to the program. Intercultural communication and intercultural understanding were especially mentioned as being developed. Because the trainees had to communicate with a considerable number of people, the interviewees gained the courage to ask and utilize their connections when they needed help.

> *"It lowers the threshold to pick up the phone and make the call. And in general, you know who to ask and who might know something."* (Christina)

> *"Social skills for sure, but I don't know if it is like especially because of this program, but it requires that […] you are active yourself and ask 'what can I do? Can I help you with something? Who should I ask about this?' It requires that I have to approach [other people] all the time."* (Peter)

Selling in person was something that the trainees observed rather than did themselves. The same was true of working with existing clients or account management. It seems that working in the customer interface at least enhanced the trainees understanding about the process. Selling relies on and requires a great number of personal/behavioral competences: e.g. listening to customers, understanding their needs and formulating the right type of sales pitch requires interpersonal skills, such as empathy, control of emotions, persistence, and conformity to the norms of professional behavior. The trainees spent considerable time observing senior sales reps /sales managers and account reps working with clients. Seeing also how different people operate and how the work can be done in many different ways was mentioned as educational and interesting.

> *"you see the situation from the other side, you see good and bad sales reps. That was good, like to see how they interact with clients and so on. I was particularly interested in that side."* (Christina)

These types of learning outcomes were often challenging to articulate and define – one interviewee described it as abstract competence development. Placements away from the trainees' home country developed a wide array of competence categories. The learning outcomes mentioned were e.g. intercultural communication skills, confidence in intercultural communication, cultural understanding and professional behavioral in intercultural context.

> *"I think during the period abroad, one's competence grew in a bit more abstract way… like when you are working abroad and you have to live your life there, and how to get along with the natives and understand their mentality… we always had very good conversation [with local colleagues] over lunch, you always learned something new."* (Christina)

> *"I would say communication in general [has improved]. We all have our backgrounds form our own home countries, but the experience if you study abroad or if you communicate with foreigners a lot, or if you work in another country, your mindset changes and you understand different people better. You see that the core values are the same, even though behavior can be a bit different. You learn to communicate better."* (Christina)

Partly overlapping with knowledge/cognitive competence, one of the major learning outcomes was also understanding how social relationships are built in a large multinational and how to act professionally in various professional situations such as meetings. This was basic professional knowledge combined with professional behavior. More specifically regarding professional behavior, the trainees mentioned learning about professional etiquette – how to behave and act with (top) management and in steering groups for example. What kind of information should be presented in these meetings and how to prepare for these in advance.

> *"Perhaps I learned how social relationships are built in a big firm. How do people act and behave, how is the meeting culture, how do you hold meetings in general etc."* (Alex)

> *"You noticed at some point that, hey I really need to think this through! Explain and justify my views properly to these people [directors & top management], more than to others perhaps."* (Alex)

One interesting finding was that the program increased some trainees' competence on how to organize induction and training for newcomers.

> *"I learned a lot about how to join organization as a new member – because we had to do it regularly – I learned how I would want to be received, and knowledge about induction processes, what it should include and how I would organize it."* (Peter)

One interviewee described that the program increased the person's maturity. In addition to learning tacit knowledge about the work itself this person mentioned learning how to behave professionally and what kind of values should professionals have. This type of learning was harder to pinpoint, but extremely important according to this interviewee.

> *"Your maturity level rises […] I got a chance to learn a lot…. you get to meet people who have been in the business or in the corporation for so long […] you meet people who are very sophisticated and who know their business […] it teaches that you cannot see results in a day. It teaches patience, strategy, lots of different things."* (Alex)

5.4.4 Meta-competencies/trans-competencies

Meta-competencies either support in developing other competencies (e.g. self-development) or are capable of enhancing competence in any or all of the component categories (e.g. creativity). The same meta-competencies seem likely to be applicable to all or most professions since, by their nature, they are fundamental and transferable between contexts and tasks. (Cheetham & Chivers 1996)

Learning outcomes in this competence category were the hardest to clearly distinguish. Nonetheless, some common competence constituents were found, such as communication competence and what several trainees called networking competence.

> *"Perhaps my networking competence improved in the sense that first of all you learned who to contact in different situations, and you also got used to approach people just to ask things, even if you would not know them so well."* (Alex)

Forming networks with colleagues from different parts of the organization and networking capabilities in general was clearly a competence which developed during the program. This was also seen as important and it was mentioned in all the interviews. Creativity and problem solving was also mentioned a few times, but it was not emphasized in any interview. One interviewee mentioned that perhaps when working with customers, you had to have a certain level of creativity and problem solving skills when trying to extract information from the client so that you could envision the type of needs this customer really has and how to best serve the customer with the company's services.

5.4.5 Critical observations regarding competence development

Despite many positive experiences, the critical side of Alex felt that there was also room for improvement in the program. Learning outcomes were not as tangible or clear to him as he had hoped when he applied for the program. He claimed that he did not actually recognize that any particular area of his competence would have developed during the program. His expectations were high and he was looking for something more than just understanding the overall picture.

> *"I feel that I just practically networked and understood what different people do in different organizations, what Lindström does, what are the services and products that we have. More of the general aspects […] but I don't recognize that in any particular category of competence would have developed [during the trainee period]."* (Alex)

Alex's example also points out how difficult it can be to determine what the right level of challenge is. Even though the majority of interviewees were very satisfied with the individual development assignments, he felt that the level of challenge was simply not high enough for him personally. He concluded that when he obtained his first, real, projects after the trainee program, he experienced that he now felt that his competence development had really started. This highlights the importance of planning and tailoring the development assignments in advance to suit different individuals.

> *”I feel that my competence development really started when I got my first real projects after the trainee period. This being said, perhaps it tells something about the trainee program itself. […] When you got those own projects which you had to take forward, then I could feel and see how my competence development really took off.”* (Alex)

5.4 Learning mechanisms during the trainee period

This chapter presents the main learning mechanisms discovered during the research. These included learning by doing in combination with tackling challenging and new tasks, learning through co-operation and interacting with colleagues, and learning by reflecting on and evaluating one’s work experiences.

5.4.1 Learning by doing + tackling challenging and new tasks

It became clear early on during the research process, that learning by doing, and especially learning by tackling challenging and new tasks was an important method of learning for the trainees. It was seen as effective, but also rewarding and enjoyable. As has been pointed out by researchers such as McCall (2010), Tynjälä (2008) and Eraut (2004), the best learning methods at work typically involve learning by doing sufficiently challenging tasks in practice.

