



An Analysis of the influence of Environment, Process and Factors in
Organisational Learning:

A Qualitative Study of a firm in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the operation of organisational learning (OL) in the Middle Eastern context in order to provide a deep understanding of the significance of a supportive environment, a productive learning process and appropriate workplace conditions. Empirical data were collected from employees of SAFORG, a large firm with multiple specialisations. The primary focus of this research is to investigate the perceptions of senior and middle managers and bottom-line employees in five SAFORG departments with a range of specialisations, namely: the Training, IT, Security, State Service and Logistics departments.

The research adopts a qualitative stance and takes a social constructivist approach, using two main methods to collect the empirical data, namely semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Twelve individual interviews and one focus group session were held in each of the five departments, involving a total of 88 participants. Although it was difficult to maintain an equal number of participants in each category by rank (senior and middle management and bottom-line employees), a sufficient representation from each category in each department was achieved.

This research contributes to the body of knowledge by highlighting the required environment, process and workplace conditions to deliver productive OL in a unique context. The findings show that the OL occurring at SAFORG was a representation of single-loop learning. Practitioners can benefit from this research by gaining an improved understanding the roles of culture, leadership and organisational context in either enhancing or hindering the functioning of OL.

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List of Abbreviations

CoP	Community of practice
ITD	Information Technology Department
LD	Logistics Department
OC	Organisational culture
OL	Organisational learning
OLE	Organisational learning environment
OLF	Organisational learning factor
OLP	Organisational learning process
SECI	Socialisation/externalisation/combination/internalisation
SD	Security Department
SSD	State Service Department
TD	Training Department

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Chapter 1 Introduction and overview of organisational learning

1.1 Introduction and overview of organisational learning

This research explores organisational learning (OL) in the Middle Eastern context, focusing on its three dimensions of environment, process and factors. This overview of the theoretical foundations of the concept of OL is to provide an introduction to the field but that it will be developed in the following chapter. The initial motive for choosing the topic of OL was the researcher's interest in understanding how individuals learn in organisations. The research journey started when I began to specialise in human resources development, leading a team responsible for designing, delivering and evaluating an annual training plan for SAFORG, a firm operating in the Middle East. When I began crafting the scope of this research, my intention was to focus on evaluating the outcomes of training programmes and I have to admit that I knew nothing about the theory of OL. However, it soon seemed to me that the notion of organisational learning deserved more attention than individual learning. Later, I came to realise that training is not sufficient for an organisation to ensure productive learning and to achieve sustainability in a highly competitive world. Bearing in mind that training is not the only source of knowledge, my focus moved gradually to the full picture of how an organisation learns through its individuals, the processes used to obtain learning, whether from insiders or across organisational boundaries, and finally the factors that facilitate or hinder the learning process throughout the organisation.

This shifting of attention towards OL was reinforced by the view that training programmes alone cannot solve an organisation's problems, fulfil employees' learning needs and enhance organisational performance. For these reasons, I became fully convinced of the need to take a different approach to learning in the organisation, beyond the scope of training. Although the

concept of OL is not widely known in the Middle East in general and within SAFORG in particular, some departments of the firm have made efforts to share learning among employees within the same department. However, the challenge remains to promote learning interactions at organisational and inter-organisational levels. SAFORG, in common with many organisations in the Middle East, does not differentiate between OL and training. Employees at different organisational levels perceive training to be the primary source for learning and consider the knowledge which comes from training as legitimate and of greatest value to the organisation (Antonacopoulou, 2006).

The purpose of this research is to provide an in-depth understanding of the OL phenomenon in the Middle Eastern context. Therefore, the research objectives address three main areas of concern: the *environment* that is essential for OL to occur, the *process* that is significant to transfer knowledge from an individual level to the group and organisational levels, and the *factors* that facilitate or hinder OL. An understanding of OL becomes a necessity rather than a choice for organisations that aim to use knowledge as a means to achieve profitability, sustainability and competitiveness.

The focus on the three dimensions of OL environment, process and factors corresponds to the importance of achieving a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Dodgson (1993) asserts that OL mechanisms need extensive exploration and that whether or not the organisation can learn rests on the nature of the environment, processes and factors. Importantly, each organisation is unique and has its own aspects of these dimensions. Tannenbaum (1997) found that organisations varied in their learning profiles and in the competencies required for their learning processes.

1.2 Guide to chapters

This introductory chapter, having provided a preliminary account of the researcher's motives for exploring the phenomenon of OL and setting out the broad aim and objectives of the research, goes on to offer an overview of the field, making the distinction between individual learning and OL, as well as outlining the theories underpinning the study of OL. It then seeks to explain the growing popularity of the concept of organisational learning in the Middle East, by examining the contextual background and the factors that shape learning in Middle Eastern organisations.

Chapter 2 comprises a review of the relevant literature, presenting a thorough examination of the theory underlying OL scholarship. It is structured into three main sections, each dealing with one of the major dimensions of organisational learning, namely the environment in which it takes place, the process by which it occurs and the factors affecting its successful accomplishment. The selection of these three dimensions is fully justified in the introduction to the chapter. Each of its main sections is then divided into subsections dealing with the main pillars of the dimension in question. In the case of the OL environment, these are three ways of classifying learning interactions: as formal versus informal, vertical versus horizontal and internal versus external. The learning process is then characterised as either cognitive-behavioural, cultural or social and the factors influencing OL are grouped under the headings of individual characteristics, organisational leadership, organisational culture and organisational context.

The third chapter of this thesis sets out the research design and methodology, justifying the qualitative stance and the social constructivist approach that has been taken to explore the perceptions of a sample of SAFORG employees regarding the influence exerted on OL by the various aspects of environment and process and by the multiple factors identified as relevant. Concerning the research design, five departments of SAFORG were chosen to participate; from

each, twelve individuals were interviewed and one focus group of at least five members was convened. The methodology chapter justifies the use of these methods of collecting data and explains the selection of the sample of participants in both interviews and focus groups from senior and middle management and from among bottom-line employees, the rationale for this diversity being the need to understand the differences and similarities of perspective across the three hierarchical levels, bearing in mind that OL practice differs not only across organisational levels (individual, group, organisational and inter-organisational) but also throughout the life-cycle of knowledge from creation and mobilisation to diffusion and commoditisation (Birkinshaw & Sheehan, 2002). The aim of the study is clarified by setting out three research questions and the chapter ends by considering challenges encountered, ethical considerations and trustworthiness.

Chapter 4 delivers an overview of the immediate research context by profiling each of the five departments at SAFORG which constitute the empirical case studies. Its five main sections cover each department in turn, describing the prevailing conditions in terms of participants' perceptions regarding the OL environment, process and factors. It takes account of the views of employees at all three levels defined above without examining causes or engaging in detailed discussion or analysis, which are reserved for Chapter 5.

The fifth chapter then sets out the findings of the research, discussing and analysing the data gathered from interviewees and focus groups with reference to the salient scholarship contained in the literature. Once again, its structure follows the tripartite analysis of organisational learning into the dimensions of environment, process and factors, each of these being divided into pillars. The analysis is then significantly refined by the subdivision of some pillars into a number of further components; for example, the employee attributes comprising the first pillar of OL environment are collaboration, dialogue, motivation and trust, while in the third dimension, the organisational

culture pillar comprises three main factors: *wasta*, generational conflict and the withholding of knowledge. This detailed analysis recognises similarities and differences corresponding to the rank of participants and to their membership of the various departments, as well as the operation and outcome of learning at the individual, group, departmental, organisational and inter-organisational levels.

These distinctions are revisited in Chapter 6, which summarises the research, draws conclusions, examines the contributions made, recognises limitations and makes recommendations for further study. This final chapter is largely structured to reflect the need to determine the extent to which the three research questions have been answered. To this end, it is again divided into three major sections, concerned with participants' perceptions of SAFORG as an OL environment, with the OL process at SAFORG and with the factors facilitating and hindering it. For each of these, the main findings, contributions and implications for practice are discussed in relation to the literature and presented in tabular form.

1.3 Overview of Organisational Learning

This section presents an overview of the theoretical foundations of the concept of OL, as distinct from individual learning. It is intended to provide an introduction to the field, which is developed through the review of literature in Chapter 2. This overview highlights the Middle Eastern context of this research and the popularity of OL. In order to ensure that it is adequately comprehensive, it addresses some essential questions posed by Prange (1999), related to learning, learners and content. It therefore considers the meaning of learning, how and when it takes place; who the learners are and the impact of learning on them; and the content of what is being learned and its impact on the organisation. This section offers a description of OL theories and the distinction between individual and organisational learning. It also includes a clarification of the popularity of

OL. The intention is to give the reader a sense of the importance of OL as a distinct area of concern for organisations.

Before considering the definition of OL and how it happens, it is relevant to give a historical overview of the concept, including when it arose and the motives for the emergence of the associated theory. The field of OL emerged in the early 1950s (Prange, 1999), as theorists sought to explain how organisations learn, and has proliferated since the 1990s (Duarte Aponte & Castañeda Zapata, 2013; Senge, 1990; Wang & Ahmed, 2002), to become multidisciplinary. Among the perspectives from which OL has been explored are strategy, psychology, business and management (Dodgson, 1993; Rashman et al., 2009). More precisely, the concept can be said to have emerged from organisational studies (Greiling & Halachmi, 2013). It is not a new concept (Fenwick, 2001), having been introduced in the mid-twentieth century by March and Simon (1958) and Cyert & March (1963).

There are many divergent views on defining OL, although there is some convergence on key terms. Failing to have a clear and unified definition of OL is associated with the absence of criteria (Howard, 2004), with excessively broad definitions (Schechter, 2008; Wang & Ahmed, 2002), with paradigmatic fragmentation (Schechter, 2008) and with complex and sometimes ambiguous explanations of how organisations learn. Lipshitz et al. (2002: 79) conclude that “proliferation of research, practice, and literature on OL has not necessarily led to a clearer understanding of what it means to be a learning organisation”. Consequently, it is hard to achieve a unified definition of OL (Duarte Aponte & Castañeda Zapata, 2013; Salk & Simonin, 2003).

One of the most common definitions of OL is that it is very much linked to change. Duarte Aponte & Castañeda Zapata (2013) and Vera & Crossan (2003) assert that this change should encompass both the individual’s cognition and behaviour. Numerous studies support the idea that learning can

be institutionalised through such changes in cognition and behaviour (Argyris, 1976; Crossan et al., 1999; Huber, 1991; Pursiainen, 2017). However, considering that learning is the sum of the change in cognition and behaviour draws attention to the importance of social context, which has not always been given priority (Stopford, 2003).

Fiol & Lyles (1985) challenge the idea that change always results in learning and suggest that change might be caused by factors other than learning. Huber (1991) proposes that learning is a combination of the change in insights and potential behaviour. This combination of insight and action to perceive learning is supported by Schön & Argyris (1996). Duarte Aponte & Castañeda Zapata (2013) add that the change should be aligned with the needs of the organisational environment, which they label 'learning adaptation'.

As seen from the above discussion, definitions have gradually moved from a limited understanding of learning to developing individual performance or changing skills, both of which are firmly attached to the notion of individual learning going beyond a simple cognitive and behavioural change (Fiol, 1994). Thus, changes in thought and action are seen as a process and this view is now widely accepted by scholars (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008; Megheirkouni, 2016; Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Seeing learning as a cyclical process involves considering past experience as a significant factor, along with learning from errors and correction, amending behaviour and improving implementation (Lipshitz et al., 2002). It can be seen that the definition of learning has become more comprehensive, broadening the focus from the individual alone to include what is going on within the organisation as a whole.

Subsequently, some theorists have perceived the process of learning from an organisational point of view and defined OL as a capacity-building process of knowledge creation and integration (DiBella et al., 1996; Pawlowsky, 2003). Scott (2011) theorises OL as a "multilevel process where

members individually and collectively acquire knowledge by acting together and reflecting together.” Adopting a slightly different approach, March (1991) focuses on knowledge itself and considers OL a twofold process comprising the exploitation of existing knowledge and the exploration of new knowledge. Other theorists have struggled to maintain a balance between these two processes (Babu et al., 2014; Mishra, 2018), because insufficient exploration could lead to worse exploitation.

Learning, in general, is perceived to have become a necessity rather than a choice, so the challenge in hyperdynamic business contexts is “learning how to learn, and learning faster” (Schein, 1992: 86). Joiner (2005) points out that learning is not about assimilating new knowledge; instead, it is about becoming a constant learner. Therefore, OL is about continual improvement, which according to Wang & Ahmed (2002: 14) means “the process by which the organisation constantly questions existing products, processes and systems, identifies the strategic position and applies various modes of learning to achieve a sustained competitive advantage”. In this regard, OL no longer remains a choice for organisations aspiring to competitive advantage.

Moving on from defining OL as a process, Schechter (2008) and Lipshitz & Popper (2000) introduced the structural-social approach to defining OL, which entails dealing with information in a structural way, including gathering, analysing and storing it. The second phase is then socialising the information among organisational members and integrating it into organisational procedures and routines. The structural-social approach differs from information processing in that the former encompasses the social integration of learning among organisational members as well as injecting the knowledge into organisational aspects and patterns.

The definition adopted in this research entails the ‘process of change’ described in this first approach and incorporates the ‘social embedment’ identified in the second. Furthermore, the

author considers innovation and creativity to be essential criteria for successful organisations to sustain a competitive advantage (Wang & Ahmed, 2002). In this regard, OL can be defined as a process of continual improvement in employees' cognition and behaviour in order to keep them as constant learners who are creative and make the organisation innovative.

1.3.1 The distinction between individual and organisational learning

There is copious literature discussing the distinction between individual and organisational learning. Schechter (2008) and Levitt & March (1988) discuss the 'anthropomorphism problem', referring to the extent to which it is possible for individuals to have learning attributes akin to those of organisations. They assert that individuals learn through their cognitive memories, while organisations learn through organisational routines, which are considered to be external representations. Thus, there is considerable argument as theorists seek to differentiate individual from organisational learning.

Despite the distinction between individual and organisational learning discussed in the remainder of this section, most of the literature agrees that organisational learning is built upon individual learning. Therefore, it is not possible to deny the impact of individual learning theory on organisational learning. In other words, learning by many individuals leads to organisational learning, although it must be understood that OL is more than the sum of those individuals' learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Lipshitz & Popper, 2000; Schechter, 2008; Wang & Ahmed, 2002). Moreover, beside the learning which occurs within them, organisations can also learn by acquiring new members with knowledge gained outside (Simon, 1991). The complexity of understanding learning at the organisational level has emerged from the unclear picture of whether what individuals capture can be regarded as OL, or whether it is new learning that emerges from individual learning (Prange, 1999).

Individual learning theory is based on the notion that individuals are the locus of learning. The concomitant idea that individuals act as the agents of learning is supported by many authors (Dodgson, 1993; Hedberg, 1981; March & Olsen, 1975). The opponents of individual learning theory affirm that if learning is purely cognitive and occurs only in specific forms, then it is unclear how employees in learning crafts rely entirely on learning by doing and mimicking others. Moreover, if learning is restricted to an individual's mind and isolated from the context, then employees cannot pursue learning without participation in a social context (Brandi & Elkjaer, 2011).

The distinction between individual learning theory and organisational learning theory is mainly about collective learning (Jones-Evans, 2006) and identity development (Brandi & Elkjaer, 2011). The main focus of individual learning theory is on knowledge of practices, whereas organisational learning theory concerns the social involvement and participation which lead ultimately to employees becoming practitioners (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Richter, 1998). It can be argued that identity development is not exclusively about cognitive development which can be fulfilled through individual learning, nor is it solely about effective development which can be achieved through social learning. Alongside cognitive and practical improvement, it also involves relational and emotional development (Soussignan & Schaal, 2005).

However, while the field of OL is based upon individual learning, it has developed and moved beyond it to provide a solid understanding of human artefacts and their interaction with the environment (Wang & Ahmed, 2003). Advocates of the idea that learning is exclusively an individual process argue that human characteristics cannot be attributed to an inanimate entity such as a firm (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; March & Olsen, 1975; Simon, 1991). The counter-argument is this: if filling individual employees' minds with information were enough for organisations to

succeed, then today's organisations should all be successful, which is not the case, despite information having become much more accessible than ever, thanks to technological advances. Perceiving learning as the acquisition of knowledge is no longer popular. Instead, the sociocultural perspective perceives learning as a process of interaction in a social event (Hill & Thrupp, 2019). In response to the question of how OL happens, there is a need to address whether it occurs in a series of deliberate or conscious actions (Kim, 1993; Paulsen, 2018). Advocates of learning as a deliberate action rely on the notion that organisations do not have brains allowing them to think and act independently from their constituent groups and individuals. Therefore, most theorists agree that OL does not happen naturally (Bess & Dee, 2012; Child & Rodrigues, 2011). However, learning occurs beyond individuals when it has a direct impact on the organisation (Hislop et al., 2013) and this cannot be achieved unless learning is embedded in the organisation's structure, culture, policies and patterns, and most importantly unless employees' cognition and behaviour are modified towards achieving organisational goals. The fact that OL takes place in a planned and deliberate manner does not negate the truth of the assertion that learners within the framework of OL must have adequate space to express opinions, share them with their colleagues, then examine them together and reach a common position expressing the views of the majority (Örtenblad, 2002).

The transformation from the individual to either group or organisational level is problematic (Pawlowsky et al., 2003). Therefore, it can be argued that the transition from individual to organisational learning does not happen automatically; it needs knowledge to be codified and articulated. According to Gunasekaran (2001: 617), "the transition of individual learning to organisational learning requires some form of behaviour change, at least to a level that knowledge can be shared with other people within the organisation". The form of this behaviour change

includes developing both individual and group insights, which will ease the transformation of learning to the organisational level (Hislop et al., 2013).

Despite the conceptual agreement of most theories that OL starts with individual learning (Bess & Dee, 2012; Wang & Ahmed, 2002), consensus is elusive on delivering practical ways to transform individual learning into group and organisational learning (Bess & Dee, 2012; Pawlowsky et al., 2003). This is not to say that the field of OL has insufficient criteria, instruments and ‘how-to’; rather, the challenge lies in how to select the right tools in a particular framework for implementation. Pawlowsky et al. (2003: 776) list four possible frameworks: “(a) different systems of levels of learning (from individual to organisational network), (b) different learning types (single-loop, double-loop, and deuteron-learning), (c) different learning modes (e.g. cognitive learning, cultural learning, and action learning) and (d) different phases of a collective learning process”. The task of selecting practical tools for the levels, types, modes and phases of learning draws attention to how organisations define tools that are appropriate and pertinent to each of these categories.

Having answered the first two queries in relation to the definition of OL and theories explaining how it occurs, there now follows a discussion of what learning is expected to yield. Some scholars are concerned with the outcomes of the learning process (Easterby-Smith, 1997; Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015); in line with this view, Fiol & Lyles (1985) emphasise that learning has to be associated with performance improvement. The literature offers contradictory views regarding the effects of learning on organisational performance (Maier et al., 2003). Some authors report a positive impact of learning on performance (Cangelosi & Dill, 1965; Fiol & Lyles, 1985), so that high productivity or efficiency is often ascribed to learning factors (Maier et al., 2003). Others including Cangelosi & Dill (1965), while supporting the idea that learning from failure leads to

change, express uncertainty about the consequences for performance (Crossan et al., 1995). It can be argued that high performance is not necessarily an immediate outcome of learning, because employees' ability to use their imaginations and to construct new meanings and insights may be more valuable for organisations in the long run.

Certain authors go further, seeing no direct impact of learning on performance (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988). Indeed, not only may learning sometimes not improve performance; it may have a negative impact on the organisation as a whole. Crossan et al. (1995: 353) conclude that it "may negatively impact performance in the short term as individuals and organisations cast off familiar practices for new and unfamiliar ways of operating". Miner (2005) emphasises the potential harm caused by learning, as demonstrated by research conducted by Bunderson and Sutcliffe (2003), who provided a group of people with learning opportunities and found that this resulted in poorer performance. Given this uncertainty, measuring the impact of OL on organisational performance is helpful to provide managers with a real indication of its value, as well as being potentially encouraging for employees (Stewart & Rogers, 2012). It is also important not to expect the relationship between organisational learning and performance improvement to be linear, since outcomes will depend on the quality of the learning (Shavinina, 2003).

The focus on OL as a process intended to improve performance draws attention to the need to create reliable tools to measure the effectiveness of that process, taking account of the distinction between the cognitive or acquisitional approach and constructionist approaches, which consider the social context. Thus, a different school of thought views OL through a social lens and visualises a process whereby "identities, artefacts, ideologies, rules, language, morality and interests are woven together and affect each other in the process of collective learning" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000: 788). The latter view has become widely recognised at a different level of learning (Casey,

2005). It is noteworthy that considering OL as a process to improve performance conceptualises the role of the leader as being to give instructions and mentor performance, rather than facilitating employees' learning in the workplace. In other words, a focus on quick performance improvement can be achieved by individual learning, which does not require much input from the leader, while OL needs leader involvement to facilitate and motivate team members to learn collectively (Bush, 2018).

1.3.2 Theories underpinning organisational learning

Having dominated for such a long time, individual learning theories are therefore important for understanding OL (Kim, 1993). Individualistic theories represent organisations as comprehending learning as a process of knowledge transformation from knowledgeable source to employees lacking knowledge; thus, they focus on the acquisition of knowledge accumulation (Eckert et al., 1997). Viewing learning from an individual learning perspective represents it in terms of a tension between individuals, knowledge and the organisation; and it is each learner's responsibility to acquire accumulative knowledge from an older generation and pass it on to other people. Not many organisations have realised that learning is part of individual life and hence not necessarily a planned or intentional activity (Elkjaer, 2003; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995). It can be assumed that organisations which used to support the individual model, based on processing information in order to modify individual assumptions and knowledge, have more recently replaced this with a view of learners as members of a community whose understanding is built as a function of interaction with others (Miner & Mezas, 1996; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995).

Other theorists have expanded their perception of OL beyond the individual possession of learning (Hedberg, 1981). Fahy et al. (2014: 123) highlight the evolution of situated learning thus: "The concept of learning and knowing as situated activity has been a major development in theory on

organisational learning.” Other theorists have conceptualised OL as a socially constructed phenomenon (Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1966). Therefore, the focus has moved from the individual to a perception of OL in terms of association, group activity and corporate development. Subsequently, researchers have adapted to the need to study OL from a functionalist perspective, which is aligned with the acquisitional perspective to create an interpretive focus, and social constructivist approaches in line with a participatory perspective. The primary emphasis of the social constructionist perspective is to move the locus of learning from individual minds or organisational artefacts to group formation and from personal to collective identity (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Cook & Yanow, 1993; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995).

The discussion of learning between individuals and organisations has moved on to the discussion of learning between groups or communities and organisations as a whole. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2000), recent advances have added value to the field of OL, thanks to the development of language that enriches the discussion. Based on social learning theory, learning takes place whenever employees, regardless of their position, intend to perform an action in the workplace. These actions include achieving tasks, interacting with others, observing them, contemplating how work is done and considering possible ways of doing it better (Guns & Anundsen, 1996). Gherardi (1995) asserts that learning encompasses the activities of learners in everyday life as well as at work, through the process of negotiating meaning. Therefore, learning is about being active in social relations (Elkjaer, 2003). OL goes beyond insight, the acquisition of new knowledge, the modification of behaviour or changing attitudes; it is about implementing the knowledge gained and experimenting with using that knowledge so that the organisation stays ahead.

It can be argued that individuals process information and construct their mental structures both in the acquisition of knowledge and in collective learning, but the main difference is the setting, because in the former perspective learners act individually, whereas in the collective perspective they act collaboratively in a socio-cultural setting (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). Therefore, the social process of learning can be said to encompass individual learning. In other words, while social actors interact with each other they achieve cognitive learning in a much more sophisticated way as they become able to construct or reconstruct their mental structures.

1.4 The popularity of organisational learning in the Middle East

In order to understand why the growing popularity of OL in many countries has not been matched in the Middle East, it is necessary to examine the influence of economic, cultural and social factors on organisations throughout the last five decades. From an economic perspective, many countries in the Middle East experienced a dramatic shift in their economic status in the mid-twentieth century due to the discovery of natural resources including oil, gas and other materials, which has greatly increased their revenues. There have followed many notable developments in public and private organisations, obliging them to respond to both internal and external forces. The need to appreciate the value of learning in an organisational context has arisen from an external force (Örtenblad, 2002), namely the influence of Western culture on those of Middle Eastern countries. Although these countries might have been expected to respond immediately to this external cultural influence by promoting OL, many of them, particularly in the Arab region, appear to have been constrained from doing so by internal forces, including political, social and cultural factors. From a political perspective, governments play a significant role in governing and directing organisations' focus. Arab governments have largely required organisations to focus on products and services rather than development and learning, with the result that they have failed to recognise

that products and services can be copied or made obsolete by advances in technology and that competitors will tend to outperform organisation which do not learn. Therefore, focusing on learning is seemingly the only option for competitiveness. In addition to this political focus on products and services, governments in the Arab world have been reluctant to reform their structure, with the consequence that organisations are no longer able to fulfil their goals (Rees et al., 2011).

Alongside these political considerations, social factors in the Middle East and specifically the Arab region tend to drive employees to work in the public sector in order to maintain high status and income. The attraction of the public sector for employees can be seen as a response to the political support that is given to the public sector. Al-Yousif (2004: 14) describes the government sector in Arab Gulf countries as being “large by international standards, accounting for as much as 60% of GDP and higher than that of employment”. This sustained governmental support and supervision of public organisations, allied with a failure to reform them, constitutes a significant barrier to the adoption of OL in the Arab countries of the Middle East.

On the other hand, the private sector, which is generally considered to be the key to building a strong economy, tends in these countries to be dominated by expatriates. As a result, the local people do not possess the skills needed to transform their organisations into learning organisations. Recently, governments in the Middle East have recognised the dual problem of a public sector unable to hire all local graduates and a private sector unconvinced of the value of hiring those who do not have the skills to compete globally. In fact, if organisational learning were supported in both sectors, employees and organisations would have the capabilities to compete in today’s world. Social and cultural factors also support the political reasoning, in that learning has not been the main concern of these organisations. An example of the changing patterns of learning can be seen in Central European businesses undergoing the change from socialism to capitalism and having to

adapt as they internalise new forms of organisational behaviour in the market economy (Merkens et al., 2003). Among the consequences of the transformation from a command economy to the free market are an increase in foreign investment, a rise in employees' educational level and know-how exploration, and an improvement in the interrelationships among these European countries.

Although the notion of OL originated in the West, it has become significant throughout the Middle East, including in particular in SAFORG, the firm of interest to this study. The discussion here is not about being ahead or behind; instead, it is about when such a concept has momentum in a particular context and at a given historical moment. The reason for the importance of examining now the concept of OL in the Middle East is that this region has relatively recently become a significant player on the world economic stage, necessitating initiatives to boost the competitive advantages of Middle Eastern organisations.

Four factors can be said to underlie the growth in popularity of OL in the Middle East. First, the region is influenced by Western culture through mechanisms including interregional cooperation between higher education institutions and the large numbers of foreigners being employed by Middle Eastern firms, ending their isolation and forcing them to establish networks through which to acquire external learning. Senge (2010: xvi) declares that organisations everywhere "are becoming more networked, which is weakening traditional management hierarchies and potentially opening up new capacity for continual learning, innovation, and adaptation". Therefore, OL becomes essential for organisations that aspire to sustainability.

Secondly, the popularity of OL rests partly on the need for businesses and other organisations to be competitive. Chermack (2011: xiii) explicitly promotes "the fundamental role of learning in organisations as the basis for competitive advantages", while Drucker (2008) considers successful OL to be a milestone for organisations seeking competitive advantage. As organisations

increasingly look to human resources development techniques to deliver the capacity building they need to improve performance and reinforce the change agenda as an ongoing phenomenon, OL has begun to be increasingly integrated into HR interventions to deliver continuous improvement and competitive advantage.

A third reason for OL becoming popular is that most knowledge is in a tacit format, requiring OL to help make it explicit and attainable by other members of the organisation. If employees are not able to learn, they will probably not be able to compete sustainably. Learning generated from continuous interaction becomes significant because it is robust, untradeable and difficult to imitate (Nonaka et al., 2003).

Last but not least, OL has gained popularity because it encourages communication across groups of specialists. Organisations urge their members to specialise, which means that employees who hold specialised knowledge in a particular field, such as engineers, architects and designers, tend to be connected with others in the same disciplines. Although having groups of specialists in place seems beneficial for organisations, it creates boundaries for knowledge transmission across disciplines and ultimately prevents OL from occurring. Conversely, OL encourages external communication because valuable learning does not only happen via interactions within organisations; instead, valuable knowledge sometimes comes from the feedback loop and communication with external actors, such as patients and their families in a healthcare context (Hollnagel et al., 2018).

This broad outline of the history, theory and practice of organisational learning and its relevance to twenty-first century businesses in the Middle East sets the scene for a detailed review of the relevant literature, which now follows

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to examine more thoroughly the theoretical foundation of organisational learning and map out its dimensions, namely the OL environment (OLE), the OL process (OLP) and OL factors (OLFs), as shown in Figure 1. Given the extensive nature of the OL literature, the criteria for selecting these particular dimensions are drawn from the author's critical evaluation of that literature and from the concepts most prominently highlighted by the research participants' perceptions in relation to these dimensions. Each dimension is discussed in a separate section of this chapter, followed by a discussion of related pillars and categories.

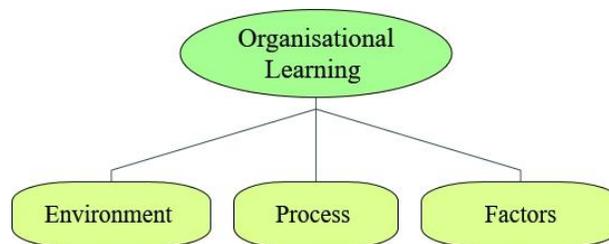


Figure 1 Organisational Learning Dimensions

Section 2.1.1 explains the rationale for selecting each of the three dimensions. In the case of the environmental dimension, for example, the first consideration was the need for employees to understand the environment that promotes ongoing learning (Nonaka, 1994). The second reason to focus on the OLE is that it is not given enough priority by organisations (Janakiraman & Gopal, 2006). Understanding the environment is expected to make managers better able to make the right decisions (Permana & Astiti, 2018), while employees are likely to be more productive. To put it differently, the OLE determines the level of employees' engagement and interaction and their capacity for productive learning. Section 2.2 reviews the literature on the OLE dimension in detail, beginning with an exploration of the distinction between formal and informal learning interactions,

before considering the vertical versus horizontal and internal versus external dichotomies, followed by a summary of work on the OLE dimension.

Section 2.3 considers the process dimension, conceiving OLP to comprise three pillars: learning as a cognitive-behavioural, a cultural and a social process (De Haën et al., 2001). These pillars differ in terms of focus; the first focuses on the individual and information processing, the second on culture and the third on organisational interactions among employees and their well-being. Because of the close connection between individual and organisational learning, the first pillar, cognitive-behavioural processes, takes an individual perspective, while the cultural and social pillars take an organisational perspective. Cook & Yanow (1993) deny that theories of individual learning have made a very useful contribution to understanding the OL phenomenon. However, given the confusion and misunderstanding that has arisen from using individual learning processes to explain organisational learning, they concede that concurrent explanations of both types of learning process are needed.

Section 2.4 discusses the diverse factors that are expected to either facilitate or hinder OL. The OLF dimension has four pillars: individual characteristics, organisational leadership, organisational culture and organisational context. The influence of culture on OL is examined with particular reference to the Middle Eastern context and to the role of the Islamic religion, while discussion of the organisational context pillar considers in some detail the influence of structure, politics, success versus failure and favouritism.

Each of the three main sections ends with a summary, while the concluding section of the chapter itself (2.5) summarises the contributions of the three dimensions to a full understanding of the theoretical foundations of organisational learning.

2.1.1 Justification of OL dimensions selection

The primary reason for studying the environmental dimension of OL is that it would otherwise be impossible to understand learning, which is inseparable from its context. Odor (2018) conceives context as comprising the internal and external environment. It can be said that organisations are mostly affected by the external environment, which includes competitors, clients, politics and the market. Critically, these elements can be seen as outside the organisation's control, unlike the internal environment, comprising its structure, processes and employees. If an organisation exposes itself to the external environment to challenge the status quo, this can lead to successful OL (Nawab, 2014). However, all organisations need to pay close attention to understanding the external environment.

Another reason for considering the OLE dimension is the importance of in-depth exploration of the organisation's environment to understand how information is effectively processed, as well as how new information is created, since examining the organisation's processes and its capabilities would not be possible without understanding its environment (Field et al., 2016; Nonaka, 1994). Conversely, its environment cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the processes that occur within the organisation when OL occurs. This research makes the assumption that learning is a process of interaction within an organisational environment, rather than a cognitive process occurring in individual minds. Based on this orientation, it is imperative to study all aspects of the environment in depth, with a particular focus on the interactions between staff which lead to learning exchange.

There are several reasons for the researcher's decision to select process as the second dimension of OL. First and foremost, OL discourse is mainly about information processing (Nonaka, 1994), participation and social processing (Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012). Furthermore, some scholars

have viewed OL as an ongoing cyclical process (Lipshitz et al., 2002), while others consider the result of OL to be process improvement (Gomes & Wojahn, 2017; Odor, 2018). For these reasons, it is important to concentrate on the OLP dimension, treating the process of learning as a set of cognitive-behavioural, cultural and social processes.

The final dimension of OL selected for this research is related to the factors that trigger learning. The OLF dimension, as noted above, comprises four pillars, namely individual characteristics, organisational leadership, organisational culture and organisational context. The fundamental reason for selecting this dimension with these particular pillars is the existence of a very large body of literature which explores the various factors contributing to OL, including those related to corporate strategy (Odor, 2018), societal-environmental factors (Schilling & Kluge, 2009), exogenous factors (Lipshitz et al., 2002), spiritual factors (Wang & Ahmed, 2002), contextual factors (Greiling & Halachmi, 2013), interpersonal factors (Scott, 2017), generic factors (DiBella et al., 1996) and economic and political factors (Antonacopoulou, 2006).

The following sections now examine each OL dimension in turn, beginning with the environment.

2.2 Dimension 1: The Organisational Learning Environment

The organisational environment is a broader concept than merely the internal environment; it includes customers, competitors, strategic partners, suppliers and regulations (Griffin, 1990). Identifying learning opportunities in each of these categories is essential. Understanding the learning environment is a significant step in explaining human learning behaviour. Haynes et al. (2010) observe that the workplace environment strongly shapes employees' ability to react to and interact with the external environment. The sociocultural perspective emphasises the inseparable relationship between individuals and their environment, unlike the biological and cognitive perspectives, which account for human behaviour in isolation from their environment (DeFillippi

& Ornstein, 2003). A collaborative, trusted and supportive learning environment motivates employees to learn collectively (Gopee & Galloway, 2017).

One of the areas of consensus that emerges from the literature on OL is the need for alignment between environment and organisation (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995). Fiol & Lyles (1985) argue that organisations must align their strategic management with both the internal and external environments in order to remain competitive. Smircich & Stubbart (1985) warn that traditional strategic management might not be competent to provide a comprehensive picture of the organisation's alignment. The literature raises the question of whether it is more important for an organisation to have an alignment with the internal or external environment, or whether both are essential. Bearing in mind that organisations have no control over the external environment, Bowditch et al. (2007) argue that they must change to secure their place in the world.

The focus of this research is on understanding the link between organisational learning and the organisational environment, through learning interactions of various kinds. The remainder of this section examines in turn the three main pillars of OLE which tend to play significant roles in facilitating or hindering OL practice, each related to a pair of contrasting forms of interaction: formal/informal, vertical/horizontal and internal/external.

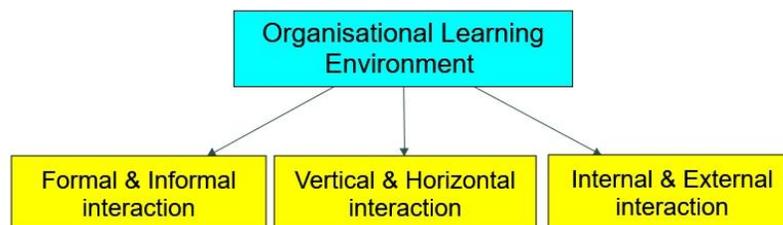


Figure 2 Organisational Learning Environment

2.2.1 Learning Interaction

The environment shapes and influences the interaction process, as actors are inevitably exposed to materials from the environment. Shipton & Defillippi (2011: 73) state that “context shapes what is learnt and how it is learnt and what is regarded as important”; at the same time, the organisation is shaped by interaction (Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015). Interaction takes different forms, based on its sources, whether internal or external, on regulation (formal and informal) and on organisational structure (vertical and horizontal).

The ideas that accumulate in an individual’s mind are worth nothing to organisations unless they are developed through interaction (Nonaka, 1994). Interaction, therefore, can be used as a unit of analysis to understand OL (Michailova & Sidorova, 2011). It can be said that “social interaction – as a prerequisite for learning – is accomplished through communication” (Michailova & Sidorova, 2011: 75). In defining organisational learning, there is always an emphasis on the process of interaction between multiple levels of an organisation (Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015). The focus in this section is on interaction as generating most learning, unlike formal learning in a classroom setting (Plaskoff, 2011). In other words, interaction can be viewed as comprising two contrasting forms: traditional forms of communication such as training courses and regular meetings, which can be defined as ‘routine processes’, and interactions which happen on purpose, called ‘improvement processes’ (Kock, 1999).

In this regard, it can be argued that OL is neither a spontaneous activity nor a fully controlled one; it is an intentional event. This view is aligned with the view of Berthoin Antal et al. (2001: 865), who consider OL “neither an effortless nor an automatic process”. Lipshitz et al. (2002: 82) argue that “for learning to become organisational, there must be roles, functions, and procedures that

enable organisational members collect, analyse, store, disseminate systematically, and use information relevant to their own and other members' performance".

Theoretically, although interaction is considered fundamental to OL and although all research paradigms view the interaction as a cornerstone of OL (Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015), it is noted that the interaction rooted in individual learning theory differs from the interaction rooted in situated or participation learning theory. The former views agents as processors of knowledge, engaged in creating, interpreting, disseminating, storing and retrieving knowledge, with learning as a process taking place inside individual minds, whereas participation learning theory views it as comprising relational activities that occur in a social setting. Learning, for Easterby-Smith & Lyles (2011: 9), "takes place through social interaction and yet cannot be passed from person to person as if it were a physical object". Therefore, the focus of the source of interaction is moved away from individual minds to the social setting (Brandt & Elkjaer, 2011).

Furthermore, while the objective of interaction for a person according to individual learning theory is to enhance his or her knowledge and skills, the expected outcome in social learning theory is to become a practitioner and part of the community. Accordingly, the interaction process seems different between individual and social learning theories in terms of how deep the interaction is, as well as the mechanisms used in the process of interaction. For instance, language is not only considered a medium of interaction to merely transfer knowledge; rather, it entails organisational culture (Brandt & Elkjaer, 2011). In other words, the forms of interaction in a social setting broaden employees' horizons, so that they become thinkers rather than executors.

Knowledge is a product of people's interactions with each other and with the context. This view is in alignment with social constructivism, according to which interaction is the means to produce knowledge (Kim, 2001). In this regard, OL theory considers interaction as having to be planned.

Reality, according to the constructivist view, is intentionally constructed (Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015). Looking at the source of information, the functionalist perspective sees it as imported from external sources, then processed and stored by the organisation (Huber & Daft, 1987), whereas from a constructivist perspective there are both internal and external sources of information, explicit and implicit, which is amplified by social interaction to become meaningful (Nonaka, 1994).

Interaction is thus viewed as a process of creating and producing knowledge rather than processing information (Nonaka, 1994). This imposes the need for integration with the environment in order to produce a dynamic understanding of the organisation. Plaskoff (2011: 220) points out that “employees must learn not only the content and techniques of their domain but also new ways of interacting in the company”. Organisations often have extremely large reserves of information but lack knowledge of how to structure it, potentially causing information overload. OL is the product of various learning processes, which can be classified as formal or informal, vertical or horizontal and internal or external information processing. It is critically important to balance these types of learning processes and to provide the right people with the right information at the right time. The following subsections discuss in turn each of these types of learning within organisations, beginning with the formal/informal dichotomy.

2.2.1.1 Formal and informal interaction

Organisational learning can be categorised as comprising formal learning, including training in a formal setting, and informal learning, which is more associated with tacit knowledge (Billett et al., 2014). The latter can be further subdivided into unintentional learning, social learning and incidental learning, which includes some activities such as task accomplishment (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Organisations need both formal and informal interaction to foster the OL process. It has been proposed that organisational networks learn through formal training and contextualise

that learning through informal methods such as shadowing. Among the many factors suggested as influencing both formal and informal learning are reward, openness and commitment (Brandi & Elkjaer, 2011).

Informal interaction is in alignment with the constructionist view, where cooperative and social relationships are given priority (Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015). Therefore, viewing organisational learning through a social learning lens emphasises its informal aspects, rather than the formal process of acquiring knowledge. Accordingly, the aim of the interaction process is not to import existing knowledge but to discover “unknown territory” and to “face mystery” (Brandi & Elkjaer, 2011: 29).

Although it has been found that informal learning significantly impacts OL, there is no evidence to prove that knowledge is produced through such interactions, as it is created informally. The absence of evidence for informal learning is demonstrated by the findings of Kyndt & Baert (2013), who emphasise the lack of a relationship between informal learning and outcomes (Kyndt et al., 2016a). The flow of informal knowledge has been given little attention, as most studies have been directed to formal learning (Almeida et al., 2011). It is difficult to report informal learning outcomes, as people learn spontaneously without realising the difference (Eraut, 2004). Thus, researchers should seek to provide a set of indicators to identify informal learning outcomes. However, the existing research does identify three expected levels of learning outcomes from informal learning, which are related to specific job function, to organisational level and to generic learning (Kyndt et al., 2016b).

Kyndt et al. (2016b) list various conditions for informal OL to be effective, including opportunities for cooperation to ensure a result, opportunities for evaluation of past experience, opportunities for feedback to identify strengths and weakness, opportunities for reflection to make the present

experience more meaningful for the future, opportunities to acquire knowledge and participation in decision-making, and—finally and most importantly—coaching, so that employees can develop their capabilities to participate effectively in natural learning.

Training can be seen as a form of formal interaction. While OL aims to improve the whole organisation, training focuses explicitly on improving particular subject, individuals or groups. Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2007: 124) warn that such formal training “may not result in demonstrable changes in either behaviour or performance back in the workplace”. Other researchers have criticised formal training as over-ambitious, irrelevant to organisational objectives and therefore inappropriate to practice in the workplace (Antonacopoulou, 1999; Casey, 2005). Thus, as a substitute for formal learning, researchers have identified a need for informal learning, where employees learn in the workplace through collective activities. Eraut (2000) stresses that most human learning is informal and occurs through day-to-day interaction (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Sorohan, 1993).