> *“You could say that for me the most rewarding moments regarding learning were those when I was able to do something myself...”* (Peter)

> *"… Like the whole development assignment, for example: organizing it, making a project plan, that ok I have 5 months of time, this is my assignment, search for information, and get it done. Make development suggestions, the whole package."* (Alex)

> *"Those single things that I could do […] where I could really help out, were beneficial and advanced my learning"* (Christina)

Each placement typically included a variety of jobs. Depending on the nature and complexity of the task (production work vs. key account management) the trainees were assigned to either work independently after a brief induction or just shadow or observe seniors while they worked and learn by observing, interacting, and reflecting. Learning through the process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991) was clearly evident as the trainees began the learning by observing from the sidelines, but gradually took more responsibility themselves as their learning and confidence grew. Personal development assignments were mentioned by nearly all the interviewees as memorable and beneficial learning experiences. Not all trainees had them, but those who did categorized them as one of the top experiences of the entire program. They typically lasted for several months and in some cases overlapped placements. Some of these assignments ran parallel to the other jobs that they were supposed to learn – as a sort of a side job within the placement. The goal was to work on practical business related challenges such as market research, development projects in the services of functions, or to organize training events related to these projects. Thus these could be compared with Poell's (2006) learning projects, where solving work-related assignments in a group is used to increase learning as well as completing work assignments at the same time.

> *"It was cool that I felt that I did something that made sense, was reasonable, accountable and then really in practice planned the execution of the project all by myself".* (Peter)

> *"It helped to grow as a lindströmer but also in other ways, because it was so extensive"* (Christina)

What made the development assignment beneficial was their holistic nature – the trainees were responsible of the project from the beginning to the end. The fact that the assignment was not just made up; but that it was a real business challenge was a motivation enhancing factor. Independence was also a positive factor; help and support were given whenever needed but it was still the trainee's own project.

> *"That was one of the few things which was kind of an independent thing during that year. It was really practical and perhaps developed things… I felt that I could really influence something. It was definitely a good thing." (Alex)*

> *"It was really educational in the sense that it was so pragmatic and practical, it had a clear goal, it was long-term and because of it, you had to contact a lot of people from different parts of the company."* (Peter)

What also seemed to increase satisfaction and enhance learning was that these projects were planned in detail. Peter had similar experiences as Alex, but he brought up the social aspects such as having to form networks and reach out to different people within the whole Lindström Group.

> *"Yeah that [development assignment] was very well defined. Well thought."* (Alex)

In addition to the development assignment, Alex hoped that he would have been given more opportunities to actually learn by doing all kinds of jobs even if they would be difficult or challenging to learn in a short period of time – like sales. He felt that he was mostly just a listening student. Learning selling would not have been necessarily easy, but it would have been beneficial as it would have forced him out of his comfort zone. Again the need to have a sufficient level of challenge is mentioned.

> *”What all of us [other trainees] said was that how little time we spent with the sales in the end […] like is selling mats for example: ‘really difficult and complicated stuff’. But could that still have been done during the trainee year, or is it just too hard so that it cannot be done? With a hint of sarcasm here…”* (Alex)

To summarize, learning by doing combined with a sufficient level of challenge was clearly an important method of learning. Factors affecting the challenge were accountability, responsibility, and independence. Other positive factors were the structure and content of the projects and their meaningfulness. Therefore “learning by doing” was often in combination with “tackling challenging and new tasks” (Tynjälä 2008). This form of learning was recognized as very important and the trainees wished for more of such opportunities. However, artificially creating these kinds of learning opportunities takes effort from the organization especially as the placements were short and fast-paced.

5.4.2 Through co-operating and interacting with colleagues

Learning through co-operation and interacting with colleagues provided the broadest learning outcomes and largest amount of learning during the program. The recognized learning mechanisms (Cheetham & Chivers 2001) were observation and copying, perspective changing/switching, mentor/coach interaction, unconscious absorption or osmosis, and collaboration. Interaction between novices and experts has been shown to be an effective method for knowledge sharing and learning (Tynjälä 2008), and in general learning from others has been recognized as an important means of learning in the workplace (e.g. Tynjälä 2008; Billet 2004; Eraut 2004; Cheetham & Chivers 2001). Learning by the trainees occurred through shadowing, observation, listening, talking, and by discussing with other members of the organization.

Informal conversations with colleagues were especially raised in the interviews. Much emphasis was also put on the organization fostering the trainees' communication and interaction with a wide range of people. Working alongside others enabled them to learn how to do the work in practice, but when they also discussed and reflected on the work, they were able to gain new perspectives, learn work-related knowledge and tap into other people's tacit knowledge. Observation, mentor/coach interaction, and unconscious absorption were the most common learning mechanisms. (Cheetham & Chivers 2001).

> *"The most rewarding thing that the trainee year had to offer […] was when people really opened up: like about the things which were good but also about the things which could be improved. Due to those moments my learning grew immensely."* (Christina)

Interaction between novices and experts – trainees and senior employees – was the most typically mentioned method of learning in the interviews. Informal discussions with experienced colleagues was perceived as very important and mentioned by almost every interviewee. These discussions were not limited to certain types of colleagues at a certain level, but occurred all over the organization. The trainees felt that especially learning tacit knowledge was one important outcome of the conversations. The trainees felt appreciated by the fact that they felt welcome and at ease and that they were trusted by colleagues so that seniors had the courage and will to *"open up"* as one interviewee mentioned.

> *"There was no 'fear of authority'. I got to hear their sincere opinions on what's happening and going on".* (Peter)

It is worthwhile to note that the interviewee actually recognized the informal learning aspect, although the person had not been given an explanation of the concept at that stage. The trainees were sort of interviewers themselves, trying to make sense of what other people did and why. Even though it was partly orientation, it was different and perhaps more relaxed than with regular orientation. Ultimately they were just visiting the units. According to Christina, this led to more honest discussions. She pondered that it is important that the job rotation time in placements is not too short; otherwise there is less time for mutual trust to be formed with other members of the organization and the trainees. The more trust there was, the more eager her colleagues were to open up and complain about the negative aspects of their work as well.

Peter had many beneficial, informal conversations with colleagues. He elaborated on this with an example from the period when he was learning about the sales and was working with the sales or account representatives. He felt that the conversations which he had before and after the sales visits, during the car ride, were more beneficial to his learning than the visits themselves. Utilizing Cheetham & Chivers (2001) typology, these findings can be categorized as observation & copying, perspective switching, mentor/coach interaction and also unconscious absorption or osmosis.

> *"Those car commutes with account and sales reps were really nice; they were filled with fruitful conversations. I think, and I have actually said in many occasions that the journeys were more educational than the actual visits."* (Peter)

However, observing the work of seniors was also raised several times and experienced as beneficial. Alex thought it was fascinating to see how sales works in practice. Joint visits gave him real insight into how professionals work. He had one particularly good positive role model which he brought up as a good example. Observing and working alongside positive role models (Cheetham & Chivers 2001) was found to be important for trainees learning in this study as well.

> *"I was with the best […] sales guy in Finland. He was fantastic! […] This guy brought up these really self-evident things [in his sales pitch] but he told it in the right tone of voice, you know..."* (Alex)

> *"Another thing which I learned was that he was a good sales guy, but then again lazy when it came to paperwork. […] and*

he outsourced all the shitty tasks to support team and focused on the essentials." (Alex)

The real purpose of assigning the trainees to shadow more experienced colleagues, especially the sales- and account representatives was to let them see how the work is done in practice. This was perceived rather positively among the interviewees. One interviewee mentioned that it was good to have a practical experience by observing, as the trainee had only formal knowledge regarding the topic of sales and account management. Although they felt that observing was beneficial, they criticized that more could have been learned if they could have done more themselves and not just observed.

"Like we were with the sales in practice, I think I was with four sales reps, to see what it [doing sales] actually meant. How he prepares for that job. What does he do there and how to behave with the customers and so on…" (Peter)

Alex realized that he was assigned to go together with the top performers, and they usually chose dates most suitable for them which meant those days when they knew they were going to close deals. So he pondered that he perhaps saw only the positive aspects of the work. He quite interestingly noted how it would have also been fruitful to see those who struggled or did not perform so well.

"The interesting thing was that the sales manager assigned me with the four best sales reps…" (Alex)

"I knew that we also have those 'shittier' sales reps. It might have been a good idea to assign me with those as well […] and the sales reps themselves picked the dates [for joint visits] so that they knew they were going to close big sales that day […] they were careful and planned it so that they would not look bad". (Alex)

Mentor/coach interaction (Cheetham & Chivers 2001) was also discussed frequently in the interviews. Each trainee was assigned a mentor at the beginning of the program. Alex considered himself lucky as he had an exceptionally good mentor, but he was unlucky with his line managers in some placements who were not that interested in his performance. Christina also liked mentoring, but pointed out that it was more of coaching or other form of support than mentoring per se. The majority of the interviewees claimed that they could have used more feedback regarding their work about day to day performance.

> *"My mentor was a true blessing, really interested in my findings and we had these monthly discussions and they were I think rewarding for both of us, but then again the line managers were not so interested."* (Alex)

> *"Mentoring was a good thing […] but mentoring as a concept is perhaps a bit off here as first of all we did not know what we were going to do after the year, so we could not drill down to aspects of professional development… it was more of reflecting and talking about the observations that we had made on the field. It was good, but really it was not mentoring per se."* (Christina)

The trainees were frequently summoned together to brainstorm and work together on common presentations to the Lindström management trainee program steering group and top management. They had to build up presentations together to sum up their observations and learning outcomes. These experiences were seen as beneficial as well. This corresponds with Cheetham and Chivers' (2001) articulation, reflection and collaboration.

> *"We were [in contact] quit much, like called each other every once in a while and then we also had those organized meetings in the head office where we exchanged thoughts, like what kind of observations we had made and what each of*

> *us had done and so forth […] that was supportive and it was nice and good that there were others at the same time.”* (Peter)

Alex related that he appreciated how he obtained access to very senior and experienced members of the organization due to the trainee program. If he would not be in the program, it would have taken years to have the chance to work in projects where there are members of the top management who oversee your work. It brought access to certain individuals, from whom he felt that he learned a great deal.

> *“You get to learn from their experiences. You learn from the ‘big boys’ directly.”* (Alex)

Being around more senior members of the organization was beneficial as Peter could then, through observation, learn from them how they acted with one another, with clients and with the management as well as how they handled situations and how they thought about work. Observing these positive role models was seen as a good source of learning. This corresponds with Cheetham and Chivers’ (2001) reflection, observation and copying, unconscious absorption or osmosis.

> *“I got a chance to learn a lot […] just their refined way of thinking can inspire.”* (Peter)

Peter made an interesting comment at the end. Even though he enjoyed learning from others and saw it as greatly beneficial, he recognized that this sort of learning has its limits. Therefore, to deepen the learning, gain expertise and professional competence, one must also participate in the activities and do these jobs personally. This is one of the most important finding which describes the whole trainee program as well.

> *”You cannot learn everything just by just observing. Rather, you learn more by doing”.* (Peter)

The findings here seem to confirm previous research (Eraut 2004, 266-267) that working alongside others allows people to observe others at work, participate in activities, learn new practices and new perspectives, to become aware of different kinds of knowledge and expertise, and to gain some sense of other people's tacit knowledge.

5.4.3 By reflecting on and evaluating one's work experiences

Reflection was the third most important way of learning for the trainees. For example, Peter was instructed in the very beginning to critically observe and reflect everything that he saw and experienced. Conscious reflection and thinking sheds new light onto everyday activities when considering how these activities affect the big picture. To foster reflection, trainees had to make notes and keep learning journals throughout the trainee period, which encouraged them to articulate their findings and observations.

> *"It was educational that you had to think and keep your 'lights on' all the time about what is done and especially 'why' it is done."* (Peter)

Thus it was not just about going through life experiences, but conscious reflection, making notes and thoughtful observations. Peter noticed this for example while working in the production. Because of that placement he was able to learn specifics about processes that other members of the organizations were not aware of. Later during his trainee period and even after the program Peter could tap into this knowledge and utilize it to his advantage. The trainees also frequently reflected and brainstorm together what they had learned.