2.2.1.2 Vertical and Horizontal Interaction

The distinction between vertical and horizontal interaction is associated with organisational structure and is thought to be relevant when considering what facilitates learning. Fiol & Lyles (1985) and Bierly & Daly (2002) favour flatter and decentralised structures rather than hierarchical and centralised ones, because the latter are expected to block learning while the former are more likely to give organisations the opportunity to disseminate and integrate knowledge. Although a decentralised structure is more acceptable, as it encourages the adoption of new ideas, it is thought to slow the implementation of innovations (Tushman & O'Reilly 1996). Demers (2007) notes that teams in centralised structures learn faster and are better able to retain learning.

Horizontal structures are associated with less imposition of authority, thus potentially facilitating learning. Chadwick & Raver (2015: 977) state that in flatter organisations, employees “can focus on networking with relevant coworkers across roles and levels as opposed to certain reporting structures only”. Without the influence of power, employees can critically identify and disagree with issues that are irrelevant or may harm their learning (Edmondson, 2002). Therefore, granting the space for group learning without imposing structural authority could help to build a learning environment in which employees enjoy the autonomy to innovate (Mok, 2013).

As mentioned above, the structure of the organisation produces significantly different types of OL interaction among employees. Furthermore, the influence of the organisational environment on vertical and horizontal interaction has been emphasised. Although Hartley & Rashman (2018) suggest that vertical interaction has produced extensive OL among governmental bodies at the national and local levels, it does the opposite among individuals and groups. This may be because vertical structures reflect power and authority, so that individuals and groups focus on competition in order to prove themselves, which makes them act cautiously and avoid risks, ultimately reducing their willingness to learn (Chadwick & Raver, 2015). Daft & Marcic (2016) claim that vertical structures align well with a stable environment.

Intra-organisational interaction strengthens OL by encouraging cross-project learning. The advantages of such interactions are high connectivity between members of project teams and the ability to move individuals quickly from one project to another without associated cost or the risk of losing knowledge (Roloff et al., 2011). Similar to cross-project learning, Orey (2010) proposes the creation of cognitive apprenticeships, where individuals are invited to take part in a community of interaction to solve a real problem. The advantage of this technique is the possibility for learners to observe how an expert thinks and acts in a real situation (Kaufman, 2019).

2.2.1.3 Internal and External Learning Interaction

The third aspect of the OLE dimension of interest here is the contrast between internal and external interaction, reflected in the extent to which organisations can generate and share knowledge among their members. It is essential for organisational learning that knowledge-sharing interactions can take place at any time. However, some authors have argued that successful interaction requires members to master specific techniques, such as the system of cues as to “when, where, and how knowledge sharing is appropriate” (Von Krogh, 2011: 416). This system of cues aims to deepen the interaction among organisational members, underscoring the need for concentration and minimising interruptions. Interactions will vary in terms of type, time and level, and those with no interruptions and no turnover of members seem most appropriate for shared learning, particularly the most critical type, which is the sharing of tacit knowledge (Tilly, 1999).

Tacit knowledge is not necessarily opposed to explicit knowledge; it is better to see them as interrelated, since much explicit knowledge underpinned by tacit knowledge. Tsoukas (2011: 472) describes them as “not the two ends of a continuum but two sides of the same coin: even the most explicit kind of knowledge is underlain by tacit knowledge”. Therefore, the role of interaction is not to effect a transformation from tacit to explicit knowledge. Instead, it is an articulation of knowledge to make it meaningful for the organisation’s members. From a slightly different viewpoint, the socialisation/externalisation/combination/internalisation (SECI) model of Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) represents the four stages of the conversion of tacit to explicit knowledge. The authors emphasise the importance of third stage, combination, where knowledge has to be articulated in order to be shared among organisational members through the process of interaction (Snell & Hong, 2011).

Chapter Two: Literature review

Learning from external interaction is more complicated than internal learning (Shavinina, 2003). Boundary-spanning and political resistance are considered to be among the factors that impede organisations from gaining knowledge from external sources. However, the power of technology is expected to influence interactions both internal and external to organisations, although technology has more influence on enhancing the organisational capability for external interaction, while at the same time organisations have less control over their members, who cannot be constrained from communicating with the external world and establishing networks (Dierkes et al., 2003).

External interaction differs from internal interaction in terms of the processes used, the expected outcomes and the ability to enrich OL. Van Wijk et al. (2011: 280) claim that external interaction with other organisations “shapes innovation infrastructures”. Lane & Lubatkin (1998) link the capacity to learn to the characteristics of actors in the interaction process. Interaction, especially across organisational boundaries, requires a common language, a clear goal and defined procedures. Argote et al. (2014) found that the exchange of knowledge among pizza stores owned by the same franchise was much greater than interactions with other pizza stores owned by various franchises. Their study emphasised that learning across organisational boundaries requires members to have similar competencies and similar work routines (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006).

External individual interaction is suggested to have a significant impact on the organisation, as individuals obtain whatever knowledge is attractive to them and essential for moving beyond locality to become global (Almeida et al., 2011). Nevertheless, there needs to be an adaptation to the organisational context and a sharing of knowledge among a broader organisational community.

Various factors affect interactions among individuals and groups. One issue tending to hold back the interaction between people is anxiety, which can emerge during the process of interaction. It

can inhibit individuals or groups when it is associated with fear and encourage employees when it is connected with energy and challenges. A second factor that is considered to significantly affect interactions among people is the ethics of care (Vince & Gabriel, 2011). For instance, gender, nationality and sometimes faith can be important parameters on which employees are judged, ultimately affecting the interaction process.

In comparison with individual learning, group interaction seems to be a cornerstone on which to construct a shared understanding. The interaction between a group of employees with the same background seems more natural than the harmony between employees with different functionality and background (Brown & Duguid, 1998). Although diversity of experience has some advantages to enrich community members' knowledge, there is complexity in the process of communication and the language used to construct meaning.

The artefacts of social context influence the level of interaction. Research has found that the similarity in social contexts such as language and the reputation of organisations across different firms has led to more interaction among members (Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009). Some argue that interaction is mainly about the transformation of words between minds in order to construct meaning, and that can be done through virtual interaction via the internet. Studies where teams have used virtual interaction and face-to-face communication have found that the latter proved to be better at establishing sustainable relationships (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000).

2.2.2 Section Summary: the Organisational Learning Environment

The foremost concern of this section on the OLE dimension has been the forms of interaction in the workplace. The organisational environment appears to shape and be shaped by employees' interactions and their inclination to learn. The level of interaction between employees can be used as a measure of whether the working environment supports learning or not. The concept of

interaction emphasises the idea of social learning and places less emphasis on the notion of individual learning. Although learning can be categorised as either formal or informal, the main concern for OL is to share tacit knowledge through informal learning. Therefore, given this association with informal learning, OL tends to be an unplanned and non-linear process and thus a more spontaneous than intentional or formal process. The informality of OL creates certain challenges and means that certain conditions must be fulfilled for it to be successful, including cooperation, feedback, evaluation, continuous reflection and finally the development of learners' communication skills and capabilities.

The second categorisation of learning interactions, as vertical or horizontal, showed that the type of organisational structure influences OL, depending on the extent to which the structure provides employees with the flexibility to interact and share their assumptions as well as to receive the required feedback. Vertical and horizontal structures vary in providing opportunities for learning interaction to take place. Flatter and more decentralised structures are expected to facilitate learning compared with the situation in more hierarchal organisations. The former structure is also expected to provide flexibility for employees to express their opinions and to give them wider opportunities to make a contribution. This is not to say that vertical structures are completely inappropriate, as there are organisations which require a firm authoritarian style, such as military institutions.

The third subsection highlighted the importance of facilitating internal interaction as well motivating employees to explore and benefit from external knowledge. The main concern with internal interaction is to articulate tacit knowledge and make it meaningful, while the focus of interaction in generating external knowledge is to select the knowledge which is most valuable to the workplace, as well as being able to adapt this knowledge to the organisational context. Thus,

internal and external interactions differ in terms of learning processes, the factors that influence these types of interaction, as well as the extent to which the organisation benefits from learning generated either internally or externally.

2.3 Dimension 2: The Organisational Learning Process

Turning to the second dimension of OL, this section examines the most prominent models and orientations that have attempted to explain “how individual learning is transferred to the organisation” (Kim, 1993: 37). Organisations learn through their members (Bessant et al., 2011; Kim, 1993; Syed & Kramar, 2017) and few of them extend learning to the organisational level. Knowing about how organisations and social entities process learning is essential, although it is also elusive, due to the massive amount of information in various forms that multiplies in a fast-changing world, requiring a variety of ways of dealing with it. Schein (1992: 85) declares that “learning is not a unitary concept”, which means that it is not always possible to identify a single method for all eventualities. Thus, knowing one method of solving a problem does not mean that it can be applied to all organisational problems. Learning processes are complicated (Balagangadhara, 1994), based on holding assumptions about how learning is produced. Individuals and organisations are viewed as two separate entities by researchers concerned with *what* individuals and organisations intend to learn and *how*, which explains the learning process. Explanations of this process from a cognitive perspective have dominated the literature and some authors have used notions of individual cognition to illuminate OLP (Cook & Yanow, 1993). Taking this assumption further, Kozlowski & Salas (2009: 367) define OLP as “the acquisition of patterns of cognitive associations and structures that are developed through experience by individuals [and] are then apprehended at the group or organisational level” . This definition reflects the interdependence between the individual and organisational learning processes and

represents the overall process of learning as knowledge acquisition through group and organisational interaction. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate alternative learning processes and to differentiate between three OLP pillars, namely learning as a cognitive-behavioural process, a cultural process and a social process, as the following subsections explain.

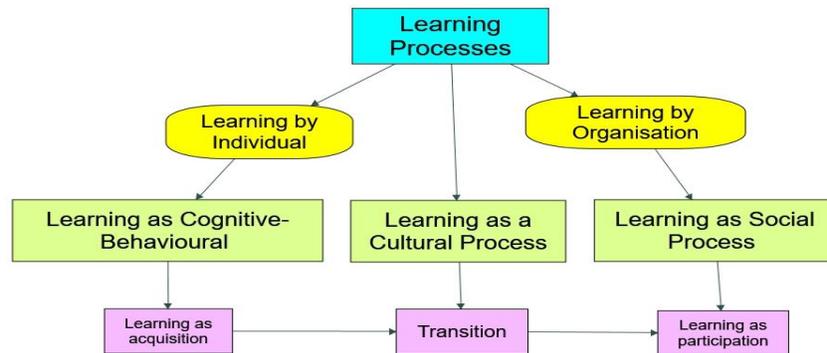


Figure 3 Learning Processes

2.3.1 Learning as a Cognitive-Behavioural Process

The first pillar conceptualises OL as a cognitive-behavioural process similar to individual learning (De Haën et al., 2001). Scholars have often used theories of individual learning to understand the process of organisational learning (Argyris, 1976; Levitt & March, 1988; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). Treating learning as a cognitive-behavioural process depends on the assumption that it entails a change in employees' cognition and behaviour, with the organisation considered as a system with defined boundaries and isolated from the external environment (De Haën et al., 2001). Thus, organisations are unable to benefit from the external environment to acquire the necessary information, which would probably help to change their internal environment.

Several models describe OLP as a cognitive-behavioural process and as a system comprising a sequence of phases in an attempt to answer the question of how organisations achieve productive learning. For Anderson (2018), for example, the organisation operates as a system to maintain alignments within its internal environment. Theories such as learning from mistakes assume that

OLP occurs through the detection and correction of mistakes (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Although this process may seem successful at an individual level, due to changes in cognition and behaviour, it is insufficient to explain learning at the organisational level. Therefore, some scholars have viewed learning as information processing (Huber, 1991; Sinkula et al., 1997) and have proposed alternative models to explain the process of learning efficiently at organisational level. One of these is the model of Huber (1991), whose four phases are described by Pastuszak et al. (2012: 4) as “knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation, and organisational memory”. This model assumes a systematic process which is problematic in various ways.

First, Tsui-Auch (2003: 727) affirms that to describe it as a static “input-processing-output system, compresses the complex, social process of learning into a linear sequence of discrete processes, and disregards the concurrence of processes and likelihood of feedback loops between them”. Perhaps learning is not similar to a prescription or a recipe, because human beings differ in their abilities and desires, making it inappropriate to treat them in a stereotypical, phased and transitional manner. Second, OL is a continuous process where employees act as learners and teachers in reciprocal ways. This can be achieved only in the presence of continuous feedback that enables employees to develop their skills and abilities continuously. Subsequently, scholars have realised that employees require a dynamic learning process. Thirdly and most importantly, OL is about the transformation of the organisation as a result of learning; in other words, learning has no value unless it is reflected in organisational practices and values, a truth which is ignored in Huber’s model (Hislop et al., 2013).

The model introduced by Daft & Weick (1984) differs by its inclusion of scanning, interpreting and learning processes. One of its advantages is that it assumes that knowledge involves shared understanding and joint sense-making (Willems et al., 2018), which cannot be achieved without

scanning the environment, interpreting it and developing a sense-making ability. However, this model still appears to treat learning as individualistic and exclusively aimed at changing individual behaviour; therefore, it is criticised for the absence of levels of learning, unlike OL, which is categorised as multilevel (Crossan et al., 1999).

Similar to those of Huber, Daft and Weick, the model proposed by Kim (1993) represents the transfer of individual learning to organisational learning (Pastuszak et al., 2012). Its acronym, OADISMM, signifies “observe, assess, design, implement-shared mental models” (Kim, 1993: 10). Kim’s greatest strengths include a focus on reconstructing mental models, which moves the role of the learner from merely acquiring knowledge to reacting with it and changing one’s way of thinking accordingly. Furthermore, changing employees’ mental models is not enough unless the outcomes of learning are implemented and action is taken. Although this model is categorised as an individual learning theory for its focus on the individual mental model, the author believes that it makes a significant contribution to understanding OL.

The models discussed above view OL as information processing. They focus on individuals rather than on collectives and the social interactions required for OL. The process of learning drawn from the cognitive perspective is problematic and insufficient to explain OL, due to the nature of the activities comprising the cognitive learning process, such as acquiring the knowledge needed to fix a machine. This type of knowledge is insufficient to build thinking capacities and ultimately unfit for OLP. It seems clear that the above models concentrate on information processing rather than cultural or social learning interactions. However, they are followed by the complementary process of storing and retrieving information (Shavinina, 2003). Thus, knowledge is perceived as a commodity which needs to be manufactured through a process and stored in a particular place. Subsequently, scholars have found it challenging to explain OLP using the concept of information

processing, because tacit knowledge is by definition not easily articulated. These considerations led Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) to propose an alternative model which perceives OLP not as a sequence of linear phases but as a transformational process. Their SECI model thus describes a spiral process to convert knowledge from “tacit to tacit (Socialisation); tacit to explicit (Externalisation); explicit to explicit (Combination), and explicit to tacit (Internalisation)” (Gourlay, 2003: 1). Although the SECI model represents employees’ conversion of knowledge from one form to another via these four processes, its primary focus remains knowledge processing.

2.3.2 Learning as a Cultural Process

Exploring the process of learning from a cognitive perspective yields the insight that it is not exclusively a change in behaviour or an increase in knowledge aggregation. Indeed, from a cultural perspective, the focus should be neither on changing cognitive or behavioural skills, nor on collective identity (De Haën et al., 2001), but exclusively on the cultural aspects (Balagangadhara, 1994). This approach to the learning process is a result of the need to view organisational learning beyond the cognitive perspective discussed above, which is not to say that the cognitive and cultural learning perspectives are mutually exclusive, but that the latter complements the former (Cook & Yanow, 1993). Bruner (2009: 161) puts it this way: “Learning and thinking are always *situated* in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilisation of cultural resources”.

Cultural learning is understood as collective process that exceeds individual efforts, as it entails artefacts of the organisational culture. The author considers that the best models in this category are the 4I model of Crossan et al. (1999) and single-loop/double-loop learning as proposed by Argyris & Schon (1978). The 4I model encompasses four stages, namely intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalising (Crossan et al., 1999) across the individual, group and

organisational levels. The reason for embracing it as representative of the cultural process approach is that it has comprehensive features which entail processing the information at individual, group and organisational levels. Although the model is consistent with previous ones in comprising a sequence of stages, it seems more comprehensive because it entails an explanation of learning occurring at those three levels (Dierkes et al., 2003) and because the processes occurring at the group level closely resemble those of organisational learning (Argote, 2012), so that understanding the former probably helps to understand the latter.

The reason for categorising single and double-loop learning as a cultural process is the need to apply a critical way of thinking in order to move from single-loop to double-loop learning (Argyris, 1976). It is essential to question organisational norms, values and beliefs by reference to cultural components in order to solve a problem. The generation of new knowledge through double-loop learning cannot be achieved if employees or their leaders resist the need to challenge their mental models and take things for granted. The following paragraphs examine these two models in depth.

The 4I model links the organisational level to the individual and group levels, positing that learning begins at the individual level at the intuiting stage, then moves to the group level at the interpreting and integrating stages. Finally, learning becomes institutionalised via systems and procedures at the organisational level (Gold et al., 2013). Although the model provides a process by which to conceptualise learning at each stage, it is associated with some difficulties in conducting this process, such as power and politics.

The intuition stage faces some difficulties related to employees' ability to intuit and share their insights with others at the group and organisational levels (Bess & Dee, 2008). Experienced employees, for example, may believe in the importance of accommodating the latest technology, but fail to realise the rationale for embracing a specific technological change in the organisation.

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The interpretation stage of the 4I model involves using imagery and metaphor to communicate ideas among employees and so to construct a shared mental model. The communication component is the key to a successful interpretation process, so without proper dialogue, the whole process is put at risk. In other words, employees need to produce some ideas at the intuition stage and these must be transmitted through the dialogue process in order to construct a mental model. Weakness at any of these stages could lead to the failure of the following stages of integration and institutionalisation.

The unique feature of the 4I model is the move from processing knowledge to action via the integration stage. Crossan et al. (1999) assert that putting into practice employees' interpretations and mental models is significant in delivering an in-depth understanding of the constructed meaning and in providing new insight and the migration of their understanding. Once the learning is integrated into workplace practice, then it becomes institutionalised, provided that it is embedded in aspects of the work; but critics have suggested that the embedded learning might obstruct an exploration of a new idea or prevent employees from initiating a different way of thinking (Bess & Dee, 2008).

Santos & Steil (2015) used the 4I framework to identify different forms of power at each of its stages, arguing that the impact of power at each level of the framework had been neglected and that there is therefore no guarantee of the transformation of a new idea to the institutionalisation stage. Subsequently, they tried to identify what forms of power might occur at each stage and it is essential to understand that these forms of power are not always seen as dysfunctional, but as crucial to fuel the process. At the intuition stage, the disciple process encompasses socialisation and teamwork to inspire organisational members to deepen and build their experience; and training and compensation to encourage them to move to the interpreting stage. The form of power at the

interpreting stage is influence, which involves techniques and tactics to persuade other actors who defend the idea. At the third stage, the integration process is about building a shared understanding through dialogue and conversation. Because of limited options of ideas, force becomes a form of power to promulgate new ideas and discarded old ones. The final form of power, at the institutionalisation stage, is domination, to deal with expected resistance to change.

It will be noted that forms of power differ from one level to another, which indicates that individuals need a different capacity to deal with their form of power. Lawrence et al. (2005) have successfully identified various forms of power, helping to understand what makes some insights reach the institutionalising level while others fail. It can be said that the forms of power suggested at each level of the 4I framework are connected to certain activities related to individuals while neglecting activities inherited from organisational policy, such as the influence of organisational structure, strategy, system and procedures. Therefore, because the focus of this research is to explore organisational learning practice from the social and situated perspective, it is essential to consider the context that provides meaning to OL activities (Fahy et al., 2014).

The second model of the OL cultural process is single-loop and double-loop learning. Schön & Argyris (1996) model the processes and mechanisms of learning by contrasting the low quality of learning and its outcome, represented in single-loop learning, which merely explores and improves the status quo, with double-loop learning, which requires organisational members to use critical thinking and reflection (Kourdi, 2015) to examine the root of the problem, which might include addressing 'unquestionable' issues. It has been shown that double-loop learning is superior to single-loop learning (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999).

Although the single-loop/double-loop distinction is metaphorically accepted, it has not been fully incorporated in practice (Huber, 1991). Single-loop learning represents a focus on routine thinking

and incremental change, whereas double-loop learning represents radical rethinking and transformational change. Therefore, one criticism is that the latter requires outside intervention to work effectively (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). It can be argued that single-loop learning is a practical tool for a quick and workable solution. However, its focus on past routines restricts the understanding that what has always happened in the organisation can no longer deliver value in the long run (Prange, 1999).

Double-loop learning, on the other hand, aims to see the big picture and enhances employees' imagination, which is quite challenging as a disruption of routine processes, unless organisations have the strategy of learning through improvement. Most organisations frequently practice single-loop learning when they detect a problem and seek a quick solution, whereas very few question the norms and assumptions underlying the problem as required for double-loop learning (Hughes, 2010).

2.3.3 Learning as a Social Process

In contrast to the cognitive-behavioural perspective, OL can be viewed as a social learning process, if noncognitive learning is considered more competent to deal with workplace intricacies (Soon & Ang, 2008). The social learning approach focuses on the process of social interaction rather than on knowledge itself. Social learning forms the substance of theories such as the community of practice (CoP) model introduced by Lave & Wenger (1991). Some other theories aligned with the CoP view are the explicit and tacit knowledge model of Polyani (Fai Pun & Nathai-Balkissoon, 2011) and after-action review, developed by Garvin et al. (Garvin et al., 2008). There follows a discussion of the CoP model and a brief outline of after-action review.

The CoP model focuses on knowledge creation and transfer (Roberts, 2006), asserting that in general, "learning occurs by becoming a participant in practice" (Gold et al., 2013). The concept

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is of a system of social participation between people to negotiate meaning. In other words, CoP simply means the production of new knowledge from experience in a social setting. The negotiation process, as identified by Wenger (1998), occurs in three main stages, named mutual engagement, collective expertise and shared repertoire. The CoP has no predetermined structure, but emerges in response to need, such as forming a team for a specific purpose at a particular time. Therefore, the CoP is not a structured entity, so management and managers have no defined role in facilitating and supporting it. Brown & Duguid (1991) express a different view, that managers can contribute to organising a CoP and help its members to exchange knowledge with other communities.

One weakness of the CoP model is relational power, making CoPs applicable in some contexts and unsuitable for others (Birkinshaw & Sheehan, 2002). The model has been criticised for not integrating OL, prompting various attempts at bridging the gap, but the element of power has not generally been taken into consideration (Huzzard, 2004). Easterby-Smith et al. (2000) also note that politics and power are too often considered as factors inhibiting learning either within organisations and departments or between organisations. This happens because CoP members vary in their ability and those who start as peripheral may be influenced by the power of another member, who acts as a source of knowledge or expertise. Then, when peripheral members move to full participation, they wield more power. Subsequently, members vary in their contribution to the negotiation of meaning, based on their possession of power. Therefore, meaning negotiation becomes dominated by some holders of power and neglects others, which ultimately results in peripheral members not being developed (Roberts, 2006). Critics of the theory of Lave and Wenger thus object that relational power remains significant due to its influence on members' ability to become full participants. This reveals the need for further exploration of the process whereby

individuals construct meaning in a social context and of the various factors that might facilitate or inhibit their full participation in the development of knowledge. Coopey & Burgoyne (2000) suggest that employees' participation and their ability to construct meaning are possibly influenced by both external and internal pressures.

As mentioned above, the distribution of power influences CoP members' participation and therefore shapes the social interaction so that employees become less confident in each other. Even though there is a common understanding that CoP reduces the authoritarian style of managers by providing self-control of CoP members, this lack of trust prevents the development of mutual understanding between community members and is considered to inhibit the transfer of knowledge (Roberts, 2006). Moreover, the lack of trust not only prevents employees from asking candid questions but also demotivates them from building a collaborative relationship (Billett et al., 2014).

The second model related to the social process category is that of after-action review, a process comprising a debriefing as to what has happened against the set goals, followed by an identification of a proposed plan for the future (Garvin et al., 2008). Both of these stages of the process require collective effort, meaning that such a review cannot be achieved individually.

2.3.4 Summary: the Organisational Learning Process

The OLP dimension comprises alternative ways of conceptualising how learning is processed in an organisation. The first approach, looking at the learning process from a behavioural and cognitive perspective, emphasises the idea that a linear or sequential series of stages is necessary for productive learning to fulfil cognitive and behavioural individual needs. Therefore, from this perspective, the OLP tends to focus on the internal environment of the organisation rather than exploring learning opportunities beyond organisational boundaries. The behavioural-cognitive process also contributes to individual rather than organisational learning, which means that the

view of learning as a result of a change in employees' cognition and behaviour cannot adequately explain the OLP. Furthermore, Fiol & Lyles (1985) affirm that change does not necessarily denote learning.

To explain OL as a cultural process, this section has examined the 4I model and single-loop versus double-loop learning. The 4I model implies the transformation of learning across the organisational level. The model benefits from cultural artefacts to enhance the level of collaboration among the group members as they construct meaningful knowledge. As to single- and double-loop learning, this approach provides new insight into the cultural dimension by integrating employees' critical thinking to investigate the roots of each problem and construct a meaningful solution.

Scholars who treat learning as a social process provide alternative views to explain how organisations learn through communities of practice and after-action review. It can be concluded that more effort is needed to explain the process of organisational learning, similar to the efforts being made to explain individual learning as a linear sequence of phases. The notion of learning as a cultural process has emerged in response to the inability of the cognitive-behavioural approach to explain the OLP. However, the cultural learning approach should not be seen as a substitute for the cognitive approach. Instead, both approaches are needed to understand the process of organisational learning.

2.4 Dimension 3: Organisational Learning Factors

The purpose of this third and final main section of the chapter is to review and clarify the literature on the factors that may promote or hinder organisational learning. There is no consensus within this literature on the precise identification of factors influencing or associated with OL (Dodgson, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Martínez-León et al., 2011). Nevertheless, this research has investigated

the most salient OLFs related to learners, leadership, culture and organisational context. In response to the body of literature reporting the numerous investigations of factors affecting learning more generally, Filstad & Gottschalk (2013) call for more empirical research to identify the factors facilitating and hindering OL specifically, since the vast majority of factors that have been identified apply to the educational context and are not fundamentally related to learning in an organisational context.

Several studies, e.g. by Hedberg (1981); Kim (1993); March & Olsen (1975), have attempted to identify the factors that influence OL. However, these were performed a number of decades ago and some theorists are not satisfied with the total number of studies in this field. For example, Jones-Evans (2006: 284) states that “few studies have attempted to identify the barriers to organisational learning”. Berthoin Antal et al. (2001) also note that insufficient publications have explored OLFs, adding that the existing body of work lacks systematic analysis. Thus, theorists vary in their alternative perspectives on identifying exactly which factors affect OL.

Weir & Örtenblad (2013) classify the obstacles facing learning organisations into four categories: inability, idealisation, inertia and interest. Obstacles of the inability and idealisation types share a common feature of employees having an interest in adopting the notion of the learning organisation and a desire to do so, but lacking the ability or perception necessary, while the inertia and interest types reflect a disinterest in the idea or an unwillingness to implement organisational learning. Thus, employees of the first two types lack the knowledge or know-how for proper implementation, unlike those of the inertia and interest types. This division of factors affecting OL emphasises two important and influential elements: desire and know-how. Employees may have a desire to learn but lack the means to do so, or they may have the right methods and a supportive environment but lack the inclination; in either case, learning is not achieved.

Taking a different view, March & Olsen (1975) identify four factors which can interrupt the learning cycle, which are role-constrained learning, audience learning, superstitious learning and finally learning under ambiguity (Berthoin Antal et al., 2001). In general, these factors are seen as affecting individual learning, rather than concentrating on learning at the organisational level. Individuals engaged in role-constrained or audience learning become unable to apply knowledge and therefore cannot influence each other's behaviour, while those in the superstitious learning and learning under ambiguity categories become unable to make a difference to their environment and therefore become stagnant and unable to pursue learning.

Kim (1993) proposes a modification of the March & Olsen (1975) model, moving on from the individual focus to describe two factors affecting OL, namely situational and fragmented learning, which are connected to learning from errors and knowledge sharing across organisational departments and are therefore significant to an understanding of OL. Hedberg (1981) introduces the concept of 'unlearning', to address the problem where obsolete knowledge acts as an impeding factor for new learning to take place. The inability to apply new knowledge in the workplace begins when employees refuse to discard the obsolete knowledge caused by the inherited assumptions deeply embedded in their minds which naturally determine their behaviour. According to Schein (1992), as cited by Berthoin Antal et al. (2001), it is more difficult to unlearn unhelpful behaviour in response to negative feedback than it is to do so when the stimulus is a positive reward. This confirms that employees' behaviours and reactions are subject to the experiences they are exposed to, whether positive or negative, that shape their inner convictions and control their subsequent actions and attitudes.

Other more recent theorists avoid the personal focus and propose alternative approaches to identifying OL factors such as contingency. For example, French & Rees (2016) suggest that

employees' learning is influenced by contingent factors like organisational culture, learner-related learning and the resources required to facilitate learning. Other studies highlight a variety of factors affecting OL, some of which relate to corporate strategy, resource allocation and motivating employees for learning (Odor, 2018). Sambrook & Stewart (2000) explore factors affecting OL in the UK and other European countries, identifying common factors related to employees' attitudes, culture and organisational policy attributes, including management commitment and organisation resources.

In order to structure this discussion, it is assumed that the factors mentioned above can be classified into four pillars related respectively to individual characteristics, organisational leadership, organisational culture and organisational context. Each of these is now discussed in turn, to illustrate the extent to which they contribute to the promotion or inhibition of OL.

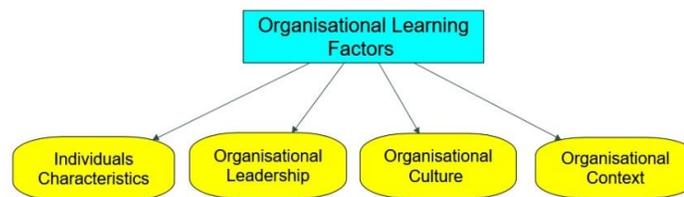


Figure 4 Organisational Learning Factors

2.4.1 Individual Learner Characteristics

The central discourse of OL can be argued to have focused on organisation, culture and structure as units of analysis and to have overlooked the role of individuals (Friedman, 2003). The fundamental reason for discussing learner characteristics and how they influence OL is the importance of alignment and consistency between the individual's activities and the organisation's purposes, policies and structures (Joiner, 2005). In other words, OL cannot happen unless the organisation and its individual members are working towards achieving the same purpose.

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However, individuals' readiness to learn will differ from that of their organisations, so the factors are also different (Scherer & Tran, 2003). Employees' inclination to engage in professional development seems to be one of the critical factors affecting OL (Lohman, 2005). Although it cannot be assumed that all individuals have the capacity to learn and to be equally efficient at doing so, Sambrook (2005: 102) states that "the capacity to learn, individually and collectively, is deemed a critical factor in the ability to adapt to changing work environments, and a key factor in the pursuit of organisational survival". Thus, being concerned about employees' capacity to absorb new information probably enhances OL (Andersen, 2006).

One of the essential inhibiting learning factors which have been investigated by many scholars as explicitly related to learners' inability to learn is defensive routines (Argyris, 1995; Berthoin Antal et al., 2001; Senge, 2010; Swanson et al., 2001). Individual defensive routines are probably similar to the mental models that are conceived as driving employees' actions, which when repeated become an organisational defensive routine. Senge (1992: 5) describes the consequences of these mental models thus: "New insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting". Similarly, Argyris (1995: 20) defines organisational defensive routines as "any action, policy, or practice that prevents organisational participants from experiencing embarrassment or threat and, at the same time, prevents them from discovering the causes of the embarrassment or threat". The defensive routine permanently inhibits double-loop learning, as employees are prevented from experiencing attributes associated with solving problems, thus denying them the chance to learn.

The main reason for defensive routines as described by Argyris (1995) is that individuals lack the skills and competence to practice double-loop learning. Consequently, their defensive routines

gradually meld into organisational culture and become organisational defensive routines. In practice, it is therefore impossible to change organisational defensive routines without changing individuals' defensive routines (Argyris, 1995). Greiling & Halachmi (2013) declare that OL cannot happen unless defensive routines are minimised.

The second factor impeding learning that is related to learners' psychology is an unwillingness to learn. Employees become reluctant to learn and share their expertise with colleagues to avoid being seen as deficient in their knowledge (Starbuck, 1992). If they do not feel secure in discussing their understanding of a particular subject, this feeling is likely to make them fearful of becoming involved in the learning process. More broadly, emotions can play a critical role in enhancing or hindering employees' ability to learn. Scherer & Tran (2003) examined the effects of emotion on employees' readiness to learn, concluding that emotion is essential for OL success and that it therefore needs careful consideration to monitor its effects on the organisational environment. Emotions such as anxiety can act as powerful obstacles to OL because the feeling of fear will tend to spread among individuals, making it extremely difficult for them to change their mental models. In this way, the anxiety and fear associated with learning new ideas will become a definite hindrance to learning, as these emotions become rooted in an affected employee's personality and act as inherited characteristics, even if the circumstances that created these fears no longer exist in the organisation.

Alongside work on factors tending to hinder learning, other scholars have explored facilitating factors, such as employees' engagement and disconformity. Merriam & Bierema (2013) report that positive measures of employee engagement, including sharing a vision and having a dynamic dialogue to test their assumptions, were associated with a significant improvement in labour relations and product establishment in a study of the Ford Motor Company. Testing assumptions

requires disconfirmation as a preliminary stage, in order to obtain knowledge. Disconfirmation, which is about rejecting the idea of taking things for granted and embracing the notion of questioning assumptions, can lead to identifying potential improvements and recognising the required information. Therefore, it can be considered necessary for employees to pass through a disconfirmation stage as part of knowledge sharing in OL (Leonard, 2002). Employees' disconfirmation creates the desire for new knowledge, which can be gained through "unofficial and informal networks of people that span organisations and even industries and impact or even drive the organisational learning cycle" (Maier, 2007: 156). Employees who have strong professional networks are better able to solve workplace problems than those who are trying to solve such problems individually, which illustrates the need for expanding networks and the importance of collaboration (Cherniss & Adler, 2000).

2.4.2 Organisational Leadership

Leaders play a significant role in learning organisations (Aragón-Correa et al., 2007; Coopey, 1995; Örtenblad, 2002). Thus, in today's world, leaders seem to need not only the capacity to be constant learners but also the ability to develop their organisations' capacity to adapt to learning (Joiner, 2005). However, there are some arguments about whether or not leaders become powerful and have more authority once their organisations adopt the idea of the learning organisation (Weir & Örtenblad, 2013). The process of OL tends to decentralise decision making and to grant more authority to employees while reducing the authority of managers. Proponents of the adoption of OL such as Child & Heavens (2003: 322) warn managers against becoming an obstacle to OL, advising that "senior managers should also be receptive to the possibility that they are standing in the way of organizational learning".

Managers who support the idea of OL can preserve their power by obtaining new skills and capabilities that enable them to direct the organisation's strategies and goals. Rogers (2016) reassures managers that they can drive their organisations by obtaining new skills and appropriate knowledge. However, a leader's discourse in the workplace is always confronted with the idea of a superhero who controls the process of learning (Coopey, 1995; Fenwick, 2001), who has ready answers to whatever issues arise in the organisation and who is the only trusted source of knowledge. According to Sadler (2003), viewing the leader as a hero shapes the relationship between leaders and followers, so that employees become passive and underestimate their ability to contribute to learning interactions and to generate the knowledge that they need to deal with the challenges faced in the workplace. Nicoll (2005) argues that employees should not rely on their leader to fulfil organisational goals; instead, an active interaction should be conducted between leaders and followers for productive learning.

Leaders recognition of the importance of learning may contribute towards the success of OL (Appelbaum & Reichart, 1998; Stonehouse et al., 2001). Conversely, the lack of good leadership is viewed as hindering OL, because "high power distance and emphasis on harmony maintenance may deter individual employees from challenging the assumptions of their leaders and may prevent individual learning from being shared at organisational level" (Snell & Hong, 2011: 639). Therefore, being a leader requires full engagement with employees to enable them to challenge their assumptions and consequently to generate valuable feedback, which is expected to benefit both leaders and followers.

The literature differentiates between transactional and transformational leaders and considers the extent to which each of these types can contribute to learning. To address the distinction between the two, Podolny et al. (2010: 65) state that the transformational leader focuses on activities that

are more likely to “change beliefs and values”; therefore his or her concern is to find ways of engaging employees in the context (Sadler, 2003). The transactional leader, by contrast, tends to focus on changing immediate behaviour to satisfy employees’ needs. Hence, the transformational leader seems to have a more direct impact on facilitating learning than the transactional leader (Goula et al., 2019).

One of the traps that transformational leaders might fall into is the assumption that the leader is heroic and that his or her actions always lead to success, whereas the role of the transformational leader should be to boost learning by transferring the focus on the leader as the only one who knows everything to a focus on the team whose members work to achieve goals collectively. Once employees’ capabilities and confidence are built, the focus can be shifted to enable individuals to work efficiently on their own (Hayes, 2015). Sadler (2003) offers the example of a leader who acts as a mediator between followers and the situation, and as a catalyst to inspire employees to come up with brilliant ideas. This example shows that leadership is not about giving instructions and being action-centred, but about energising employees to be constant learners.

For Suliman & Hayat (2011: 111), leadership is influenced by “socio-cultural factors... such as charismatic and spiritual leadership, specifically in Islamic states”. The impact of socio-cultural factors, along with political and economic ones, forces organisations to adapt to radical change and to focus on production and services instead of the quality of leadership (Rees et al., 2011). The main reason for those organisations to focus on production rather than quality is the need for survival more than sustainable development.

Schein (1992) notes that one of the most critical factors tending to constrain learning is changing the cultural norms of leaders, such as treating them as having unlimited abilities to provide solutions for every single problem in the workplace. Leaders need instead to embrace the notion

of teamwork. Furthermore, according to Schein (1992) and Shallcross (1973), leaders can facilitate OL by embracing errors and treating them as an opportunity for learning, as well as creating a nonjudgmental learning culture that appreciates and welcomes new ideas without ignoring the uniqueness of individuality. Most importantly, leaders must appreciate collective and collaborative learning rather than individual efforts in order to change the cultural norm of one-person work achievement.

The role of a transformational leader in facilitating learning has been identified by several studies which have confirmed that leaders could inspire and motivate OL at every stage of acquisition, interpretation and transformation, and most importantly support the process of dialogue between organisational members (Amitay et al., 2005; Brown & Posner, 2001). A research study by Sadler (2003) found that the most critical role for a leader in facilitating learning is the adaptation required in passing on knowledge from one generation to another. Furthermore, Child & Heavens (2003: 309) see senior management as having “a critical role in providing a direction for learning (vision), promoting necessary teamwork, and overcoming resistance to change”. These activities cannot be performed successfully unless the leader concerned observes them and provides proper feedback. It is possible to conclude that the leader has multiple roles in promoting learning, including adaptation and monitoring, and that these roles cannot be accomplished without employees’ collaboration. In other words, the quality of the relationship between employees and their direct manager significantly affects OL.

Joiner (2005) suggests that a leader should practice three principles to create OL. The first is sharing the purpose, to establish an alignment between the organisation and individuals’ activities. Second, active experimentation means that the organisation must constantly adapt to the changing environment through continuous feedback. The final principle is open integrity, which means

incorporating individuals' contributions into collective action in alignment with organisational goals. Similarly, Block (1993) suggests that organisation should move from the idea of leadership to what is called 'stewardship', which essentially means shifting the focus from viewing the leader as the centre of the universe to one of power distribution and employees engagement. Jobe (2017) posits three principles for leading in the manner of a steward, the first of which is that the leader should appreciate history and the people of the past who have paved the way, adopting their values and principles and using them to ensure success. The second principle is to engage with the current position that the leader holds and to do whatever is possible to build on it. The third is to imagine the future of the organisation without being a part of it. Embracing these principles in the workplace will help the leader to become a learning facilitator.

Although the theories set out in the literature confirm the significant role of the leader in supporting and creating the right environment for learning (Healy, 2020; Marsick & Watkins, 1999), there is evidence that in reality some leaders fail to manage the learning process in their institutions. This failure may have several causes, including not only the qualities of the leaders themselves (Van Wart, 2008), but also the organisation's support for them and the extent to which staff are willing to cooperate with them in producing OL.

Focusing on individual leadership has been found to be a key reason for the organisation to either learn or to sustain learning (Fullan, 2011). In other words, leaders will not be able to develop their leadership skills unless they learn, while learning will not happen without engaging with employees and learning from ongoing learning activities (Peltier, 2011). Crossan et al. (2008) and Rosenbach (2018) concur that a leader must master skills at multiple levels of leadership: the self, others and the organisation. At the self-level, the authentic leader must have self-awareness and self-regulation, while at the second level, the leader must have the communication skills to

establish good relationships and influence his or her subordinates. The final level of leadership is related to the organisation; the leader must address the interrelation between the organisation and its environment.

Leadership style is connected with how decisions are made, which is also considered the central theme of OL. Involving learners in the decision-making process can yield better learning. While employees are discussing a particular issue that requires a decision to be made, a productive discussion probably contributes to the development of their skills and their cognitive ability to critically address a situation of conflict. Involving employees in decision-making does not necessarily mean giving them the power to make final decisions, but may be limited to allowing them to take part in the knowledge dialogues which help their leaders to reach a proper decision. Surprisingly, one of the contradictory issues in workplace environments that leaders often perceive the need to involve employees in everything that matters for the organisation, whereas in reality, the membership of the boards and committees which are responsible for making important decisions is limited to those who have authority and decision-making capacity, to the exclusion of ordinary staff (Paulsen, 2018). Therefore, the learning that occurs in these gatherings is limited to this narrow membership, although their discussions may well be conducted at a deep level corresponding to the practice of double-loop learning.

It can be concluded that employees need to be involved in every aspect of organisational life that would enhance their knowledge and help them to change their assumptions and mental models. Therefore, according to Brandi & Elkjaer (2011), individuals should be empowered to become involved in decision-making, which can be enhanced by developing a mental model. Shipton & Defillippi (2011) note that the organisation needs to create a structure where individuals freely intervene and participate in making the right decisions. Moreover, an individual's role in

promoting his or her own participation in decision-making is to process information and apply knowledge, which requires team-building capabilities (Alavi & Denford, 2011). The capabilities required for individuals to utilise information in decision-making are called cognitive and collective skills. Crossan et al. (1999) label the process of acquiring these skills as ‘integration’, whereas Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) call it ‘internalisation’.

Empowering employees to take part in decision-making will build their confidence and enhance their inclination to learn and to prove their capabilities. One aspect of employee empowerment is to involve them in decision-making without fear of making mistakes, which will raise their chances of learning. It appears that encouraging such participation should be initiated in the form of official organisational policy, so that employees at all levels become motivated to take charge of making good decisions and to learn from the experience.