> *"We were in the head office the same time and then we brainstormed those observations which we had made together and we might have had some common assignments and we had to gather a common presentation from our aggregated observations. In that way the other trainees acted as a support, so that it was nice that at the same time there were others."* (Christina)

Formal education did not pay that much part in the trainee program. Some of the trainees had formal courses and trainings on sales, which were seen as beneficial and interesting to add to the program. Some also participated in management development programs and courses set by the organization. The trainees who experienced these liked that the organization allowed them to participate in management courses even though they were normally only for those who were already in a managerial position.

5.5 Factors affecting learning in the workplace

This chapter examines the factors which affected the learning of the trainees utilizing Eraut's (2004) framework. The factors are divided into learning factors, which relate to the individual and context factors, which relate to the organization. The applications of this chapter are mostly practical – providing suggestions as to how to develop this particular management trainee program in the future. However there is also a theoretical contribution, as findings which are made here seem to confirm arguments in existing models (Eraut 2004).

Each placement was a unique setting for learning and the trainees experiences varied greatly from placement to placement. However, the majority of the trainees had surprisingly similar kinds of experiences from the same placements. This makes it possible to draw some common conclusions. As Eraut (2004) has argued, workplaces differ as to how they support learning. This research shows that not only workplaces, but also functions within one organization can be really different in this aspect.

> *"It depends… if you are in the head office, your experiences would be slightly different than if you would be in subsidiary x, or if you would be in subsidiary y, or in any other unit. So it really depends on the region you are in, how old the system there is, what kind of people there are, plus various other factors."* (Christina)

5.5.1 Learning factors

This chapter examines the learning factors, which according to Eraut (2004) are the challenge and value of the work, confidence and commitment, and feedback and support. Employees' confidence is important, as a great deal of learning comes by practically doing things, being proactive and searching for learning opportunities. Successfully overcoming challenges increases confidence. Confidence to attempt challenges depends on how the employees feel supported by the organization. Therefore, there is a triangular relationship between confidence, challenge, and support. (Eraut 2004)

Challenge and value of the work

The significance of challenges and the perceived value of work was brought up in many interviews. The results of this study indicate that at least in this context a sufficient level of challenge and the value of the work play a critical role in either fostering or hindering learning. The placement in production caused the most controversy. The idea was to learn all aspects of production by working on the line and in all the workstations and to understand the laundry processes. The length of the placement varied from 1 to 3 months. The experiences varied from disappointment to mild satisfaction, which was dependent mainly on the duration of the placement - as the challenge level remained constant. Expectations regarding the placement also affected the overall satisfaction – the participants who had high expectations were more dissatisfied than those who did not have such expectations. One or two interviewees actually enjoyed that the placement in production was relaxed and lacked cognitive challenges.

In general, the results indicate that as the time spent in the laundry increased, dissatisfaction increased due to lack of challenge and perceived value of the work. The main issue seems to be that the participants had high expectations of the trainee program and as this placement was the first one, their expectations and reality did not match.

> *"In the beginning I had this feeling that 'ok I'm just about to graduate [from university] – what is this program all about? What's the purpose and what am I supposed to learn here?'"* (Alex)

> *"To me, there was no additional value in spending months working in the laundry, especially if I was not given any supervisory duties either".* (Alex)

> *"Really often I had this feeling like 'gosh, I've been in the laundry again for 8 hours straight, what's the point…"* (Christina)

It seems that by adding challenge and value to the work could have improved the placement, or consequently the placement itself could have been shorter. Lack of challenges and feeling that the work was not valuable had a negative effect on the trainees' overall learning, confirming previous research findings (Eraut 2004). Lack of challenge was not solely related to this one placement, but was one general characteristic of the program according to several interviewees. For example, Alex was expecting that the program would be more tough and demanding, considering the trainees' academic background. The trainees felt that they had potential and capability which was not utilized.

> *"I was not utilized as a resource that well most of the time."* (Christina)

> *"When you hire a competent young person – and all college educated know that you have to work hard – it's strange that it is not utilized."* (Alex)

Considering earlier findings regarding learning methods, what seemed to increase the value and effectiveness of learning by doing was a sufficient level of challenge and novelty. In addition, personal responsibility and accountability increased the level of challenge, which consequently increased learning. The novelty of the tasks was not an issue, as almost all the jobs in the program were new to the trainees. Some tasks were, however, learned faster than others, such as production related tasks on the shop floor. As the novelty in the task decreased over time, the effectiveness of learning could have been increased by adding responsibility or other elements to the job. Another enhancement to learning is the feeling of being useful and participating in everyday work activities.

Feedback and support

Feedback and support was perceived as an important factor affecting to the participants learning, and it was brought up in many conversations. Feedback and support was available from peers, other colleagues, supervisors, mentors and HR and top management in steering group meetings. To summarize, mentoring was experienced as a positive aspect if it was well planned and the mentor and mentee relationship worked. In addition to mentoring, the level of feedback could have been better throughout the program.

Christina was impressed with the initial induction sessions. She liked the fact that top management actually took time to meet with her personally. She felt welcome and was positively impressed by the whole process. She felt that it is important to create a hospitable atmosphere for newcomers. The experience of support had a positive impact on Christina's commitment as well.

> *"The first week of orientation was something really impressive, the company kind of cares about the individual so that they will reserve time from everyone's schedule – be it CEO or vice president – to have you talk to these people."* (Christina)

> *"You can also feel that people care about newcomers."* (Christina)

Confidence and commitment

The trainees had relatively high commitment and confidence when they started the program but these factors were not much discussed in the interviews. One interviewee mentioned that completing development assignments boosted satisfaction and confidence, because they could see how their own actions influenced the results. Commitment was affected by the perceived value of the work. One interviewee mentioned that providing opportunities to grow and learn increased his/her commitment. Feeling of support also increased commitment.

> *”The satisfaction came from achieving something which you usually would not have done otherwise. Now you have gone for it and you have achieved it! […]Something that you did on your own, and when your choices influenced the result.” (Alex)*

> *“If you find the job rewarding, plus there are opportunities to grow, then people would definitely want to pursue longer careers within that same organization instead of jumping around.” (Alex)*

5.5.2 Context factors

The main context factors according to Eraut (2004) were the allocation and structuring of work, the expectations of each person’s role, performance and progress, and encounters and relationships within people at work.

The allocation and structuring of work

Allocation and structuring of work plays a key role in fostering learning since it affects the degree of challenge in the work and possibilities for interaction, observation, and working alongside more experienced colleagues (Eraut 2004).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Alex had high expectations towards the program and thought it would be more challenging, have more pressure and be better steered. By lack of steering, he meant that occasionally he found himself in situations where he had nothing to do which was the opposite what he expected. He considers himself to be proactive, but what bothered him was that sometimes he felt it was just his responsibility to keep busy and find work to do. Nevertheless, he aimed at doing the best performance that he could in the given situation, but acknowledged that there would have been room for improvement. The learning opportunities and his potential were not used to the fullest capacity.

> *”The peculiar thing of this program was… well… lack of steering from time to time […].”* (Peter)

> *“I was told that ‘you have to find something to do!’. That did not quite fit into my thinking, knocking on peoples’ shoulders every morning and asking ‘Hey, would you happen to have something for me to do today?”* (Alex)

> *“Compared to what I know, my friends have been in somewhat bigger and smaller firms’ trainee programs, and I know that they worked their butts of over there, roughly speaking. So that if you survive that then you could do pretty much anything. So I could have taken this [program] significantly more lighter compared to what I did.”* (Alex)

Christina faced similar issues to Alex. She had the impression that the receiving units were not committed to having her around, or that they had not done any planning beforehand. However, she always found something to do and a plan was organized, but it could have been better. The basic structure and layout of the program was well thought out, but it was not always ensured that the placements had good content. She felt that this affected her learning negatively.

> *“Sometimes I had nothing to do because nobody was prepared that some kinds of trainees were coming.”* (Christina)

> *"Maybe this traineeship idea was not 'sold' to them [receiving units] enough".* (Peter)

> *"Too much trust was placed on the receiving units. The responsibility was given completely to them and liberty to either create the content to the placement or not."* (Peter)

> *"Sure, we always had times and places when and where to go… but many times I felt that nobody really cared. The receiving units […] were not asked to report what kind of program had they planned or organized for us, which lead to the situation that I spent a week of just folding T-shirts… I was just an extra resource, which hardly contributed to my learning."* (Alex)

For Peter, the lack of steering was not entirely a negative thing. He argued that lack of a strict curriculum brought flexibility, which made it possible for him to be active and search for those projects or learning activities which he considered interesting and beneficial. If the program would have been stricter, he perhaps would not have been able to do some things that he now could. However he did recognize that for some this was a negative thing. Flexibility made it possible to do what was interesting and available. Peter felt that there was always something worthwhile and meaningful to be done.

> *"Another thing which was satisfying was – it can be either satisfying or unsatisfying depending how you take it – things were very flexible."* (Peter)

> *"There were certain instances where I have tried and achieved to go the extra mile […] it happened because things were flexible."* (Peter)

> *"If they don't have any kind of task for you, you can create something for yourself […] you are free… you can find something that you would like to do!"* (Peter)

In general, the learning could have been improved by increasing the challenge, pressure, and pace. In the end, many interviewees felt that they were underutilized. Taking into consideration that the trainees had academic degrees and high motivation, not enough really challenging tasks were given to them. They had either assistant type of duties or they simply were shadowing more experienced colleagues and observing what they were doing, rather than participating themselves. This caused some frustration among the interviewees and they hoped that they could have done more themselves.

> *"During the year you are supposed to mostly follow others around and learn from them. Eventually you begin to wonder that when I can start to contribute and earn my paycheck, you know?"* (Alex)

> *"I went with a delivery service representative a couple of times to see how that work is done. [Another trainee] went like fifteen or fourteen times… Was that really beneficial?"* (Alex)

Expectations of each person's role, performance, and progress

Expectations of performance and clarity of role of the trainees caused some confusion among the trainees and also their supervisors in the placements. Alex and Christina reported that they faced many questions about the trainee program and about their future in the company. As explained in the previous chapters, the managers in the placements did not always know what type of assignments they could give to the trainees. Peter thought that through better planning and coordination in advance, many of the downsides could have been avoided.

5.6 Summary of results

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the results of this research. The combined results are presented in table 5.

Table 5. Summary of results

Competence category	Learning outcomes and constituent competences	Learning methods
Knowledge/ cognitive	Contextual knowledge • Organization, services, products, processes Tacit/practical knowledge • Task performance, awareness and understanding, organizational culture	Co-operation and interaction with colleagues, learning by doing, experience, Reflection
Functional	Occupation specific • CRM-system and other software Process/organizational/management • Project management • Self/time management • Service and production processes	Learning by doing, Tackling challenging and new tasks, co-operation and interaction
Personal/ behavioral	Social/vocational/intraprofessional skills • Interpersonal skills, meeting procedures and practices, interaction at work, communication	Experience, Observation, Learning by doing, Reflection
Values/ ethical	Personal / Professional • Professional values and code of conduct	Experience, observation, and Learning by doing

In the knowledge/cognitive competence category, contextual knowledge was the dominant constituent. All of the interviewees emphasized that knowledge related to the organization, services, products, processes and culture developed the most during to the program. Additionally, tacit-practical knowledge, which on the one hand related to performance of specific tasks or functions, and on the other hand referred to overall organizational culture, was developed. These two categories formed the knowledge about organizational 'big picture'. Experiencing and observing in person different jobs in different functions enhanced this learning. Cooperation and interaction with colleagues provided the majority of tacit-practical knowledge, which was crucial for trainees' overall learning. Fostering social exchange and informal relationship can also be seen as very important for developing knowledge/cognitive competence. All of the interviewees learned how to operate a number of different software, so in this regard technical competencies also developed.

In functional competence, occupational-specific key functions such as customer relationship management and processes related to service production were learned. Basic project management competencies were also learned according to the majority of interviewees. Self/time management was mentioned by a few in conjunction with project management competencies. Learning by doing as well as learning by tackling challenging and new tasks was the predominant learning method in this category. In this category, learning could have been even more enhanced throughout the program by increasing the possibility for the trainees to participate in professional tasks themselves instead of only observation.