Before moving on to discuss the third pillar of the OLF dimension, which is related to organisational culture, it is essential to define some terms very closely related to the concept of leadership, namely ‘power’ and ‘politics’, and to identify their implications for OL. The main reason for addressing the concepts of power and politics in association with OL, in the view of Contu & Willmott (2003: 283), is the “embeddedness of learning practices in power relations, rather than the cognitive contents of individuals’ minds”. Therefore, the influence of power and politics on learning is inevitable and they could have a positive or negative impact on organisations (Collien, 2018; Denhardt et al., 2018). However, these two concepts have a broader definition, which is beyond the scope of this research. The main concern here is to explore the effects of power and politics on organisational learning through psychological and behavioural lenses. It is often said that leadership discourse is associated with power (Bertocci, 2009); however, according to Nye (2010: 305), “leadership involves power, though not all power relationships are instances

of leadership”. In other words, power does not necessarily imply coercion or hard power, as it can be manifested in soft power in the interaction process (Bertocci, 2009). In the context of this research, the terms ‘power’ and ‘politics’ are used interchangeably.

The issue of political intervention is not given enough attention in the OL literature (Örtenblad, 2002; Poell & Krogt, 2014). Santos & Steil (2015: 115) argue that “political factors in organisational learning have often been overlooked”. Dee & Leišytė (2016: 319) explain why power is necessary in promoting OL: “Power and politics provide the social energy necessary for organisational learning”. Understanding the relationship between power and learning requires an understanding of personal and formal power and the extent to which they influence OL. According to Channel (2017), employees’ learning can be enhanced by rewards and promotions, while it is inhibited by coercive power and punishment. In addition to legitimate power, personal power practised by individuals has a significant impact on learning, such as when experienced employees show their superiority by sharing knowledge. Lawrence et al. (2005) confirm that employees with authority can either obstruct or support OL, depending on whether the learning is in line with their interests.

The link between OL and the influence of power can also be viewed from a social interaction standpoint (Collien, 2018). Taking a constructivist stance in describing learning implies that learning is context dependent (Stavredes, 2011), and provides a constructivist and meaningful understanding (Harasim, 2012). The social-constructivist approach suggests that OL is fully integrated with power relations and is shaped by their strength or weakness, which confirms that OL depends on the degree of interaction within the organisation. Denhardt et al. (2018) asserts that politics can have a negative influence on organisations, especially employees’ interventions, while

power has been found to hinder OL (Hong, 2009). In contrast, Contu & Willmott (2003) view power as a facilitating factor for OL from a situational perspective.

Collien (2018) suggests that for the organisation to dismantle the structure of power dominance and reduce its adverse effects on the learning process, employees should be political by fostering social equality, critical by questioning what is taken for granted and reflexive by representing their actual views on workplace issues. For learners to be social actors, they must be provided with the authority and power to become involved in all aspects of organisational matters; otherwise, learning rarely happens (Gherardi et al., 1998). If individuals treat learning as something that exists solely in their minds, as assumed by the cognitive approach, they are unlikely to become involved in ongoing workplace conflict and its complexities.

2.4.3 Organisational Culture

To identify what drives learning, it is essential to understand organisational culture (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). The culture of an organisation refers to the behaviours and values of individuals and teams that govern the organisation (Jones & Lockwood, 2002; Maltbia, 2016); alternatively, it can be considered to comprise the “accumulated learning of the past” (Schein, 1992: 89). This culture is about collective beliefs, rather than one person’s assumptions; therefore, it is “a pattern of shared norms, rules, values, and beliefs that guides the attitudes and behaviours” of the organisation’s members (Neck et al., 2018: 1). Culture is a hidden and powerful force that runs the organisation beyond our awareness (Schein, 2010). In short, Poole (1999) states that organisational culture determines employees’ behaviour.

A value-driven culture has been considered to facilitate OL. Schermerhorn et al. (2019: 50) declare that “learning organisations require for their success a value-driven organisational culture that emphasises information, teamwork, empowerment, participation and leadership”. In addition,

Zachary (2011) suggests that a mentoring culture can significantly increase learning and leverage existing knowledge into practice. A negative organisational culture may conversely act as a filter that precludes OL (Berthoin Antal et al., 2001). However, it can be changed in response to employees' desire for change (Ruch et al., 2011).

Besides being considered a set of beliefs and norms, the culture of an organisation can also mean an accumulation of prior learning, which could strengthen or weaken employees' inclination to learn, depending on whether connected to a positive or negative experience. To put it differently, employees' motivation to learn is dependent on the type of learning culture and whether it is a pleasant or unsuccessful experience. As a result, employees tend to avoid learning that is connected to a negative experience. In most cases, employees are reluctant to develop learning that is connecting to failure, in order to avoid the pain and anxiety that might be associated with punishment (Schein, 1992).

Therefore, the concurrent challenge for organisations seeking to create a learning culture is to direct the organisational structure, norms, beliefs and values to support ongoing learning as well as to benefit from the accumulative experience. According to Coopey (1995), past experience becomes embedded in the current organisational structure and those employees who take advantage of that structure intend to support it. In other words, the staff of the organisation is divided into two groups: those who are compatible with the existing culture and support its survival and retention, and those who are against the existing culture and continuously seek to change it.

There is a multifaceted relationship between OL and organisational culture. Proponents of the inseparable connection between the two emphasise that learning is strongly influenced by culture (Berthoin Antal et al., 2001; Fook et al., 2015; Zachary, 2006), although culture is not seen as an inherited factor in the learning process (Sloan, 2013). Creating a learning culture in an organisation

is challenging, because of the discrepancy between workplace learning and how employees learn outside the organisation. The existing culture of the organisation itself influences learners' inclination either to do or not to do things, regardless of what is right and wrong (Murray & McKinney, 2014). Garvin & Edmondson (2008) argue that a particular section or department in an organisation can have its own unique learning subculture. The question here is not just how to create such a subculture without the support of the whole organisation, but also how to prevent any negative influence of the whole culture on the subculture and those employees who are involved.

Schein & Schein (2016) contend that organisations can have subcultures depending on the shared history of learning among a group of employees in a particular part of the organisation. Having distinct subcultures in different parts of the organisation can preclude OL from benefiting the whole organisation, primarily if they do not have standard features and do not encourage knowledge sharing. Such an impediment to learning occurs across subcultures when organisational members become unable to communicate with each other due to incompatible terminology. Thus, Kieser (1998) notes that having different languages in one organisation inhibits learning across groups, teams and departments. Conversely, Garvin & Edmondson (2008) argue that even where the whole organisation does not support learning, managers can play a critical role in creating a subculture that promotes it, by modelling groups' assumptions and showing the importance of curiosity and learning.

Despite the emphasis on organisational culture, learning may sometimes happen in the workplace without the need for a learning culture, if it is imposed on employees via formal means such as training. To put it differently, organisations can force employees to attend training courses, but they cannot force them to engage and learn, which can be achieved only by having an ideal working

environment that embraces a learning culture. An ideal working environment is about having clarity as to what people are supposed to do and why, and making explicit the advantages of having them engage and learn together, none of which can be achieved without having a learning culture.

According to Blake (2015), organisations with robust learning cultures tend to outperform their competitors, because they are more likely to respond effectively to customers, fulfilling their needs with work of high quality. The need to create a learning culture emerges from the necessity of informal learning, which constitutes approximately 70% of on-the-job learning, compared to 30% in the form of structured training courses to deliver formal learning (Biech, 2016; Chen et al., 2018; de Wit & Meyer, 2010; Jasper et al., 2013; Merriam et al., 2006). These percentages indicate that firms that are interested only in formal learning and spend the majority of their learning budget on it are mainly concerned with the small percentage which targets individual learning.

Conversely, Stewart & Brown (2019) argue that employees who receive formal learning, such as training, are more productive than those who do not. It is reasonable to see training as a means for employees to gain knowledge and to assert that the more knowledgeable they become, the more capable of sharing knowledge they will be, subject to whether they are motivated enough to do so. By providing their employees with formal learning opportunities, including training courses, organisations may be able to enhance informal learning such as in-house training including coaching and mentoring (Wilton, 2019), which is considered a good foundation for OL.

The discussion of formal and informal learning in an organisational cultural context shows the degree to which organisational culture can influence OL. For instance, informal learning seems to be directed by learners rather than by the organisation; therefore, it is affected more by an individual's beliefs than by the organisational structure. Conversely, formal learning tends to be planned, managed, funded and delivered by the organisation; therefore, it is organised and

structured by the organisation. Meanwhile, informal learning seems to be the main contributor to workplace learning, but as it does not seem to be supported by organisational policy, so creating a culture for it is far more complicated.

In order to create an OL culture, employees need, besides their competencies and skills, to have a set of values to drive their interaction and shared learning behaviours. Moreover, organisations need to promote these values and to reward employees for being committed to them, in order to create a proper culture of learning. Dierkes et al. (2003) note that incentives are among the learning mechanisms which can facilitate the introduction of new norms and help people to unlearn old habits. Rhoades (2016) identifies a causal chain from leaders via values, employee behaviours and culture to performance by which organisations are responsible for incorporating values and promoting the culture that embraces those values by rewarding employees for adopting them.

Creating a learning culture requires some changes in the actual behaviour that is driven by existing values (Carmazzi, 2019). A blame culture, for instance, concerns itself with unacceptable behaviour, which results in employees being blamed and untrusted. The fear and lack of trust associated with this blaming culture may then prevent them from taking a forward step towards learning engagement. As a consequence of such a culture, employees can be passive about sharing their experience, preferring to withhold their knowledge in order to avoid being blamed if something goes wrong.

An OL culture is threatened by the absence of cohesiveness and cooperation between departments. Therefore, the lack of internal communication between departments will tend to prevent the organisation from fulfilling its goals. It is not enough to have an OL culture in some parts of the organisation, within one department or among a group of employees in one section, while other departments are uncooperative and disengaged. There are several reasons why having such a

partial learning culture in only some parts of the organisation will result in failure. First, there will be no support from senior management for learning. Secondly, the absence of internal learning between this part and the rest of the organisation makes the OL process incomplete. Third, there will be a lack of external learning, which is necessary for the completion of OL process.

Learning culture may also be obstructed by employees' complacency and their feelings of knowledge saturation. Complacent employees are unmotivated to become involved in learning activities and unwilling to make the effort to learn, because they are too easily satisfied with the status quo, or as Carmazzi (2019) puts it, too accepting of mediocrity or a live-and-let-live culture. Such employees are not inspired to add extra value to the organisation and are thereby disinclined to learn and to challenge their assumptions. A learning culture can, by contrast, be facilitated when a leader acknowledges employees' ideas and considers them as the most valuable assets for the organisation. However, this cannot be achieved when people at the senior level think on behalf of their employees and force them to believe in their assumptions and act accordingly. Once employees' thoughts are valued, their abilities and competencies are needed and their mistakes are tolerated, then they are likely to be motivated to engage in OL.

Corporate culture is considered to be an essential factor that affects OL, especially for those employees from different countries and cultures. It is also known that employees of different nationalities come with different backgrounds, beliefs and working styles that may differ from those of the host culture dominant in the organisation. Any such discrepancy between cultures can act as a learning barrier, if employees have difficulty in coping with the host organisation's patterns of work (Raines, 2019), including the difficulty of having a universal work procedure. Berthoin Antal & Sobczak (2014) note that foreign and multinational companies are often shaped by the cultural attributes of the country of origin, which is likely to differ from that of the host country.

Culture has been found to affect the relationship between compatriots and expatriates in the workplace (MacIntosh et al., 2019); therefore, multicultural organisations are likely to experience conflict among their employees. However, there is a type of conflict that is positively helpful in promoting OL, when employees use their cultural differences to enhance the level of communication and knowledge sharing (Krebsbach-Gnath, 2003). The Middle East is a multicultural context because its industrialisation has attracted people from different cultures around the world. This makes it essential to explore the cultural attributes of this region and their impact on OL.

2.4.3.1 Organisational culture in the Middle East

This research was conducted in the Middle East; therefore, this subsection examines the cultural attributes of this part of the world. Over the past fifty years, the Middle Eastern region has undergone tremendous changes in all aspects of life, including its infrastructure, economy, politics and value set. These have had a significant impact on organisations and in particular on their cultural attributes and values. Factors that affect the culture in the Middle East are diverse, including Islamic cultural values and a multicultural workforce comprising expatriates of many nationalities. According to the London School of International Communication (2016), 96% of employees of Middle Eastern organisations think that changes in corporate culture are needed, while 35% are ready to leave their organisations if the existing culture fails to meet their expectations. Although these figures are quite high, they indicate the influence of culture on organisations, including employees' inclination to learn.

Given its geographical position in the Middle East, it is significant to explore the impact of Islamic attributes on the OL culture of SAFORG. Approximately 317 million Muslims lives in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Pew Research Center estimates a total global Muslim population

of nearly 1.6 billion (Desilver & Masci, 2017). Islam can be seen to have values of what is right and what is considered to be unacceptable in common with other religions. According to Kyriakidou et al. (2013: 85), “some researchers have noted that HRD often reflects Islamic values [...] influencing a range of attitudes towards organisational change and commitment”. Therefore, embracing Islamic values in organisational culture would not make the organisation appear strange or different from international organisations, because of the universality of values across religions (Ahmad, 2013). For instance, justice is a principle common to most religions; therefore, it is not uncommon to deal justly with employees by treating them according to their achievements, rather than giving equal treatment to all, regardless of laziness or hard work.

Islamic principles require Muslims to practice Islamic values and behave accordingly in all matters of life, at home, on the street or at work. According to Ahmad (2013: 145) “Islam requires its believers to practice the religion in every facet of life including the management aspect”. Therefore, Islamic principles are expected to shape organisational culture and thereby guide and influence employees’ behaviour towards learning (Ali, 1996). Based on these principles, a Muslim employee must be honest and diligent, obeying the maxim that ‘work must be equal to pay’. The principles of Islam do not allow harmful practices at work; if, for example, withholding knowledge would harm the firm, then an employee must not do so.

Furthermore, employees cannot be true Muslims unless they want for their colleagues what they want for themselves. In other words, if employees love to be knowledgeable, then they must desire the same thing for others and direct their efforts to fulfilling this goal. According to Kazmi (2005), management practice must be compatible with Islamic sources of wisdom including the Qur’an (the Holy book of Allah Almighty), and the Sunnah (the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad).

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The people of the Middle East and in particular Arab societies seem to adhere to the principles of Islam, while actual practices give preference to different considerations other than religion. Such preferences which drive employees' behaviour in the workplace include gender, friendships, favouritism and other sorts of network. These practices are usually incompatible with Islamic law, and therefore the fewer people adhere to the principles of religion, the less influence religion has on employees' actions and beliefs. In other words, there is a manifest disregard for the principles of Islam, especially when these principles conflict with personal interests. A second reason for the divergence between organisational management practices and Islamic principles is globalisation. Once employees become open and exposed to the world around them, the possibility of being influenced by global artefacts appears to be greater than the influence of Islamic principles.

There is a growing recognition of the need to consider the Islamic perspective in management studies. Since Islam predominates throughout the Arab world, Weir (2001) suggests that Arab management should be treated as the fourth paradigm alongside American, Japanese and European management styles. The main reason for this suggestion is the growing interest in the economies of Middle Eastern countries, particularly those of the Gulf region, because of their plentiful natural resources, mainly oil and gas. Weir and other scholars have made it a priority to embrace Arab management as a fourth paradigm because they expect mutual gains between the Arab world and other nations. Iles & Kyriakidou (2013) contest this, arguing that the Arab management model has not yet matured and cannot be considered on a par with the American, Japanese and European models, because of 'cultural discontinuity'. However, the growing importance of business in the Arab world has brought together various cultures and experiences which provide ample opportunity to learn and exchange expertise.

While the American model has contributed by introducing the free market concept and the European model has established the notion of the social market, the Arab model rests jointly on the European, Asian and American cultures because of the very large number of emigrants to the Middle East. In other words, Middle Eastern organisations tend to be dominated by non-national employees. The London School of International Communication (2016) reports very high percentages of expatriates in the workforce of Gulf countries, reaching approximately 84% in the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait, and nearly 50% in Saudi Arabia. This mix of workers from different cultures has created a fertile environment to produce great experiences that can be used by other cultures around the world.

2.4.3.2 Organisational learning from a religious perspective

SAFORG operates in the Middle Eastern business context, which is strongly influenced by the Islamic religion. Therefore, in a study of OL in that firm, it is important to describe the Islamic perspective on learning and to determine the extent to which the principles of Islam affect individuals, groups and organisations. In general, Islam urges its followers to be lifelong learners and to consider learning as obligatory. Since Islamic principles hold learning to be commendable and those who possess knowledge are ranked higher than those who do not, the value of learning must be reflected in organisational structure, culture and policy. According to Islamic values, learners must be humble and show respect to knowledgeable people. Ahmad (2013) asserts that Islamic moral principles promote the spiritual dimension of OL. However, the promotion of spiritual patterns remains theoretically recognised but practically unaddressed, given the shortage of practical tools to translate spiritual attributes into the OL context.

Islamic principles require learners to show their inclination to seek knowledge from knowledgeable people by promoting learning interaction. Furthermore, learners must strive to

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obtain knowledge that enhances their performance and their ability to work efficiently. Although these principles presumably support learning interactions at the individual level, they are not explicitly reflected in learning at the team and organisational levels. Moreover, not all Muslim employees recognise that learning is compulsory in Islam. Some believe that if they acquire knowledge and produce quality work, God will raise their status and reward them with paradise on the day of resurrection; however, very few pay attention to Islamic principles in the workplace. Many lessons can be drawn regarding how Islam perceives learning in an organisational context. The religion gives learning high priority in its primary sources of value, which are the Qur'an and the Sunnah. According to the Qur'an (24:38), people should consult each other to choose what is best for them, while the Sunnah encourages people to perform in a group instead of individually. In this way, Islam promotes a culture of sharing thoughts and ideas in order to decide what is best for the benefit of all, without ignoring personal advantage.

The Sunnah also urges Muslims to pray in groups rather than alone and states that those who habitually pray collectively will be rewarded 27 times more than those who pray individually. Although in both scenarios, Muslims must pray, preference is given to group prayers, which indicates that the Islamic religion motivates its followers to work in groups, even in their prayer. It is possible that this preference for congregational prayer is intended to reduce the probability of mistakes being made. By applying this equation to the work environment, one may conclude that teamwork is less prone to error than individual work. Although many examples reported in the Qur'an emphasise the importance of unity in all aspects of life, including work, the application of these Islamic practices remains invisible.

The Islamic religion promotes OL culture by encouraging employees to act in a way that facilitates OL. For instance, according to Ahmad (2013), the prophet Mohammed advised that to be

considered faithful, a person must love for others what they love for themselves. The Prophet thus guided people to love each other and to eliminate the concepts of envy and selfishness at work. Cooperation should be reflected in action in everything that promotes the concept of collective action. Thus, the concept of teamworking in fulfilment of other's needs, including the exchanging of knowledge and expertise, can be considered the embodiment at work of Islamic principles reinforced by the primary sources of wisdom in Islam: the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Islam can also be said to support the concept of double-loop learning discussed in Section 2.3.2 (Ahmad, 2013; Choudhury, 1991). On one hand, Islam is concerned with benefiting from history to improve the status quo by introducing the term *'ibar*, which means 'experience', as Ahmad (2013: 149) explains: "The application of *'ibar* in an organization implies that events and activities in the organization should be recorded, stored and may be referred to at any time by all members as lesson learned". On the other hand, Islam urges people to apply critical thinking before they act and warns them against repeating the same mistakes over and over. However, although the above Islamic principles seem to be in alignment with the concept of OL, organisations in the Middle East are not always successful in applying OL principles in the workplace.

Several reasons may be adduced for this failure to translate Islamic principles into OL practices. First, a variety of schools of thought operate in Islam, each interpreting and understanding its principles in different ways, which leads to some degree of contradiction. Therefore, the application of Islamic principles in everyday life is influenced to some extent by a hidden agenda to employ religion in the service of personal interests (Mead, 2019). For example, to dominate and control people's way of thinking, it is preferable to promote the concept of individual orientation rather than teamwork. An organisational reflection of this approach is to promote an employees' evaluation system which builds on individual-oriented considerations, rather than rewarding

collective efforts. Second, employees are obliged to follow the organisation's policies and regulations, no matter how strongly these may conflict with any other employees' considerations. Therefore, employees' mental models are reprogrammed by organisational context and policies, forcing employees to act accordingly, regardless of religious values. A third reason may be related to the influence of globalisation and the extent to which it reduces the control that organisations have over their environment. People imitate what is happening around them, whether or not these behaviours are compatible with religious values. Before turning to the next pillar of OL, it is desirable to consider some aspects of culture in the Middle East.

2.4.3.3 Cultural attributes in the Middle East

Having identified the characteristics of organisational culture in the Middle East, this subsection considers some important attributes of Middle Eastern culture more generally and their impact on OL. One such attribute is favouritism, referred to in Arabic as *wasta*, defined as "special influence enjoyed by members of the same group or tribe" (Barnett et al., 2013: 41). It is sometimes translated as 'nepotism', which is considered a type of favouritism; according to Melé (2009: 186), nepotism "refers to the favouring of relatives, usually in employment or promotion, based upon that relationship". It is a practice which has one of the most significant effects on the work context in the Middle East and may directly affect employees' inclination to collaborate with their peers in the learning environment.

Ali (1996) notes that *wasta* is a prominent feature of organisational life in the Arab world (Mohamed & Hamdy, 2008). It is mostly associated with hierarchical relationships (Shields, 2007). Several studies have ascertained the relationship between *wasta* or favouritism and employee motivation (McGrath & Bates, 2017; Sollecito & Johnson, 2011; Syed & Kramar, 2017).

Although *wasta* apparently extends its impact to OL, there is a paucity of studies of the impact of favouritism on learning (Mohamed & Hamdy, 2008).

Favouritism may seem to be a personal trait which becomes inherited in all aspects of organisational culture because it affects the most valuable asset of an organisation, which is its people. In some organisations, for example, *wasta* dominates the recruitment process. According to Ezzedein & Swiercz (2001: 34), one of the largest companies in the Middle East showed evidence of the influence of *wasta* in the workplace: “The use of personal connections or *wasta*... remains the most predominant recruitment method (65%)”. The implications of using *wasta* in organisational recruitment are enormous, including the lack of convergence of experience, as well as the likelihood of internal conflict between those recruited by *wasta* and those who have no connection with influential people. Favouritism has other implications for the work context, including the resignation of employees. A study by Arasli & Tumer (2008) found that favouritism was seen as a significant stressor which led to employee turnover.

Wasta can also indirectly influence learning in the organisation. When employees are negatively affected by *wasta*-related practices, they become demotivated and disinclined to participate in a learning dialogue. For instance, *wasta* benefits some individuals by allowing them to jump the queue for promotion, to gain undeserved benefits and to obtain illegitimate advantage from their status in their organisation (Barnett et al., 2013). People without the support of *wasta* become frustrated and unwilling to integrate with those employees who enjoy *wasta* power. The spread of this kind of feeling creates an unhealthy culture for OL.

Not only is such favouritism harmful to those employees who do not benefit from it, as they become isolated from work activities and lack opportunities for development, it also affects the favoured employees by making them arrogant and unwilling to interact with their colleagues, with

the result that they fail to learn and thus lack knowledge. In light of the impact of favouritism on learning and the extent to which it may facilitate or hinder the process of participating and generating new knowledge, this area needs more consideration. Dent et al. (2017) suggest that having clear criteria for employee evaluation is likely to create some satisfaction and maintain a healthy level of cooperation among employees.

The foregoing discussion of OL factors concerning learners, leadership and culture highlights the need to examine the organisational context and the extent of its influence on OL.

2.4.4 Organisational Context

It is important to understand the organisational context, because it is a central element without which organisational learning cannot occur. “Learning in organisations occurs in the interaction between the organisational context and the individual”, as Kyndt et al. (2016b: 439) put it. Recognising the importance of context helps to understand the associated conditions that facilitate or hinder OL. Learning differs according to the type of context where it takes place. If learning is taking place in a societal context, it will be different from that which happens in an organisational context (Antonacopoulou, 2000). Similarly, learning that takes place for an individual’s sake gives less emphasis to the context than when learning happens at the group or organisational level. In the same vein, formal learning can be expected to be less influenced by organisational context, which has a prominent role in informal learning and is indeed essential for the production of informal and collective learning (Lancaster & Di Milia, 2014).

Although the role of organisational context in fostering or hindering learning has been widely explored (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tyler, 2004), some researchers have called for further investigation (Seba et al., 2012; Thuy Pham & Swierczek, 2006). Field et al. (2016) refer to some critical influencing factors within the organisational context, including

learning culture, teamwork and the learning environment. Because organisational culture has been explored in the previous section, the main focus of this section is on organisational structure and the conditions for OL success and failure.

The structure of the organisation is considered to be an essential element shaping the organisational context and can be expected to affect learning. An organisation that aims to be a learning organisation must promote the type of structure that supports employees' learning and provides dynamic flexibility for continuous learning. The literature identifies a strong connection between organisational structure and learning (Bapuji & Crossan, 2004; Dodgson, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985). OL needs the type of structure that promotes openness, empowerment and continuous knowledge sharing (Griego et al., 2000; Pedler et al., 1991). However, Berthoin Antal et al. (2001) object that the concept of structure remains overly general and mostly contradictory. Nevertheless, understanding organisational conditions, including the type of structure, can probably be said to deepen understanding of which structures favour learning (Finger & Brand, 1999; Martínez-León et al., 2011).

Organisational structures vary according to the type of organisation, specifically on the axes of tall versus flat structure and mechanistic versus organic structure. Tall and mechanistic structures share the view of the confined structure which supports objectivism and regulation (Örtenblad, 2002), such as in defined job descriptions and formal procedures. Conversely, flat or organic structures tend more towards less formality and complexity, being aligned with interpretivism rather than functionalism or objectivism (Hughes, 2010; Örtenblad, 2002; Thomas & Peterson, 2016). Rebelo & Duarte Gomes (2011: 173) found that organic structures could facilitate OL by acting "as facilitators of the development of a learning culture in organizations". However, the ability of the

organic structure to facilitate learning depends on there being relatively few layers in the managerial hierarchy (Steven, 2004).

In a study of the Norwegian police force, Filstad & Gottschalk (2013) observed that each district had an independent police authority, constituting a kind of organic structure, as a result of which the police might be expected to enjoy a high level of communication and participation in decision-making. However, they found that despite the decentralisation of authority and high levels of communication and cooperation, the Norwegian police force was not successful in producing the values of a learning organisation. The problems were that the force focused on execution more than planning and favoured short-term rather than continuous learning; finally, the police authorities failed to create a learning culture within their districts. The authors conclude that providing the right organisational structure is not in itself sufficient to create a learning organisation, unless employees recognise the values associated with a true learning organisation and act accordingly.

Furthermore, the organic structure promotes the idea of decentralised decision-making, which enhances the flow of communication and provides employees with more responsibilities and opportunities for learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Howard et al. (2012) found that employees who were involved in decision-making processes recognised a different way of thinking and became flexible in embracing change, unlike those who were isolated and ignored when decisions were made. By contrast, centralised structures have been found to have a negative influence on OL (Shipton et al., 2002). The preference for organic structures seems to be subject to whether environmental conditions are stable or volatile: an organic structure appears appropriate for an unstable organisational environment which supports decentralised decision-making.

Employees in a stable environment prefer a vertical structure that supports specialisation and reporting to a particular manager to get jobs done, rather than focusing on the flow of information and the need to have decision-making authority. Although an organic structure seems supportive of OL, opponents of decentralisation are afraid that providing extensive learning opportunities for employees could cost organisations many resources and make the workplace chaotic (Beech & MacIntosh, 2017). Moreover, giving employees the freedom to participate in making decisions may lead them to take advantage of the space granted to them for personal ends. This draws attention to the notion of power conditions and the extent to which power distribution can promote or hinder OL, as discussed previously in Section 2.4.2.

2.4.4.1 Learning from success and failure

The above discussion of organisational structure provides insight leading to a consideration of other factors that facilitate or hinder OL within the organisational context, such as learning from success and failure, which appear to be fundamental concepts for OL (Scherer & Tran, 2003). According to Argote (2012), both success and failure are essential for learning in organisations. Learning from failure is a valuable contributor to OL (Baum & Dahlin, 2007; Slack & Lewis, 2002). Argote (2012) cites several studies demonstrating very positive outcomes of learning from failures such as airline accidents (Haunschild & Sullivan, 2002), railroad incidents (Baum & Dahlin, 2007) and mining disasters (Madsen, 2009). Madsen & Desai (2010) found that the knowledge acquired from failure remained longer than that gained from successful experiences. Although failure is thus demonstrably significant for OL, it is difficult (Edmondson, 2012), for reasons including the sensitivities of individuals, who might be embarrassed by having to admit to failure, and of organisations, as failure reflects poorly on the competence of the organisation as a whole and of its leadership.

Chapter Two: Literature review

According to Hollnagel (2005), learning through failure occurs at three levels: individual, collective and organisational. Learning from failure at the individual level happens very quickly at the moment of error, while group learning, being naturally characterised by a combination of the group members' experiences, therefore takes longer than individual learning. Learning from failure at the group level is nonetheless likely to be more robust, because it is reflected in the way the organisation works. The most exhausting learning from failure occurs at the organisational level, because it takes a long time to have an impact on the organisation. Perhaps the main reason for the difficulty of this type of learning is the existence of concerns about the organisation's policies and norms. Learning from failure at this third level can be considered double-loop learning.

On the other hand, there is a widespread belief that success consistently leads organisations to sustainability and competitiveness. Organisational learning, for Levinthal & March (1993: 110), "oversamples successes and undersamples failures". Therefore, organisations give stronger consideration to success than to failure, despite the finding of some studies that success acts as an OL impediment (Berthoin Antal et al., 2001; Sitkin, 1992). Berthoin Antal et al. (2001: 867) cite a study of Chinese, German and Israeli organisations as finding that "a long period of success was believed to be a blockage to organisational learning". The reason for success turning out paradoxically to be a failure is that employees become complacent and satisfied with what they have achieved so far and therefore lose sight of what others are doing and of opportunities for improvement, causing them to fall behind. Furthermore, repeated success creates a culture of homogeneity and fine-tuning, as well as diverting organisational attention from seeing failure as an opportunity for learning (Starbuck & Hedberg, 2003).

Chapter Two: Literature review

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of learning from both success and failure in the organisational context, this contention has been criticised in several ways. Madsen & Desai (2010: 452) insist that the OL literature offers “no direct empirical examination of the relative efficacy of organizational learning from success and failure”. The scarcity of such literature may be related to the downsides associated with learning from failure more than success. According to Scherer & Tran (2003), organisations must be cautious about the consequences of letting employees experience trial-and-error learning, which will sometimes be catastrophic.

Furthermore, Bartlett & Burton (2016) argue that repeated failure makes employees demotivated to learn; therefore, an ideal environment to facilitate employees’ learning would integrate challenge with reward and combine accomplishment with failure. Crossan et al. (1995: 352) challenge the motivational value of failure: “If learning is motivated by failure, poor performance can be part of the learning process”. Naot et al. (2004) report that failure to learn is attributed to a lack of community engagement and the low efficiency of learning, which results in OL of low quality (Miner & Mezas, 1996; Naot et al., 2004).

Similarly, March (1991) notes that success can also block learning and lead to a failure trap, when ideas are not taken into consideration and used for accumulative experience. Kim et al. (2009) declare that organisations have an equal opportunity to learn from success and failure. In order to provide useful knowledge for the organisation by enhancing shared experience, success and failure must have a valuable interaction (Argote, 2012). The purpose of this interaction is to search for change which might lead to failure, leading in turn to another search which eventually generates valuable learning.

One of the motivating factors related to failure is tolerance of mistakes, which perceived to be an essential catalyst for OL. It also can be a potent inhibitor, depending on how an organisation reacts

to and tolerates mistakes. Weinzimmer & Esken (2017) used the exploitation and exploration model of March (1991) to understand workplace mistakes. They suggest that organisations exploit successful experiences and explore new knowledge to substitute for failures or mistakes. In line with this view, Argote (2012) argues that learning from failure is more beneficial for the organisation than learning from success. Therefore, it can be concluded that mistakes can be used predictively to identify the kind of knowledge that is necessary for organisations. The term ‘failure’ should be replaced by the phrase ‘things that went wrong’ or ‘not the way that it was supposed to be’. The word failure reflects some negative feelings which might demotivate employees to recap and learn from that experience.

When something goes wrong, this presumably acts as a stimulus for innovation and for employees to challenge themselves (Sitkin, 1992). However, Weinzimmer & Esken (2017: 323) believe that “most organisations still do not tolerate mistakes because employees are rewarded for successes and punished for failures”. It is difficult for those organisations to tolerate failure in disruptive innovations if they do not do so in a stable situation (Christensen, 2015). A strategy of tolerating failure prompts employees to predict the future and act accordingly; therefore they become proactive rather than merely reactive.

Although allowing employees to work spontaneously without fear of making mistakes might cost firms time delay, financial cost and the feeling of futile management, the long-term consequences of not letting employees work spontaneously are significant. Organisations that consider the things that went wrong as a bridge to success tend to learn from incidents by identifying the roots of failure, disseminating this knowledge in the form of rules and instructions, and mentoring their implementation.

Once employees are allowed to experience how mistakes occur, then given the opportunity to develop their critical thinking in order to overcome them and prevent them from occurring in future, they become competent and possess the tools to deal with difficulties in worse situations. On the other hand, the fear of making mistakes will push employees to follow whatever rules, regulations and procedures are set by the organisation's policy, to keep themselves safe from criticism. Thus, organisations that punish employees for making mistakes create an environment of non-forgiveness where employees become unwilling to be involved in an open discussion in the workplace.

Mistake tolerance helps organisational members to be confident of presenting their ideas and not afraid of being criticised. Megheirkouni (2016) stresses the importance of leaders who appreciate employees' initiative and determination to take risks and do not criticise their ideas. There is a distinction from a management point of view between exception-active and exception-passive leaders, as the former tend to take proactive action, predicting errors and dealing with them in advance, whereas the latter detect errors during mentoring and react to them after they have spread into the organisation (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

2.4.5 Summary of Organisational Learning Factors

This section has classified the third dimension, OL factors, as comprising four central pillars, which are learners' characteristics, organisational leadership, organisational culture and organisational context. The first subsection explored learners' characteristics as the cornerstone of all learning activities, without which no learning is initiated. Employees' psychological conditions and their readiness and inclination to learn are regarded as the primary motives for learning. Then, once employees are eager to learn, the possibility of overcoming any challenge is high. Therefore,

ensuring that employees are engaged and do not take things for granted are positive factors facilitating productive learning.

The second pillar, organisational leadership, has the capacity to contribute by either enhancing or hindering OL. The conventional view of the leader as knowledge-centred has gradually changed in organisations that aspire to learning. The main focus has shifted to the interaction process between leaders and followers, which ought to help leaders to have alternative roles rather than being knowledge- and action-centred in regard to organisational issues. Leaders can enhance OL by shifting their role from heroic and learning-centred to supporting employees as they share their knowledge and generate innovative ideas to deal with workplace challenges. The discussion of transactional and transformational leadership showed that for successful OL practices, leaders should act as facilitators, rather than remaining knowledge-centred. The greatest challenge to shifting the role of leaders from the conventional view is changing their mental models. The idea that knowledge is power drives both leaders and workers to withhold knowledge, whereas sharing knowledge with others appears to strengthen individuals as well as organisations.

The third subsection explored organisational culture and the extent to which being a value-driven organisation could influence learning. The main concern in creating an organisational culture that supports learning is to ensure alignment with the organisation's cultural norms, beliefs and structure. Moreover, it is not enough to create a learning culture without employees having the right competencies and skills. Organisational culture is affected by an absence of cohesiveness and cooperation among organisational departments. The discussion of organisational culture highlighted the factors that influence Middle Eastern organisations, including SAFORG. Among these is the Islamic religion, which is seemingly the most influential factor shaping organisational culture in the Arab world. Wasta or favouritism was found to be the factor most strongly affecting

OL in the Middle Eastern context, leading to the suggestion that the Arab model be added as a fourth management paradigm along with the American, Japanese and European paradigms.

The final pillar of OLF pertains to the organisational context, whose central theme in relation to learning is interaction. The discussion focused on the type of structure that enhances learning interaction and provides employees with more extensive flexibility to participate in decision-making. Organic structures appear more supportive of OL due to features such as the decentralisation of authority, as well as learning from failure and allowing employees to commit mistakes in order to learn by applying the mistake-tolerance policy.

2.5 Conclusion

This final section summarises and draws conclusions from the literature review chapter, which began by outlining the foundations of organisational learning and addressing fundamental queries about learning, learners and the content of learning. The first main point concerned the definition of OL, with emphasis on the complexities of agreeing a unified way to define it (Kim, 1993). Contributors to the literature have instead viewed it from different angles, moving gradually from an individualistic and cognitively focused orientation to more collective, social and participative perspectives. In alignment with this shift, there has been a noticeable theoretical transformation from individual to organisational learning, due to the realisation that individuals learn differently from organisations. This realisation has resulted in a transformational shift from individuality to a collective view and from knowledge acquisition to the constant development of thinking capabilities which cannot be acquired without participation.

Meanwhile, OL has gained extensive popularity among other fields of management due to the requirement for business to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Because many Middle Eastern countries have experienced a quantum leap in economic growth, organisations there have been

urged to adopt the latest management orientations, including OL, to make them competitive and successful. Many have therefore adopted the OL approach to enhance communications and to boost the level of interaction among employees, thus converting tacit and hidden knowledge to explicit knowledge.

To deepen the understanding of OL, this chapter has focused on three fundamental dimensions of OL, namely environment, process and factors. The OL environment is worthy of careful study because of the importance of understanding both internal and external context. Indeed, without understanding the context, it is almost impossible to understand how information is processed and how participation to share knowledge is established. The decision to explore the process dimension was based on the belief that whether OL focuses on knowledge or participation and whether it is concerned with individuals or groups, a key consideration is the process of learning, whose workings must therefore be examined in detail. With regard to the third research dimension, it is essential to understand the factors that tend to strengthen OL in order to nurture them, and no less important to recognise the destructive factors that hinder OL so that they can be addressed.

This chapter has therefore reviewed the literature on how environment, process and factors influence OL. Although these three dimensions have been discussed separately, they are all connected. It is almost impossible to have a successful learning process without having a supportive environment in which the relevant factors are in place. Section 2.2 discussed the OL environment and focused mainly on learning interaction, because it is the substance of OL, without which it simply cannot occur. The level of interaction can be regarded as a parameter to evaluate how successful organisations are in pursuing continual learning. Different forms of interaction were discussed, on three axes: formal versus informal, vertical versus horizontal and external versus internal.

It can be concluded that OL is facilitated by a more informal, flatter organisational structure and that it requires constant exploration for external knowledge and continuous development for internal knowledge. A flatter structure seems to be more supportive of OL, making it easier for employees to share their contributions across organisations compared to a more hierarchal organisation. A decentralised structure, although it encourages the acquisition of new information, has been criticised for slower implementation in comparison with an authoritarian style in a hierarchal structure. Thus, OL can be enhanced internally by deepening the level of interaction in order to generate valuable knowledge. Also, once internal knowledge is identified, organisational members are able to specify the kind of external knowledge required to fill any gaps.

Section 2.3 explored the OL process dimension from various perspectives to highlight how scholars perceive the processes of learning. Theories of individual learning can be considered to have provided a platform for the study of OL to emerge. The first approach was to consider learning as information processing, which can be seen as aligned with the cognitive-behavioural processes of error detection and correction. These approaches are concerned with the individual's mind and actions. Knowledge, viewed as a cognitive-behavioural process, is a means to change employees' cognition and behaviour. Similarly, error detection and correction also focuses on solving problems by applying quick solutions.

The final main section of this chapter sought to identify the most prominent factors affecting OL, related to learner characteristics, organisational leadership and organisational culture and context. The characteristics of learners, including their psychological attributes, can contribute negatively by making learning less productive, such when individuals lack the inclination and willingness to learn. Other related negative factors are individual and organisational defensive routines as well as fears and anxieties about learning new concepts. Once these psychological conditions become

part of employees' personalities, they are unlikely to learn. Conversely, engagement and conformation are considered to be the learning characteristics most likely to enhance OL. Besides the desirability of engagement, employees also need to possess and embrace the skills of questioning their mental models, challenging their own assumptions and disconfirming what they believe is right.

The second pillar of the OLF dimension is organisational leadership. OL is viewed as a threat to the leader's power, whereas leaders who embrace the notion of OL retain power by obtaining knowledge, which enhances their value to the organisation. Another factor negatively affecting OL is to view the leader as a superhero and the primary source of trusted and unquestionable knowledge. Employees who embrace this assumption become hesitant to challenge their leader's knowledge, so that learning interactions become a process of one-way communication and employees become passive consumers of information, destroying the process of generative OL.

Viewing the leader through a heroic lens deters employees from seeing OL as a dynamic process which requires ongoing questioning and reflection in order to generate productive learning. Therefore, transformational leaders outperform transactional leaders by seeing learning as a result of the engagement process. It is the leader's responsibility to overturn the cultural norm by which he or she is seen as the primary source of learning. In order to achieve this, the leader must embrace and promote learning by engaging others, as opposed to being learning-centred. They also need to provide vision and direction while recognising the associated challenges. The discussion of the leader's role in facilitating OL highlights the need for a leader to have certain characteristics and abilities of alignment, adaptation and open integrity in order to be able to appreciate each employee's history, engage with their current situation and plan for the future.

The third pillar of the OLF dimension is related to organisational culture. A value-driven culture seems to promote OL by encouraging teamwork and participation. However, it is not easy to modify organisational norms or employees' assumptions and values in order to promote OL, especially if employees' experience is of failure. Although organisational culture has been shown to shape employees' behaviour, the extent of this influence depends on their background, as well as the external environment. Taking into account that employees' beliefs and assumptions shape the culture of the organisation and thus affect the learning process, it is conceivable that there can be a learning culture in some parts of the organisation and not in others, since people will vary in their support for OL and willingness to work with its principles. However, having a thriving partial learning culture in some parts of the organisation requires continuous support from senior management and employees' collaboration.

The examination of organisational culture in this chapter has drawn attention to the significance of cultural values in the Middle East, which is the context of this research, and the influence of Islamic beliefs and practices on OL. Islamic principles appear to drive employees' behaviour as they seek compatibility with the primary sources of knowledge in Islam, which are the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Followers of Islamic principles are characterised by a number of traits such as humility, eagerness to learn, altruism and respect for knowledgeable people. The practice of Islam in an organisational context has been inadequately explored in the literature and requires closer attention in future. In contrast to religious belief and practice, one of the most prominent characteristics of Middle Eastern culture is *wasta* or favouritism, which has both direct and indirect effects on organisations, creating an environment where employees become demotivated to learn and share their expertise.

Chapter Two: Literature review

The last pillar of the OLF dimension is the organisational context. Its relationship with learners has been explored through the contrasts between collective and individual learning and between informal as opposed to formal learning. Another important aspect of organisational context is the type of structure that is most favourable to OL. Discussion of the opposition between tall and organic organisational structures revealed that a preference for learning depends not only on the type of structure that guarantees learning but also on the conditions of the learning environment and employees' readiness for learning. Nevertheless, an organic structure seems more likely to promote OL because of openness, empowerment and most importantly the notions of decentralisation and authority sharing. The type of organisational structure that promotes learning from failure and tolerates mistakes is likely to be more conducive to productive learning. Although success seems to be an explicit indication of organisational achievement, it may alternatively act as an impediment to OL if employees are so satisfied with their achievements that they fail to observe what their competitors are doing or to explore further opportunities for improvement. In short, organisations have an equal opportunity to learn either from success or failure, depending on employees' readiness to learn and the organisation's continuous support.

Following this detailed examination of the literature germane to the present study, attention turns in the next chapter to the methodology adopted to pursue the research.

Chapter 3 Methodology and Research Design

3.1 Introduction

This chapter starts by identifying the philosophical position of the research, which includes the ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches. In order to do this, it offers an exposition of research paradigms and methods, specifically the paradigm adopted: social constructionism. Following the philosophical section is an explanation of the research design and data management, covering the process of designing the semi-structured interview and focus group instruments and the adoption of an inductive analysis strategy. There is then an account of the procedures involved in conducting the research, organising and interpreting the data and generating the findings. The final sections present some reflections on the challenges associated with this research, details of the ethical considerations and the assessment of trustworthiness, then the chapter ends with a summary.

3.2 Research Stance

Understanding research philosophy is important to determine what ontology, epistemology and methodology mean in the research context. It is also essential to know that these concepts are connected, which means that the ontology dictates the epistemology, which in turn dictates methodology and of course the methods. Organisational learning as a field of study requires research methods that suit its multifaceted nature. As Yukl (2009: 52) explains, “Progress in the research on leadership and organizational learning is limited by over-reliance on research methods that are not well suited for studying complex, dynamic, processes that occur slowly over long periods of time in organizations”. For example, exploring OL practices such as employees’ behaviour quantitatively, using scales and numbers, is not always sufficient to provide accurate information, due to the complexity of human behaviour.

In contrast, qualitative methods provide the researcher with deeper access to respondents' answers and reactions. Nonverbal reactions to a question are sometimes more meaningful than the answer itself, and such reactions cannot be recorded through a questionnaire. In other words, due to the complexities of the OL phenomenon, qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups are expected to provide more detailed and richer information than quantitative methods.

Before moving on to investigate the research philosophy, it is vital to identify the conceptualisation of the organisation. Morgan (2011) explains that a metaphorical process has the power to shape the image of an organisation. For example, looking at the organisation from a structural or political point of view presents an image of its structural or political aspects only, whereas viewing it as if it were a machine leads us to conceptualise its operations and functions in a similar way to those of a machine, as processes involving inputs, operations and outputs which have to be evaluated and monitored to ensure efficiency. Similarly, looking at learning as a conceptual and linguistic construction emphasises that reality is internally constructed and does not exist as an external reality. As Hager & Hodkinson (2009: 621) put it, "people construct and label certain processes/activities/products as 'learning'".

The next section details in depth some alternative philosophical stances, including ontology, epistemology and methodology, as well as the researcher's position in the current research.

3.3 Theoretical Standpoint

3.3.1 Research philosophy

Consideration of alternative research philosophies guides the researcher to choose a philosophical position that is suitable for a particular study and to enables the researcher to prove or deny the hypotheses in quantitative research, or to provide in-depth understanding to support the premises in qualitative research, as shown in Figure 5 below. Although it is not easy to make a distinction

between ontology and epistemology, as they are interwoven (Cunliffe, 2008), it is useful for the researcher to identify the research position, to enhance the level of understanding of the research phenomenon.

According to Heidegger (1995), philosophy is a universal science that provides the right breadth for the research. In contrast, Husserl & Buckley (1997: 330) argue that philosophy “is itself not in a position to provide what is needed because it is not yet a science at all”. Nevertheless, to understand the research phenomenon, the researcher needs to identify the pillars of philosophy, which are ontology, epistemology and methodology. Methodologically, researchers tend to position their research as either positivist, interpretivist, or pragmatist (a combination of the first two, involving mixed methods) and they should offer a clear rationale and justification for whichever of these approaches they have taken.

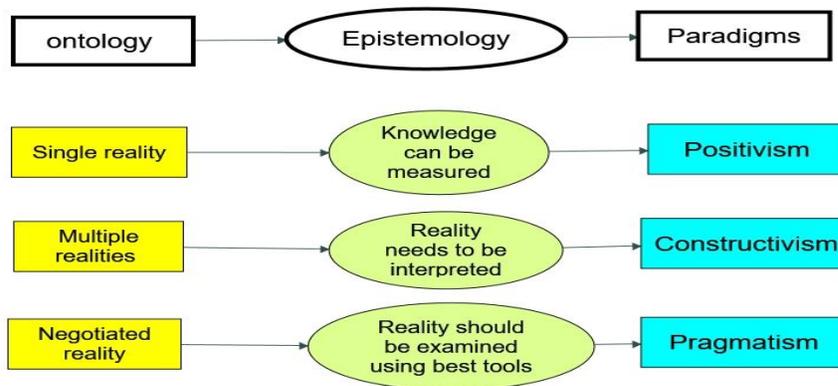


Figure 5 Research philosophy (adapted from Pretorius, 2018)

3.3.2 Research ontology

Ontology concerns what people believe is real; hence, it involves the study of the nature of existence or of reality (Kjellstrand, 2015). Ontologically, the truth may be single, multiple or negotiated. In other words, the ontology could be objective, subjective or constructive. Two main ontological strands can be described: realism and relativism. In an objectivist or realist ontology,

reality is viewed as independent from social actors and not subject to human conception, meaning that human perceptions of reality do not influence that reality itself. The realist ontology perceives the world as fixed and knowable, so that the truth never changes and reality exists independently. From this perspective, reality is unattached to context and is therefore generalisable. Thus, the epistemological position aligned with a realist ontology is objective. The researcher in a realist study takes an etic approach; he or she stands away from the research and does not intervene in the data that is being gathered. The methodological position of objective reality is positivism, favouring an experimental approach, which requires quantitative methodology due to the need for measuring, counting and statistical analysis. The most appropriate methods for social scientific research adopting a realist ontology and objective epistemology are questionnaires and surveys. In other words, when the ontology is determined by a single truth or reality, then the epistemology has to be etic and the methodology has to be experimental to prove the truth, which can be achieved by deductive and quantitative research.

The opponents of realism argue that the cognitive ability of humans is influenced by emotion and that it is therefore almost impossible to isolate the researcher from the context. Hence, realist researchers tend to use numerical data to avoid being biased by human emotion. Another criticism of realism is that its approach to searching for reality is very narrowly directed towards achieving a specific aim, whereas idealism tends to pay extensive attention to the wider environment.

Relativism, on the other hand, represents a belief that there are subjective, multiple versions of reality, which means that reality emerges through an understanding of people's experience, which is not possible without interaction. In other words, truth and meaning are interrelated, so the truth cannot exist without meaning. The researcher takes a different approach from the realist position;

it is an emic approach, which means the researcher purposely takes part in the research to construct the meaning of what is meant to be real.

In comparison with realist ontology, reality for the relativist is context-bound; therefore, findings are ungeneralisable. The epistemological position for a relativist ontology is subjective because the reality is socially constructed. The methodological approach for a relativist ontology and subjective epistemology is qualitative.

Subjectivist or idealist ontology considers truth to be dependent to some extent on the context (Adlan, 2012). Furthermore, the idealist believes that researcher effects on research are inevitable; thus, bias is part of the process. The truth in objective ontology cannot be changed; in the subjective ontology, it is subject to the context or setup. Hence, the results from realist research can claim generalisability, while those of idealist studies cannot. Subjectivism or idealism is aligned with qualitative studies and the use of methods such as interviews and focus groups to gather data.

As a third stance, Adlan (2012) suggests that pragmatist ontology is located between objectivism and subjectivism; therefore, it is a mixture between the two. In other words, pragmatist ontology assumes that whatever ontological position serves the research is acceptable and that it is unnecessary to embrace a sharp distinction or leaning towards one position. Mixed methods are considered ideal for pragmatism, because the main focus is on the outcome regardless of method, making it unnecessary to take a certain philosophical stance.

This research embraces an idealist ontology for various reasons. The first is related to employees' personalities, as they hold diverse beliefs which represent multiple realities. The second issue is related to context, as SAFORG has different departments which have diverse working environments, according to the different functions of each department. The third issue is related to

the researcher's role in providing a thorough understanding of the social setup of SAFORG's environment, processes and factors.

According to objective ontology, OL can be viewed as a reality; therefore, senior managers, for example, would be viewed as external actors and separate from reality. In contrast, subjective ontology would view OL as a subjective phenomenon produced by social actors (senior managers in the current example), because subjective ontology does not see reality and social entities as separate; instead, it views reality as a product of human interaction.

The so-called Thomas theorem states: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences". This means that what people define as real *is* real, in the sense that it will produce consequences (Clair et al., 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). In other words, regardless of whether other people's interpretations of what they perceive as real are true or not, it becomes real in consideration of the consequences. To exemplify the concept, if children believe that ghosts exist, then they are real in their minds and they experience fear at night as a consequence of their constructed reality. Therefore, understanding employees' different experience across departments may help in making sense of different constructed realities and different consequences.

One of the ontological questions in relation to this research concerns the existence and characteristics of organisations. Amazon and Google, for example, have changed the way people view organisations. In a conventional view, an organisation is conceptualised as an entity in a particular setting. Through continuous development of the digital world, the framing of the setting of an organisation as requiring a particular structure, staff, central office and subsidiaries has changed recently; the traditional model is no longer applicable to many prominent organisations which mostly operate via digital platforms. This recent change challenges the organisations that have universal features which represent reality. As a result, looking at an organisation as a social

entity represents the ontological position of multiple truths based on different settings and denies one universal truth.

Another ontological question in this research is related to people and whether they prioritise their own advantage over seeking to benefit their colleagues and the organisation. The understanding of the ontological positions of people's characteristics would most likely provide a good insight into the epistemological positions they embrace. An additional ontological inquiry could be related to employees' realisation of the consequences of their actions (James, 2015). The awareness of the consequences of a particular action could lead employees to think carefully before proceeding.

3.3.3 The researcher's ontological position

Identifying the ontological positions of the participants and the researcher is vital to understand a particular piece of research. The researcher in a social study has three alternative ontological positions, according to Moeman et al. (2016): 1) to remain completely independent of the phenomenon and to be objectivist or naturalist; 2) to become an integral part of the research and therefore to co-construct the reality along with the outcome of the phenomenon; or 3) to adopt a subtle realism that balances the researcher's role in constructing reality with the reality of the phenomenon. Although the first position is hardly achievable in social studies, due to the need for dynamic interaction between participants and researcher, subtle realism seems a reasonable ontological position. It is argued that if participants construct their own realities, then a question arises (Moeman et al., 2016): Should the role of the researcher be solely to report reality as it is, or should the viewpoint of the researcher be considered part of the social world? Since researchers cannot isolate themselves from social phenomena, it is advisable to let phenomenological findings construct reality, with consideration of the researcher's point of view. Cunliffe (2003) questions

researchers' ability to be reflexive and to capture all relevant realities if they are constrained in challenging all forms of inquiry about philosophical issues and the nature of reality and knowledge.

3.3.4 Research epistemology

Epistemology is about the theory of knowledge (Brabazon, 2017; Jensen, 2011). Knowledge requires two things to be valid: that people believe in it and that there is a justification of what is considered to be true knowledge (Carneades.org, 2018). Thus, Audi (2018) construes it as a theory of knowledge and justification. Here, justification essentially means the ground of someone's belief, which might be based on reasoning or perceptions (Audi, 2018). Carneades.org (2018) argues that this justification could be proved internally, within a person's mind, or externally from the outside world. If the justification is internal, it is necessary to define the epistemological position and whether the person uses coherent thinking to judge the belief or whether they might be making certain assumptions.

Social science requires an investigator's epistemological reflection to explore new knowledge (Vasilachis, 2009). As shown in Figure 6, the status of findings differs according to the particular paradigm underlying the researcher's assumptions. The findings are objectively true according to the positivist paradigm, whereas they are subjective and created according to the stance of the current research, the constructivist paradigm, whereby knowledge is considered to be socially constructed.

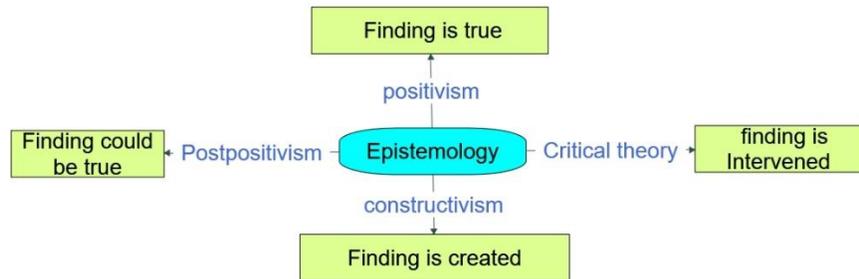


Figure 6 Epistemology and the truth of findings, adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994)

Epistemology in research concerns why and how people justify a particular position on a specific topic. British people, for instance, have different views about Brexit; each of these positions has a particular theory of knowledge and justifications behind what people perceive to be real. Epistemology, in this context, helps people to ponder what makes them believe in what they perceive. Therefore, constant questioning would probably help to figure out the basis of how people know what they know, which may or may not support or destabilise their truth. In other words, people’s beliefs cannot be taken as true knowledge unless they are justified through constant questioning.

Jensen (2011) describes knowledge as a true belief. The justification of true belief occurs when individuals occupy the related information, which helps to construct the truth of a person. Rescher (2012: xvi) states that “knowing a fact is not something that one does; it is a condition one has come to occupy in relation to information”. Three approaches can be used to justify true belief, representing different schools of thought: correspondence, coherence and consensus (Jensen, 2011).

Correspondence is about matching the exact reality, such as when truth corresponds to the fact; it means conformity and verification (David, 2002). The point to make here is that whether a truth is proved or not depends on other factors that the researcher needs to consider, including the extent

to which truth coheres with another set of belief, as well as whether or not that truth has gained a degree of consensus.

The second approach to looking at truth is coherence, which is about the extent to which truth is in alignment with other beliefs (Blanshard, 2001; Jiménez-Crespo, 2017). It is also called pragmatism, as it examines the usefulness of truth for human behaviour. For example, believing in God might guide people to do the right thing (Lindemans, 2011). Unlike the correspondence and coherence theories of knowledge, consensus is about a collective agreement among people that a particular truth is consciously considered to be true knowledge because it works for that particular group, so it does not matter whether or not it works for others. In other words, the truth becomes true knowledge in the consensus view when it resonates with our ongoing daily experience, regardless of whether it has correspondence or coherence with other thoughts or is relevant to another group of people (Jensen, 2011).

Taking this point further, one of the premises for this research that can be drawn from consensus theory is to view the category to which an employee belongs as irrelevant to the forming of a consensus viewpoint among employees across organisational levels. To put it differently, senior managers might be in harmony and agreement with middle or bottom-line employees on issues related to OL. Alternatively, contradictory views might exist among a group of employees on the same level of the hierarchy, due to discrepancies in their beliefs.

One of the epistemological problems associated with this study is the immense body of knowledge related to OL, which makes it hard to map out such a large quantity of literature. The reason for this complexity comes from the great number of issues underpinning each of the OL research dimensions: environment, process and factors. In other words, the issue of knowing underpinning OL dimensions has no consensus, which causes an epistemological dilemma.

Another controversial epistemological question related to this research is whether knowledge requires experience or not. This represents the distinction between empiricists, who believe that knowledge requires experience, and rationalists, who believe that it does not (Carneades.org, 2018). The distinction between those two viewpoints reflects the researcher's and the participants' beliefs about what is considered to be valuable and true knowledge. However, experience is about accumulative knowledge (Postrel, 2011) and people need experience to predict the type of knowledge they require.

3.4 Research Methodology

Identification of the ontological and epistemological positions of this research leads to a definition of the methodological standpoint, as well as the distinction between the different schools of thought in relation to the features of methodology, which is essentially the logic applied to choosing research methods (Adlan, 2012). It answers the questions of how the research is conducted and why specific methods have been used (Brabazon, 2017), involving all sorts of discussions and decisions in relation to how the study is carried out. Methodology differs from methods, which are the end tools, approaches and techniques adopted to conduct the research and gather the data (James, 2015; Matthews, 2014). The philosophy of methodology is concerned with choosing the right methods, enabling, for example, the production of valid data. If the research can be achieved using quantified data, then taking a qualitative approach would not only waste time and efforts but would also be unproductive (Howitt, 2016).

Generally, there are two schools of thought on how to conduct research; the first is related to quantitative research, which aims to confirm hypotheses, while the other school is qualitative research, which aims for exploratory knowledge (Adu, 2016). The distinctions between them can be seen in several features. First, quantitative research, according to Hammersley (2013), is based

on hypothesis testing and numerical data. Second, the variables are controlled to minimise the impact of external factors. Third, the data processing is objective and finally, the ideas of the research are constituted by the researcher, rather than by the research itself.

Conversely, qualitative research tends to study a situation in its naturalistic setting, rather than under a controlled environment. Therefore, qualitative data is not given, but is constructed, as stated by Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2017). It starts from ideas drawn from the topic under investigation, with data generated through an interpretation of respondents' perceptions and conceptualisations. However, it is not enough to rely entirely on respondents' data without considering the observable environment. Furthermore, knowledge cannot be produced independently of values, as the researcher is part of the process and affects as well as being affected by the research environment.

The relative merits of hard science which relies on quantification versus less quantifiable research such as social science have been historically debated. The argument has been extended to weight the appropriateness of research methods, which has resulted in quite extensive quantitative research compared with qualitative studies. The predominant reason for selecting quantitative or qualitative methods is the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Numerical and statistical data in quantitative research are probably not the right measurements to understand participants' attitudes and interpret their behaviour, especially when these attitudes are as changeable as the respondents' thoughts from one moment to another. Hence, making a correlation between variables is not always possible when researching social phenomena (Silverman, 2006). Sometimes, however, the researcher avoids choosing a quantitative paradigm simply because he or she is not good at statistics, or prefers to spend more time in the field rather than at the library desk.

This study is a qualitative one, using interviews and focus groups to collect qualitative data. According to Curry (2015), qualitative research can be defined as a process of systematically collecting textual information, organising and interpreting it. The main reason for choosing qualitative research for the current study is to naturally identify employees' perceptions and behaviour in relation to the three OL dimensions of environment, process and factors. Some would argue that employees' perceptions of OL could be reported quantitatively using a questionnaire. The reason for not doing so is the possibility of an incomplete picture or misunderstanding of OL. In the Middle Eastern context and working environment, employees utilise the terms 'training' and 'OL' interchangeably, although they are not the same.

Additionally, although some employees may recognise the importance of sharing knowledge across organisational levels, very few methods or mechanisms have been described for doing so. It was hoped that qualitative research would help participants to become aware of OL and how it differs from training, through their involvement in interviews and focus group dialogue. Moreover, in dialogue with the researcher, participants would provide more accurate information as they became aware of major ideas in the field of OL, such as the differences between individual learning and OL.

Most importantly, in qualitative research, respondents are not constrained by predefined variables. Instead, they are given the flexibility to express themselves and address alternative issues, which might be ignored or constrained by quantitative research variables (Hammersley, 2013). However, it could be argued that quantitative hypotheses are not merely predictions, without linkage between the variables and research problems (Gómez & Mouselli, 2018). The answer would be that in qualitative research, respondents are not solely guided or directed by the research questions, but by what they perceive as necessary.

3.4.1 Quantitative versus qualitative research

It is important to differentiate between quantitative and qualitative research, not principally to favour one approach over the other, but to identify the appropriateness of a given approach to answering the research questions (Hammersley, 2013). Quantitative research represents the human experience in numerical and statistical terms, whereas qualitative research articulates findings by means of descriptive analysis (Marvasti, 2004). The two approaches also differ in terms of sample size and selection. In quantitative research, a random selection of participants is necessary, due to the sampling requirements, whereas in qualitative research, theoretical sampling is preferable (Longbottom, 2016).

The second main difference is related to the size of the sample, which in quantitative research has to be large enough to avoid the possibility of biased findings. In contrast, in qualitative research, it is more useful to select respondents with the right resources of knowledge, such as a particular group of knowledgeable insiders, than to recruit a large number of respondents (Marvasti, 2004).

Qualitative research tends to be more attachable to the theoretical background throughout the research and has more flexibility to make a theoretical contribution than quantitative research, where the researcher uses theory at the beginning of the research to define the concepts, then revisits it at the end of the research to confirm or reject the hypotheses (Marvasti, 2004).

3.4.2 Research paradigms

As mentioned earlier, the ontology dictates both the epistemology and the methodology of a research study. The methodology describes the systematic way of discovering knowledge (NurseKillam, 2015). Therefore, different research paradigms have been proposed, to either prove the truth experimentally, such as in quantitative paradigms, or to construct a meaningful understanding, in qualitative paradigms. According to Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2017), the research

paradigm is determined by the ontological and epistemological positions of the research. However, Blaikie (2007) argues that embracing a particular ontological and epistemological position may restrict the researcher to dogmatic adherence to a particular paradigm and lead to a failure to explore extensive research opportunities. Hence, research paradigms should not be viewed as opposite ends of a continuum and as necessarily contradicting each other, because each of these paradigms has a certain ability to generate a particular type of knowledge.

Although research by nature may seem personal, it has to employ a particular paradigm that shapes and determines what the researcher intends to find. A research paradigm is shaped and determined by the underlying metaphysical assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and philosophy of the researcher, as well as the purpose to be achieved from the research. Guba & Lincoln (1994) list four research paradigms in qualitative inquiry: positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism. They define paradigms as “basic belief systems based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 107). The set of beliefs that researchers hold guide them to choose the right paradigm.

Each of the research paradigms mentioned above has a particular set of ontological, epistemological and methodological positions. According to Aliyu et al. (2015: 2), the research paradigm is viewed as a framework that “influences how you see the world, determines researcher perspective, and shapes the understanding of how things are connected”. Positivism and constructivism are seen as opposite end of a continuum. Positivists are looking for existing reality, while constructivists believe that knowledge is created (Murray & Chamberlain, 1999). Although critical theory has an interest in specific topics such as power and justice, it can be categorised under the interpretivism umbrella, as it shares the same assumptions about reality being constructed either by individuals or groups of people (Williamson, 2017).

3.4.3 Social constructionism

Social constructionism differs from personal constructionism (Williamson, 2017), as the latter focuses on individual construction of meaning, while social constructionism proposes multiple realities constructed by people and rejects the assumption of a single ultimate truth (Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012). Social constructionism assumes that people form multiple descriptions of what they believe is real about themselves and their world; therefore, reality is socially constructed (Thursfield, 2007). Guba & Lincoln (1994), term constructivism “naturalistic inquiry”. The social constructionist perspective provides a rich understanding of the relationship between individuals within an organisation, in a way that constructs meaning (Richter, 1998).

This research takes a constructivist perspective that considers knowing to be inextricably linked to context, unlike the cognitivist perspective, where learning happens irrespective of context. Thus, participants are expected to challenge the traditional way of thinking and provide different interpretations of the existing knowledge. According to Cunliffe (2003: 988), “Constructionist research explores how meaning is created between research participants”. Hosking & Bouwen (2000) theorise that social constructionism rejects the view of learner and learning as entirely separate things and insists on viewing OL as the production of ongoing constructions. People’s interpretations of themselves, others and the world around them produce different realities which are interdependent. It follows that from this viewpoint, knowledge is an inseparable part of the process and is therefore a relational entity.

Due to the focus of this research on providing a thorough understanding of OL in terms of its environment, processes and factors, social constructionism is expected to offer a deep understanding of the relationships among these three dimensions, for several reasons. First of all, the social constructionist approach is appropriate to the study of OL, since the aim is to explore

relations, rather than investigating individual learning or one-way communication. Second, considering knowledge as not a product in itself emphasises, as Cunliffe (2008) suggests, that it is socially constructed. It might be asked why this research takes a social constructivist approach rather than any other. Answering this question is essential for an understanding of the complexities of studying the OL phenomenon. There is a need for exploratory and in-depth research, due to the nature and complexities of OL. For instance, OL is dominated by the idea that learning is the sum of invisible knowledge stored in individual minds. Another prominent idea in the field of OL is to consider learning as sensemaking generated from the process of social interaction between individuals and ongoing work activities (Richter, 1998). From this perspective, the constructivist approach is expected to produce a thorough understanding of OL phenomena through the interview dialogue, enabling participants to differentiate between individual and organisational learning as well as to understand what is meant by knowledge construction.

The main reason for taking a constructivist approach in this research is to provide respondents with unlimited opportunities to construct meaning. The use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups offered participants unlimited flexibility to express their feelings without imposing a standard definition, which is more likely to happen in a survey. Thus, Muijs (2002: 142) points out that “a constructivist or objectivist epistemology, which champions the individual construction of meaning, would not lead one to use survey research which tends, to a certain extent, to impose standard definitions of the meaning of what is being researched”.

3.4.4 Research methods

Identifying the type of method that is best for the research has to be associated with the method's ability to answer research questions. In the case of interviews, for example, the researcher has to consider participants' availability to attend them. There are four popular methods in qualitative

research, which are: observation, analysis of texts and documents, interviews and focus groups, as well as audio and video recording (Silverman, 2006).

Although observation is prevalent in qualitative research, it normally involves a small sample. Quantitative research, on the other hand, can cover a large number of respondents. Quantitative researchers assert that the information gathered by observation is less reliable than survey or questionnaire data (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Conversely, qualitative researchers are unconvinced that quantitative instruments can be used to explore perceptions and feelings and believe that their approaches can provide trustworthy results.

The quantitative researcher can use textual analysis to examine the content of documents and code the information into categories to examine the results, whereas in qualitative research, text analysis is concerned with categorising participants in order to reveal their activities and practices in daily life. The third and most popular method is to conduct individual or focus group interviews, which are discussed in depth in the following subsections.

The quantitative researcher who intends to gather specific information prefers more structured surveys or questionnaires and does not need to code much information. Qualitative research aims to understand people's experience and is therefore more likely to conduct unstructured interviews, using open-ended questions give respondents more flexibility to disclose large quantities of information, which is later used in the coding process (Silverman, 2006). Finally, audio and video data are often used and strongly recommended in qualitative research for their ability to provide authentic data, which the researcher can retrieve whenever needed.

The researcher should always think about the accuracy of the data collected. Foster (1996) warns that even quantitative data such as crime statistics will be subject to some degree of uncertainty. For example, incidents reported to or registered by the police do not represent all of the crimes

committed in a given region; therefore, absolute rigour and perfectly reliable statistics are rarely achievable. Furthermore, some incidents reported as crimes, such as broken windows, might not be vandalism, because they might be broken by weather conditions. More generally, confusion in reporting incidents occurs when incorrect information is reported to satisfy the researcher's curiosity. In this case, the researcher needs to pay attention to the answers given by respondents (Foster, 1996). Respondents' judgment may lead either to over-estimation or to under-estimation, when they describe and interpret the case. Therefore, the researcher should pay full attention and link answers to check the accuracy of the information given. The following subsections describe the methods used in the current research, followed by the associated challenges facing the researcher while conducting individual interviews and focus group sessions.

3.4.4.1 Interviews

The interview is a primary method for collecting information in qualitative research (Waltz et al., 2010), although it can also be used in quantitative research in a stricter and more fixed format (Whitehead et al., 2012). Quantitative researchers argue that the central issue in choosing the right research method is to stand apart from the collected data, as well as to ensure efficiency in collecting accurate data. However, this is the investigator's responsibility, more than of the method itself, as he or she acts as a facilitator, rather than information co-producer (Morgan, 2012). In academic research, the researcher should take care in interpreting variations in respondents' answers (Marvasti, 2004) to ensure that differences are not attributable to the researcher's behaviour, but related to the respondents' attitudes and understanding of the research questions.

Among the different forms of interview are face-to-face, telephone and computer interviews (Waltz et al., 2010). This research used the most popular type, namely face-to-face interviews. Another tripartite distinction is between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews.

In qualitative research, the semi-structured interview is often considered particularly appropriate for its ability to cover the planned topics, while at the same time allowing flexibility for interviewees to raise unplanned issues. The researcher argues that it is unnecessary to have a full descriptive written question. Instead, he or she should have clear themes in mind and set them out as bullet points. There is no harm in having written questions or themes, but in semi-structured interviews, the interviewees are provided with unlimited space to express themselves.

In a structured interview or survey, the researcher often designs questions that are easy to answer so as to build trust with participants. Questions may be designed to help the researcher to convert respondents' answers into numerical data and explain the reasons for different results. Thus, the structured interview can also be used in quantitative research, as long as it contains specific questions which require short and specific answers.

Asking an uncomplicated question in semi-structured or unstructured interviews helps respondents to give more detailed answers, rather than giving a short reply. The single question makes participants more focused and rigorous about the answer. Unstructured interviewing opens the door for respondents to explain their experience and link ideas together, rather than having to adhere to restricted answers for or against a particular standpoint. In-depth interviews explore respondents' feelings and tacit knowledge while building a dynamic interaction between the researcher and participants (Marvasti, 2004). Although unstructured interviews seem not to be restricted in structural terms, the researcher must have a clear framework and intervene when it is needed, to keep the discussion on the right track and within the main themes.

One of the strengths of the interview is flexibility (Waltz et al., 2010). Participants with difficulties in understanding research questions or expressing their feelings find that an interview is a helpful tool, as they can clarify ambiguities directly with the researcher. Moreover, through interaction

and clarifications, respondents may alter their assumptions and modify their mental models (Sarantakos, 2012). The changes in interviewees' thinking which lead to a change in behaviour will occur only in association with physical communication (such as in an interview) and cannot be obtained by a questionnaire, because respondents will answer what they understand and ignore the remaining questions.

Another strength of face-to-face research is knowing the respondents' identity. In other research methods including questionnaires, there is no guarantee of respondents' identity, due to the distance at which the research is conducted. Furthermore, the face-to-face researcher has control over the completing of the research instrument, because of his or her presence and influence on participants. In a questionnaire, there is no guarantee of respondents' commitment, seriousness, or dedication of reasonable time for completing the research.

On the other hand, the interview has some limitations, such as a heightened risk of bias, inconvenience, lack of anonymity and reduced sensitivity (Sarantakos, 2012). Respondents, especially when discussing sensitive issues, may feel uncomfortable and inconvenienced because of the lack of anonymity. Furthermore, organising and conducting interviews requires much effort (Juska, 2017). For these reasons, some firms refuse to allow researchers to interview a large number of people, to avoid time-wasting.

Figure 7 below is the sampling frame, showing the distribution of interviewees across the departments and hierarchical levels of SAFORG. In order to ensure a representative population, this research used three communities of practice, namely senior, middle-ranking and bottom-line employees, to make sense of OL phenomena and events across these categories. Although equal numbers were not achieved across the hierarchical levels, equal numbers were interviewed from

each department. Due to the importance of the middle management category, as research findings have shown, a large number of interviews were dedicated to this particular group.

Department	Distribution of interviewees			
	Senior management	Middle management	Bottom-line employees	Expatriates
Training	2	8	2	1
Security	4	5	3	-
State Service	2	5	5	4
IT	4	5	3	1
Logistics	6	4	2	-
Total	18	27	15	6
60				

Figure 7 Distribution of interviewees across SAFORG departments

3.4.4.2 Focus groups

While recognising the value of individual interviews as set out above, it is recommended to gather data using more than one method, to enhance the quality of research (Ridder & Hoon, 2009). This research achieved this by conducting focus group sessions, defined by Kitzinger (1994: 103) as “group discussions organised to explore a specific set of issues such as people’s views and experiences of contraception”. This is a research method where participants come together to discuss a certain topic. The focus group as a complementary technique is more informative and probably enhances the accuracy of data gathered via in-depth interview as participants confirm the concepts presented in both methods. Focus group discussions provide accessible data, as participants discuss various issues among themselves to provide a range of perspectives (Barbour, 2008). Liamputtong (2011) argues that the use of focus groups can reduce the bias of the researcher, who has relatively little influence in framing the discussion. The main concern in the focus group is the interaction among the group members, which is essential and expected to produce valuable data (Liamputtong, 2011; Morgan, 1996).

Morgan (1996) identifies three ways of using the focus groups, which are self-contained, supplementary and multimethod. The self-contained method considers a focus group as the primary means of gathering the data, which is not the case in the current study. Rather, this study utilised the focus group as a supplementary method alongside the interview. Therefore, focus group sessions were conducted to assess and support the authenticity of the primary data gathered through interviews. This research showed that the ideas presented in the focus group discussion are likely to be authentic, due to the group's agreement and consensus, or synergistic approach, as described by Litosseliti (2003). It also provided additional support, through a series of opinions for the main themes generated.

Juska (2017) argues that a focus group could not be considered as a representative sample of a firm in itself and that it should be used to provide in-depth understanding, rather than as an independent primary method. Juska's claim might be valid, in consideration of some limitations of the focus group, as some members might become passive in the presence of other members. Therefore, considering that qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, it is useful to use a supporting method beside the focus group, as happened in the current research.

In comparison with in-depth interviews, the focus group is enriched by the comprehensive understanding offered by different respondents' stories, whereas participants in interviews are unlikely to have a chance to challenge and develop their ideas. Hence, individual interviews presumably offer less opportunity for a thorough discussion, due to the lack of commonality with the researcher, unlike the discussion with colleagues in a focus group.

Focus groups, like individual interviews, may be more or less structured. The researcher has more control of a structured group, as he or she asks a series of specific questions and allocates limited time for each. Therefore, the flexibility for respondents to express themselves in depth is quite

limited. At the same time, the researcher and respondents are following a planned format. On the other hand, the participants in a less structured focus group will dominate the discussion and thus elaborate the issues in greater depth and link relevant themes to give a fuller picture of the situation. In other words, a less structured focus group allows the researcher to understand participants' thinking and investigate the research topic much more deeply than a more structured one (Marvasti, 2004).

The focus group is thus an ideal adjunct to individual interviews, rather than a stand-alone method. It allows the researcher to study group norms and how a group interacts and functions together (Bloor, 2001), in contrast with the one-to-one interview, where participants may experience difficulties in reflecting their experience or believe they have little to contribute to the research. The focus group might be seen as an ideal secondary technique, as participants encourage each other to talk and share their expertise (Kitzinger, 1994).

3.4.4.3 The use of focus groups in the current research

Five focus groups were conducted, one in each participating department of SAFORG, with memberships ranging from five to six participants. There was no restriction on group composition, such as participants having to be in the same professional category. The reason for this flexibility in group composition was to allow participants to relax and be attentive to taking an active part in the discussion. In this way, focus groups, along with in-depth interviews, fulfilled the primary goal of this research, to obtain an insightful understanding of the OL phenomenon and its associated aspects. Stated differently, the ideas elicited from the focus groups may be considered to be the sum of collective thinking and experience, thus complementing the individual views expressed in the individual interviews. This research can also be seen to some extent as using the focus group

as a weighting technique, to identify the most prominent issues highlighted by members of each department.

Focus groups help to scrutinise and support the data collected by other research methods. In this sense, important information can be gathered from a focus group discussion (Liamputtong, 2011), which is an advantage over the individual interview. For instance, the issue of gender has been raised as constituting a barrier to interaction, limiting the sharing of knowledge between men and women. However, the discussions occurring in the five focus groups in this study, all of which had mixed-gender memberships, refute this claim and confirm that men and women are willing to interact, regardless of gender. Moreover, considering that OL is built on the efficacy of learning interactions, the researcher had the chance to sense the versatility of the focus groups through participants' engagement, the extent of their interaction and their ability to build on each other's ideas.

One of the criticisms of the focus group method is that some members may be passive because they have nothing to share or are reluctant to talk. However, in this research the focus groups were seen to offer an extensive opportunity for timid participants to imitate their more enthusiastic peers and become willing to share their knowledge. A contrasting criticism is that some members may be unusually charismatic and therefore dominate the discussion to the extent of manipulating the discussion and pressurising others to conform, to embrace their thoughts and to repeat the same ideas (Liamputtong, 2011).

A specific challenge to the use of the focus group method in this research was that participants might feel uncomfortable at having to answer sensitive questions in the presence of other people. For such participants, in-depth interviews may be seen as preferable, giving them the privacy necessary for them to be willing to reveal sensitive information that could be harmful, annoying, or

combative if raised in a focus group. This issue was addressed, as noted above, by the use in this research of both individual interviews and focus groups, together eliciting both general and complex information. The focus group was found to be a supportive method when used in conjunction with in-depth interviews. The researcher elicited views on the most common issues via the interview process, then this information was used as a guide to structuring the focus group discussions.

The focus group provides the opportunity to identify consensus among group members on certain issues, allowing ideas to become more widely accepted. By contrast, the views presented in an in-depth interview are more individual and participants need more time to become comfortable compared to focus group participants. The latter also tend to react quickly, because the discussion stimulates group members to think and link ideas together, making them more comfortable about contributing, compared with individual interviewees. The structural learning style is more evident in a focus group, as participants are excited by the ideas discussed and contribute with different cases and examples to support or challenge them. The focus group can therefore be considered a suitable method to explore OL practice, because group discussion mirrors the OL process.

Because interaction is vital in a focus group, it may be seen as useful to video record the conversation; however, the present researcher avoided doing so, in the belief that it might cause some participants to become nervous and uncomfortable about discussing sensitive issues. Instead, the researcher used audio recordings to monitor the dynamics of each discussion, rather than focusing on who was talking and who was not.

3.5 The Practical Conduct of the Research

3.5.1 Research design

Having explored the ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects of this research, there now follows an account of how it was conducted. Figure 8 below illustrates the focus on five departments of SAFORG, a firm operating in the Middle East. These departments differ in their nature and responsibilities. The Training Department, for example, is responsible for providing proper training opportunities for SAFORG members, while the IT Department is charged with providing technological solutions and automating SAFORG’s workplace environment. The Logistics and State Service Departments are responsible for procurement and the Security Department for securing the company’s premises.

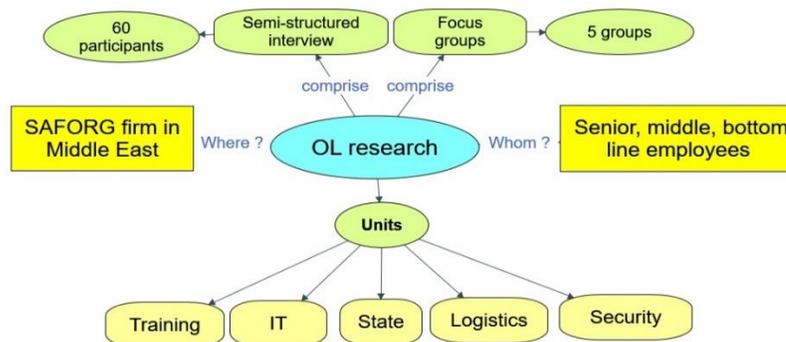


Figure 8 Research design/ methods/ approach

3.5.2 Research objective and questions

3.5.2.1 Research procedures

The current research is an exploratory study without pre-determined ideas, addressing themes concerning three dimensions of OL: Environment, Process and Factors. However, as explained in Chapter 2, the researcher reviewed the literature in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic and identify the main themes as a starting point for the discussion.

Next, the research position was selected. This could have been an inductive or deductive approach, or indeed an integration of the two, such as retroductive or abductive reasoning (Blaikie, 2007). Both inductive and deductive approaches are concerned with how to justify reasoning (Nonaka, 1994). Inductive reasoning makes inferences from evidential premises. It begins with particular observations of the data and concludes to a theory of knowledge (Azim, 2018). Therefore, it helps to obtain a more profound understanding of the phenomenon. Deductive research, on the other hand, starts with a hypothesis to be tested in order to generate a theory or conclusion; thus, it involves the use of statistical data in quantitative research. In comparison with the inductive and deductive approaches, abductive reasoning is considered to be a “conceptualisation process” (Nonaka, 1994: 25). It is neither inductive, because of incomplete observation, nor deductive, because of incomplete explanations or justification. The present research is inductive.

3.5.2.2 Research aim

This research aims to better understand OL practices through an exploration of the participants’ perceptions in relation to the OL environment and process and to the factors affecting it. Therefore, the focus of this study is to explore the influence of these dimension on OL by means of a qualitative case study of a firm in the Middle East, SAFORG. In this way, it seeks to identify and evaluate the characteristics of OL as a social phenomenon, its types, forms and variations, and the tasks associated with it. Identifying the causes and consequences of a phenomenon would require quantitative analysis, which is beyond the scope of this research (Lofland et al., 1971).

3.5.2.3 Research objectives

1. To identify and evaluate participants perceptions of SAFORG firm as an Organisation Learning environment.
2. To identify and evaluate SAFORG Organisation Learning process.
3. To identify and analyse Organisational Learning facilitating and hindering factors

3.5.3 Data gathering and management

Data collection and theory building should not occur in isolation from each other; they have to work consistently. Some considerations were taken into account while designing a data collection plan. First of all, the plan was designed to collect data that would answer the researcher questions. The design was also concerned with who was being researched, the type of methods being used, the logic of the argument and if it was consistently interpreted (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996).

Two critical aspects of validity had to be considered before data collection began. The first was population validity, which indicates that the number of participants is representative and sufficient. Second, the validity of the measurement was quite important, because if a researcher chooses wrong methods, then the data gathered might be irrelevant or not susceptible to interpretation, so that the result does not represent the actual study and the research does not have authenticity (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996).

The research premises are drawn from the literature; therefore, the main themes are ones that fall under each of the three categories of environment, process and factors. Because semi-structured mechanisms were used, the interviews addressed flexible themes, rather than depending on predefined questions, to allow both researcher and interviewees to expand on alternative ideas connected to a particular theme, instead of being restricted to answering a set of specific questions. Before data collection began, the researcher submitted a request form to the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Hull to obtain approval to conduct the research. The ethical approval process aims to ensure participants' good treatment and safety in the research (Privitera, 2018).

Data were collected in several phases. In the first phase, the researcher conducted sixty individual interviews and five focus group sessions in three months. In the second phase, translation from

Arabic to English took over place three months, followed by the process of transcribing the data from audio to written descriptions, which also consumed about three months. The third phase was dedicated to data management using the NVivo Pro 12 software to organise the data into thematic codes and nodes. Management of the data was developed and updated throughout the second and third years of the research journey.

3.5.3.1 Organising the data

The process of coding was accomplished in alignment with the inductive approach (Geiger & Antonacopoulou, 2009). It began with in-depth reading and categorising of the interview responses into relevant themes. The themes were generated and built accumulatively by adding the relevant information from each interview to a particular theme. The second phase was to minimise the similarities across different themes and reduce their number to enable better analysis.

This process of grouping themes provided the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of dominant themes and enabled him to distinguish trivial ideas. The themes were not imposed on the data; instead, they were initiated and developed spontaneously. Because some ideas were repeated across multiple interviews, the researcher paid profound attention to associated factors, such as the context and language, which might represent diverse meanings with the same vocabulary. The understanding and analysis of the data involved the researcher's subjectivity. Therefore, this research does not aim or claim to identify an ultimate truth, because the study is exploratory, aiming to enrich understanding of a phenomenon by providing socially constructed insights (Geiger & Antonacopoulou, 2009).