Development of personal/behavioral competencies was at first harder to recognize, but through interpretation of the interviews, constituents such as social/vocational and intra-professional competencies were recognized as being improved. The interviewees mentioned learning how to act and behave in meetings, how to present information and how to interact with different kinds of people from the grassroots level to the top management. This was a significant learning outcome, as the trainees did not have this kind of experiences prior to the program. This was also learned mostly by personal experience, a combination of learning by doing, and also observing the behavior of others. Access to high-level individuals, a wide range of different meetings and management level meetings was seen as beneficial in this regard. Values/ethical competence was mainly affected in the professional values constituent. Professional codes of conduct and adopting appropriate attitudes was broached in several interviews. Competence to be able to evaluate critically the existing processes and culture was mentioned by some interviewees. The same learning methods are valid here as in personal/behavioral competencies.

Meta-competencies/trans-competencies were developed most significantly in areas of communication. Intercultural communication and cultural understanding were especially mentioned as being gained. Problem solving skills and perhaps self-development skills regarding how to develop one's own professional networks and own project management skills was increased. Learning occured by trial and error methods and through personal experience.

Learning by doing was perceived as the best way to learn, but much learning came through co-operation, interaction, and observation as well. Informal conversations with colleagues were mentioned as a source of tacit-practical and also procedural and contextual knowledge. Tacit-practical knowledge was improved significantly due to shadowing and knowledge sharing with senior members of the organization.

The key factors which affected learning were easily recognized. The allocation and structuring of work was perhaps the most significant, since it affected all aspects of the trainee program. The majority of the trainees perceived that the program offered a good framework, but it occasionally lacked content and steering. This highlighted the trainees' initiative taking ability. The level of the challenge and value of work was also an important aspect. When the level of challenge and value of work was experienced as sufficient, the quality of the learning was also experienced as high. Consequently, when there was not enough challenge or value in the work, the trainees experienced frustration and felt that they did not learn as much as they otherwise could have. As research indicates, learning is a reciprocal interaction between learner and the environment where the learning occurs (Hager 2005). The results of this research point out that managing the learning context plays an important role as regards how much the trainees learned and what they learned. A sufficient level of challenge is important for learning, and also a lack of challenge can hinder learning and motivation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis has been to investigate how trainees experienced a management trainee program as a method of learning and competence development. The following sub-questions were used to support the answers to the main question: 1) What types of competencies developed during the program? 2) How did the learning occur? 3) What factors affected learning during the program? An additional and secondary goal of this study was to provide practical development suggestions to the case organization on how the program could be improved.

The research was conducted as a qualitative single case study and the data was collected through thematic interviews. Altogether ten interviews were conducted; nine interviewees were trainee program participants and one was a management representative from the case company. Research and literature on individual competence and learning at work provided the theoretical framework for this study. A holistic competence model by Cheetham and Chivers (1996; 1998) was utilized in categorizing competence development and learning outcomes. Learning at work literature (e.g. Tynjälä 2008; Eraut 2004) was used to understand and conceptualize learning mechanisms and also to take into account the factors which affected learning in this case context.

Focusing on trainees' subjective experiences was chosen as the main approach to solving the research questions. Monitoring trainees' reactions or their subjective evaluations about their experiences has also been used before in earlier research which investigated trainee program effectiveness (e.g. Tan, Hall & Boyce 2003; Sitzmann et al. 2008). Therefore this study also contributes to the existing stream of research in addition to being a suitable method for this particular case.

6.1 Main findings

The aggregated findings of this study indicate that the program was perceived as beneficial and a good method to develop basic professional competences. The program works well for the training of new employees, as Virtanen (2008) has argued. The program is especially effective in providing tacit-contextual knowledge and overall awareness and understanding about the organization, business processes, and culture. Basically, the program delivered what it promised, which was providing a holistic understanding of the organizational ‘big picture’. Interviewees were also mostly satisfied with their experiences. Satisfaction was related to how useful they experienced the program and how much they actually learned. The more they learned, the more effective they experienced the program. Trainees’ experiences were also surprisingly similar in all aspects, despite the different years of participation and different backgrounds. Interestingly this similarity applied to learning outcomes, learning methods and also for the factors affecting learning. This made the analysis of the results a little easier as common themes and incidents began to appear as the data saturated during the research process. Even though each round of the program is somewhat unique, the results show that the rounds shared many similar characteristics. Notwithstanding that the majority of participants were satisfied, it became clear during the research process that there was room for improvement especially in how the program was steered and planned in some instances. An important observation was that some elements (allocation and structuring of work, challenge and value of the work, feedback and support) within this particular trainee program played a significant role on how satisfied the trainees were and consequently how they felt about the program. These elements could be either the strength or the weakness of the program and therefore should receive more attention.

The aggregated results of these sub-questions focused on competence categories, learning methods, and the main factors affecting learning methods and are presented in Figure 10. The aim of this figure is to summarize the main learning outcomes and related learning mechanisms and present their importance. The figure also presents which learning mechanisms affected which competence category. For example, knowledge/cognitive competence (Cheetham & Chivers 1998) and awareness and understanding (Eraut 2004) were developed through co-operation and interaction with colleagues, learning by doing the job itself and by tackling challenging and new tasks, as well by reflection. Communication competence (under meta-competence), developed largely through co-operation and interacting with colleagues. The sizes of these elements in Figure 10 are disproportionate, which aims to elaborate the factors or categories which were more dominant or developed more than others. At the bottom are the most important factors which affected learning.