3.5.4 Challenges associated with the research

This section discusses some problems encountered during the process of gathering and analysing data and explains how the researcher dealt with these obstacles. Interviews varied in their length

from seven minutes to over an hour. One possible reason for this variation could be related to the ability of participants to convey their tacit knowledge verbally. Alternatively, it may have been that some participants lacked experience and were therefore unable to express themselves fluently, unlike experts, who would have more conscious than tacit knowledge and would thus be more likely to be able to convey their tacit knowledge, provided that they had good presentation skills.

Since the interviews were conducted in the workplace, it was potentially difficult to concentrate on the discussion because of many distractions, such as phone calls, visitors, work commitments and computer notifications. A decision was made to interview participants in a private place to keep them away from all such distractions. Thus, a separate meeting room was booked in each department and the interview schedules were set to be convenient for the investigator and the respondents.

As the researcher is male, interviewing women could be challenging in some cultures and although women agreed to take part in the study, their openness and willingness to discuss sensitive issues depended on individual personality traits and the influence of religious culture which might restrict certain behaviour. One of the strategies used to overcome this problem was to allocate additional time at the preliminary stage to make female participants feel comfortable and relaxed. For instance, one female member of the IT Department expressed reluctance to attend an interview because of a religious restriction on being alone in a room with a male stranger. The solution was to allow the woman to be accompanied by a colleague. In the event, she appeared able to relax and became enthusiastic about the discussion.

3.5.4.1 Challenges related to NVivo

Although NVivo is a helpful tool to organise qualitative data, some challenges must be reported.

The sixty interviews and five focus group sessions with five or six members in each group

generated a massive volume of data; using the searching and filtering features of NVivo then caused some missing data, due to language and meaning differences (Williams et al., 2015). The researcher used two techniques to resolve this issue; the first was to group the themes into categories to make it easier for the to identify the similarities and differences, as exemplified below in Figures 9, 10 and 11. The second solution was to conduct an in-depth reading of the leading research concepts.

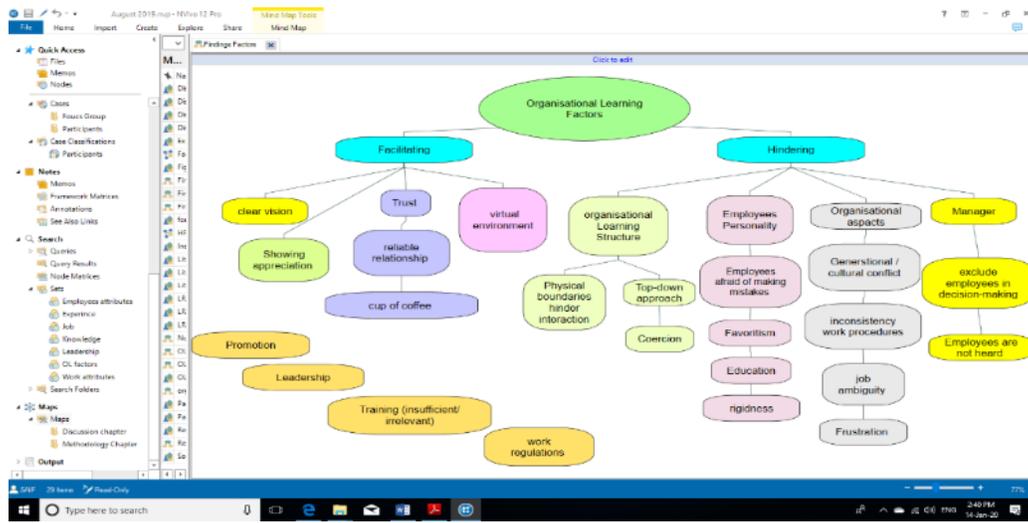


Figure 9 Distribution of organisational learning factors

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
atmosphere	29	38	02-Oct-17 12:33 PM	HU	17-Dec-17 10:27 PM	SK
Expatiate	20	28	08-Oct-17 11:17 AM	HU	23-Dec-18 11:49 PM	SAIF
OK Practice	19	26	18-Aug-16 12:50 AM	SAIF	28-Nov-18 1:57 PM	SAIF
performance understanding	17	18	02-Sep-16 11:31 AM	SAIF	22-May-18 9:34 AM	UOH
job Descriptions	15	20	06-Oct-17 9:50 AM	HU	25-Apr-18 4:13 PM	SK
general perceptions	14	16	18-Aug-16 12:59 AM	SAIF	28-Aug-18 12:59 AM	SAIF
Incentives	13	10	05-Oct-17 4:14 PM	HU	26-Dec-18 11:56 PM	SAIF
Frustration	13	17	08-Oct-17 9:58 AM	HU	17-Dec-17 7:47 PM	SK
Space for thinking	11	11	11-Dec-17 5:48 PM	HU	17-Dec-17 7:08 PM	SK
Competition	11	14	12-Dec-17 10:36 AM	SK	17-Dec-17 8:29 PM	SK
generation comparison	11	11	13-Dec-17 10:30 PM	SK	23-May-18 8:04 PM	UOH
Regulations	11	15	09-Oct-17 11:35 AM	HU	17-Dec-17 2:12 PM	SK
rotation	11	17	13-Dec-17 10:58 AM	SK	14-Jun-18 9:23 PM	UOH
Promotion	10	15	08-Oct-17 1:01 PM	HU	30-Nov-18 10:40 AM	SAIF
Facilities	10	12	08-Oct-17 12:10 PM	SK	28-May-19 9:08 PM	UOH
right place employment	9	12	12-Dec-17 11:51 AM	SK	09-Nov-18 9:19 PM	SAIF
teamwork	9	10	16-Oct-17 10:36 AM	SK	15-Oct-18 10:34 AM	SAIF
reward and punishment	9	12	13-Dec-17 10:26 PM	SK	19-Jun-18 10:32 AM	SK
routines	9	9	17-Dec-17 12:28 PM	SK	13-Jun-18 10:39 AM	UOH
innovation	8	10	12-Oct-17 7:24 PM	HU	03-May-19 1:07 AM	UOH
job Security	8	9	08-Oct-17 11:24 AM	HU	08-Nov-18 7:27 PM	SAIF
Social environment	8	8	15-Dec-17 7:11 PM	SK	03-May-19 9:45 AM	UOH
isolation	8	11	15-Dec-17 8:13 PM	SK	17-Dec-17 8:39 PM	SK
instructions	8	10	13-Dec-17 10:22 PM	SK	14-Dec-17 10:43 AM	SK
Work tasks distribution	7	11	11-Dec-17 7:07 PM	HU	17-Dec-17 10:17 PM	SK
work procedures (Nodes)	7	12	05-Oct-17 4:02 PM	HU	14-Dec-17 10:50 PM	SK
ambiguity	7	8	11-Dec-17 5:16 PM	HU	17-Dec-17 11:59 AM	SK
Favoritism	6	9	02-Oct-17 12:24 PM	HU	09-Nov-18 9:18 PM	SAIF
Networking	6	8	08-Oct-17 3:20 PM	HU	17-Dec-17 10:39 PM	SK
affectiveness	6	6	18-Sep-18 10:24 AM	HU	15-Dec-17 8:37 PM	SK
Charismatic Learning	6	7	26-Aug-18 12:37 AM	SAIF	13-Oct-18 10:34 AM	SAIF

Figure 10 Organisational learning dimensions

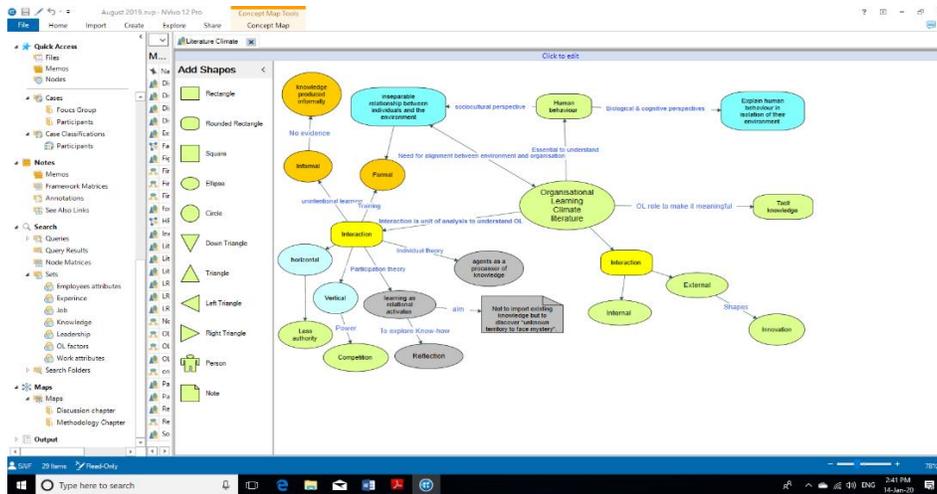


Figure 11 Organisational learning literature

3.5.4.2 Language

OL as a field of research uses specialist terminology to identify various issues in relation to the OL environment, process and factors, which was found to be somewhat challenging. Thus, when the interview process began, interviewees experienced difficulty in understanding some of the academic jargon (Sada & Maldonado, 2007), such as in reference to explicit and tacit knowledge, intrinsic motivation, authority and empowerment. The researcher realised the importance of using alternative and understandable language while ensuring absolute clarity in the interview questions. Therefore, less technical synonyms were used and further explanation was provided as necessary.

3.6 Research Ethics

Research ethics aims to protect participants' rights and to clarify the expected risks and harms associated with taking part in the research; therefore, obtaining participants' consent is essential (Reamer, 2009). Having certain ethical standards in place will help to ensure participants' safety and the accuracy of the data. Furthermore, the researcher has an obligation towards any organisation which is the subject of a case study, to maintain confidentiality of any sensitive knowledge and to avoid any anticipated harm during and after execution of the research. Thus, it

can be said that research ethics is about the researcher's obligations towards participants, knowledge, the organisation and society in general. It is worth mentioning that maintaining ethical research standards also protects the researcher from being involved in a dangerous or risky situation, even though it could deliver rich information.

Ethics can be defined as “norms of conduct” (Resnik, 2011); therefore, ethical norms tend to be seen as mere common sense. However, it can be argued that they go beyond common sense, given the rising number of ethical issues reported in research. Disagreements as to the meaning and application of ethical norms arise from disparities in human understanding and experience as to what is regarded as right or wrong. Adhering to ethical norms in research promotes the philosophical drive to obtain authentic truth by urging both researcher and participants to avoid manipulating the data by providing false or fabricated information (Resnik, 2011). It also urges the researcher to avoid misinterpreting or distorting the data or relying on irrelevant descriptions. Moreover, ethical norms promote mutual benefits for researchers, participants and agencies involved in the research. Therefore, it is essential to respect the interests of these parties, such as by protecting the data, the identity of respondents and intellectual property rights.

Before addressing the ethical considerations applicable to the current research, it is worthwhile to differentiate between postpositivism and constructivism by examining how ethics is viewed through the lenses of these paradigms. From the former perspective, Bok (1982) and Diener and Crandall (1978), as cited by Guba & Lincoln (1994), consider ethics to be extrinsic to the inquiry, which means that ethics are governed by external forces such as committees and institutions, rather than by the researcher. For example, providing ethical consent means that participants cannot be traced after filling in a questionnaire (Naujokaitiene et al., 2015). Constructivism, on the other hand, views ethics as intrinsic to the inquiry, due to participants' and researchers' involvement and

values (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To put it differently, managing ethics in qualitative research is seemingly more complicated than in other studies.

One ethical difficulty experienced in the present research was the researcher's potential bias as an employee of SAFORG, making it necessary to minimise his influence on the research. Subjectivism or idealism in research accepts the idea that the researcher's identity inevitably influences respondents' perceptions, as well as data interpretation. The realisation of the expected influence of bias in this research probably helped to minimise manipulation of the research data and thus to maintain the trustworthiness of the research.

However, the identity of researchers and interviewees has been found to directly bias research findings (Sada & Maldonado, 2007). In the present case, the researcher's position as a senior manager is likely to have influenced interviewees' participation and authenticity in answering some sensitive questions, especially any perceived as involving criticism of senior leaders, because participants will have assumed there to be a relationship between the researcher and their own managers. It was therefore essential to be transparent and to explain the research objectives, as well as the researcher's responsibility to protect the interviewees' identity. Furthermore, assuring participants that they would not be harmed and that the information would not be used other than for research purposes helped to minimise these tensions.

Another issue was that of the researcher's male gender and the hesitation of some female participants to meet him in isolation. According to Bailey (2008), female researchers generate a higher percentage of accurate information than male researchers. The present researcher, as noted in Section 3.5.4, also faced some difficulties regarding the interviewing of female participants in isolation, due to some cultural and religious considerations. Therefore, the researcher gave female

interviewees the option of being accompanied by a colleague in the interview room, so that they would feel comfortable and confident to talk.

Being an insider to SAFORG provided the researcher with a deep understanding of the cultural issues highlighted by the interviewees. On the other hand, the disadvantage of being an insider is the personal influence the researcher might have on the interpretation of the data or on participants. For that reason, the researcher paid attention to ensuring that the interview questions were neither threatening nor confusing. He also explained at the beginning of each interview that his role was as a researcher, not a representative of the firm.

It is essential to understand the ethical complexities that arise before and after conducting research. The researcher's obligation to protect participants' identity must be stated clearly and if the researcher breaches research ethics, participants must be able to claim their rights. Therefore, the researcher explained the ethical considerations to the participants at the beginning of each interview. Before the interview began, each participant was also given a consent form with full details of the research and a statement of their right to withdraw at any stage.

An ethical issue particularly affecting qualitative research is information confidentiality. Participants who develop a good relationship with the researcher may disclose confidential information which they have not talked about before. In this situation, the researcher should protect participants and never disclose such information to anyone. It is inappropriate behaviour to use participants' information or personal details to achieve personal objectives at the expense of harm to participants. Such participants are vulnerable and seeking help from the researcher. Therefore, it is essential not to force them to disclose confidential information or to take part in the research if they do not want to.

3.6.1 Research trustworthiness

Validity is a vital requirement in order for any research to be trusted. However, researchers differ in the steps they take to judge and demonstrate that their research is conducted ethically and that they have acted with integrity (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). The traditional approach to ensuring research validity follows the idea that quantitative and qualitative research should be validated with the same criteria, while opponents of this view believe that every type of research is unique and should have its own approach (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). The current researcher embraces the latter approach, believing that the tools used to evaluate quantitative research validity are invalid to ensure the authenticity and trustworthiness of qualitative research. The reason for not having the same criteria to validate both quantitative and qualitative research is that the former seeks to prove or deny hypotheses, while the latter aims to enhance the understanding of a particular phenomenon.

All research pillars, including the researcher, participants, data, society and findings, have to be understood with consideration of their trustworthiness and authenticity. This research, as an inductive study, is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the OL phenomenon, rather than to prove or deny its premises. Therefore, the concept of reliability and credibility, which are used in quantitative research, have been substituted by alternatives that are more suitable to ensure the validity of qualitative research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The criteria suggested by Guba & Lincoln (1994) are trustworthiness, transferability, dependability and confirmability. According to Rees (2011: 240), trustworthiness in qualitative research can be defined as “one of the criteria used in establishing the authenticity and accuracy of the information presented”.

Guba & Lincoln (1994: 114) identify authenticity as particularly appropriate for constructivist research, defining it as comprising “criteria of fairness, ontological authenticity (enlarges personal

constructions), educative authenticity (leads to improved understanding of constructions of others), catalytic authenticity (stimulates to action), and tactical authenticity (empowers action)”. Thus, authenticity in social constructivism implies constructed realities and knowledge.

Thus, authenticity in social constructivism implies constructed realities and knowledge.

Trustworthiness in the research context is about balancing the interests of participants and of the researcher with the results. In other words, there is an expectation of conflict of interest for the researcher between representing the reality according to participants’ points of view and his own interpretation of the findings. Thus, the interpreted reality does not necessarily match participants’ interest (Vossler & Moller, 2014). Trustworthiness is one of the sufficient criteria by which to judge research. Therefore, judging research does not necessarily imply ignoring or manipulating participants’ thoughts. Instead, trustworthiness can be achieved through scrutiny of what has been disclosed by participants and what has remained unexplored. Trustworthiness can be attained as long as a result can be trusted (Biggam, 2015).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the current research, specific procedures were put in place regarding data generation, participants, data analysis/interpretation and results. First, the data were gathered using multiple methods: interviews and focus groups. Additionally, trustworthiness was ensured by exploring OL themes across different organisational layers and departments, involving senior, mid-level and bottom-line employees in the Training, Security, IT, Logistics and State Service departments.

Second, the level of trust between the researcher and participants is an indication of research quality. Therefore, participants must be provided with sufficient proof of trust to make them feel secure and care should be taken to avoid deceiving them at any stage of the research (Vossler & Moller, 2014). In the current research, participants were fully aware of the purpose of the research and of their rights to participate voluntarily and to withdraw at any point (Zoethout et al., 2017).

Trustworthiness was strengthened by protecting participants' right to anonymity and by not disclosing their information to any third party.

Third, the trustworthiness of the data analysis was achieved through a series of steps, the first being to read the transcripts extensively in order to ensure that the researcher's interpretation was consistent with the meaning intended by each participant. The second step was to group the themes and check the accuracy of meaning as a whole. Since the data were mostly gathered in Arabic, a diary was used after each interview to record the main ideas expressed by the interviewee, thus maintaining a certain level of transparency. However, the researcher did not provide a descriptive recording of what had been said, preferring to add a self-reflection, especially when the ideas were still fresh in his mind, while meaning was conveyed in the interaction process.

3.7 Conclusion

The early sections of this chapter have identified the research philosophy, including the ontological, epistemological and methodological positions adopted. It was noted that the ontological position is interlinked with epistemology and methodology. Embracing a particular research position drives the researcher to adopt a corresponding philosophy. In positivism, the ontology proposes a single reality, while the epistemology assumes that reality has to be measured to be proved. On the other hand, when the ontology proposes multiple realities, an interpretive epistemological stand is needed, which characterises constructivism. Pragmatism reflects the belief that reality is understood by selecting the best tools to solve the problem, as reality is negotiated.

The researcher can take one of three epistemological positions: correspondence, coherence or consensus. Correspondence is achieved through the researcher's hypotheses matching the observed reality, while coherence is about alignment with certain beliefs. The consensus approach

usually involves collective agreement, when participants embrace the same assumptions. Research methodology defines the research and the researcher's position regarding the appropriate methods to generate knowledge. In this respect, the current research embraced a qualitative approach and the methods deemed to be appropriate to generate the constructed realities were interviews and focus groups.

The later sections of the chapter explained the processes of selecting, designing and applying appropriate methods to collect the data, noting that after a series of individual interviews, focus groups were used to deepen the understanding of the emergent themes and to make it more comprehensive. Some of the challenges experienced by the researcher were detailed, then it was explained how the researcher paid careful attention to ethical considerations, which helped to minimise the risks and resolve most of the issues. Finally, there was an account of the means used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

Chapter 4, which follows, gives a detailed description of the five departments of SAFORG involved in the case study and the operation of organisational learning in each of them.

Chapter 4 Case Studies

4.1 Introduction

This research investigates five departments of a firm in the Middle East, namely, the Training, Information Technology, Logistics, State Service and Security departments of SAFORG, a consultancy that provides various services in the fields of training, logistics, construction, IT and workplace security. The main reason for selecting these particular departments is the differences in their functionality, as they represent a range of administrative, technical and security services. It was expected that this diversity of functionality would provide rich insights into three dimensions of organisational learning: Environment, Process and Factors.

This chapter aims to provide an outline descriptive profile of the five SAFORG departments selected for data collection. Most importantly, it highlights the research participants' views on the environment in which OL operates, its processes and the factors that facilitate or inhibit it in the Middle Eastern context. The description of each department is expected to provide a useful understanding of commonalities and differences across departments. The intention is also to differentiate the perceptions of senior, middle-rank and bottom-line employees in respect of the three dimensions of OL. This chapter is not intended to discuss causes or provide justifications of the state of affairs in the case study departments, because these matters are discussed and analysed later, in Chapter 5.

4.2 Training Department Profile

The Training Department (TD) is responsible for creating and providing learning opportunities for SAFORG's employees. Therefore, the TD is accountable for identifying employees' learning needs, designing suitable content and evaluating the return on investment. The range of methods that are used to fulfil employees' learning requirements include formal training courses, both in-

house and external, as well as further education programmes. The formal training provided by the TD seems to be structured into a sequence of phases, from identifying employees' learning needs and designing the appropriate content to the delivery and evaluation phases. As will be done for each of the other departments in the case study, the following subsections explore the nature of learning in the TD as related successively to the dimensions of OL environment, process and factors.

4.2.1 Training Department: learning environment

One of the apparent aspects of the OL environment in the TD is that learning interactions have various characteristics across organisational levels and in particular, between senior and bottom-line employees. The lack of interaction across different organisational layers has become an issue that inhibits learning. Although the hierarchical structure seems to organise the workflow across organisational levels, less experienced employees become intimidated by the requirement to listen and obey the rules rather than share their views.

A management presence in the workplace helps to understand employees' problems and challenges, thus enhancing levels of interaction and reducing bureaucracy. Interactions to exchange knowledge between TD employees at the middle and bottom-line levels has improved radically as more educated employees have been recruited, so that bottom-line employees have increasingly similar educational backgrounds and the same interests. Moreover, bottom-line employees, especially the new generation, are more open-minded and inclined to learn new information than older employees, who are more likely to stick rigidly to the methods of working that have been in use for decades. Members of the older generation also tend to work in their zones and prefer to interact with colleagues of the same age and interests. Younger employees seem to be eager to absorb new expertise, whereas older ones consider knowledge as instructions that must

be followed. Unlike the new generation, the old generation prefers to work according to given information and tends to avoid social interaction. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between the two generations tends to be formal rather than friendly.

The characteristics of learning interaction vary from one section of the TD to another, depending on how close employees feel to each other. The TD uses formal meetings for sharing experiences. However, these are seen as mechanisms not for sharing knowledge so much as for solving immediate problems. On the other hand, the TD does not seem concerned about sharing informal knowledge and there are no noticeable informal practices in place to ensure that employees share their experience. Furthermore, the TD has no criteria to ensure the application of knowledge. As to sharing the learning obtained through formal training courses, the TD encourages trainees to conduct post-training workshops to transfer their knowledge to less experienced employees.

The TD is characterised to some extent by a representation of super-hero individuals who are routinely assigned to solve the most complex problems in the organisation. Despite its awareness of the negative consequences of this practice, the TD continues to encourage individuals to solve problems, rather than promoting teamwork and collaboration. The idea of promoting super-hero individuals to deal with the most critical issues reduces trust and weakens motivation for the whole department. Moreover, in the long run, those employees with valuable experience are likely to leave the organisation, taking their expertise with them.

Making mistakes is considered an indication of inadequacy. Therefore, the TD is concerned to minimise errors and often warns employees not to make mistakes. Employees are asked to report challenging issues rather than given the opportunity to propose solutions. Although taking no action prevents employees from learning through error and experience, it is still a safer way to avoid criticism or punishment.

Policymakers' orientations and perceptions influence the characteristics of the TD's OL environment. This influence extends to providing employees with sufficient training opportunities and encouraging them to apply what they learn. Conversely, employees are not allowed to challenge or disobey the rules and instructions issued by a higher authority. While senior managers seem aware of the desirability of building a new conception of the working environment, they seem frustrated and pessimistic about the possibility of imminent change in the situation. The learning process in the TD seems to be a representation of single-loop learning, where employees are directed to propose and apply immediate solutions to problems, rather than questioning the norms of the organisation. Such questioning is not encouraged by the top management and it has to be monitored and approved by an external authority.

Despite being in one department and under the same supervision, there is no unity between the sections of the TD. Each section operates differently and has distinct work procedures and learning style. Employees in each section of the TD appear unaware of the experience of those in the other sections. They also appear programmed to work on particular tasks, deal with the same people and interact within a limited network, all of which makes them unwilling to change their environment. Moreover, the scope of their ambition is to focus on achieving their immediate tasks rather than broadening their horizons and searching for new information which might help them to do their work differently and more efficiently.

It is noticeable that the level of TD employees' education and knowledge influences the degree of harmony between them and their inclination to share knowledge. Thus, employees with a low level of education are unable to exchange their experience, unlike more highly educated employees, who can express their implicit knowledge. Despite the importance of acquiring communication skills for learning interactions, employees' competencies are not necessarily always linked with

their academic qualifications, as some have extensive knowledge of different disciplines without having been educated to a higher level.

External communication to obtain knowledge is not at the expected level among TD employees, as their motivation to build networks with external sources is dependent on their personal characteristics. Some TD employees refuse to establish networks beyond SAFORG's boundaries and complain about not having the skills to initiate conversations. On the other hand, some employees have joined professional networks to keep up-to-date in their fields.

4.2.2 Training Department: learning process

The nature of sharing tacit knowledge in the TD is subject to the level of trust between employees. Employees need to feel secure and relaxed to bring up their tacit knowledge to the surface level. The Department does not have clear procedures to share tacit knowledge between experts and less experienced employees. The experts do not understand that the process of sharing knowledge does not merely mean answering a set of questions using knowledge stored in people's minds as separate fragments, but rather that the person needs to construct useful knowledge from these fragments in order to provide valuable answers and pass on the accumulative experience. Although it is recognised in the TD that trust, transparency and proper communication constitute the solid foundation on which to build a powerful process of tacit knowledge sharing, the existing pattern of communication without trust, affinity and friendly relationships is not sufficient to create a productive and dynamic learning environment.

One of the indications of the weakness of the learning process in the TD is the absence of an orientation programme, which should be established so that newcomers become aware of the organisations' tasks and procedures. Instead, novice employees are asked to read the available documents, which does not always leave a pleasant impression or have positive outcomes. The

absence of a robust learning process for knowledge transformation has kept new staff busy with no clear direction as to how to build their capabilities.

4.2.3 Training Department: learning factors

Leadership appears to play a significant role in shaping and influencing learning in the TD. However, the inclinations of employees varies across the different sections of the TD, depending on the each section leader's willingness to create a learning environment which supports the sharing of knowledge. Managers can encourage OL by assigning work activities which promote discussion and collaboration among employees regardless of post or position, whereas other managers limit such interaction exclusively to the senior and middle levels.

One of the factors hindering knowledge sharing in the TD is workload and the associated urgency to finish tasks, which contributes negatively to knowledge sharing and increases the likelihood of errors being committed. An additional consequence of a heavy workload is a narrowing of employees' minds, reducing their ability to benefit from internal or external experience. Despite the middle management's acknowledgement of the need to allocate sufficient time for employees to share knowledge in order to minimise errors and to improve standards and quality of work, priority is given to simply getting the job done.

The lack of a continuous career path and the absence of internal communication between TD sections in order to transfer knowledge together constitute an essential obstacle to OL. The TD emphasises that relocating staff from one place to another may lead to tension and disagreement with the existing staff in the place to which employees are transferred. It seems that the main reason for the inability of relocated staff members to integrate with their new work environment is the lack of continuous communication between sections of the TD to share knowledge, which thus makes the transfer of staff from one section to another unbeneficial.

Another factor influencing knowledge sharing in the TD is the implementation of a social enterprise network which enhances the sharing of knowledge by technology. The TD encourages employees to post and upload documents into its portal and to use the chat facilities to discuss workplace issue in a secure online learning environment. The result is the creation of a virtual warehouse full of fragmented information, while employees have become steadily less well motivated to share knowledge by a lack of physical interaction and incentives.

As most TD employees are academically well qualified and professionally competent, their reluctance to share knowledge may be explained by cultural rather than academic factors. Another essential factor affecting learning interactions in the TD would appear to be employees' personalities. In practice, they are not inclined to embrace the teamwork concept because they do not trust each other's capability and have a tendency to prefer performing their work tasks individually rather than relying on collaboration. Making the learning culture truly collaborative requires collaboration between senior, middle and bottom-line employees.

4.3 Information Technology Department Profile

The Information Technology Department (ITD) is responsible for technical and technological development through the preparation of technical programmes and systems. It is also charged with providing services related to ICT in terms of devices, equipment and applications. Through these means, it is accountable for the provision of mechanisms and tools to help improve the efficiency and speed of completion of work throughout SAFORG. Thus, the ITD contributes to meeting the company's objectives by developing work, streamlining procedures, improving efficiency and performance and rationalising expenditure in line with the regulations and directives issued by the company. Finally, the ITD supervises and develops SAFORG's information network to benefit from building a knowledge society.

4.3.1 Information Technology Department: learning environment

The ITD takes a different approach from other departments to the transformation and dissemination of knowledge. Most of the learning in the ITD occurs in a virtual environment, as employees use a dedicated system which organises their workload as well as recording their experience and passing it on to anyone who intends to do a similar job. However, knowledge discrimination is crucial to complete the cycle of learning; otherwise, the knowledge becomes useless and no implementation takes place.

The ITD relies on a system that is responsible for recording the mechanisms that its engineers and technicians use to tackle and resolve incidents. The advantage of this system is that it records the whole process, including analysis of the problem and solution. After the problem has been solved, the system asks the solver for feedback, including on the associated challenges, and this process helps to recall to the implicit knowledge stored in the minds of employees.

Leadership behaviour seems to influence employees' motivation for learning in the ITD. Some managers are more concerned with employees' attendance and fingerprints than with evaluating their productivity. Although the leadership style seems concerned with being on time, it creates a feeling of injustice when some employees are treated differently. Therefore, managers' attitudes affect employees' enthusiasm for learning and sharing their learning, because they are often seen as key influencers in the organisation. Furthermore, some managers in the ITD distribute work unfairly among staff, preferring to assign tasks to people whom they know because they believe in the existence of supermen and superwomen. The result of this favouritism is to make employees careless because they are not given a chance to show their skills and capabilities.

An apparent feature of the ITD environment is an inconsistency in working procedures across the department, making it difficult for employees in one section to interact with those in another.

Learning interactions thus depend on each individual's inclination and personality, rather than inherent features of the organisational system. Internal knowledge-sharing interactions are satisfactory, compared to those at the inter-organisational level. The ITD seems to have ineffective communication across organisational layers. Restricting employees to their job domains inhibits productive interactions, as they are constrained to specific tasks at defined places and times, eventually becoming unable to interact beyond these intangible boundaries. Similarly, learning is inhibited by organisational routines where the main concern of the organisation is to complete routine tasks, rather than providing employees with sufficient time and space for learning.

Seeking external knowledge in the ITD is self-driven by employees' interests, rather than by the organisation. Although it is healthy for OL to be employee-driven, there is an associated risk that employees may be disinclined to learn. Employees can acquire external knowledge by attending professional workshops and certified training courses to obtain globally recognised qualifications. However, training within the ITD has been criticised as inadequate to meet employees' needs. Indeed, it is mostly irrelevant to their needs because of the absence of personal development plans and of training needs analysis. Employees therefore tend to search for alternative learning opportunities to keep up-to-date with technological advances. It can be said that the individual inclination to learn in the ITD is self-driven rather than organisation-driven.

4.3.2 Information Technology Department: learning process

One of the processes used to share learning in the ITD is an experimental session. Employees are invited to participate in a learning session where an expert, for example, explains in sequential steps how a problem occurs, the best ways to deal with it and the challenges associated with applying these solutions. Participants have the opportunity to question and clarify their colleague's experience. Retaining experience in the ITD's warehouse is one of the main features of the learning

process. The Department records knowledge of its problems and solutions in an online library; new employees are then able to log into the warehouse database and retrieve past experience of how problems were detected, diagnosed and solved.

Besides creating an online library as a warehouse of experience, the ITD tends to record such experience in its documentation, which is relatively useful and involves clear and well-defined procedures. Although OL is mostly about employee interaction and building learning capabilities, having some documented experience will help to retrieve experiences, especially those that happened long ago. Retaining former employees' experience is complex, particularly when an organisation does not have an OL process. Therefore, documenting and retaining their experiences helps later generations to understand the history of the organisation. Documenting experience is mainly possible with explicit knowledge, whereas implicit or tacit knowledge can normally be acquired only through practical techniques such as learning by doing, observing others and imitating them. Tacit knowledge is a source of innovation and its complexity emerges as it is embedded in individual personalities, beliefs, values and perspectives.

Another process used to share acquired learning in the ITD is to ask trainees who have attended training courses to share their knowledge by delivering on-the-job session to show their colleagues what they have learned in a virtual technical environment. The learning process in the ITD has been criticised as ineffective. The problem-solving dialogue, for example, did not involve a stage of reflection, which is essential to learn the lessons associated with a problem. The discussion remained at the surface level rather than investigating the roots of the problem deeply, representing single-loop learning.

4.3.3 Information Technology Department: learning factors

An important obstacle to various learning processes in the ITD is the absence of strategy, including a transparent organisational system, vision, goals and work procedures. Another restrictive factor is that much of the information in the ITD is classified as secret; therefore, mid-level managers and bottom-line employees are not aware of some critical information that would be necessary for them to learn.

One factor facilitating learning in the ITD is the availability of facilities in the rest area for employees to watch custom-made video material related to their work, which they then have the opportunity to discuss. On the other hand, some technical employees have complained of technical shortcomings; although the ITD is aware of the need for employees to have an IT laboratory in order to practice their professional skills, no such support has been provided.

Learning transformation in the ITD can be hindered by the discontinuity in building employees' accumulated experience. Sustainability is necessary for stability of experience, and experience needs time to be built and shared, so moving employees to work on an entirely different job minimises the opportunity to accumulate experience. Assigning employees to work in the wrong place, against their interests and discipline, probably decreases their motivation, thus their inclination to learn.

The conflict between local employees and expatriates in the ITD is considered to be another factor inhibiting OL. Expats are afraid of becoming redundant if local employees reach their level of expertise and locals believe that they withhold essential knowledge in order to maintain their advantage over time. Thus, lack of trust is a major factor hindering interaction and cooperation between local employees and expatriates, while the withholding of knowledge, which is regarded as one of the most influential factors hindering OL in the ITD, is closely related to a lack of

confidence. Employees refuse to share knowledge with others to avoid putting themselves in a weaker position, believing that knowledge is power and that sharing it will make them less powerful while strengthening the other party.

A further factor noticeably hindering OL is the lack of the incentives needed to promote employees' motivation to share knowledge. Strengthening this motivation is essential for successful OL. Employees were invited to attend an informal knowledge-sharing session and because this was optional and there was no pressure on them to attend, very few did so. Reluctance to be involved in such learning events may be related to disappointment with the inadequate level of work recognition.

Job security also has a significant influence on ITD employees' inclination to engage in learning interactions. This is more apparent in not-for-profit organisations, where there is less competition than in the private sector. Thus, the public sector attracts risk-averse employees who want to have an unchallenged job. Employees who feel secure whether they improve their performance or not are likely to be less motivated to interact and exchange learning. Therefore, job security seems to contribute negatively to employees' motivation towards learning and enhancing their skills.

4.4 Security Department Profile

The Security Department (SD) is responsible for providing security consultation and services to SAFORG's other departments and for monitoring and securing the organisation's sites to keep them safe and protected. The SD is unique in terms of its culture, language, values and people. Unlike other departments of SAFORG, SD employees are trained to respond immediately to urgent and unexpected situations, so they require specialist knowledge and skills.

4.4.1 Security Department: learning environment

The work of the SD is mostly concerned with task achievement rather than investigating the mechanisms and processes of learning. Although this approach seems to be useful in the short term, it cannot guarantee long-term organisational sustainability. The work pattern is one of following instructions and obeying rules and regulations to get the job done. Employees are not allowed to challenge the instructions given. From the top management's point of view, the flow of information or instructions across hierarchical ranks is unquestionable and unlikely to be altered or adjusted. SD employees at the different organisational levels tend to avoid breaking rules or questioning instructions, as most of prefer not to risk doing so. Any inclination or motivation to criticise instructions always provokes a harsh response from the management. Supervisors use their authority to judge any suggestions and usually consider them a waste of time and effort. Consequently, motivated employees become demotivated and unwilling to share their thoughts or make suggestions.

The SD is influenced by the authoritarian leadership style that shapes relationships across seniority ranks. Bottom-line employees are expected to act as listeners and executors, rather than thinkers and collaborators. Their passivity and reliance on the management make them dependent, unwilling to take responsibility and therefore unenthusiastic about generating valuable knowledge. It is noticeable that obligations are not distributed across different organisational levels; instead, employees blame the top management for failures and senior managers blame bottom-line employees for not meeting targets. Each level of functionality accuses the next of causing problems: Junior employees accuse senior staff of not allowing them to unleash their abilities and potential, while the latter accuse the former of manifest inability to achieve goals.

Managers are considered the only source of valid knowledge in the SD, who are expected to act as ambassadors or agents, obtaining knowledge from external sources and feeding it to others in the organisation. This view of managers as agents of learning is consistent with a bureaucratic leadership style, according to which managers are responsible for organising, managing, supervising and evaluating all aspects of the organisation's work. Therefore, it cannot be employees who seek knowledge from any external sources and the concepts of team learning and knowledge sharing are not appreciated or supported by the SD.

One of the significant challenges to OL in the SD is the inconsistency of leadership policy. Leaders differ in their styles and approaches to leadership, so each is liable to have a unique way of managing. This causes inconsistency in work procedures, the repetition of problems and a lack of the internal communication on which shared learning depends, ultimately creating divergencies and barriers to collaboration within the department.

Employees in the SD work in fixed shift patterns which restrict their contact with particular supervisors and colleagues. Although they are able to benefit from interactions with different supervisors and colleagues as they move from group to group, the negative consequence of this shift work is that they have little opportunity to build strong relationships with others because time together is restricted, which makes employees unable to accumulate shared knowledge.

4.4.2 Security Department: learning process

The top-down approach adopted in the SD means that there is very little interaction across organisational levels. The nature of work is mainly about the translation of instructions from higher to lower levels. Therefore, there is no communication cycle between these levels and a weak learning process. As instructions move from one level to another, employees tend to obey rather than challenge them. In such a hierarchical structure, it can be claimed that front-line employees

probably make meagre contributions to the knowledge-creating system because of the lack of interaction with middle and senior managers.

Communication in the SD is a thus one-way process where employees are expected to listen and obey rules without seeking to clarify them, let alone challenge them. The lack of reciprocal interdependence and communication between employees across the department on one hand and between employees and managers on the other inhibits trust and creates an isolating work environment. However, both middle managers and front-line employees stressed the need to improve the quality of relationships between employees as a step towards building a learning organisation. Deepening relationships will tend to enhance job satisfaction, thus improving interaction and learning.

Building on accumulated knowledge is a challenge for managers in the SD, most of whom prefer to build their own experience in isolation from that of others, which is wasteful of time, effort and resources. Some tasks can be done using a knowledge recording system, including documentation, which could help employees to do routine work. However, while it is possible to record explicit knowledge such as the steps taken to organise an event, it is much more difficult to record the tacit knowledge which has accumulated in people's minds.

One learning process used in the SD is job rotation. Rotating employees into jobs with similar characteristics can enhance both their knowledge and their level of interaction as they get to know more employees. Moreover, job rotation probably helps them to learn alternative skills and work mechanisms that are used in different jobs. Immersing employees in unfamiliar work environments, so that they leave their comfort zone and have to deal with uncertainty, will help to build their resilience and resourcefulness. However, to maximise the benefits of job rotation, it

should be planned to enhance employees' learning rather than to reduce labour costs, especially in a staff shortage.

4.4.3 Security Department: learning factors

Discussion of the factors affecting OL in the SD highlights the power of the leader's behaviour to shape employees' behaviour and inclination to learn. A leader concerned with individual productivity drives employees to think and act similarly. In contrast, one who ignores them and does not involve them will cause them to tend to lock everything in their offices to avoid sharing knowledge with others. The SD focus group described supervisors as the cornerstone with the power to drive employees towards productive learning.

The learning process in the Security Department is driven by instructions imposed by senior managers on front-line employees, rather than a collaborative learning style. Hierarchy and rank are highly respected and whoever challenges these structures risks being punished. The top-down approach requires front-line employees to accept the rules and act accordingly. For example, if an employee has an idea, he or she has to pass it on to his direct supervisor and it is unacceptable to go over the supervisor's head by communicating the idea directly to a more senior manager. Most such ideas are rejected by immediate superiors, who do not see their value. Sometimes, these suggestions disclose the dark side of the work and contain direct or implicit criticism of the managers' leadership capabilities.

Problem-solving in the SD rarely involves bottom-line employees, because senior and middle managers believe that the bottom-line role is to act, not to think or plan. In the absence of internal communication, employees do not know what is happening in the department. Bottom-line employees receive instructions every morning regarding specific tasks and duties, then act accordingly. Therefore, there is no space for them to plan or organise their responsibilities. It can

be said that one factor inhibiting OL is employees' belief that interaction is pointless, as they must simply follow specific instructions.

Employees' inclination to learn is considered another factor significantly contributing to OL. Although some individuals in the SD are eager to learn and ask many questions, others are unconcerned with learning and have no desire to improve their skills and abilities. Top managers tend to criticise their bottom-line employees as unable to acquire knowledge. Learning in the SD is threatened by staff fears of failure, although employees who are keen to learn, patient and possess communication skills seem to be more successful.

In the SD, having power is positively related to acquiring knowledge. As employees are promoted, greater authority probably enables them to express themselves and acquire learning. Hence, those in higher positions have the power to interact with other employees in different disciplines and different places, unlike bottom-line employees, who do not have the power to create their own learning networks in which to exchange knowledge. Finally, although power provides individual employees with opportunities to be exposed to new ideas and learn from others, this takes the form on individual learning, not collective learning.

4.5 State Service Department Profile

The State Service Department (SSD) is responsible for construction and maintenance at all of SAFORG's sites. Therefore, the department performs all tasks related to planning, establishing and supervising the implementation of projects, to engineering design studies and to the maintenance of these sites. The SSD employs a larger number of expatriates than most other SAFORG departments.

4.5.1 State Service Department: learning environment

The unique nature of its work makes the SSD resemble a public sector service provider rather than a private sector one. A feature of learning in the SSD is employees' reliance on their own inclination to learn rather than on the Department's support, with the consequence that diversity among individuals produces a variety of incompatible learning styles and methods. Differences in personality and in employees' readiness to learn seems to make it difficult to achieve a unified learning environment in the SSD. Another possible cause of this fragmented learning environment is the misalignment of policies between the various sections of the SSD and the fact that each team has its own ways of working and transferring knowledge. As a consequence, employees who rotate from place to place are confused by differences of style and procedure, which prevents them from building a learning experience.

In order for SSD employees to learn, they need to be proactive, as the interaction process requires those who seek learning to approach knowledgeable people. The intention to learn among employees is a prerequisite for OL success. Furthermore, individuals need enthusiasm, ability and engagement as active members of a community of learning; they also need to be patient and keen to explore alternative possibilities in order to steadily improve their understanding of work processes.

The characteristics of employee relations depend on the distribution of projects and teams. Thus, employees are distributed in occupational groups, involved in activities such as engineering, construction or architecture. Placing employees in such groups isolates them from others in the department and instils a spirit of competition inhibiting employees from sharing knowledge across groups. Although employees therefore tend to work in isolation from other groups, there is

compulsory interaction across different disciplines. When each group has done its part, they have to meet to exchange views and finalise the planning for the whole building.

Competition and hidden conflict shape knowledge transformation across groups in the SSD, as they clash with the aim of gaining superiority more than achieving organisational goals, the ultimate result being an failure to share tacit knowledge. Both senior and middle managers stressed the need for groups to exchange experience in order to ensure the consistency of work and transmission of knowledge. Enhancing group coordination draws attention to what makes group members inclined to pass on their experience to colleagues in other groups. Giving preference to achieve organisational goals instead of individual interests is likely to minimise conflict and enhance knowledge sharing.

4.5.2 State Service Department: learning process

The division of SSD employees into groups, each working on a particular project, may appear useful to enhance internal learning interactions, but it does not support learning interactions across the organisation or external interactions beyond departmental boundaries. Although colleagues interact well within teams, these operate in isolation from each other. Instead of cooperating and exchanging knowledge, the teams compete and tend to conceal knowledge in order to maintain superiority. Separating employees into different groups creates a sense of competition and sometimes a tendency to pursue personal rather than organisational goals.

Acquiring knowledge through external communication seems to be self-driven as SSD employees seek personal learning opportunities. Accordingly, the SSD believes that employees should be responsible for their learning and managers should only empower and facilitate them. An apparent advantage of encouraging employees' self-driven inclination to learn is that it makes them independent and self-motivated to find ways to acquire knowledge. The drawback of this self-

reliance for is that the pursuit of external knowledge remains subject to individuals' motivation and willingness to learn.

One successful learning strategy implemented by some groups in the SSD is to persistently ask questions, a process by which all team members can participate, either by asking or by answering these questions. Moreover, the strategy need not be limited to the current situation but can also focus on future business for the organisation. In this way, employees who keep asking questions and clarifying issues will probably become more experienced than others.

Problem-solving is considered to lie at the heart of the OL process in the SSD. The mechanisms by which employees think and tackle problems are conceived as fundamental sources of learning. The SSD takes two approaches to dealing with workplace problems, the first being to ignore them unless they appear on the surface and start to have noticeable effects. This reactive approach reflects a problem-solving style rather than a desire for learning opportunities. The other approach is when managers take responsibility for addressing a problem without involving their subordinates, with the result that the solution is not disseminated. Both approaches represent single-loop learning, because they do not challenge organisational norms or investigate the root of the problem.

The repeated occurrence of similar incidents in the SSD indicates the absence of OL, as employees repeat the same work process, which causes the same problem to recur. The failure to record experience or problem history is very costly for the organisation, including the waste of not benefiting from the experience. Furthermore, the SSD is very slow at adapting to change and making the right decisions. Repeating the wrong approach to dealing with the same problem indicates that OL in the SSD is ineffective in addressing this weakness. It might also be that the organisation fails to disseminate knowledge at the right time to the right people.

4.5.3 State Service Department: learning factors

As mentioned earlier, the work process in the SSD is shaped by group interaction; therefore, interactions among group members are influenced by individuals' interest in their work. Two factors caused the lack of interaction to share learning among group members: attitude and aptitude. Here, attitude represents employees' motivation to acquire knowledge, while aptitude indicates their capabilities as active members in a group setting. With an attitude of asking questions, employees can have a better aptitude.

Employees' aptitude, in some disciplines, tends to be at the root of their success, rather than their academic qualifications. Great designers, for example, should have the aptitude of imagination and visualisation in order to produce excellent designs. Although attitude seems to be acquired via learning and aptitude appears to be a congenital trait, the distinction between the two seems to be blurred by continuous improvement and constant collective learning.

Various factors related to personality can impede learning. Employees' willingness to share knowledge might be influenced by the attitude that keeping it for themselves will make them seem more capable. Such employees may feel over-confident and therefore refuse to accept comments or feedback from their supervisors or colleagues. Commitment to work and preparedness to give time to it may also contribute to employees' inclination to learn. Those who are committed to investing time and effort in their work are likely to be willing to learn and share knowledge. Conversely, underestimation of employees' experience tends to impede collaborative learning.

One important factor discouraging SSD employees from learning is the absence of performance appraisal and continuous feedback. Although the SSD has an annual evaluation system, it does not provide feedback to employees on their strengths and weaknesses. The mentoring system does not have to be a tool to disclose employees' weaknesses; rather, it should explore and chart their

growth process and help them to recognise the extent to which the knowledge they have gained is aligned with OL. Not only does the SSD lack performance appraisal; it also suffers from the absence of career paths, which can be expected to contribute negatively to employees' learning motivation.

Despite the importance of training to enhance knowledge, SSD employees are not satisfied with the quality of their training. Some training courses are also irrelevant both to their interests and to organisational goals. Furthermore, the training available takes the form of planned learning events within specific timeframes and targeting certain outcomes, whereas OL is a continuous process which aims to share experience, particularly the tacit knowledge which is always hidden in employees' minds.

The conflict between local SSD employees and expatriates is considered to be a critical hindering factor because the latter tend to withhold knowledge, mainly in order to keep the local employees at a lower standard. Expatriates are cautious and unwilling to exchange knowledge because they feel threatened by providing it to others. Refusal to share knowledge can be very costly for individuals and organisations, but experts tend not to share their valuable experience unless a follow-up system is in place.

There are various leadership styles in operation in the SSD and each creates a unique learning culture which is supported by the staff members. Positive leadership characteristics influence employees to be eager to learn and seek valuable knowledge. Some SSD employees show their appreciation towards leaders who engage them in decision-making, holding daily work meetings and listening to their views. The leader's role in this regard is to facilitate and create a learning environment, rather than feeding employees with information.

One of the challenges driving employees to work individually rather than collectively is the promotional system in the SSD. Despite seeming to work together in a group setting, employees strive to assign their names to jobs in order to gain special privileges and receive compliments. This hidden competition results in promoting individual effort instead of rewarding group achievement. Therefore, the SSD has recognised the importance of incentives to encourage employees to learn while they earn. Promotion seems to drive employees to search for relevant knowledge that will enable their organisation to stay competitive. Linking learning with extrinsic motivation is not always workable, and when incentives gradually disappear the motivation to learn may also diminish. Therefore, it is undeniable that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation appear to affect employees' enthusiasm for learning.

Some SSD employees do not allow other employees to intervene in their work domain, which restricts knowledge sharing to some extent. Such individuals consider their job to be their personal property and appear reluctant to be involved in a community of learning. It therefore seems logical that bottom-line employees should seek to have defined work boundaries, asserting that the absence of a job description and a defined scope of work would make them confused. According to their perspective, defining their scope of work would help them to build an accumulative learning experience. These bottom-line employees thus see job descriptions as enhancing learning opportunities; conversely, others consider job classification as an inhibiting factor, as it prevents dialogue and discussion among employees.

Favouritism or *wasta* is seen as one of the most prominent factors hindering learning. Workers criticise their leaders for frequently assigning essential work tasks to a particular person, with the result that this person becomes the most experienced and an essential asset of the organisation. Conversely, the senior management believes that work tasks are assigned on the basis of

employees' capabilities rather than their seniority or length of experience. On the other hand, being assigned undemanding tasks can make employees unmotivated and sometimes frustrated.

4.6 Logistics Department Profile

The Logistics Department (LD) is responsible for drafting and implementing SAFORG's purchasing policies to provide other departments with requested items, and for managing the company's assets. This involves making and terminating contracts with external bodies and ensuring that these are aligned with SAFORG's policies and regulations. It also manages the fixed and mobile assets, shipping and clearing procedures. Finally, the LD arranges the insurance required for materials and services.

Purchasing, insuring and retaining assets are complicated processes which require the employees concerned to have up-to-date knowledge and skills. Members of the LD staff must possess an international level of expertise to be able to purchase high quality, compatible products at reasonable cost. To do so, they must be able to distinguish between goods and services of differing quality and to negotiate successfully. Forming international contracts requires employees to understand both local and global regulations.

4.6.1 Logistics Department: learning environment

Sharing knowledge, either internally or externally to the LD, tends to be based on individual inclination rather than any system inherent to the organisation. One apparent environmental reason for OL not occurring is employees' concerns about their positions and job domains, causing them to focus on achieving the assigned tasks rather than the primary purpose of the organisation. The LD does not support collective learning, as employees insist on sticking to their individual zones and specific tasks. For this reason, the LD fails to circulate knowledge among sections and

employees. As a result, some employees rely on outdated information because they do not receive the updated version.

Individuals who are concerned only about performing the tasks related to their particular job tend to fulfil their personal goals rather than organisational ones. Therefore, the opportunities to develop employees' knowledge and skills are very narrow, unless employees try personally to connect with other employees and communities of practice, either within the department or outside their work boundaries.

Although seeking external knowledge is essential for the LD to contribute to giving SAFORG a competitive advantage, employees are not well informed about developments in their field. Those who believe that searching for external knowledge is each employee's responsibility insist that employees need to be selective about the kind of information that is necessary for them and related to their work. External knowledge seekers tend to be open-minded, but cautious to learn and seek relevant information.

One apparently significant factor related to the LD's learning environment is organisational memory. Appropriately storing the history of the organisation would seem to be important if it is to be retrieved at a particular time. However, most of the stored history is abstract and in the form of know-why rather than know-how, the latter being necessary to provide employees with the tools required to do the job. The LD has implemented a document storing system to be used to solve problems or guide the work process, but although archiving information seems beneficial, it is not being utilised to the expected level, because employees do not have time to reflect on their daily work and upload such information to the system.

4.6.2 Logistics Department: learning process

The primary purpose of a process for learning is to retain in an accessible form the most valuable knowledge that employees possess. One of the techniques used in the LD to preserve knowledge is job rotation, where employees working in the same place exchange responsibilities. They must ask their colleagues to guide them in doing each new job, which ultimately results in exchanging knowledge and sharing ideas.

The learning process in the LD is influenced by the steps that managers take to enhance the level of participation in work-related discussions. Inviting employees to join them daily in taking morning tea is one strategy successfully adopted to encourage employees to talk informally about workplace issues that concern them and to elicit their views on overcoming them. One apparent consequence of involving employees in such discussions is to help them to become part of the job and to feel involved in its success and failure, thus spontaneously strengthening their commitment to their work. Openness in involving employees in talking about their work not only encourages members of the department to be active but also motivates other departments to follow the same strategy.

Employees' interrelationships and interactions within the sections of the LD seem to be at a satisfactory level, as personal relationships are strong and friendly, whereas inter-departmental relationships tend to be formal and in writing. The main reason for having a high level of interaction within sections is that strong relationships and cooperation facilitate the exchange of knowledge.

4.6.3 Logistics Department: learning factors

Leaders' attitudes play a significant role in facilitating or hindering learning in the LD. Allowing employees to take responsibility for their own decisions is the cornerstone of motivating them to

learn. Conversely, if they are restricted to acting as executors and excluded from participating in making decisions at work, they are likely to feel indifferent towards the job and become unwilling to learn by taking part in a community of learning. Letting leaders decide on behalf employees and organisations without having a system of sharing knowledge puts the whole organisation at risk, as there is no guarantee that leaders will continue to make the right decisions.

One of the factors that facilitates learning in the LD is that employees' interactions are enhanced by a blame-free culture, making it easy for them to participate in both formal and informal dialogue with no fear of being blamed or criticised. Moreover, employees tend to be accountable and responsible when their ideas are taken on board and respected. Another factor related to organisational culture in the LD, but which impedes learning, is the absence of reflection. It is not enough for organisations to have experienced without reflection, because experience can be outdated, forgotten and sometimes irrelevant. In other words, experience without reflection will not result in learning. Reflection is essential to render the experience more understandable and workable. Furthermore, reflection on experience gives employees insightful thoughts about the learning that the organisation requires.

Outdated policies and regulation act to inhibit learning in the LD. Organisations need to update their regulations and policies regularly. Employees refer to these updates and rely on them to do their work and exchange knowledge, so if policies and regulations become outdated, employees' experience becomes invalid, resulting in many defects. It seems that an absence of the communication needed to update these regulations indicates a failure in the system somewhere in the LD. Furthermore, it represents the absence of external communication and of commitment among employees to working in their domain.

Employees' personalities can also facilitate or hinder the success or failure of OL. Confidence is among the most prominent personality factors of this kind, as employees in some departments become programmed and unwilling to learn things that are not directly related to their current jobs. Some LD employees dislike job rotation, preferring to remain permanently in the same job patterns. Such people are hard to convince and resist learning or sharing their learning, believing that this might threaten their status. Other character traits which can influence OL include laziness, which makes employees unlikely to engage in a process that they assume will involve extra work. Employees who hold such assumptions contribute negatively towards building a learning and sharing environment. Those who underestimate the importance of knowledge will also contribute to the creation of a negative atmosphere around learning and sharing expertise.

A further negative factor is a lack of confidence between employees and their supervisors. New recruits to the LD are required to hold a certain level of qualifications and technical certificates. When these employees join the workforce, hidden conflicts can arise from the fact that they are better qualified than their supervisors, so that their superiors become afraid of the newcomers taking their positions.

The motivation to share knowledge is an important factor affecting OL, which is thus hindered by the absence of adequate incentives such as pay and promotion. Some employees with many years of experience in the LD feel that they are not suitably rewarded, reducing their motivation to share their expertise to a very low level. Favouritism similarly creates feelings of frustration among experienced employees, who become demotivated and unwilling to share knowledge, preventing much organisational expertise from being transferred. This frustration not only deters employees from sharing knowledge or learning from others but also prevents them being fully productive. They attend work to keep their jobs but have no enthusiasm or the initiative to be active members

of the workforce. In short, favouritism and unfairness create frustration and limit employees' inclination to take part in the learning process.

Apart from factors related to personality, the extent of employees' participation in the learning process is also affected by their capability. Incapable employees tend not to involve themselves in sophisticated discussions because they do not want to be underestimated or to be seen as the weaker party. Some employees are by nature more capable and competent than others, such as in being able to negotiate well or to respond quickly to unexpected questions. Finally, employees vary in their ability to solve problems intelligently, even though they may possess the same level of knowledge. Therefore, getting employees to work collaboratively and exchange skills while they are doing the job will help them to build an effective team. It can be said that the OL process in the LD helps towards building employees' capabilities.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided descriptions of the special characteristics of each of the five departments of SAFORG involved in the case study and outlined the views of the research participants on the three dimensions of OL (Environment, Process and Factors) examined in the present research. It has not sought to offer causal explanations of the observations presented, but simply to provide sufficient background knowledge to give a clear picture of the reality of OL in each of the departments.

Participants in the Training Department highlighted a range of elements closely related to the organisation's environment, including the extent of interactions between staff, which were found to be weaker between lower and senior ranks than among staff at the same hierarchal level, due to differences in qualifications and interests and to the influence of power. Despite some formal learning opportunities provided for employees, the TD does not have a noticeable practice of

informal learning opportunities. Employees are also restricted from involvement in solving certain critical issues; instead, their responsibility is to report these problems, then the TD relies on ‘super-hero’ individuals to solve them. Beyond the lack of learning opportunities, the TD does not tolerate errors and blames employees for committing mistakes, making employees afraid of taking the risk of thinking and proposing alternative solutions which might end in failure. The TD appears to practice only single-loop learning, concerned with solving problems in the short term, rather than investigating their root causes.

The OL process in the TD was found to be subject to a lack of trust, poor communication skills and the absence of procedures to facilitate shared learning, especially of tacit knowledge. Concerning the third dimension, factors which appeared likely to affect OL negatively include leaders’ attitudes to learning and their assignment of tasks, workload, work urgency, the lack of career paths and unplanned job rotation. Further factors found to influence OL were employees’ personalities and their inclination to work in teams, as well as certain cultural issues.

The nature of learning in the Information Technology Department differs from other departments in that it uses a virtual learning environment. The ITD has a computer system to archive the work process, so that anyone required to do a similar job can recall the process via the virtual system and follow the same steps. Although such systems can help individual learners, they do not promote interaction, which is considered the heart of OL.

As to process, the ITD holds informal gatherings to share valuable information. It also uses documentation to ensure that employees have a library of information to refer to when needed. The Department also encourages its trainees to conduct knowledge sharing sessions after attending training programmes. At the same time, employees are expected to reflect on the learned experience by asking critical questions to ensure the building and sharing of experience for all.

Learning interactions among ITD employees are inhibited by the absence of unified work procedures, a lack of inter-organisational interaction and restrictions on working in defined domains, as well as job routines. ITD employees are influenced by their leaders' attitudes and inclination to learn. One of the leadership behaviours that affect OL in the ITD is favouritism, whereby employees are treated unequally in the distribution of tasks. Moreover, competition between expatriates and local employees causes knowledge to be withheld and results in demotivation and frustration.

In the Security Department, employees were found to follow a set of rules and regulations which to some extent make the work more organised. Therefore, the hierarchal structure encourages employees, especially at the lowest level, to obey instructions unquestioningly. As a result of the authoritarian leadership style, senior managers' responsibility is to plan the work and suggest its implementation, which bottom-line employees are required simply to execute. Moreover, the leaders are considered agents for acquiring knowledge on behalf of employees.

The process of learning in the SD is influenced by the lack of interaction across organisational levels. It is a one-way communication process that is used to convey instructions from the top to the lower levels of employees. This style of management diminishes the quality of relationships between employees across the department. The employees' role in this regard is to follow the rules and never to question any instructions given, which creates isolation instead of building a workplace learning experience. As a result, managers prefer to establish their own work procedures instead of building on the experience of others, disrupting the building and sharing of experience. Leaders' behaviour and their inclination to learn influence employees' behaviour and shape their attitudes towards learning. Insisting that employees perform particular tasks without question or challenge tends to make them very narrow-minded and unmotivated to learn. Moreover, restricting

employees' freedom to share their thoughts and ideas with higher-ranking employees inhibits their creativity and makes them unwilling to propose further ideas.

In the State Service Department, the absence of a unified learning process was seen to dominate the workplace environment. Individual employees and teams have their unique procedures, making employees confused and unable to cope with the diversity of working styles. The absence of a unified learning process is caused by the absence of an inclination towards learning at the departmental level. Therefore, employees who aspire to learn need to be proactive and search for learning opportunities.

Dividing SSD employees into groups creates hidden conflicts, as each group strives to beat the others. Although this competition enhances work productivity, it does not create a competitive advantage at the organisational level, because employees are unwilling to share their expertise with colleagues in other groups. Among OL the processes occurring in the SSD are asking endless questions, problem-solving and learning from errors. The strategy of asking critical and reflective questions helps employees to build on their experience and modify their mental models. Employees need to benefit from problem-solving by asking critical questions in order to investigate the roots of problems and so prevent them from recurring in future.

Learning in the SSD is influenced by diverse factors, some related to employees' personalities, some to organisational policy and others to organisational culture. As in the other departments, employees' interests and capabilities are significant in either enhancing or hindering OL. Factors related to organisational policy that are likely to affect learning significantly include the absence of appropriate or adequate performance appraisal, career paths, a promotion system, training, job domains, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Favouritism or *wasta* is an aspect of leadership style that is also reported to greatly affect OL in the SSD.

The Logistics Department has many characteristics in common with the other departments of SAFORG. An essential characteristic of its learning environment is that learning takes the form of individual efforts rather than organisational events. In other words, learning occurs as a result of employees' inclination to learn and the effort they make, not because the organisation wants the learning to happen. Individuals themselves may be seen as inhibiting the organisation from supporting learning, because they concentrate on their individual zones and on their concerns about achieving their work tasks, rather than building their learning capabilities along with colleagues in collective learning.

One of the processes used to enhance learning in the LD is job rotation, whereby employees are transferred to work in different settings in order to learn from the experience accrued there by others. An example of a successful learning process in the LD is the informal morning tea gatherings, intended to enhance employees' participation in sharing their thoughts and ideas about workplace issues.

Finally, the LD is influenced by various factors which are related to individual characteristics, leadership, organisational culture and policy. In order to facilitate learning, individuals are encouraged to share their expertise, to have the confidence to take the initiative and to ask reflective questions that are useful for productive learning. Organisations should update their outdated policies and encourage employees to share their knowledge in a blame-free culture. Furthermore, to build employees' capabilities, organisations must create a culture that continuously supports OL.

The preceding chapters have established the background to the present study, reviewed the relevant literature, detailed the methodology adopted and described in some detail the conditions pertaining in the case study departments that are germane to the three dimensions of organisational learning

of interest to the research. The following chapter presents, analyses and discusses the results of the individual interviews and focus group sessions, considering each of the three dimensions in turn.

Chapter 5 Findings, Discussion and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings emerging from an analysis of the data gathered in interviews and focus group sessions with employees of SAFORG. It aims to explore participants' perceptions of existing organisational learning practices in the Training, Logistics, Security, State Service and Information Technology departments. In order to address the research questions set out in Chapter 3, the chapter is divided, as shown below in Figure 12, into three major sections, each concerned with one of the three dimensions of OL being investigated. The primary reason for classifying the findings according to the dimensions of Environment, Process and Factors is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of OL. Because an understanding of individual learning is inadequate to provide a full understanding of OL, it is essential to explore the effects of the environment, context and dialogue among employees, as well as the interactions between the different departments, in order to build a holistic picture of OL practice. A comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon depends on a detailed examination of the environment where OL grows, the process by which it operates and the conditions or factors that may facilitate or impede it.

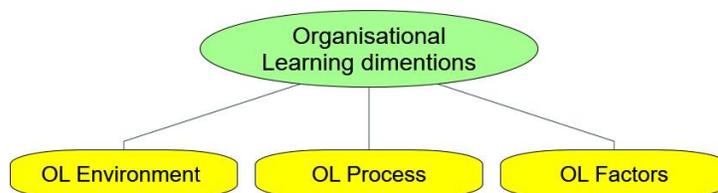


Figure 12 Organisational Learning Dimensions

Each of these three dimensions is a complex entity comprising several pillars, which can in some cases be subdivided in turn into a number of items. This chapter presents a detailed analysis of

each of these dimensions in turn, structured according to the pillars and subcategories, followed by a summary of the implications for OL. The pillars and categories associated with each dimension emerged from the process of coding by which themes were extracted from the empirical data. They can be summarised as follows.

The environmental dimension consists of three pillars (see Figure 13 below): employee attributes, organisational leadership and organisational culture. The four attributes of employees considered to be essential for successful OL are identified as collaboration, dialogue, motivation and trust. The second pillar comprises two significant attributes of successful leadership, namely open-mindedness and empowerment. Finally, organisational culture is subcategorised into integrity, issue orientation, accountability, transparency and inquiry.

Section 5.4 discusses the four pillars of the process dimension, namely learning from past experience, from current experience, from external sources and from innovation, then Section 5.5 delivers a representation of the main features of the OL process at SAFORG and considers implications for practice.

The final dimension is that of the factors affecting OL, whose pillars are human resources characteristics, organisational culture and organisational policy. In Section 5.6, each pillar is discussed through an analysis of the assumptions and perceptions reported by employees at three levels of seniority: senior and middle managers and bottom-line employees. In the human resources category, senior managers identified the relevant factors as lack of trust, accountability, friendly atmosphere, neglecting experts and promoting individual initiatives for learning; middle managers focused on factors related to sharing, holding and underestimating knowledge and to knowledge saturation; and bottom-line employees identified two influential factors: trust and withholding knowledge. The second set of factors, related to organisational culture, were derived

from analysis of the data gathered in interviews with middle managers and bottom-line employees and from focus groups. The three principal factors identified by these sources were knowledge withholding, *wasta* and generational conflict respectively.

In relation to the third pillar of organisational policy, the senior managers identified innovation, incentives and unity as the most influential factors; the middle managers considered the clarity of procedures, workload and physical boundaries as most impactful; and the focus groups highlighted putting the right person in the right place and training.

5.2 Dimension One: Organisational Learning Environment

For an effective OL practice, several authors pay considerable attention to the organisational learning environment and the closely related concepts of climate and culture (Beer & Spector, 1993; DiBella et al., 1996; Levitt & March, 1988). Painting a holistic picture of the workplace learning environment requires consideration of three main pillars, as illustrated below in Figure 13: employee attributes, organisational leadership and organisational culture. Each of these pillars and its component themes is discussed in depth in the following subsections, beginning with employee attributes.



Figure 13 Organisational Learning Environment

5.2.1 Employee attributes

This pillar relates to the individual characteristics and qualities needed for OL to occur. If employees lack certain competencies, this may lead to a failure to accomplish OL (Bess & Dee,

2008). The data analysis identifies four main characteristics expected to contribute to OL under the employee attributes pillar: collaboration, dialogue, motivation and trust, as shown in Figure 14.

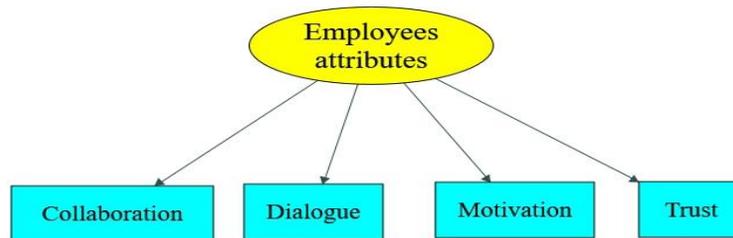


Figure 14 Employee Attributes

5.2.1.1 Collaboration

Collaboration is an act of collective learning when employees coordinate their efforts and work in a community setting instead of working on their own. The literature emphasises that collaboration is the gateway to learning from others (Edwards, 2017). Bruhn (2011: 251) describes the benefits of collaboration as generating “new ideas and new solutions that emerge from the interplay of experience and knowledge coming from people both inside and outside an organization”. Learning from others can thus occur both internally and externally. One finding of this research is that internal collaboration (i.e. within individual departments) was generally perceived as satisfactory, unlike collaboration between departments. This finding is in alignment with the warning of Bess & Dee (2008) that decentralisation of the departmental structure may preclude horizontal collaboration across departments within an organisation because each tends to have its own communication culture. Thereby, the positive effect of hierarchical structure on learning can be defined as providing a direction and determining organisational unity (Argote & Levine, 2020).

This means that the lack of collaboration between SAFORG’s departments is not necessarily related to the structure of the organisation. However, the critical issue of collaboration is whether

employees are able to abandon the belief that organisations are homogenous and cope with the challenge to sustain collaboration as a means of learning (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). The influence of organisational structure on the collaboration process was found to have changed dramatically, because the organisation had become unable to sustain its boundaries. Therefore, strengthening employee attributes had become a necessity to enhance learning collaboration.

Despite the perception among some participants of the importance of collaboration as a foundation for organisational productivity, as stated by the Logistics Department focus group, this research has shown that employees tended in practice to work individually rather than collectively, for various reasons. First, they preferred to work on their own to gain promotion and appreciation and to attach their names to prestigious projects, as revealed by a middle manager in the Security Department (Respondent 40). A middle manager in the Training Department (Respondent 12) suggested a slightly different reason: that some employees might simply be too shy to raise questions.

“People work very much in their zone and tend not to collaborate, because they feel shy and are hesitant to ask questions.”

When employees become cautious and reluctant to approach their peers and supervisors, it is not possible to establish the collaboration process. It is important to establish trust between employees to build a constructive collaboration (Nonaka, 1994). A vital part of the collaboration process is to allow employees to speak out and to value their contributions. Once employees feel appreciated, and their contribution trusted, a sense of belonging will develop, either in the organisation and the team or in the community in general.

An alternative explanation related to the lack of learning collaboration is the nature of working conditions. This applies to employees who usually work on their own in a specific domain, such

as teachers in the classroom, where the nature of the job allows little direct collaboration with colleagues. In other words, the lack of collaboration in such a situation is related to the nature of the job rather than employee attributes. This research found that the lack of learning collaboration in most SAFORG departments was not solely influenced by physical boundaries but also attributable to metaphorical ones. The existence of metaphorical boundaries appeared to encourage employees to spend much of their time working alone at their computers and to be less likely to interact with their colleagues.

Metaphorical boundaries in this research context means that employees were unlikely to interact not because of geographical constraints, but because they preferred to work on their own, regardless of whether the job required them to collaborate with their peers. It was widely recognised across SAFORG departments and at different organisational levels that virtual communication between employees can replace face-to-face interaction. Instead of talking verbally, senior managers encouraged employees to communicate virtually when raising queries. Senior managers' attributes and their preference for virtual communication probably tended to reduce the face-to-face communication which is essential for OL success. Although virtual communication makes it easier on one hand to record the exchange of information and to follow up on the work process, it reduces the level of verbal communication on the other.

Generally, the above discussion shows that collaboration seems to have been affected by personal, organisational and cultural issues. At a personal level, the lack of collaboration was influenced by employees' inclination and the level of trust between them to engage in constructive, collaborative learning. At the organisational level, the nature of work and how it connected employees together could likewise have weakened collaboration. Finally, the culture of technology and the extent that people became obsessed with using technological solutions as a substitute for face-to-face

communication also affected the way they viewed and valued collaboration. The ways in which employees, organisations and cultures view collaboration also has a close connection with dialogue, the second employee attribute to be examined here.

5.2.1.2 Dialogue

The analysis of the research data shows that dialogue, or better conversation as Isaacs (1999) labels it, is an essential element of OL. Dialogue differs from debate in that the aims are to understand the situation better, to recognise the other's point of view and to build constructive and meaningful ideas, rather than concentrating on proving the value of a particular perspective (Hillman, 2013). While participants across the five departments tended to express a consensus view about the lack of learning dialogue, which sometimes leads to OL failure, different views were raised across the hierarchical levels of SAFORG.

A Training Department middle manager (Respondent 9) attributed the lack of dialogue for productive learning to aspects of employees' personalities, such as the disinclination to share their expertise and the inadequacy of their communication skills. Another middle manager, in the State Service Department (Respondent 27), distinguished employees who were eager to seek knowledge and tended to ask frequent and challenging questions from those who believed themselves to have reached *saturation*. This feeling of having long years of experience and ample professional qualifications makes some employees reluctant to learn better ways of working, because they see themselves as having enough knowledge to do their jobs properly and are therefore demotivated to learn from others or to engage in dynamic dialogue.

Since the concept of saturation is not mentioned in the OL literature, the author believes that it would be valuable to provide a substantial explanation of the phenomenon and its impact on OL. Saturation can be defined as an inherent feeling of having enough knowledge to do one's work

properly without seeking help or guidance from others, which inhibits a person from sharing and communicating with others in pursuit of productive learning. Feeling saturated in this sense does not necessarily imply a real possession of knowledge, but makes employees arrogant and unwilling to listen to or communicate with their colleagues or others beyond their organisational boundaries.

Saturation and an unwillingness to learn may also be related to work security. Employees may become reluctant to learn because they feel secure and unthreatened by dismissal in a public sector system where employees are not sacked for poor performance as long as they attend work. A Logistics Department middle manager (Respondent 54) suggested alternatively that some workers underestimated their capabilities and the knowledge they possessed, making them unwilling to interact with others. Overall, middle managers across the five departments considered the most influential barrier to learning dialogue to be employees' poor personal and professional capabilities. Some senior managers expressed similar views, attributing the lack of knowledge-sharing dialogue to employees' poverty of talent and interest.

In contrast, other middle and senior management participants believed the main contributor to the lack of learning to be organisational policy such as preventing employees gathering. IT participants perceived career interest as the key to encouraging employees to interact and develop their skills by learning from others' experience. Respondents 39 and 44 from the Security Department emphasised that interest in the job should drive employees to pursue professional competence by means of continuous interaction, engagement and asking thoughtful questions.

Although senior and middle managers held front-line employees accountable for the lack of OL dialogue, there were some learning activities initiated by individuals and representing to some extent their inclination to gain and share knowledge. For instance, some were found to subscribe to online training courses, attending certified training and participating in professional networking

across different organisations, using social media channels. The primary aim of such learning activities is to enhance an individual's capability and they are unlikely to facilitate OL in the absence of collaboration and dialogue.

The SAFORG workforce was found to be better educated now than ever before, with employees willing to take more responsibility, even outside their own domains and beyond organisational boundaries. Consequently, the allegation that they lacked the professional and personal attributes needed for engagement in productive learning dialogue seems ill-founded. If workers are inclined to interact and engage outside the organisation, it is logical to assume that they would have the ability to interact internally if provided with an appropriate and sufficiently supportive learning environment. Therefore, the reasons for the lack of interaction are more likely to be related to the workplace environment, to leadership or to policy, as explained further in Sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3.

Several factors may explain employees' inclination to work individually and not to share their experience with others. The first of these is the absence of a foundation that encourages employees to work collectively. Organisational policy is to design work to be done individually rather than by teamwork. For example, a senior Training Department manager (Respondent 1) stated that responsibility for evaluating academic training programmes was assigned to individual employees rather than to a group. These individuals would see the preservation of this authority as a source of power, whereas sharing responsibility for such decisions would mean losing power.

The findings indicate that employees avoided sharing their work because they did not trust their colleagues to do it efficiently. They may also have been afraid of exposing their own mistakes, which would be perceived as weakness and vulnerability. Wilson (2005) attributes the concealment of knowledge to employees seeking to avoid losing the value of possessing it. Another variant of hiding knowledge is to prevent colleagues from being knowledgeable and from

taking one's job. Finally, employees may have been afraid of being punished if they approached their superiors.

5.2.1.3 Motivation

Motivation was revealed as another employee attribute contributing to the OL environment. It can have either a positive or a negative impact on employees' learning behaviour. Some literature recognises the importance of motivation for learning and urges organisations to maximise productive motivation and decrease counterproductive motivation (Frey & Osterloh, 2001b; Goyette, 2016; Hutchinson, 2013; Rogelberg, 2007; Shaista Jabeen & Sultana, 2018). Specifically, this research clearly shows a direct connection between the motivation of the staff and their degree of willingness to learn. The critical issue here is when motivation is boosted by the existence of good leaders and declines in their absence. In other words, employees are motivated to learn only when the manner of leadership is appropriate; their inclination to learn is influenced by the leader's behaviour.

A more nuanced view is that of path-goal theory, which recognises four levels of a leader's behaviour—instrumental, supportive, participative and achievement-oriented—that influence employees' inclination to learn in different ways (Chelladurai, 2014). These effects on employees' behaviour vary from directing it at the instrumental stage to providing full authority and participation in decision making. It can be concluded that enhancing employees' inclination to learn requires motivation to be induced by the organisational environment.

The analysis of the data gathered in this research shows that employees' motivation to learn was linked to their degree of integration into the work environment, in that more integrated employees were more likely to feel the need to learn more about their work. A senior IT manager (Respondent 23) recognised the importance of employee motivation as a primary source of learning and

suggested that employees might become unmotivated to learn because they had become isolated and unaware of the organisation's activities as a result of not sharing knowledge. The consequence of this loss of motivation might be that employees would become unmotivated, leading them to intentionally manipulate and transmit incorrect information to their peers. Another senior manager in the Security Department (Respondent 36) related low productivity to employees' isolation and weak motivation.

Besides the influence of leaders' behaviour and the degree of employees' engagement in the workplace, participating middle managers and bottom-line employees perceived working conditions as the most critical factor affecting employees' inclination to learn. According to the IT focus group, technicians became demotivated to learn when they compared their professional development with their peers in other organisations. The privileges enjoyed by people in other organisations can be considered an external force that affects both the organisation and its employees. However, employees are not only influenced by their peers outside the organisation but also by those inside it. The effects of the privileges granted to some employees cannot be ignored, as they affect other employees negatively. A bottom-line employee in the Training Department (Respondent 5) explained how frustration would affect other employees unless addressed.

“Employees’ demotivation will tend to spread among those who are motivated and they will become affected.”

The findings of this research indicate that regardless of other factors, motivation to learn was significantly affected by the personality types of the employees themselves, such as their degree of introversion or extroversion. Goyette (2016) reports that according to neuroscientists, introverted employees have narrow circles, preferring to be with people they know, unlike

extroverts, who are open-minded and have an unlimited willingness to work and learn from different people and in different situations.

This research reveals some consequences of employees' demotivation towards learning. For instance, absenteeism can be considered an apparent sign of unwillingness to learn and share one's experience. A senior Logistics Department manager (Respondent 43) asserted that a reduction in the level of absenteeism was due to the open culture of sharing knowledge. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Naujokaitiene et al. (2015), which shows that organisational learning is likely to reduce absenteeism.

5.2.1.4 Trust

The propensity to trust is related to employees' personal traits, experience and cultural background (Mooradian et al., 2006). The level of trust determines the strength of relationships and degree of integration between employees in different work environments. The present research has found that interpersonal trust can be considered a substantial employee attribute that could lead to OL success or failure. Drobnyak (2013: 163) cites Child and Faulkner (1998) as finding that "high levels of trust contribute to information sharing and learning". There was consensus among focus group respondents across all departments of SAFORG on the occurrence of knowledge hiding among coworkers within groups in the same department on one hand and between employees across organisational levels on the other.

Members of the Training Department focus group explained that a lack of confidence and a feeling of knowledge ownership created an environment of selfishness and an uncooperative atmosphere among employees, making them reluctant to share knowledge. The IT Department focus group expressed a similar point of view, asserting that employees tended to withhold knowledge to preserve their power and superiority over others. While very few studies appear to have

investigated the impact of hiding knowledge on OL, there is some evidence “that Fortune 500 companies lose at least \$31.5bn a year by failing to share knowledge” (Peng, 2013: 399).

The findings of the Training and IT Department focus groups are consistent with evidence in the literature that psychological ownership, i.e. the feeling of ownership of knowledge, could negatively affect OL (Pierce et al., 2003). Furthermore, Mason & Lefrere (2003) showed that trust determines the effectiveness of collaboration. Thus, if employees do not trust each other, the possibility of collaboration is very low. Conversely, trust can be enhanced by engagement and participation, which can be increased by OL.

Another strand related to trust is the relationship between education and trust. This research has revealed contradictory views about whether qualified employees are willing to share their expertise. Participants in the Logistics and Security Departments expressed similar views about the effects of qualification on withholding knowledge, namely that qualified employees preferred not to share their strengths with unqualified actors. In a similar vein, according to a senior State Service Department manager (Respondent 41), employees were categorised by the qualifications they held, with the result that unqualified employees had less opportunity than their more qualified colleagues to become involved in the OL process. Training Department participants expressed an alternative view, that dealing with qualified employees was more straightforward and beneficial than working with unqualified colleagues. It is possible that qualifications were considered necessary in the more professional departments, meaning those where a high level of intellectual effort is required to achieve good results, unlike some routine work which does not require critical skills.

It is essential to explain that withholding knowledge does not necessarily imply that employees do not communicate with each other at all. Rather, it refers to a failure or refusal to share the tacit and

most valuable knowledge that could make a difference in the workplace. An examination of the antecedents or causes of knowledge withholding proposed above, including psychological ownership, power possession and qualifications, reveals that they are all related in some way to trust. Employees tend to hide knowledge to avoid being in a position of relative weakness compared to an untrusted party. Due to the difficulty they face in boosting the level of trust in the organisation, managers need to act with discretion, honesty, collaborativeness, communicativeness and commitment to make the right decisions (Abrams et al., 2003).

Alternative explanations for the lack of trust involve attributing it to a shortage of knowledge. In a normal situation, a lack of knowledge should prompt employees to communicate with their peers to gain knowledge, while this study shows that it can instead lead some employees to become introverted and thus to appear *complacent*. Far from actually feeling complacent, however, such employees underestimate themselves and distrust their own capabilities among themselves or with their colleagues at different organisational levels, as explained by Respondent 12, from the Training Department:

“When you feel that you lack knowledge, you will be less motivated to share what you have, because you feel people always know more than you and you become unconfident.”

It remains an open question as to how organisations can raise the level of trust to enhance OL and how they should respond to what Kramer & Tyler (1995) label employees’ vulnerabilities and uncertainties. Building relational trust between employees and their managers requires an enhancement of employees’ awareness of the benefits of building mutual trust, which can be achieved through the process of OL.

Overall, the four mechanisms of collaboration, dialogue, motivation and trust appear to be connected. Stated differently, unmotivated employees will probably neither be collaborative nor

become active participants in dialogue. Conversely, when employees trust each other, they obviously become motivated and more willing to engage in collaboration and dialogue. Collaboration requires continuous dialogue between employees in order to construct a mutual understanding among them. However, attributes such as complacency can stimulate employees to unlearn and encourage them to rely solely on their own assumptions to perform their allotted tasks. It is unlikely in a complacent learning environment that there will be dynamic collaboration and eventually, continuous dialogue among employees.

Some employee attributes cannot exist without others; for example, collaboration is dependent on trust. Because of low trust, unqualified employees are ignored, on the assumption that capability is always linked with qualifications. Employees need to trust each other for collective learning to occur. Having similar capabilities, such as are reflected in similar qualifications, is essential to achieve a certain level of intellectual activity, especially in the more specialised or professional departments such as IT and Training. This is not to say that knowledge is always subject to qualifications, but it is an indication that can be used to differentiate between qualified and unqualified employees.

5.2.2 Organisational Leadership



Figure 15 Organisational Leadership

The second pillar of the OL environment is that of organisational leadership, whose two subcategories are open-mindedness and empowerment, as shown in Figure 15. The literature

suggests that successful OL requires quality leadership (Scott, 2011; Vera & Crossan, 2003; Wang & Ahmed, 2003) and that conversely, cynical leaders may ruin good ideas and dysfunctional employees may obstruct dynamic interaction (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2002). Schein is quoted by Austin & Hopkins (2004: 5) as stating that “organisational learning does not happen until ‘leaders become learners themselves’ and become models for others to follow”. Leadership can be considered one of the five dimensions on which to measure an organisation’s learning capabilities, along with teamwork, the transformation of knowledge, experimentation and clarity of mission (Filstad & Gottschalk, 2013).

The role of the leader has been examined in the organisational context and found to be relatively unexplored and disconnected (Berson et al., 2006; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). Thus, the learning process needs a participative leader who facilitates learning and mitigates the influence of OL barriers (Buckler, 1996). Research into group authority has found that the leader’s behaviour and expectations will signal the way things are done in the workplace (Tyler & Lind, 1984). In a related vein, leaders were found to provide physical, mental and emotional motives for learners (Nonaka, 1991).

Organisational leadership was found to affect the way that work was shared among SAFORG employees, either positively or negatively. On the positive side, the findings show that work was successfully shared in some departments under the influence of good leadership. For example, some managers in the Training Department were reported to encourage employees to discuss their work with their colleagues and approach their superiors for advice. As a result, employees became aware of each other’s work, making it easy for them to replace each other and provide useful feedback when needed. Where managers recognise the importance of discussing workplace issues with their subordinates, this is quite helpful in encouraging workers to disclose mistakes and

present alternative solutions to rectify them. It can be said that in order to enhance the process of sharing experience, both managers and workers have to admit their weaknesses and accept the need to learn from each other.

Managers need to take action to change the direction of corporate policy in order to encourage employees to share their expertise. Consequently, the way subordinates respond to their leader's actions indicates how vigilant the leaders are in enhancing the workplace learning interaction. A senior Logistics Department manager insisted on changing the instructions given to employees by their former manager as to how they should work, because of the need he perceived for employees to have flexibility and accountability by discussing the actual work, as well as having the opportunity to give their input.