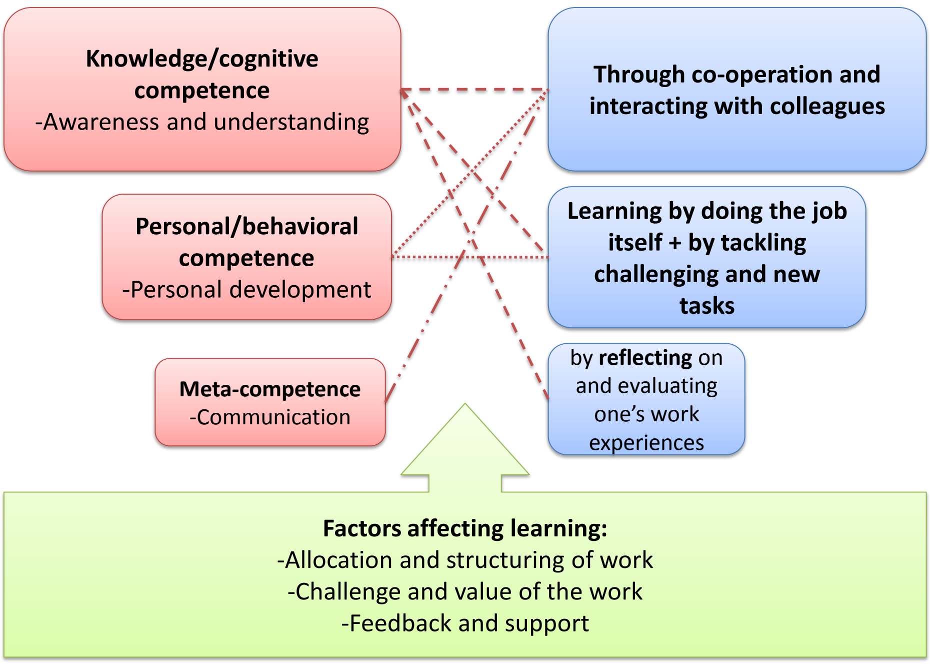

Figure 10. Competence categories and learning methods

The knowledge/cognitive competence category was developed the most. The results indicate that the trainee program increased the participants overall awareness and understanding of the organization. This learning outcome was something that the management was aiming for with this program. Considerable contextual knowledge and tacit/practical knowledge was gained during the trainee program. The second largest competence category was personal/behavioral competence. This included for example self-management competence, which was developed mostly by interaction and co-operation but also by personal experience. The third most developed competence category was meta-competence and communication. General communication skills as well as intercultural communication and networking skills were gained during the program.

Learning through co-operation and interacting with colleagues was the dominant method of learning for the interviewees. This exposure to different people within the organization was much valued and appreciated by the interviewees. Learning by doing in combination with learning by tackling challenging and new tasks was the second largest method of learning. It must be noted that especially in this category, there would have been potential for additional learning. The participants felt that they occasionally lacked possibilities to really take advantage of learning by doing. This was related mainly to the allocation and structuring of work. Reflection was the last key element, although not as notable as the previous ones. The participants reflected over their experiences by themselves but also with each other and other members of the organization, such as the management, their supervisors, and mentors.

Allocation and structuring of work, the challenge and value of the work, and feedback and support were the most significant factors affecting learning which were recognized in this study. The results of this study indicate that especially with these types of structured trainee programs, organizational factors can have a tremendous influence on learning, both positively and negatively. In this vein, the secondary goal of this research has been to understand how the program could be developed in the future by the case organization. Drawing on the results of the research questions, a number of clear and practical development suggestions were found. These are presented in the following chapter.

6.2 Discussion

From the management perspective, one important goal of the Lindström Management Trainee Program is to support Lindström’s fast-paced international growth by building a talent pool of the right kind of individuals with the right kind of experiences (Laurio 2014). Individuals who have succeeded in Lindström in the long run have understood Lindström's unique business concepts, business logic, and working culture. Hiring from inside has been the preferred method exactly for of this reason – the person would already be familiar with the company and its business. Thus it makes sense that the practical goal of the trainee program has consequently been to give the trainees a 360-degree view of the firm and offer cross-functional experiences, accelerating this natural process of learning by experiencing different positions through career development. As Virtanen (2008) has pointed out, trainee programs can indeed beat traditional means of development and be an instrument for improving exactly this type contextual competence. The results of this study indicate that the program has clearly been successful in this aspect. Following Sydänmaanlakka's (2002) line of thought regarding competence management processes, Lindström's has utilized the management trainee program as one means of achieving the strategic objective (fast-paced international growth) by developing the critical competencies (profound contextual understanding of the business and business logic) on individual level. In this case, the trainee program is an instrument of the competence management process at Lindström. It remains to be seen how the results are realized in the future: will the trainees be successful and step up to be Lindström's future key players. Time will tell.

Regarding the theoretical contributions, the results of this study seem to validate the existing research findings (Torp 2008; Dysvik et al. 2010) that participating in trainee program provides beneficial outcomes such as knowledge and skill acquisition and increased individual performance. It was also established here that some competencies are easy to learn while others take more time and effort to develop, as many researchers (e.g. Viitala 2005; Garavan & McGuire 2001; Bergenhenegouwen et al. 1997) have argued in their respective studies. Thus, the pace of job rotation should not be too fast so that the trainees have enough time to focus and consolidate their knowledge and gain expertise. However, the pace should not be too slow either especially if the work is not challenging mentally. In summary, placements should be planned carefully to maximize learning outcomes and utilize the overall learning potential.

Not all learning experiences are created equal – some were drastically more beneficial than others. Development projects with end-to-end responsibilities in an actual working environment were highly valued. Just as Eteläpelto (1998) has argued, developing expertise requires experiences in authentic work settings. Poell (2006) has demonstrated with his model of learning projects that these kinds of experiences can be simulated and structured, just as was done in this case successfully. McCall (2010) has emphasized that leadership (or professional) competences require time and the right kind of experiences to develop. In this sense, these programs could have the potential to develop leadership competences as well. In the current program, development of leadership competences was arbitrary, incidental or even non-existent. Focusing on this aspect might be beneficial for the organization in the long term, considering that the purpose of the program is to develop future leaders. Some form of structured and supported leadership experiences might be beneficial, but would need significantly more resources to plan and coordinate from the organization.

Considerable potential lies in workplace learning, as Eraut (2004) has noted. The findings of this research confirm that investing in workplace learning pays off in terms of competence development and learning outcomes. Despite its incidental and informal nature, workplace learning can be steered and directed. Actually it should be, as the lack of steering, feedback, and guidance negatively affected how much the trainees felt that they learned. Learning about sales or perhaps project management could have been even further improved by simply increasing the level of managerial support and facilitation of learning activities. As with other novices such as apprentices and interns, trainees need just as much support or even more. Increasing understanding about nonformal learning (e.g. Werquin 2010) might be particularly beneficial when planning these sort of on-the-job learning programs.

The beneficial outcomes of interaction between novices and experts (Billet 2004) and the process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991) can be observed clearly in this research, as the trainees gradually moved from observation from a distance into learning by doing and having more responsibilities. As Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested, newcomers were gradually socialized into the practices and communities in the workplace. This worked very well. A great deal of learning occurred with others and came from others. It was also evident that the more seriously the trainees' co-workers, coaches, supervisors or mentors took their role, the more satisfied the trainees were and consequently the more they learned. Trust was an important aspect between the trainees and seniors. When there was trust, there was also knowledge sharing, open communication and rich learning experiences. However, building trust takes time and it seems that this process was often interrupted when the trainees were transferred to a new placement.