“I found that employees had to report every single detail to the previous manager so that he could make decisions. Employees were not given their own space to think.” (LD, 49)

In a similar vein, a senior Training Department manager (Respondent 1) criticised the mechanism currently used to select the appropriate training courses from those offered by some training providers, which he described as primarily dependent on individual opinions, rather than teamwork decisions. The expected benefit of promoting collective decision-making would be to enhance employees' awareness of the selection procedures and associated issues that should be taken into account to make the right decision and to encourage them to provide some useful insights.

“As a manager, I helped to build an environment of knowledge sharing when I rejected what some employees were doing about the selection of training tenders. There was one employee who did the whole job and ran to the boss. I changed that by encouraging employees to share and discuss the offers, and share whatever knowledge they have to make the right decision.”

Self-awareness is one of the authentic leadership qualities considered likely to help employees to engage fully in OL dialogue (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). Self-awareness and self-reflection are evident in the behaviour of some senior managers, based on the findings of this research. A senior Logistics Department manager (Respondent 41) recognised the important role in facilitating OL of dialogue between employees and of discussing critical issues before making a decision. Therefore, employees were encouraged to work as a group to be able to reflect on their work. Moreover, the manager stated that he would call architects and engineers ‘design leaders’ to show his appreciation. He also encouraged architects, construction managers and building services employees to meet regularly to identify and resolve contradictions. Thus, employees would by default automatically share experiences among the group members.

Analysis of the data gathered for this research shows that the leader’s ambition and determination to create a learning environment are likely to influence subordinates’ intentions towards OL.

“Our challenge is to keep employees working together in great harmony and exchanging knowledge continuously as a response to our leader, who is very ambitious and loves to work with us”. (LD, 57)

Approaches to leadership can be classified into two types, whereby some leaders prefer to continue what others have started, while some choose to ignore the experience accrued by others and prefer to start from scratch. A strong finding of this research is that the second type of leaders dominated the working environment at SAFORG. The drawbacks of this approach are the absence of continuity in building experience and a consequent inability to benefit from lessons learned from a knowledge and understanding of past mistakes. One senior manager (Respondent 20) explained that most managers preferred to establish their own systems of building a learning culture, rather than taking advantage of the accumulated knowledge that existed in the organisation. A middle

manager in the Security Department (Respondent 27) supported this claim, asserting that managers who sought to establish their own systems forbade employees to follow the legacy systems which had been created by their predecessors. Those operating at the senior and middle managerial levels thus appear to have preferred to establish their own learning systems that suited their individual styles of leadership and then to use these systems to control their subordinates.

This hesitation on the part of some managers to follow the existing organisational system or to create a new one indicates the fragility of the organisational learning system and that employees did not enjoy a robust learning environment that was known to everyone in the organisation. Ignoring accumulated experience at the organisational level is not healthy for OL, given its critical value in making learning meaningful for members of staff. Furthermore, unsustainable learning systems caused feelings of frustration and uncertainty, so that some employees became careless, because they knew that each new system was subject to change once a new leader took over. Therefore, among the multifarious leadership characteristics that successful managers should possess, this research draws attention to two main qualities needed in a leader to promote a sound OL environment: open-mindedness and empowerment. The following subsections examine successively each of these components of the OL leadership pillar in depth.

5.2.2.1 Open-mindedness

It is very helpful for employees to have an open-minded leader, as this means that they can express their feelings, clarify uncertainties, share their thoughts and exchange insights. In his interview, a senior Logistics Department manager (Respondent 57) expressed the view that being open-minded is a key to establishing a good relationship between managers and employees. Another senior manager in the same department (Respondent 49) reported having created an electronic platform to keep employees informed of what was going on in the field and what others were doing. He

explained that employees could share knowledge through such platforms. Mazutis & Slawinski (2008) consider being open-minded among the authentic leadership capabilities that would probably enhance learning dialogue among employees at different levels. Argyris & Schön (1997) emphasise the importance of dialogue to promote OL across organisational levels, noting that it helps to exchange ideas and progress mutual understanding among employees. Accordingly, an open-minded leader is more likely to establish a supportive learning environment and to be flexible in providing more extensive learning opportunities.

Turning to the negative side of leadership openness on sharing work, the analysis of the data indicates that poor communication between senior managers and bottom-line employees at SAFORG was related to a lack of openness, causing workers to feel intimidated by their senior managers and to fear voicing their opinions, in an organisational environment where they are forbidden to refuse or challenge the instructions that come from the top. This finding is consistent with the following assessment of Weir & Örtenblad (2013: 72): “If the leader reverts to a command-and-control style of wishing to be perceived as managing for specific outcomes, the openness required for the learning organization will be compromised”. In SAFORG as elsewhere, workers may well have potential solutions for many workplace problems. However, they are restricted in bringing these to light because of the authoritarian leadership style where all decisions must come from the top. Although the work can be done under a system of direct orders and obedience to instructions, it is not guaranteed that employees will function well when their managers are not present to give orders. It can be said that an open-minded leader is likely to inspire and empower subordinates to be good learners and creators of knowledge, rather than being controlled and instructed by their managers.

5.2.2.2 Empowerment

The second relevant aspect of OL leadership is empowerment. It has two dimensions, related to being empowered as a leader and to empowering subordinates. The analysis of data gathered during this research shows that a threat to OL raised by participants at all three levels was that of unsustainable leadership. Once a manager's position has been vacant for an extended period, it creates an atmosphere of chaos, absence of authority and most importantly, the absence of a body that supports and delegates staff to learn. A senior IT Department manager (Respondent 17) reported that SAFORG had experienced a decline in employees' inclination to learn due to a lack of empowerment, caused in turn by the absence of a manager. It can be said that an absence of leadership can have a strong influence on the OL system.

Conversely, Hedberg (1981) denies that leadership sustainability is an issue for successful OL, as organisations have to accomplish learning through cognitive systems and memories, regardless of who is taking the lead (Scott, 2011). Hedberg's claim can be accepted in cases where the organisation has a dynamic learning system that operates spontaneously, whoever leads the organisation. However, in the case of SAFORG, it seems that the leadership role was an indispensable element for successful OL and that the absence of leaders could obstruct it.

A controversial issue is whether the source of empowerment necessary for successful OL should come from the leaders, or whether it should be self-driven by employees themselves. This research has found that the senior managers considered themselves responsible for stimulating employees' motivation to share learning. A senior Logistics Department manager (Respondent 49) opined that sharing knowledge requires people to talk, form groups and speak out, none of which can be achieved without a leader's guidance and supervision. Although leaders may have the authority to force employees to share their expertise, it is impossible to drive people to learn if they do not

want to. Furthermore, if employees were forced to pass on their expertise, they would be likely to transmit unimportant or incorrect information.

Turning to the negative impact of leadership on OL, various studies of leadership behaviour have emphasised that leaders should act as role models for their subordinates (Tyler & Lind, 1984), because workers' behaviour is shaped by their leaders' attitudes. The pitfall associated with the leader as role model is that if the manager's behaviour is inappropriate, it will affect his or her subordinates negatively. In other words, the manager contributes to the formation of the employee's behaviour one way or the other: either positively or negatively. This direct relationship between the behaviour of the manager and that of subordinate individuals explains the observed disparities among SAFORG's departments as arising from differences in working style between the managers of these departments and their perceptions of the importance of learning in their respective environments.

The middle managers considered senior managers to be accountable for creating the type of workers who were not inspired to learn. Senior managers usually gave less information than required, in order to prevent both middle and bottom-line employees from becoming knowledgeable, according to an IT Department middle manager (Respondent 18). These senior managers, by restricting information in this way, can be seen as supporting the top-down approach. Accordingly, the middle managers and bottom-line employees would absorb the same leadership style and follow the same strategy of holding back knowledge and giving little information to others.

Nonaka (1994), in his model of knowledge creation, proposes an alternative to the top-down structure to promote OL, which is the middle-up-down approach. This would appear to be an appropriate way to make senior and middle managers act as facilitators, catalysts and learning

stimulators, rather than instructors. Nonaka's model facilitates interaction and provides subordinates with the required framework to make sense of their experience, by moving from the idea that the leader is the centre of learning to a more collaborative and communicative learning process (Nonaka, 1994).

The challenge associated with the idea of viewing senior managers as knowledge creators or as sources of knowledge is the danger of creating one-way communication, whereby employees become passive, feel inactive and have no commitment to learning (Lipshitz et al., 2002). Senge (1990) notes that a flat organisational structure motivates employees to learn, because it promotes the vision to be shared among staff across organisational levels. In a similar vein, leaders are stimulated to share their vision with their subordinates, while the latter are encouraged to share their own thoughts and insights (Yadav & Agarwal, 2016). People, as Senge (1990: 9) states, "excel and learn, not because they are told to, but they want to", which means that when a genuine vision is shared, subordinates become intrinsically driven to learn.

As shown in this research, leadership empowerment is sometimes affected by ongoing conflict and hidden competition between a team's members and its leaders, making it quite difficult for knowledge to be shared. It is not easy as a leader to deal with this kind of process, as it is inherent in the system and in organisational policy, so people get used to it. A middle manager in the Logistics Department (Respondent 48) explained that the organisation created conflict between leaders and employees, and that the conflict was sometimes caused by employees themselves. As a result of ongoing conflict, whatever its origins, some managers would ignore employees entirely and refuse to let them become involved in the learning process. In contrast, other managers did involve employees in order to benefit from their opinions, but then overlooked them, which created severe conflict, as illustrated by Respondent 54, a Logistics Department middle manager.

The analysis of the data reveals another aspect of the lack of empowerment, related to the underestimation of coworkers' capabilities. The Logistics Department middle managers and focus group members complained about their senior leaders' behaviour in assigning small and unchallenging tasks to coworkers because they underestimated the latter's experience and ability to work efficiently. The coworkers, on the other hand, believed that being restricted to working in a narrow domain tended to prevent them from interacting and learning from either their managers or their peers. There are two possible interrelated attitudinal explanations for the senior managers' assigning of unchallenging tasks to bottom-line employees, concerning respectively their perceptions of learning and their assumptions about their subordinates' competence. Their perceptions of learning may have led them to assume that the employees lacked knowledge and needed more training to enhance their knowledge and skills. In contradiction to these senior managers' beliefs, experimental research has shown that it is more powerful for individuals to learn through identifying rather than teaching (Kogut & Zander, 1996). In other words, employees' involvement and participation are the critical factors in enhancing their competencies. Moreover, training cannot be effective unless employees have the willingness to acquire learning.

In his account of the middle-up-down process, Nonaka (1994) emphasises the importance of middle managers in promoting OL by playing a mediating role between senior managers and bottom-line employees. It can be said that a hierarchical structure can work appropriately if middle managers are allowed to promote OL by bringing the views of senior managers and bottom-line employees closer. It also facilitates the process of reciprocal learning between both parties.

5.2.3 Organisational Culture

The third pillar of the OL environment is organisational culture, which according to Lipshitz et al. (2002) encompasses five elements, namely integrity, issue orientation, inquiry, transparency and

accountability, as shown in Figure 16. The previous sections having explored the employee attributes and organisational leadership pillars, this section seeks to shed light on the organisational culture (OC) pillar and on how the three pillars are connected. Organisational culture, in the words of Rebelo & Duarte Gomes (2011: 173), “is mainly conceived as an essential condition to promote and support learning in organizations”. Harris et al. (2003: 183) explain that it involves “internal processes, systems and management practices to meet customer needs and to direct both the skills and efforts of employees towards achieving the goals of the organisation”. Therefore, the key to building OL capabilities is to have a proper culture that supports learning (DiBella et al., 1996). Individual organisations are part of a whole system that is affected by people’s beliefs, their lifestyles and relationship patterns.



Figure 16 Organisational Culture

Wilton (2019) considers OL to be a cultural phenomenon because it involves the norms, language and values of the organisation’s members. Organisations should be seen as unique, differing in terms of ‘enduring attributes’, as described by Chang & Daly (2012). In a similar vein, Weir (2018) emphasises that culture creates unique conditions for every group, department, organisation and across organisational boundaries, enabling employees to share knowledge.

To adopt a computing metaphor, the organisation’s culture can be perceived as its software, while its structure represents the hardware; OC can be considered an output of OL and conversely, it undoubtedly shapes learning to some extent (Friedman et al., 2001). OC, especially in a multi-

functional organisation, impels leaders who aim to build collaborative learning to pay constant attention to internal obstacles such as organisational inertia (Harthey & Lyndsay, 2010), which have been found to be “the greatest barriers to learning” (Jones-Evans, 2006: 285). However, Howard (2004) highlights the limitations of empirical research into the effects of OL culture. He cites Kofman & Senge (1993) as stating that OL is an ideal solution to dispose of “frozen thought”, a term denoting the inherited culture that acts as a barrier to becoming a successful organisation. By understanding OC, it might be possible to capture the most critical issues contributing to productive OL (McCormack & McCance, 2011).

In the particular case of Middle Eastern organisations, including SAFORG, the Islamic religion has impacted the culture in several ways, at the level not only of belief but also of practice. Weir (2018) suggests that Islam has gone beyond the stage of dogma to the existence of practices that can be used as a new learning paradigm. Although Western studies dominate the study of management, Weir (2012) believes that Islamic tradition can contribute significantly to the field, particularly in the study of world leadership. Considering alternative cultural models to the Western paradigm may enrich the field of culture and leadership and help to understand their influence on OL.

Leaders, as an essential element of the OL phenomenon, cannot be exempted from the culture of the organisation and the influence on it of the moral framework of Islam, which drives people’s behaviour to be aligned with the main principles of the religion. In other words, as Weir (2018) stresses, organisational leadership behaviours and practices are derived from and constrained by the ethical framework of Islamic principles. Learners will certainly not be excluded from this cultural influence either; therefore, their behaviours are inevitably shaped by the existing culture.

Against this background of the theoretically established importance of culture for OL, the analysis of the data related to OC shows SAFORG's departments to vary in terms of how strongly culture actually affected their learning practices. For instance, a culture of safety was found to dominate both the Security and IT Departments. However, the safety culture in the Security Department tended to protect employees and organisational assets, while in the IT Department the aim was to protect information and privacy. Both cultures had some influence on employees' inclination to learn. The analysis shows that although the organisation as a whole was supposed to have a single culture, there is strong evidence of sub-cultures having emerged throughout SAFORG under the influence of employees' attributes and leaders' behaviour.

This research has used the five facets of OL identified by Lipshitz et al. (2002) and listed above to explore employees' perceptions as to the extent to which these aspects of culture could help to deliver productive OL at SAFORG. The following subsections examine participants' responses regarding each of the five in turn, to determine whether they can be seen as acting to facilitate or hinder the achievement of productive OL.

5.2.3.1 Integrity

Integrity implies giving feedback and receiving it from others in order to encourage an interactive dialogue among employees. The analysis of the data suggests that some of SAFORG's departments experienced a lack of integrity. A senior manager in the Training Department (Respondent 1) reported providing instructions and work guidance but being unwilling to receive feedback. This is a case of one-way communication, where integrity cannot be achieved because both managers and employees require mutual dialogue and feedback to achieve productive OL. The analysis shows that employees at the same levels and those with similar specialisations appeared more supportive of productive OL, rather than those who were not.

A possible explanation could be related to the nature of the work, which may have shaped the type of learning culture operating in the workplace. For instance, the IT and State Service departments seemed to have on-the-job knowledge transformation. A State Service Department middle manager (Respondent 40) reported that construction engineers, designers and architects were required to meet on site to discuss obstacles and ongoing issues with the building entrepreneur. Employees with similar specialisations were also encouraged to meet on site, not in their offices or over the phone, due to the nature of work, which resulted in on-the-job shared learning experiences.

Organisational culture does not always have negative connotations, as it can enhance collective commitment, stimulate social stability and direct employees' behaviour (Earl-Lewis, 2000). The type of OC that promotes teamworking, open communication and risk-taking probably enhances internal learning (Jones-Evans, 2006). Respondent 53, a Logistics Department senior manager, stated that employees had created a shared email system to enable their peers outside the workplace to observe the work process and even to communicate and share their views. Stated differently, when everyone in the organisation is passionate about learning, alternative ways can be found to keep every member of the organisation motivated to learn.

5.2.3.2 Issue orientation

The second facet of OL culture is issue orientation, which can be explicitly applied to the Security Department. Issue orientation, according to Lipshitz et al. (2002), means that priority should be given to the issue itself rather than employees' social status in terms of rank, sex or religion, for example. However, rank was found to be intrusive in the Security Department, where front-line employees were not allowed to challenge or refuse the orders they were given or to criticise anyone above them in the hierarchy; thus, in one way or another, employees were prevented from

participating. Surprisingly, a lack of issue orientation was also found to be prevalent among employees on the same hierarchical level in the Logistics Department, where some front-line employees were reported to refuse to learn from their colleagues because of the supposedly low rank or reputation of the institution they had graduated from. Thus, graduates of highly prestigious universities would ignore issue orientation, paying attention only to the source of a colleague's learning rather than to the knowledge itself.

Issue orientation demolishes the boundaries that constrain criticism of the status quo and gives equal opportunity to all employees, regardless of rank, to comment on ongoing workplace issues. OL is likely to prosper in such an environment, where everyone in the organisation contributes to and participates in the learning process. Thus, parallels may be drawn between issue orientation and the exploitation approach theorised by March (1991), whereby employees are encouraged to discuss existing knowledge that is directly germane to the issue at hand. However, issue orientation does not support the exploration of new knowledge which is not necessarily connected in any obvious way to the issue being discussed.

5.2.3.3 Accountability

The third facet of OC is accountability, which means employees' responsibility for learning and implementation (Greiling & Halachmi, 2013). The analysis shows that some bottom-line employees refused to accept responsibility and accountability for their learning or their actions, in order to avoid being blamed or punished. While it is not acceptable to take harsh action against employees for making mistakes, which would result in them being deterred from taking responsibility in future and make them less inclined to learn, it is also unacceptable for employees to behave carelessly and irresponsibly. A senior Security Department manager (Respondent 26) stated that some employees tended to be unwilling to take action and to be responsible for their

decisions, due to unclear work procedures which made them hesitant to make decisions. This indicates that uncertainty may be a factor hindering employees' interaction, in contradiction to a study suggesting that uncertainty can be considered to promote OL (Greiling & Halachmi, 2013).

A related issue is that front-line employees in the Logistics Department were reported to underestimate their own capabilities because of the way they were perceived by the senior management, as illustrated by these words of Respondent 51, a senior manager in the Logistics Department:

“People at the senior level do not believe in employees with lower-level capability, and they do not consult them when establishing regulations.”

An overall finding emerging from the analysis of the data is that a culture of bureaucratic decision-making pervaded SAFORG and was particularly evident in the Training Department. Four TD participants (Respondents 1, 6, 7 and 11) remarked on the centrality of decision-making, led by a committee responsible for deciding on behalf of the whole department. Although employees were given a chance to provide input and to argue in favour of particular positions, they were not trusted with the autonomy to decide and to be accountable for their decisions. The consequences of this bureaucratic culture can be seen in the undervaluing of employees' ability to achieving productive learning. In other words, if employees were trusted to the extent of being allowed to make responsible decisions, they would probably be willing to be accountable for their actions and inclined to make their organisation more productive by continuing to learn.

Moreover, gathering employees' insights is not sufficient to create an active process of OL, which requires them to become involved in a dynamic learning dialogue. In alignment with the present analysis, an empirical study conducted by Chatterjee et al. (2018) found that a flexible or adhocracy culture promoted learning transfer better than a hierarchical one. Therefore, in order to

have a productive and generative learning environment, both managers and workers should have a role in creating a learning culture.

5.2.3.4 Transparency

Transparency, the fourth element of organisational culture, refers to making things accessible and public. However, it is not always welcomed within a given OC, even though it supports understanding (Lipshitz et al., 2002). Defined as “the willingness to expose one’s thoughts and actions to others in order to receive feedback” , it is a prerequisite factor for successful enquiry when investigating severe and nontrivial problems. However, achieving transparency is risky, according to Greiling & Halachmi (2013: 392), because of “the potential exposure of mistakes and faults”, which may make employees uncomfortable and anxious about the effect on them of potential outcomes. A study carried out by Child & Rodrigues (2011) revealed a positive connection between learning outcomes and transparency among eleven US-Japanese alliances, while in the Middle East, transparency was found to be an enabling factor for knowledge management in the Emirates Identity Authority (Rahman et al., 2018).

One of the most significant benefits of transparency is to enhance organisational members’ knowledge of the latest updates in their workplace (Griffin et al., 2015). It also extends employees’ understanding of the rationale for a particular action (Abrams et al., 2003). Transparency can be inhibited by employees themselves, especially when they make a high volume of errors. Training Department employees’ hesitation in asking questions, which as stated in Section 5.2.1.1 was found to hinder collaboration, can also be seen to represent a lack of transparency. Their lack of confidence in asking productive questions, which was discussed in that earlier section, pertains to the level of engagement which ideally would gradually build their self-esteem and confidence.

Conversely, if employees are reluctant to reveal their mistakes and present themselves as wrong, this could cause the absence of transparency. The misconceptions associated with non-transparency might then result in many barriers to OL (Boateng, 2011). Accordingly, transparency is mostly linked with the disclosure of accurate and unbiased information, which could represent reality (Greiling & Halachmi, 2013). Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer (2014) perceive transparency as an interpersonal characteristic where employees become able to reconstruct their mental models to construct their realities, resulting in social cognition among employees. The role of leaders in facilitating OL dialogue is connected to relational transparency. This means that leaders must engage and take an active part among organisational members (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008), as well as being transparent in presenting their views to encourage other members to do so. Swart & Harcup (2013) examined how senior managers' leadership capabilities, including transparency, could shape organisational culture and represent the importance of feed-forward and feed-back learning across organisational levels.

The present analysis shows that it is not enough for managers to recognise the lack of transparency; they must act to resolve it. Training Department employees were found to have developed a culture of hidden competition and lack of trust. Their behaviour, reflecting a lack of transparency, had thus become an inseparable ingredient of the prevalent OC, so that even new employees had to adapt to it accordingly. The senior Training Department manager, Respondent 1, asserted that front-line workers were inclined to work individually and not to trust their peers, because they had been treated in the same way. This is contrary to transparency, which requires employees and leaders to work in an open learning culture where mutual support enhances cooperation.

Because SAFORG's hierarchical culture made it unacceptable to disobey instructions imposed from the top, employees were found to have absorbed the existing cultural elements and

incorporated them into their behaviour. It would therefore not be easy to change employees' attitudes overnight, because of the profound influence of the prevailing OC on their beliefs and assumptions, with the consequence that OL was unlikely to be successful, given the deep-seated nature of the organisational culture of withholding knowledge.

As emphasised earlier in this thesis, any OC will influence people's beliefs and assumptions. The analysis of the empirical data shows that the culture of one department not only affected the beliefs of the employees directly concerned; rather, it spread across the entire organisation and affected other workers. For instance, a front-line worker in the State Service Department (Respondent 46) reported having been affected by frustrated workers who seemed pessimistic about their work environment and had spread the same feeling to newcomers. Conversely, other employees seemed optimistic and tended to transfer positive feelings and attitudes to those who had joined the organisation recently. This infectious nature of both negative and positive beliefs and behaviours reflects the complexities of OC and shows that if negative aspects of an OC are not changed, they can become ingrained in the beliefs and practices of a majority of employees, regardless of the influence of more optimistic colleagues.

5.2.3.5 Inquiry

The fifth element of a productive OL is inquiry, which can be defined as simply "the capacity to think" (Crossan, 2003). The engine of inquiry aims, as Schultheiss & Wallace (2012: 4) point out, to explore "how certain phenomena or forms of knowledge are generated by people through social interaction". Therefore, from the post-modernist point of view, inquiry is one of the tools that can be used to generate learning beside intuition, attention and dialogue (Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015); it is also considered to lie at the heart of the participative approach (Sfard, 1998).

Based on this understanding of the inquiry technique, employees are supposed to shift from asking clarifying questions to applying critical thinking skills in order to move authentic OL dialogue forward towards generating knowledge rather than uncovering truths. This form of inquiry is significant not only in the organisational context but also in generating research knowledge, as researchers ought not to take things for guaranteed, but should instead apply their critical thinking skills to reframe their assumptions (Kellie, 2012). It can be concluded that inquiry is an effective instrument for a dialogue process aiming to develop real communication and shared understanding (Bapuji & Crossan, 2004; Earl-Lewis, 2000; Jyothibabu et al., 2010). Moreover, it is a significant characteristic that facilitates OL (Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015).

The inquiry method is a quick and direct instrument for people who hold existing knowledge to make it productive and more collaborative (Lipshitz et al., 2002; Nonaka, 1994). The inquiry process may yield a higher quality of learning, which Argyris & Schön (1996) call ‘double-loop learning’ and which is able to modify organisational norms and values, reframe assumptions and explore otherwise undiscussable issues (Argyris, 1976; Ebrahim, 2005; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008; Naot et al., 2004; Worrell, 1995). However, authentic dialogue requires an authentic leader who uses reflective inquiry rather than power for generative learning (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). One of the significant benefits of reflective inquiry, as highlighted by Howard (2004), is the ability to express employees’ thoughts, to modify mental models and to explore anti-organisational learning practices. Through inquiry, employees become able to broaden their observations with consideration of other points of view (Garvin et al., 2008).

Looking carefully at the functions of inquiry processes, Antonacopoulou (2009) draws attention to the importance of unlearning conventional ways of asking questions and instead practising new ways of pursuing an inquiry that can generate productive knowledge. Furthermore, Sanchez (2006)

highlights the manager's role in using the inquiry procedure as a periodic and systematic tool to ensure the adoption and utilisation of knowledge by connecting employees' past experience to their present and future knowledge. The employees' role in an active inquiry is to build authentic relationships that allow a variety of perspectives and permit people's stories and experiences to be exchanged (Geldenhuis, 2015). By proper reflection and sincere inquiry, employees become able to reconfigure their mental models and develop shared values (Hilden & Tikkamäki, 2013).

Argyris and Schon (1978) are cited by Mok (2013: 198) as follows: "Organisational inquiry can proceed only by concerting inaccessible information, by clarifying obscure information, and by resolving the inadequacies in the organisational theory of action (the mistakes, incongruities, and inconsistencies) which clarification reveals". Earl-Lewis (2000) points out that in order for the inquiry process to flourish, employees need to change their thinking and their mental models and to align their behaviour to encourage the inquiry process. In doing so, they become able to make the right decisions due to their contextual awareness, which probably enhances OL. Individuals act as agents for the inquiry to take place, to explore the situation between actual outcome and expectation. Once individuals become able, through the process of thoughtful inquiry, to modify their mental images, then there is a possibility that OL may occur. To put it differently, inquiry differs from modifying individual learning to reach the stage of OL (Hernes & Irgens, 2013).

Having explained the theoretical background to the importance of the inquiry pillar in relation to OL culture, it is now possible to determine to what extent inquiry contributed to OL practices at SAFORG. Analysis of the study data shows that the inquiry process was not well supported by the prevailing OL environment. For instance, employees were not given the freedom to explore sensitive issues because of security considerations, nor did they have the autonomy to engage in deep discussions which would enable them to reframe their assumptions and develop mutual

understanding. Moreover, the analysis reveals some practices inimical to OL, such as employees in the Training Department being asked to give their opinions without being involved in authentic dialogue, thus preventing them from achieving proper learning. In reference to the literature discussed earlier, inquiry means using employees' capacity and applying critical thinking, which cannot be achieved without having a dynamic dialogue and interaction.

The current analysis shows how the behaviour of both employees and managers can influence the process of inquiry. Front-line employees in the Logistics, Training and State Service departments expected the middle and senior managers to approach them to initiate inquiry and vice versa. Conversely, front-line managers in the Security and IT departments showed evidence of having used their initiative to initiate inquiry. A possible explanation of the divergent attitudes to initiating inquiry could be related to employees' assumptions about their managers being responsible for learning. Alternatively, this divergence could be related to an OL culture where inquiry was not initiated unless an incident occurred and called for resolution.

5.3 Summary: Organisational Learning Environment

This section summarises the main features of the OL Environment dimension and the implications that can be drawn from the above discussion. An overall reflection in relation to the three pillars of employees' attributes, organisational leadership and organisational culture is that they have a reciprocal relationship. Having great leadership qualities is likely to be associated with strong employee attributes and connected positively with elements of organisational culture. With some exceptions, bottom-line employees were highly appreciative of middle and senior managers' learning initiatives and behaved accordingly. Conversely, when they were treated with ignorance and not trusted, employees became unmotivated to learn and share knowledge.

Figure 17 tabulates the OL pillars and their constituent elements analysed above, indicating with a three-colour code whether each element was perceived to be present at a high, medium or unsatisfactory level in each of the five SAFORG departments. It shows the Training Department as having all of the characteristics at a moderate level, except inquiry, which was unsatisfactory. The bottom-line workers were found to be forbidden to act beyond their instructions, which may have prevented the OL process from gaining knowledge from external sources. Although employees were asked to give their opinions, they were not fully engaged in collaborative dialogue as a result of not enjoying full empowerment, trust or transparency.

OL Pillars	OL categories	Training	IT	State service	Security	Logistics
Employee attributes	Collaboration	Yellow	Red	Green	Red	Yellow
	Dialogue	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Red	Yellow
	Motivation	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green
	Trust	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red	Yellow
Organisational leadership	Open-mindedness	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green
	Empowerment	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Red	Green
Organisational culture	Integrity	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green
	Issue orientation	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Accountability	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Transparency	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
	Inquiry	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Key	Green	High level				
	Yellow	Moderate level				
	Red	Unsatisfactory level				

Figure 17 Organisational Environment dimensions

There were contradictory data on collaboration in the IT Department, whereby employees at lower levels were dissatisfied with the extent of collaboration due to the hiding of knowledge, whereas employees at the top of the hierarchy believed that employees were highly collaborative but at the same time powerless. Therefore, employees became demotivated to learn as they became isolated and discouraged from seeking external knowledge to keep abreast of the latest technology, as explained in Section 5.2.1.3 on motivation. Employees' tendency to withhold knowledge as a

reaction to not being empowered made them narrow-minded; they also lacked integrity due to the absence of dialogue.

Unlike the IT Department, Figure 17 shows that the State Service Department enjoyed a high level of collaboration, primarily on the job, as employees were encouraged to meet on project sites to discuss developments and challenges. Despite this level of collaboration, which could be driven by the nature of the work, employees did not trust each other and engaged in hidden conflict to gain appreciation and compliments. Employees' motivation for inquiry seemed to be driven by their level of satisfaction with their managers and working conditions, rather than being directly linked to the need for knowledge itself. Even if employees were in desperate need of knowledge, their lack of motivation to learn would probably reduce their tendency to engage in inquiry.

Figure 17 shows that in the Security Department, like the IT Department, employees lacked collaboration in terms of exchanging knowledge, because they were obliged to obey instructions without challenging or even interpreting them. Although the policy of preventing employees from challenging instructions seems harsh and presumably did not support OL, it can be seen to be workable in such a military organisation, where delay and hesitation could have catastrophic consequences. Therefore, security employees had no opportunity or power to engage in in-depth dialogue, which made them unmotivated and unwilling to take on additional responsibilities, because they felt isolated and unintegrated in the organisation.

The collaboration process seems to have been unstable in the Logistics Department, where employees sometimes tended to work individually rather than collectively and refused to gain knowledge due to their underestimation of their own capabilities and knowledge. However, thanks to senior managers' motivation and encouragement, employees did become open-minded and keen to establish good relationships with their managers and peers. The Logistics Department can be

considered better than other departments in terms of sharing knowledge and having an active dialogue process, due to continuous encouragement and support from senior managers.

Several implications can be drawn from findings regarding the OL Environment dimension. The first is related to the employee attributes pillar and the need for employees to maintain unique characteristics to function well in the OL environment. Moreover, collaboration, as an essential employee attribute, can be seen to have gradually changed because the organisation could no longer sustain its boundaries. SAFORG must respond to this change by providing its employees with more flexibility to be exposed to the external world and to others, to enhance their awareness of the expected pitfalls associated with this exposure. Employees' collaborative dialogue for productive learning is affected by the actor's initiative and reactions. If managers were taking part in the dialogue, the research found that their position in the hierarchy might play a part in holding back the process.

Moreover, the feeling of saturation, i.e. of having enough knowledge, tended to prevent employees from engaging actively in the dialogue process. The State Service Department was seen as the most collaborative and active department, because its employees recognised the value of knowledge to keep them updated. However, the value of knowledge was not seen as important in the Security Department compared with building the physical skills needed to maintain safety standards. The analysis confirmed that individuals' recognition of the importance of knowledge and their learning activities probably served at the individual level rather than at the group or organisational levels.

As illustrated in Figure 17, motivation was found to be at a moderate level in four departments and high in the fifth, which is ascribable to the influence of the environment and leadership initiatives. Moreover, motivation is an infectious phenomenon, in that a well-motivated leader can more easily

motivate employees, whose motivation can then spread among their colleagues and vice versa. The final employee attribute is trust, which was found to be mostly related to psychological ownership and the feeling of possession.

The findings related to organisational leadership emphasise the need for leaders to become involved in unconditional engagement with day-to-day discussions in order to inspire OL (Krishnamoorthi et al., 2018). Leaders must understand the requirements for successful OL, as well as being able to minimise the influence of inhibiting factors. The leader's role should not be limited to giving instructions and evaluating employees' achievements. Instead, it is about authentic engagement and being responsible for both failure and success, side by side with employees; and as Hopkins & Austin (2004: 5) assert, in order for learning to happen, leaders should become models for their subordinates. Likewise, managers must understand how employees work: some prefer to be left alone, whereas others need constant guidance to continue working. Employees differ and must be treated in ways that are consistent with their nature (Hoffman & Bateson, 2016). At the level of bottom-line employees, it is important to understand that they may feel frustrated because of how they are treated by their managers.

Leaders should not be excessively passive, but should be present in many of the organisation's activities (Yadav & Agarwal). This does not mean that they have to control all aspects of work. Instead, they should aim to secure the employees' involvement and motivation and to stimulate their capacity to learn. This research has found that employees experienced the ignorance of autocratic leaders who mostly relied on their own opinions rather than accepting the ideas of others, as a bottom-line participant in the Training Department (Respondent 10) complained. Singh (2015) describes authoritarian leaders as dogmatic and very strict.

Conversely, dealing with employees with credibility and fairness contributes to the motivation of employees towards work and meaningful interaction to transfer knowledge among them (Long, 2010). The present analysis also shows that the presumption that managers necessarily have superior qualities and must be involved in every detail of the work might demotivate other employees from participating actively and sharing knowledge, as suggested by a bottom-line employee, Respondent 38. When employees felt that a manager preferred to work with certain of their colleagues for one reason or another, they interpreted this as a diminishing of their rights and a disparagement of their abilities. They therefore strongly criticised both the manager concerned and the favoured employees and tended to avoid interacting with them.

Another implication for OL leadership concerns fuzzy strategy, which has been found to affect OL due to the absence of a guiding framework or pattern for managers and workers to follow (Duarte Aponte & Castañeda Zapata, 2013). The lack of a clearly defined strategy for managers and employees creates an atmosphere of instability that affects employees' willingness to share knowledge and experience. It emerges from the analysis that misalignment between sections of one department, which were supposed to have a common strategy and similar work patterns, could impede OL. Bottom-line workers in the State Service Department reported that in the head office of the organisation, employees worked in teams with their senior leaders and colleagues, whereas in the subsidiary offices they worked in isolation. The reasons for staff practices to differ within a single organisation are related to differences between group learning and individual learning, confirming the necessity for leaders to pay close attention to anything that hinders employees from working as a team, particularly the importance of sharing their knowledge and experience (Wagner & Hollenbeck, 2014). Therefore, it is up to the manager to set the work pattern, as it not inherent in organisational policy. It should be noted that the misalignment in organisational strategy does

not necessarily have to be redressed by the imposition of a single learning style. Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2003) emphasise that there is no harm in an organisation having a variety of learning style. However, the main conclusion in the present context is that the absence of harmony of work patterns between departments probably makes the transformation of knowledge much harder.

This research gives a strong indication of the importance of middle managers facilitating OL by acting as mediators between front-line employees and senior management. It is the responsibility of middle managers to implement the strategies established by senior managers. Their importance lies in the fact that if they do not agree with the higher management, they will fail to implement corporate strategy and that since they are the closest to bottom-line employees, this will have a negative impact on their performance (Bass & Bass, 2009). In a top-down hierarchal structure, the middle managers can enhance OL practice by acting as a conduit for the flow of information between decision-makers and front-line employees, and by performing as effective team leaders. Furthermore, their closeness to both senior managers and front-line employees makes it easy for them to synthesise the tacit knowledge of both groups and convert it to explicit knowledge for the benefit of all (Nonaka, 1994).

One of the implications of the third pillar of OL Environment that is organisational culture cannot be ignored, because it is inherent in employees' beliefs and assumptions, as well as representing organisational norms and attributes. Conrad & Poole (2012) argue that each organisation should have a cultural strategy that treats its employees as rational beings who must therefore be involved in the organisation's vision, values and strategies in order to be productive and willing to learn. Therefore, building an organisational or corporate culture cannot be achieved if employees are ignored or excluded from sharing. Put differently, part of organisational culture is concerned with a view of the world and logically part of this concerns how to view the organisation itself.

Employees differ in their assumptions and sharing these will probably help to achieve a convergence of views.

By sharing and understanding OC and its impact on OL, employees and leaders become able to deal with it more effectively, by minimising the negative aspects of OC and enhancing its positive facets. Analysis of the perceptions of SAFORG's employees shows that it is possible to create a common culture among employees through the consolidation of ideas and visions and to put collective thinking in the place of individual thinking while taking care not to impair the creativity of individual employees or their intellectual contributions. It is notable that employees who share cultural characteristics tend to be more collaborative than those from diverse cultures. One of the important categories of OC is issue orientation, which has been found not always to be given priority in SAFORG departments due to dominating factors such as power and status. Accountability cannot be achieved in these departments unless employees' capabilities are trusted. Trusting employees at an individual level entails authorising them to take part in every aspect of the organisation's activities, including some critical issues such as involvement in decision-making. The more autonomy employees are given, the more accountable they are likely to be and the more willing to share knowledge (Nelson, 2012).

5.4 Dimension Two: Organisational Learning Process

The OL process dimension is partially explored in the literature and theorists have called for learning to be explored from a process perspective (Easterby-Smith et al., 1999; Schofield, 2013). The present research is concerned with the various processes of learning which were found to take place in the five departments of SAFORG constituting the case study. It is essential, before analysing the data on the OL process, to explain the meaning of process in the OL context. Extensive literature has explored the process of learning in non-organisational contexts, but there

remains a need to address the intricacies and properties of the learning process within the workplace.

Learning as a process has been investigated from two broad perspectives: as a process of interaction (Blackler, 1995; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and as a process of knowledge acquisition (Senge, 1990). The proponents of the first perspective, such as Lave & Wenger (1991), perceive learning as a process of social interaction that occurs, in the words of Schultheiss & Wallace (2012: 6), “by participating with others in activities that are culturally situated”. Members of the second school of thought include Buckler (1996), who describes learners as needing to know what they should learn (focus), why (environment) and how (techniques). A merging of these two perspectives suggests that the aim of the OL process should be to generate knowledge, which requires employees’ engagement and interaction in a social setting in the form of spontaneous rather than planned activities. This research adopts the point of view of Ambrose et al. (2010), who considers the process of learning as a vehicle for the experience to change employees’ behaviour towards learning and performance improvement. In other words, the effectiveness of the process of learning is directly linked to the ability of the process to change employees’ conceptions, rather than accumulating knowledge. Moon (2013) describes the process as “transforming conceptions”.

Figure 18 is a graph whose vertical axis shows the levels of interaction for learning among employees across the five SAFORG departments, according to participants’ perceptions. The horizontal axis distinguishes interactions at the individual level, among group members, between groups across departments, between groups within SAFORG, among organisations in the Middle East and among organisations across the world. Considering individuals as a starting point for OL (Wang & Ahmed, 2002), Figure 18 shows that the majority of participants rated individuals above

a medium level of individual learning. This means that participants could learn if they were inclined to do so and that their learning inclination was subject to a supportive environment and the existence of the learning process.

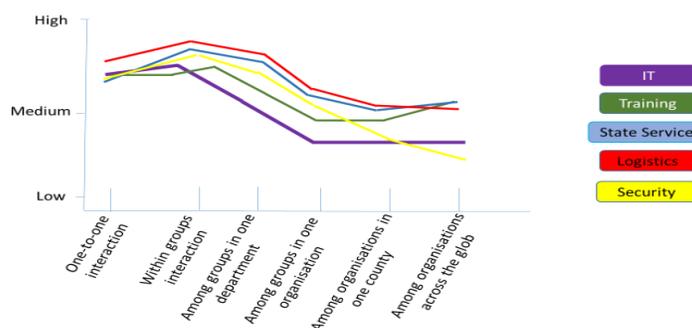


Figure 18 Levels of Interaction across SAFORGS's departments

Figure 18 also shows that the departments tended to have similar characteristics in terms of learning at the individual level, while the level of interaction required to establish collaborative learning declined gradually as the size of the group increased. The variation across the levels of interactions within groups, among groups and among departments draws attention to the need for a process of learning at each of these levels. It can be clearly seen that the peak of knowledge sharing occurred among group members in the Logistics Department. At the same time, inter-organisational learning interaction was at a low level in the Security Department. The variation among departments reflects differences in managers' understanding of the importance of promoting learning and in the supportive nature of the OL environment.

One of the factors underpinning the stronger interactions within groups in the State Service Department was the homogeneity of group members, including similarities in their professional status and interests, as a middle manager in the Department (Respondent 39) observed. While this homogeneity appears to have strengthened learning interactions within the groups, at the same time it contributed to minimising the learning interactions between groups

across departments and with other departments, because of the competition as reported by Respondent 37, a front-line employee in the State Service Department. In the case of the Security Department, its external interaction process was sharply reduced by two different mechanisms: the existence of safety concerns and the fact that employees were not permitted to establish a network to exchange learning beyond SAFORG's boundaries.

The OLP literature underlines that there is no time-frame allocated to moving, for example, from the individual learning stage to learning at group and organisational levels, as it all depends on the process of learning itself (Weber & Antal, 2003). Individual learning is considered to be a prerequisite for OL (Mann et al., 2011). However, individual learning cannot be converted to OL unless organisations pay attention to the behavioural change involved in the process (Gunasekaran, 2001). OL is not an automated or linear system that can be shifted to at any point in time, because it depends on human characteristics. Duarte Aponte & Castañeda Zapata (2013: 443) state that OL “is not always a lineal process that begins with individual learning, becomes group learning and then organisational learning”.

Theorists offer different perspectives on OLP transformation, such as the theory of knowledge creation, which perceives learning as a systematic process (Nonaka & Konno, 1998). This dynamic process converts tacit to explicit knowledge through a spiral of socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation (Basten & Haamann, 2018). Wang & Ahmed (2002: 13) emphasise the systematic nature of learning: “Every single process follows a plan-do-study-check circle and pursues a scientific problem-solving or information-process system”. This section of the discussion identifies the pillars of OLP as shown in Figure 19, namely the processes of learning from past experience, from current experience, from external sources and for innovation.