Trust, support, empowerment, and a sufficient amount of challenge seems to be the building blocks for a successful management trainee program.

6.3 Managerial implications and suggestions for future research

The previous chapter presented many implications for the management as to how the program could be improved. To conclude, it can be said that successful execution of a management trainee program requires a significant amount of resources from the organization and it should be taken seriously. However, investments in these programs pay off in increased individual competence and a strengthened organizational talent pool. Trainee programs with job rotation are an excellent means of providing an especially holistic understanding of the organization and its business. High-potential trainees who have high motivation and the capability to learn quickly and absorb large amounts of information benefit from this approach, compared to the more conventional means of career development.

As mentioned, it is pivotal that these programs are well planned in advance. However, planning alone is not sufficient, management and steering during the program should receive similar attention. Otherwise there is a risk that the trainees' potential, or valuable human capital, is left underutilized.

Significant implications and interesting findings came from the factors which affected learning during the program. The individuals who applied for the program had a rather high-level of intrinsic motivation and commitment to begin with. High-potential candidates require specific attention from the organization so that their potential can be tapped and that their retention is secured (Silzer & Church 2009). Supporting findings of existing research (Eraut 2004), effective learning requires a level of challenge to match the capabilities of the learner. With young, inexperienced high-potential candidates, this right level can be hard to determine. It seems that the trainees were rather sensitive to the fluctuation of the challenges. Individuals with high motivations and drive to succeed felt frustrated when there was not a sufficient level of challenge. Due to high expectations, some reacted strongly to the informality of the program. They were expecting a stricter and curriculum based experience.

It requires effort from the organization to select the right type of learning activities for the trainees. Learning assignments where the trainees were accountable for the execution of real and business related projects were experienced positively. These types of experiences are certainly the most productive ones, but require some planning in advance. Learning from others was not only beneficial but also enjoyable. However, even if they provide rich learning experiences and produce tacit and implicit knowledge, there is a limit to what can be learned by observing or by interaction alone. Increasing learning by doing in other activities would have probably increased the trainees overall learning as well, at least according to interviewees' perception. Learning by doing, in for example sales would not always be pleasant, as one interviewee mentioned, but it would be beneficial. In other words, moving out of the trainee’s comfort zone is necessary.

As this research was based on a single case study in only one organization, applicability of these findings should be evaluated critically to other contexts. As suggestions for future research, it would be interesting to compare these results with other companies with similar programs to see if the results would be applicable in a broader context. This particular study could also have been done with quantitative methods and questionnaires to evaluate and categorize the competence development using a more precise model. This would have also enabled the gathering of data from a larger group of respondents. Finally, it would be interesting to do a similar type of study focused on the period after the trainee program. This would allow an examination of how competence development and learning has continued beyond the safety net of the trainee program, in contexts where the young professionals have had to stand on their own feet.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

What is learned in the workplace? (Eraut et al. 2004, 265)

TASK PERFORMANCE Speed and fluency Complexity of tasks and problems Range of skills required Communication with a wide range of people Collaborative work	**ROLE PERFORMANCE** Prioritization Range of responsibility Supporting other people's learning Leadership Accountability Supervisory role Delegation Handling ethical issues Coping with unexpected problems Crisis management Keeping up-to-date
AWERENESS AND UNDERSTANDING Other people: colleagues, customers, managers, etc Context and situations One's own organization Problems and risks Priorities and strategic issues Value issues	**ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS** Use of evidence and argument Accessing formal knowledge Research-based practice Theoretical thinking Knowing what you might need to know Using knowledge resources (human, paper-based, electronic) Learning how to use relevant theory (in a range of practical situations)
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT Self-evaluation Self-management Handling emotions Building and sustaining relationships Disposition to attend to other perspectives Disposition to consult and work with others Disposition to learn and improve one's practice Accessing relevant knowledge and expertise Ability to learn from experience	**DECISION MAKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING** When to seek expert help Dealing with complexity Group decision making Problem analysis Generating, formulating and evaluating options Managing the process within an appropriate timescale Decision making under pressurized conditions
TEAMWORK Collaborative work Facilitating social relations Joint planning and problem solving Ability to engage in and promote mutual learning	**JUDGEMENT** Quality of performance, output and outcomes Priorities Value issues Levels of risk

APPENDIX 2

Taxonomy of informal professional learning methods (Cheetham & Chivers 2001, 282)

Learning mechanisms	**Learning events/ -experiences**
Practice and repetition	Iteration, simulation, drill and practice, preparation and planning
Reflection	Self-analysis, reflection on how others do things, journal writing
Observation and copying	Structured or casual observation of others, positive/negative role models, shadowing
Feedback	Evaluation exercise, learning from clients, appraisal and performance review
Extra-occupational transfer	Pre-entry experiences, learning transferred from formal education to (turning theory into practice)
Stretching activities	Deep end experiences, Demanding or complex tasks and problems, challenging experiences, multi-faceted experiences
Perspective changing/switching	Role transfer, job exchanges, cross profession working, cross-cultural working (working abroad), mental perspective switching
Mentor/coach interaction	Coaching, mentoring, instruction, advice, counseling interrogation (questioning a more experienced person), bouncing ideas
Unconscious absorption or osmosis	working alongside: more experienced colleagues or a role model, networking with others, apprenticeship, rubbing shoulders with experts
Use of psychological devices/mental tricks	use of mental/cognitive models, theorizing, mental preparation, learning by linking/association, mind-set changing/shifting
Articulation	Teaching/tutoring/instructing, presenting lectures, speaking, justifying/defending/explaining actions, developing learning materials
Collaboration	Team working, collaborative projects, learning from clients, collaborating with clients, working in multi-disciplinary team, international collaboration

APPENDIX 3

Thematic interview template

1. Background information (education, work history, motivation, why did you apply?)

2. General experiences of the program. What has been satisfying/unsatisfying?

3. Which placements or job roles have you experienced as especially useful? Why?

4. Describe your top experiences during the program which were significant for your professional development and learning?

5. In your opinion, what kind of competencies developed the most during the program?

6. How did your competence development / learning take place in practice?

7. Did you feel that some competencies did not develop sufficiently? Why?

8. Do you have some ideas of improvement for the program to make it more efficient with respect to developing competencies?