Figure 19 Organisational Learning Process

It is important to stress that learning can happen through one or more of these pillars at the same time; as Bapuji & Crossan (2004: 400) explain, it can be “behavioural and cognitive, exogenous and endogenous, methodical and emergent, incremental and radical, and can occur at various levels in an organization”. The following subsections analyse in turn participants’ perceptions regarding each of these learning pillars.

5.4.1 Learning from past experience



Figure 20 The process of learning from past experience

Learning from past experience is one of the five building blocks comprising the model of Garvin (1993) cited by Basten & Haamann (2018). Garvin’s model emphasises the need for constant reflection to align past experience to the organisational status quo. Therefore, analysing successes and failures and exploring issues associated with them are key factors enabling learners to benefit from past experience (Worrell, 1995). SAFORG’s departments were found to share common practices as a way to retrieve past experience, which they did only as a reaction to problems. Variations were evident between departments in terms of how quickly employees reacted to

retrieve past experience and in the extent of the process of retrieval that contributed to OL. The analysis shows that experts in the Training Department discussed their past experience only to solve problems. The senior hierarchy usually met middle managers to recall similar situations which had occurred in the past, while the role of the middle managers was to pass instructions on to front-line employees. It can be said that the middle managers usually acted as brokers to bring front-line experience to the senior managers and vice versa. The point here is that the incident or problem which prompted managers to retrieve their past experience acted as a learning process.

The problem encountered with this process related to managers, who retrieved only the tacit knowledge directly connected with each incident, which meant disregarding a considerable body of relevant experience. This overlooked tacit knowledge would never be triggered unless a problem occurred. Moreover, the experience as presented was subject to managers' interpretations, so it did not necessarily represent reality. Moreover, recalling past experience is not useful in itself; the true benefit lies in generating new knowledge that is conceptualised by matching the past experience of experts with the current experience of workers. Wehlburg (2019: 729) asserts that "learning happens because of the reflection on the experience, not necessarily as a result of the experience itself". In other words, it is possible to benefit from past experience only when employees utilise their critical thinking and modify their conceptions as well as developing their reflective ability to adapt that experience to the current situation.

Some authors highlight the importance for learners to integrate and balance their past experience with new ones (Bukner & Finn, 2018). In order for employees to benefit from the experience of others, the interaction process has to be followed by continuity, which is all about the change in learners' current experience as a result of past experience (Lipnevich & Smith, 2018). Another concern is related to the influence of power, which can reduce the benefits of past experience. A

manager's powerful influence can slow the process of employees' critical thinking and understanding of past experience, as bottom-line employees tend to avoid criticising their manager's behaviour and actions.

A relevant example of the influence of power on benefiting from experience would be when front-line employees tend to be courteous to the senior managers and never criticise them, no matter how convinced they are of faults in their style and orientation. The prevailing explanation as to why managers do not share their knowledge and experience is their desire to retain the dominance and control derived from their knowledge. Rhem (2016) argues that fear of losing control, which could lead to losing one's job, stands behind managers' reluctance to share knowledge. Consistent with this argument is the finding of the current research that managers' inclination to share knowledge was influenced by their desire to maintain power (Respondents 9, 18, 19 and 52).

The analysis reveals that SAFORG's departments benefited from the process of retrieving past experience by generating new rules and regulations as a reaction to obstacles, challenges and conflicts encountered in day-to-day work. In addition to the lack of benefit from accumulated expertise, these rules and regulations constrained employees' freedom to think beyond their limits and their ability to generate productive learning. Gaining the benefit of past experience at the senior and middle managerial levels also seems to have been driven by the knowledge holder's inclinations. For instance, an expert in the State Service Department (Respondent 48) had exceptional knowledge in building architecture and refused to share this knowledge, claiming that he was too busy to do so. Theorists have insisted on the importance of building awareness among managers of the need to share their past experience, to act as information-sharing role models and to see the sharing of knowledge as mutually beneficial for all parties (Garcia, 2013).

In general, this research has found that senior managers were less concerned about the process of sharing past experience than middle managers because the latter were more firmly attached to front-line employees. This finding is consistent with the APGC study (1996), cited by Maier (2005) as concluding that senior managers are less committed than workers to knowledge management. That study is also reported to show, however, that middle managers have the weakest commitment to knowledge management; this inconsistency with the present findings is a quite puzzling phenomenon and worth exploring further.

In respect of the importance of sharing past experience across different levels, Kidwell & Martin (2004) raise the issue of doing so without clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of each employee. For example, some employees might act in an unacceptable manner, such as by accessing confidential information, which could result in restricting the sharing of information. Maier (2005) insists that the manager must define employees' responsibilities and consider knowledge sharing as an essential part of this, regardless of their position. Lack of clarity regarding who can legitimately share what knowledge can contribute negatively to the process of learning from past experience. The disinclination of senior managers to share knowledge could be related to their passivity and their ability to dedicate time to knowledge transformation (Taloo, 2007). Sometimes, however, managers are unable to share knowledge because have none, not being able to master every single aspect of the organisation's work (McCrie, 2015).

5.4.2 Learning from current experience



Figure 21 The process of learning from current experience

Organisational learning from current experience means utilising day-to-day experience to generate productive learning. Limiting learning to the organisation's own experience has been criticised by Bapuji & Crossan (2004) as lacking vision and being constrained by organisational and local conditions. The analysis of the present data shows that physical and metaphorical boundaries affected the process of learning from day-to-day experience. The interaction among SAFORG employees within one geographical location appears to have been more effective than the interaction of employees in diverse locations. Wilson (2005) suggests that proximity increases learning interactions. The understanding of proximity has been extended beyond the physical closeness of work stations to connectivity between tasks (Naswall et al., 2008). SAFORG has recognised the importance of employees working close to each other and recently initiated an open-space office culture that enabled employees to interact without leaving their desks. Employees' ability to interact helps them to develop common goals and builds their dependence on collectively achieving their work goals. Therefore, the closer employees are able to work together, the more opportunity for interaction and the more effective they become (Sims, 2002).

Unlike the situation of those working in close proximity, the process of learning from ongoing daily work beyond groups or sections was not perceived to be satisfactory. A Training Department middle manager (Respondent 2), for example, asserted that employees in one section knew almost nothing about the work of other sections, even though these were in the same department. Part of

the explanation is that the opportunity for employees to learn from the current experience of their peers in other sections was constrained by geographical factors. Turning to physical barriers to the learning process, Schultz & Schultz (2015) assert that the size of a building can inhibit interactions among employees who operate at a significant distance from each other. A front-line participant from the Logistics Department (Respondent 60) stated that employees tended to work individually because of the building's layout.

The lack of the interactions required in order to learn from current experience could be related to employees' personalities and working styles. It is essential to understand that employees' behaviour might influence colleagues to behave similarly. Therefore, as an increasing number of employees became inclined to work in isolation from others, the opportunities for a productive OL process diminished.

The consequence of restricting employees from taking advantage of other's knowledge across different sections is that it will limit their ability to explore more extensive opportunities and inhibit them from expanding their narrow thinking. Limiting the process of learning among employees in the internal domain makes them unable to think beyond their scope of work, unfamiliar with organisational goals and vision, and incapable of doing other jobs efficiently. Moreover, they become programmed to their internal working style and routines, mentally locked and unable to be innovative and creative, which is the ultimate goal of OL.

A likely justification for employees' restricted interactions with their peers across different sections and departments, from a managerial point of view, is that employees in different sections have little in common worth sharing. Therefore, the process of learning, according to Dalkir (2013) would not be successful. Blacker & McConnell (2015) challenge this assumption, insisting that external interaction is vital for employees and that managers cannot justify limiting their freedom

to interact with anyone other than their direct superiors. A second explanation for low internal interaction could be related to documentation and most recently to technology. The analysis shows that at SAFORG, documentation contributed to the obstruction of the process of learning from the current experience of others. In all departments, the researcher observed that instead of face-to-face communication, employees preferred formal interactions such as sending written documents, in order to record the information in case it was needed. The need for the security of having documentary evidence of interaction prevented employees from approaching each other physically.

Thirdly, the analysis shows that the interactions caused a partial reduction in real interactions to share the current experience through documentation, under the increasing influence of technology. The IT Department, being responsible for providing SAFORG with IT solutions, had created a system to foster interaction among employees and departments, which promoted virtual interaction and online communication. The aim of the system was to enhance remote interaction, according to a senior IT Department manager (Respondent 23). Technical faults could be resolved without either verbal or face-to-face interactions. When a fault was reported to the system, a technician would browse the database or online sources to explore similar cases which might help to resolve it. The technician would then post whatever accumulated experience had been gained from solving the problem that could be most valuable to other technicians. Recording what previous technicians have done to deal with similar incidents seems to be an emergent form of tacit knowledge sharing which could lead to OL. Although technicians appeared to have no opportunity to interact in order to challenge and modify their mental models, they would still have the opportunity to enhance learning. However, the online transformation of knowledge would probably be insufficient to enhance employees' capacity for productive learning, because it is one-way communication.

A possible explanation for using this technological method of communication could be related to a shortage of staff and to the need to accelerate the pace of work achievement. The use of documentation or emails as methods of interaction may give the impression of pragmatism, because record keeping is facilitated compared with face-to-face interactions and because employees may feel under less pressure, being able to say whatever they wish at any time. Although the literature supports the claim that technology can be utilised to enhance the OL process (Easterby-Smith et al., 1999; Senge, 1990), however, the present analysis has found the use of IT to be a factor impeding learning interactions. Indeed, technology can be seen as constituting another intangible obstacle to learning from current experience by physical interaction. Employees at SAFORG were found to be encouraged to use technology to communicate rather than walking a few steps to interact physically with their colleagues. A senior manager in the IT Department (Respondent 20) explained that SAFORG had the intention to automate the communication process to reduce the need for physical interaction, either internally between sections or among departments across the whole organisation.

Another variant of learning process interaction is related to organisational policy and more specifically to organisational rules. Rules and policies can facilitate learning if employees are allowed to challenge them; conversely, they can hinder learning when employees are instructed to follow them unquestioningly. Rules and policies can facilitate OL when employees use their capacity to alter and develop them in a way that helps to improve the working process and when they can be creative in performing their work tasks efficiently. Rules can also act as hindering forces in a bureaucratic environment where employees are restricted in being innovative and given no flexibility to modify them (Dierkes et al., 2003). This can be clearly seen in the Security

Department, where participants reported that rules could not be challenged and that employees must obey all instructions regardless of their own interpretations.

The process of learning from current experience can be seen through the learning intervention of problem-solving. The mechanisms used to involve employees in the process of problem-solving defined the level of benefits for employees and the organisation. In the IT Department, professional employees were called immediately for a short meeting to discuss any emergent problem and suggest a solution, as an IT Department senior manager (Respondent 23) explained. The process of learning through problem-solving benefits only those employees who are involved, however, and learning is not generated unless double-loop learning, which as explained earlier explores the roots of the problem, is employed. A senior manager in the Security Department (Respondent 26) added that vagueness and poorly organised procedures to solve problems could slow the process of interaction and reduce the participative inputs, which in turn would minimise the benefits of the whole learning process.

5.4.3 Learning from external sources



Figure 22 The process of learning from external sources

There was consensus across the five case study departments that learning from external sources was understood to be self-driven rather than organisationally driven. However, exploring what others are doing is beneficial, according to the literature: “Learning from others, a form of ‘benchmarking’, involves a disciplined and systematic process of identifying best practices” (Worrell, 1995: 354). Analysis of the data reveals a widespread recognition among participants

that gaining external knowledge gives the knowledge seekers an advantage over those employees who are not involved. Getting to know what others are doing in similar jobs expands employees' horizons and enables them to apply, modify or reject practices depending on their applicability. In other words, by learning what others are doing, employees become able to challenge their own mental models. Respondent 56 cited the example of lawyers in the Logistics Department who had decided not to adopt a system of managing contractors which had been implemented in other organisations, simply because SAFORG had relatively few contractors and establishing such a system would be too costly.

Figure 23 is a graphic giving a broad indication of the extent to which each of the five departments was found to engage in the process of learning from external sources, with the Security and IT Departments at opposite ends of a continuum from red (low engagement) to green (high engagement). The Security Department is depicted as occupying the low end of the continuum, because security considerations apparently restricted the opportunities for personnel to establish interactions external to their work domain without permission. Some senior managers in the department (Respondents 29, 36) did report using their personal relationships with external organisations that pertained to the nature of their work to arrange training courses. However, these did not represent opportunities to enhance their working skills or to gain valuable knowledge, but were probably for promotional purposes and to obtain personal advantages.

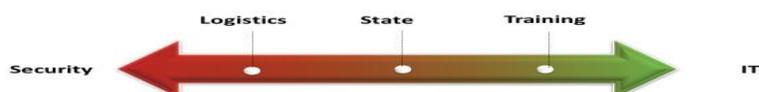


Figure 23 Continuum of the process of learning from external sources

At the other end of the continuum, technicians in the IT Department had to keep up to date with developments in the fast-changing world of IT. The Department was responsible for building and

maintaining an IT to perform essential financial and data-sensitive processes such as payroll and HRM. Any IT system that is not updated regularly becomes insecure and easy to hack. Bapuji & Crossan (2004) report that several empirical studies have found that IT experience tends to diminish in value over time. Thus, two senior IT managers (Respondents 20, 23) explained that when the IT Department launched a new system or modified an existing one, one consequence of the change was the need to train employees to deal with the updated system, which in turn would enhance their knowledge and development. One finding that emerges from analysis of participants' responses is that employees' realisation of the importance of liaising with the external world to gain the latest knowledge derived from them establishing their own networks such as by joining IT associations, enrolling in international online certification, or participating in professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn and WhatsApp groups. Some relations with the external world were seen as essential, as part of inter-organisational projects, and not necessarily regarded as channels to gain knowledge, being temporary and established for a certain limited purpose. The external networks that employees aimed for were those that would provide valuable information and help them to challenge their mental models. A bottom-line employee (Respondent 13) explained that IT employees were driven by market demand and that they must keep up to date in their field in order to survive commercially.

Figure 23 shows the Training, State Service and Logistics departments as lying between the extremes of the external sources continuum, indicating that their members were neither obliged to maintain external networks nor prohibited from doing so. The Training Department was found to have stronger external interactions than the other two. However, these were driven by employees' motivation, according to a middle manager (Respondent 7) who complained that some of his

colleagues lacked sufficient motivation to make the effort needed to build external networks in order to enhance their professional expertise.

The State Service Department was reported to have coordinated with other organisations to enrol front-line employees to attend some training sessions, which in turn represented an awareness of the importance of external knowledge, even though the communication was temporary. A middle manager in the Department (Respondent 40) stated that it took advantage of workplace problems to enhance employees' learning from both current and past experience:

“At the site, employees contribute and present their views about how to tackle problems, and at the same time, they get to know the past or similar experience of others. Through this kind of experience, the human brain starts thinking and developing and not just relying on theoretical experience.”

It can be seen that the Logistics Department, lying towards the low end of the continuum, had relatively little opportunity to gain knowledge from external sources, which may have been because such interactions were shaped by the nature of the work, as explained by a senior manager (Respondent 51). Stated differently, the seeking of external knowledge was driven by job requirements such as in the purchase section, where employees needed to understand the international procurement trade to be able to liaise with global companies. Conversely, in situations where an employee's performance depends on aptitude rather than knowledge or qualifications, then seeking external knowledge will not necessarily enhance the efficiency of talented employees. Thus, a senior manager in the State Service Department (Respondent 44) gave the example of interior designers, who would not be able to build on their talent by absorbing external knowledge or become expert by learning from either internal or external sources, unless they had the aptitude and ability of imagination and visualisation as inherent aspects of their

personality. It can be concluded that the process of learning at SAFORG varied with the extent of the need associated with particular functions, so that employees in some jobs, such as IT technicians, clearly needed to remain updated, while people in other jobs, such as interior designers in the State Service Department, had a less pressing need for such learning. However, this is not to say that people whose jobs are based on talent rather than knowledge can prosper in isolation from learning.

5.4.4 Learning for innovation



Figure 24 The process of learning for innovation

Innovation can be seen as an ultimate goal which stimulates OL, according to Jian & Zhou (2015). An organisation that has the capacity to use OL to promote innovation will use clear direction to encourage its employees at all levels to work collaboratively and enthusiastically to enhance the process of learning interaction, thus building their innovative capacities in order to achieve the organisation's vision and goals. The literature highlights the role of managers in driving OL through their passion for making a difference for their organisation (Easterby-Smith et al., 1999). The analysis of data gathered at SAFORG reveals some attempts to establish a process of innovative learning in the IT Department, when the leader called for regular, informal and optional meetings to discuss the future aspirations of the department. The aim was not to discuss what had been done in the past or problems related to the current situation, but to explore what had not been done yet and to consider the broader opportunities for development, as well as to highlight the

latest trends in the IT world. It is not assumed that the strategy was successful; however, having a framework in which to exchange ideas and thoughts with employees across the hierarchy about moving the organisation forward is likely to have created a unified feeling of responsibility and accountability.

One of the obstacles which held back the process of learning for innovation, as reported by an IT Department middle manager (Respondent 24), was the absence of direction in leading that process. Amabile (1998: 86) reports a similar issue: “Managers at one company undermined employees’ creativity by continually changing goals and interfering with processes”. In such circumstances, any discussion remains superficial, which may have been the main reason for the lack of an innovative workplace environment in the ITD. Furthermore, the opportunity for innovative learning was reduced by the knowledge gap between the department and its business clients, according to a senior manager in the IT Department (Respondent 22). If the ITD’s personnel had a much higher level of technical understanding than the clients, it would be difficult to create good performance and high productivity.

Restricting employees’ involvement in the process of learning would also probably prevent them from being innovative. An example of this obstacle was found in the Security Department, where employees were obliged to submit their ideas and thoughts to their direct supervisor only and were not allowed to take part in the process of discussion unless they were at the same level in the hierarchy. Consequently, discussions were exclusively for a certain level of people, because the military system divided employees into planners, supervisors and executors, preventing interaction across organisational levels and making it difficult for problems to be clearly articulated. The lack of interaction affected not only bottom-line employees but also senior and middle managers, as security regulations restricted them from being open and transparent. The reason for separating

employees by hierarchal status may have been rooted in cultural standing, in that more highly placed employees sought to preserve the power and respect associated with giving instructions, rather than creating a cooperative culture of learning interaction. OL seems to depend on a blurring of boundaries across organisational hierarchies to maximise interaction among employees, which was not really appreciated by the top position holders.

Innovative leaders can play a significant role in encouraging employees to share knowledge and be innovative too. A senior Logistics Department manager (Respondent 49) reported adopting various strategies to break the ice among middle managers and front-line workers by encouraging them to share their current and past experience so that they would be inspired to generate innovative ideas.

“One of the strategies I’ve used to encourage employees to interact is inviting them to have morning tea in my office and talk informally about work. This technique allows me to explore many workplace issues, challenges, and even some personal issues that cause obstacles and need to be solved”.

The analysis suggests that when employees are motivated, boundaries are abolished and fear is eliminated, then learning is shared within groups, among groups and across the organisation. The findings also demonstrate that it is the role of a leader to inspire others, which is considered one of the most important traits of visionary leadership beside self-reliance and creative thinking (Olson & Simerson, 2015). The innovative leader also helps employees to develop their learning skills, improving the performance of those who have difficulties in expressing themselves and conveying their messages to others. A senior manager (Respondent 49) recognised that some employees found it difficult to pass on their experience to their peers and developed an attitude of nervousness which could lead them to keep quiet. The leader asked these employees to draw what they had in mind on a whiteboard using arrows, lines and boxes to represent a building. All members greatly appreciate the intuitions and insights that emerged from this experience and it was reported to have helped to exchange ideas efficiently.

5.5 Summary: Organisational Learning Process

One of the general conclusions that can be drawn regarding the OLP dimension is that learning at SAFORG was perceived to be good at an individual level, partially acceptable at the group level and unsatisfactory at the organisational level. In the introduction to Section 5.4, Figure 18 showed that employees across different departments had the initiative to learn at the individual level, as seen in one-to-one interaction, at above the medium level. However, this research is particularly concerned with the learning process at the organisational level, seeking to identify processes that could move the organisation from individual to organisational learning.

The importance of understanding the organisational learning process arises from there being various types of learning interactions (one-to-one, within groups, among groups in one department, among groups in one organisation, among organisations in one country and among organisations across the world), each associated with certain characteristics and requiring a particular type of OLP. Figure 18 depicted the reduction in strength of interaction from individual learning towards the organisational category, which prompted an exploration of the features associated with various types of learning, namely learning from past experience, from current experience or existing knowledge, from external sources and finally learning for innovation, as shown in Figure 25.

Type of learning process	Training	IT	State Service	Security	Logistics
Learning from past experience	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow
Learning from current experience	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Yellow
Learning from external sources	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Red	Yellow
Learning for innovation	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Green
Key	Green			High level	
	Yellow			Moderate level	
	Red			Unsatisfactory level	

Figure 25 Learning process

The Logistics Department, according to Figure 18, had a higher level of interaction among the groups, whereas Figure 17 (Section 5.3) shows that in terms of the OL Environment dimension, the State Service Department was more collaborative than the other departments. The main reason

might be related to the nature of work in the SSD, requiring employees to work in groups on the various projects and making it inevitable for them to collaborate. This finding is in alignment with the suggestion in the literature that group settings enhance learning collaboration (Oermann, 2017). The strong interaction among groups in the Logistics Department is attributable to encouragement and support from the leadership.

Reacting to problems seems to have been a common way to retrieve past experiences across SAFORG departments. However, experts appeared to draw only on tacit knowledge directly connected with a given problem, which means that a huge mass of experience remained unexploited, despite tacit knowledge being recognised as the most valuable source of information (Swanson et al., 2001). The benefits gained from learning from past experience were dependent on the influence of managers, as employees avoided criticising them, which prevented the employees from applying their critical thinking and scrutinising the managers' proposed solutions and their approaches to dealing with conflict.

Managers continued to believe that losing the power of knowledge could easily lead to losing their position; therefore, to preserve their jobs, they often followed a strategy of withholding knowledge, as described in the literature (Review et al., 2019). New recruits appeared to be better qualified than the older generation, while the latter had more experience than the former. Each generation seemed to be trying to defend themselves in order to sustain whatever advantage they could, resulting in isolation and the withholding of knowledge instead of engagement and collaboration. Figure 17 showed SAFORG to be at a moderate level in sharing past experience because the process of shared learning from past experience was employed exclusively to solve problems. Learning from past experience was linked to initiatives by senior and middle managers to exchange knowledge. However, exchanging past experience varied from one place to another, based on how

active both employees and their managers were in initiating the necessary dialogue. Figure 17 showed that due to the separation between guards, supervisors and officers, based on military ranks, it was clear that the majority of guards had a high level of learning from current experience, because they learned by observing their supervisors and peers, whom they emulated very easily. By contrast, they learned relatively little from past experience, doing so only in ways related to their specific work tasks as well as the current experience that directly connected them to their immediate supervisors. On the other hand, guards had very few opportunities to broaden their horizons and explore new information from outside sources; as a result, they were unable to be innovative.

The amber colouring in Figure 25 classifies the Training Department as at a moderate level of learning from both past and current experience, which reflects various elements of the analysis. Front-line employees were found not to be fully engaged in the day-to-day routine, preventing them from taking advantage of ongoing work experience. This indicates that management did not support the OL process and that there was no procedure in place to encourage employees to engage in learning interaction. The State Service Department was seen to be unsuccessful in exchanging past experience, unlike the Logistics Department, which reached a higher level to generate innovative knowledge. The leaderships of the two departments appear to have played a critical role in either enhancing or inhibiting the OL process.

An clear implication that can be drawn from analysis of data in the OLP dimension is that the five SAFORG departments had made good attempts to exchange learning at the individual level, which can be considered a good indication of intention to promote learning at the group and organisational levels (Trott, 2005). Learning from past experience occurred as a reaction to solving problems, which means that past experience was not processed when there were no triggers.

Therefore, the organisation became reactive rather than being proactive in circulating shared experience. However, Tyler (2010) points out that problems must be complicated to trigger employees' thinking and ideas in ways that promote learning. Although firms do not aim to replicate past experience, it is a great platform to build on. It can be claimed that it is much harder for a firm to build OL without considering its past experience.

Employees' working styles are shaped by work patterns and leaders' influence, as well as their own assumptions. Therefore, paying closer attention to the factors that drive its employees to behave in ways that inhibit interaction will enable an organisation to modify their behaviour in order to support learning. The literature asserts that knowing the factors that influence employees' behaviour, such as the example of their coworkers, would probably help to modify unwanted behaviour (Nye & Roberts, 2019).

Despite the significance of learning from external sources, SAFORG was found to be cautious in supporting some departments to establish networking and to learn from external sources. The nature of the work could be considered the main factor that influenced learning from external sources. The Security Department, for example, chose not to establish external networking because of security considerations, unlike the IT Department, for which it was preferable to explore the latest technological developments in order to make SAFORG's systems more secure. These research findings illustrate a reciprocal relationship between the type of job and the need to seek external knowledge. Stated clearly, if a job is based on aptitude, there is no essential need for external knowledge, whereas if the job is centred on employees' attitudes, then seeking external knowledge becomes significant.

Regarding the process of learning for innovation, the research findings highlight the need for the organisation to have a clear sense of direction. Only when employees across different

organisational levels have a unified view of what their organisation aspires to can they work to achieve that vision. Various contributors to the literature have highlighted the need for organisations to have a clear vision and to ensure that employees have the tools to implement it (Maylett, 2019). Furthermore, involving employees in discussing not only the organisational vision and goals, but also alternative channels to achieve the vision, encourages employees to come into alignment with organisational efforts for innovation. Again, as stated in different places in this thesis, higher ranking employees at SAFORG were found to prevent lower ranking colleagues from taking part in ongoing discussions, especially in relation to organisational policy, strategy and innovation, with the apparent aim of maintaining their own power and superiority. It is managers' role to motivate their subordinates to participate and provide their thoughts and innovative ideas. The literature suggests that getting employees to work in groups could help to increase the level of cooperation between them (Liu et al., 2018).

5.6 Dimension Three: Organisational Learning Factors

This third major section of the discussion chapter analyses the data on organisational learning factors (OLFs); in other words, it is an exploration of the mechanisms by which organisations (specifically SAFORG) learn and what factors influence their learning. Therefore, it is essential to map out the issues raised by interviewees as affecting the various departments at SAFORG and their perceptions of the factors that facilitated and inhibited their learning. This discussion, which in common with the preceding ones explores salient factors identified by senior and middle managers and bottom-line employees in individual interviews and focus groups, aims to identify the factors most strongly influencing OL at all levels of the organisational hierarchy and to determine the underlying causes of any significant similarities and differences across organisational levels and among departments. The main reason for taking different approach in

identifying OL factors from senior, middle and bottom-lines employees' point of views is to see the similarities and differences in viewing the factors that facilitating or hindering OL.

The main themes emerging from the three sets of interviews and the focus groups revolve around the three pillars illustrated in Figure 26, namely learners' or human resources characteristics, organisational culture and organisational policy. The categorisation of OLFs into these pillars is intended to give practitioners an in-depth understanding of when organisations learn and under what circumstances, thus providing a proper foundation for learning to take place. Identifying the source of OLFs and determining whether these factors are internal or external to the organisation, whether they are related to employees' characteristics or inherent in the culture of the organisation, or whether they may be related to organisational policy, would probably help practitioners to pay more attention to the primary sources of OLFs. The following subsections address each pillar in turn, analysing the empirical data to determine the extent to which these sets of factors may have contributed to facilitating or inhibiting organisational learning at SAFORG.



Figure 26 Organisational learning factors

5.6.1 Human Resources Characteristics

DiBella et al. (1996) advise that organisations should pay close attention to developing employees' existing learning characteristics or to encouraging new ones. Consistent with this advice, the empirical data shows that at SAFORG, OLFs in the human resources characteristics pillar were given high priority in regard to employees at all levels. Participants at the three levels differed in which characteristics they highlighted and the extent to which these factors were seen to influence

OL. The senior managers reported that OL was influenced by the level of trust either between managers and their subordinates or among employees themselves. A second strand identified by senior managers was accountability and the need for employees to be accountable for their work. Other factors highlighted as facilitating OL at SAFORG to some extent include the need for integration between employees and for a friendly working atmosphere.

Middle managers tended to focus on the importance of knowledge-related factors and on the extent to which these would contribute to OL. Therefore, the discussion below includes explanations of sharing and withholding knowledge, underestimating knowledge or learning capability and types or saturation. Factors perceived to encourage employees to withhold knowledge from others, to underestimate others' capabilities, or to refuse to become involved in a learning process are also clarified. Bottom-line employees were found to share some of the same concerns as senior managers, including the question of trust, and to give similar responses to those of middle managers in highlighting the effects on OL of withholding knowledge. This last concern was shared by focus groups members, who also highlighted employee characteristics including competitiveness and arrogance.

5.6.1.1 Senior managers' views on human characteristics

One of the characteristics perceived as affecting OL was lack of trust. According to a senior Logistics Department manager (Respondent 52), senior managers did not believe in the capabilities of their subordinates and did not trust them to do their work without direct supervision. Seeing subordinates as incapable of handling their work independently could not only impact their performance but also inhibit cooperation and reduce the possibility for OL to occur. According to Mone et al. (2018), research has shown a significant impact on employees when they trust top managers, because they feel safe to participate and offer their opinions. Lack of trust could also

make employees careless and inclined to become unaccountable for their behaviour. Furthermore, it could narrow employees' thinking by forcing them to follow predefined instructions rather than trusting them to learn, apply, share and develop their own ways of thinking.

Several contributors to the literature have highlighted the importance of trust between employees (Rashman et al., 2009; Reagans & McEvily, 2003; Scott, 2000). Consistent with this, some senior managers at SAFORG recognised the importance of trust as a facilitating factor for OL. Thus, according to a senior Logistics Department manager (Respondent 55), some managers would designate their subordinates to take over their positions while they were on leave. Although assigning more responsibility to employees could enhance their confidence and might widen their horizons, it tends to promote individual learning, rather than serving OL directly.

A second characteristic, connected to the lack of trust, is accountability. When employees are trusted, they are more likely to become willing to take accountability for their actions. Employees who are given the opportunity for self-learning and to draw their own conclusions, rather than being instructed to follow a certain procedure, are inclined to be more engaged with others in a learning culture (Sessa et al., 2009). According to a senior manager in the Training Department (Respondent 11), some managers accepted accountability for what happened in the workplace, whereas others put all of the blame on employees' shoulders, thereby making those employees wary of being punished and so inclined to work within certain boundaries.

One of the facilitating factors reported by a senior manager in the State Service Department (Respondent 41) was that employees working in the field, like architects and construction engineers, were asked to meet to avoid conflicts between them. They were also expected to share experiences among group members. Another facilitating factor, implemented by a senior manager in the Logistics Department (Respondent 49), was to invite employees to join him for an early

morning cup of tea. During these informal gatherings, employees tended to talk spontaneously about their work and associated problems, as well as suggesting solutions for them. The morning tea technique allowed both managers and subordinates to explore, understand and share their thoughts about workplace issues; therefore, the dynamic dialogue that occurred during these discussions was a means of enabling OL.

One of the facilitating factors mentioned by a senior manager in the Logistics Department (Respondent 51) was encouraging employees to update their knowledge beyond organisational experience. For instance, some employees still insisted on asking companies abroad to use red wax to seal packages of goods, instead of using security tape, which makes it easy to discover any illicit attempt to open a package. Lack of knowledge may cause employees to act according to out-of-date information, with potentially undesirable consequences.

A related factor inhibiting OL is neglecting experts and not giving them the status they deserve. Although it might be argued that some experts are incapable and cannot keep up with developments, while others seek excuses for administrative negligence, it is important to make a distinction between employees' ability to learn on one hand and their initiative and willingness to learn on the other. Some employees are capable of learning but have a low motivation to do so, while others are less capable but eager to learn and enhance their understanding. OL can bring both types of employees together in order to benefit those who are eager for knowledge and to encourage those with low motivation. For instance, a senior manager in the State Service Department (Respondent 49) explained that some experts with long years of experience were frustrated by various factors such as incentives, promotion and others related to personal attitudes. Ignoring these types of employees could result in a worse situation, as they might play a negative

role in discouraging their peers and subordinates, as well as underestimating the value of OL and disrupting it.

One of facilitating human characteristics is individual initiatives for learning. According to senior managers in the Security and State Service Departments (Respondents 32 and 44), individual enquiry for learning through the questioning process could yield OL. Therefore, individual initiatives to ask a question either to experts or their peers would be likely to create an atmosphere for learning and both initiator and responder would benefit from the discussion.

5.6.1.2 Middle managers' views on human characteristics

Middle managers at SAFORG were found to act as mediators between senior managers and bottom-line employees. Therefore, they played a critical role in striking a balance between the two levels, especially with regard to facilitating OL. The views presented by middle managers revolved around four major factors that they believed to influence OL, as illustrated in Figure 27 below.

Knowledge sharing security refers to the fact that some middle managers had high job security and were not afraid of losing their jobs or of someone taking their position; therefore, they were willing to share knowledge and to be involved in a learning dialogue. According to a middle manager in the Training Department (Respondent 12), middle managers with a high level of confidence tended to share their knowledge, as they felt secure and unthreatened.



Figure 27 Knowledge characteristics at SAFORG

On the other hand, a second characteristic mentioned by middle managers was knowledge holding. Employees who lacked job security and felt in danger of being laid off were inclined to hide or

withhold their knowledge, believing that this would prolong their employment because the organisation would continue to need their expertise. The types of employees who fell into this category were experts and expatriates, both of whom tended to hold important positions and were usually employed temporarily. Cagan et al. (2002) argues that long-term employees are inclined to feel safe and will tend to establish good relationships with their colleagues, whereas local employees, especially in non-profit organisations like SAFORG, despite having long-term contracts, would still in some cases withhold knowledge.

Some employees in the IT Department were found to have subscriptions to scientific and specialised journals in order to keep up to date with the knowledge needed to fulfil their job requirements. Some IT specialisations required technicians to remain licensed to obtain specific qualifications. Although this may seem useful for the organisation, it did not benefit OL, because individuals had paid for their own training and therefore tended to keep the knowledge for themselves rather than share it with others.

The third human characteristic discussed by middle managers was having an inferior view of one's own abilities. Some employees seemingly tended to underestimate their own capability and accordingly had no desire to learn or to be involved in a learning process. According to middle managers in the Logistics and Training Departments (Respondents 54 and 16), some employees underestimated the knowledge they possessed and therefore did not take the initiative to share it with others. Furthermore, a participant from the State Service Department (Respondent 40) described some middle managers as having low visionary and imaginative abilities. For example, an architect and a quantity surveyor failed to identify the height of the worksurface in a kitchen when they were suddenly asked to do so. It would make sense that such people would have much difficulty in designing a large building with high technical specifications.

Some other middle managers viewed their subordinates as immature in terms of experience, which can be considered an impending factor related to human resources characteristics, in that employees who perceive themselves to have less experience than others will tend to lack confidence and determination. Employees might become convinced that no matter what they knew, others' perceptions of them would not change. Two State Service Department employees (Respondents 38 and 46) reported that having their experience ignored and being instructed to refer to experts for guidance reduced their motivation to learn.

Conversely, some middle managers, including Respondent 12 from the Training Department, believed that underestimating employees' abilities might actually encourage them to learn and to share knowledge, because they would want to prove their capability and show themselves to be a confident and dynamic actor in the organisation. OL was thus seen as capable of modifying employees' characteristics by involving them dynamically in day-to-day learning interactions.

The fourth human characteristic apparently influencing OL is knowledge saturation, which means that when employees feel themselves to be in a state of cognitive saturation, they react by becoming unwilling to either learn or share their experience. Most employees seen as having this characteristic were among those who had been in senior positions for a long time or who had a significant level of qualifications or professional training. Hunt & Weintraub (2002) warn that employees can become uninterested in learning or sometimes opposed to it, if they feel it is of no value to them. Their feeling of extensive experience, as well as high qualification, swells to the sense of knowledge sufficiency, or what the authors label 'knowledge saturation'. In this situation, although an organisation apparently has a repository of knowledge located in the individual minds of its members, others cannot benefit from it unless OL is considered.

Along with high job security, low job security, knowledge underestimation and knowledge saturation discussed above, middle managers at SAFORG also highlighted some areas for consideration which they believed would provide a good foundation for OL to grow. First was the need to for employees to choose a career suited to their desires and abilities, because it would later become quite difficult to establish a solid relationship between the person and his work. For example, Respondent 44 from the State Service Department reported his surprise at finding that newly graduated architecture recruits did not know the distinction between columns and beams. Similarly, it would make no sense for an architect to graduate without being familiar with AutoCAD and this was only likely to happen if people sometimes decided on a speciality or a career based on availability in the market rather than on their desires and inclinations.

A middle manager in the State Service Department (Respondent 40) asserted that employees' commitment to work schedules and hours of work mostly indicated their eagerness for success, which required learning-based success. One of the concerns that could accompany this assumption is that an employee's commitment to official working hours is not necessarily an indication of achievement. Furthermore, some employees appeared to be more interested in their individual achievements rather than collective success; therefore, their inclinations did not support OL.

The second set of factors expected to promote OL were communication skills. Employees' ability to learn and share knowledge is sometimes linked to their possession of effective communication skills. Two middle managers, in the Training and State Service Departments (Respondents 9 and 42), asserted that a lack of communication skills acted as a barrier to OL because employees had great difficulty in formulating questions that would trigger learning. The need to create a learning environment that supports communication skills was also recognised by a State Service

Department middle manager (Respondent 39), to fulfil an individual's needs and hunger to ask productive questions that could yield OL.

There can be said to have been a cultural shift in communication habits in recent years due to technological advancements. Communication channels no longer rely on physical interaction but increasingly involve the use of technical devices and social media. It is not surprising that organisations including SAFORG are affected by these changes. An IT Department middle manager (Respondent 18) explained that people's ways of learning were changing. For example, some employees, especially from the new generation, preferred to watch a video clip rather than just hearing audio or reading a 20-page article. He also noted that people would often send messages in the form of audio clips, rather than typing them. These changes entailed a need to change the learning process and styles. The new generation would not accept the traditional ways of learning and next generation might not accept current methods either.

5.6.1.3 Bottom-line employees' views on human characteristics

Having explored senior and middle managers' views in relation to human resources factors, attention now turns to those on which bottom-line employees in different categories tended to agree. The main OLFs highlighted by bottom-line employees were knowledge holding, trust and individual eagerness for learning.

First, the withholding of knowledge received significant attention from participants at all levels of SAFORG's hierarchy. Bottom-line employees in the IT, State Security and Training Departments (Respondents 13, 38 and 5) expressed the view that employees would tend not to share knowledge, in order to retain their reputations for excellence and remain superior to their colleagues (King, 2009). Furthermore, knowledgeable employees could expect to benefit from the appreciation and

familiarity of the decision-makers, giving them the advantage of security of employment, whereas facilitating OL might cause them to lose these advantages.

The second issue on which bottom-line employees focused was trust. This concept was seen from the point of view of mutual confidence between employees, based on their belief in each other's abilities. According to two bottom-line employees in the State Service Department (Respondents 38 and 46), underestimating employees' experience and not allowing them to work except through continuous follow-up prompted them to complain and become unwilling to work. Furthermore, distrusting employees tended to make them frustrated and unwilling to become involved in OL dialogue. The importance of trust and its relation to OL has been discussed in great detail in Section 5.2 on the OL environment dimension and specifically in Section 5.2.1.4 in the employee attributes pillar.

5.6.1.4 Focus groups' views on human characteristics

The focus groups shared some views on OLFs related to human characteristics akin to those discussed above in relation to the individual interviewees. Among these factors were knowledge holding, arrogance and competition. Withholding knowledge, for example, is a factor that was commonly mentioned, mostly by middle managers and bottom-line employees. Apparently, participants in these categories were the ones who were most concerned about the need for learning and at the same time, they were the most strongly affected by the absence of OL. The Training Department focus group attributed knowledge withholding to selfishness and to a feeling of ownership, because knowledge holders have paid to get it and therefore consider it unfair to share this knowledge freely, fearing that their colleagues might outperform them when they obtained it for themselves.

In the same vein, the IT focus group agreed that employees withheld knowledge primarily because of their personal characteristics. They also identified another behaviour closely related to withholding knowledge, namely arrogance, referring to when an employee would not accept the sharing of someone else's knowledge but would instead tell the other person about the best practice that they should follow. Although such employees might be privately convinced of the importance of the knowledge being offered for sharing, they would treat it with complete arrogance and take the offer of sharing it with hypersensitivity. The IT and Training focus groups wondered whether some employees refused to accept information from particular people because they had no direct relationship with them and to avoid being the weaker party.

The third and last factor, identified by the Training, Security and Logistics focus groups, was competition. They were not referring to the favourable competition that leads to outstanding work, but instead to conflict between employees where each intends to gain preference over the other. Wilden et al. (2018) assert that collaboration can reduce competitiveness among employees and enhance knowledge sharing. Such negative competition can take many forms and have a variety of causes, but it leads to a common outcome, which is the absence of learning. The Training focus group described some employees as believing that their colleagues were trying to catch them out in order to expose their mistakes and weaknesses, rather than seeking cognitive participation. Another issue that caused unfavourable competition was educational resentment. Members of the Security focus group suggested that when a manager found that someone on his staff had the same level of education, this might create a hidden conflict and reduce the level of interaction. The same issue was identified by the Logistics focus group, which reported that qualifications represented a perceived threat for other staff, causing hidden conflict and ultimately inhibiting learning.

5.6.2 Organisational Culture

After human resources characteristics, the second pillar of organisational learning factors to be considered here is that of organisational culture. The culture of the organisation is seen as being as important in its impact on OL as employee characteristics were shown above to be. Although various aspect of the cultural pillar have been discussed in Section 5.2.3 as part of the analysis of the OL Environment dimension, the concern in the present context is to identify those particular aspects of organisational culture that were highlighted by the three sets of interviewees and the five focus groups, mirroring the foregoing discussion of human resources characteristics.

This parallel consideration of the two pillars is justified by the reciprocal relationship that Earl-Lewis (2000) highlights between employees' behaviour and organisational culture, as both sets of factors affect each other and eventually affect OL. Aspects of organisational culture mentioned by participants at SAFORG were generational conflict, knowledge holding and *wasta*, a term discussed at length in Chapter two, referring to what affects the primacy of private interests over public interests (Cleveland, 2018).

Interestingly, senior managers did not talk about organisational culture and its influence on OL, in contrast to their strong interest in discussing human resources characteristics. This may have been because senior managers viewed their subordinates as being responsible first and foremost for creating an OL culture in the workplace. Additionally, if they attributed OL factors to the culture of the organisation, they would indirectly be pointing the finger at themselves as being responsible for creating the culture required to promote OL. There follows a discussion of the three themes shown in Figure 28 as having been most commonly raised respectively by middle managers, bottom-line employees and focus groups, namely withholding knowledge, *wasta* and generational conflict.

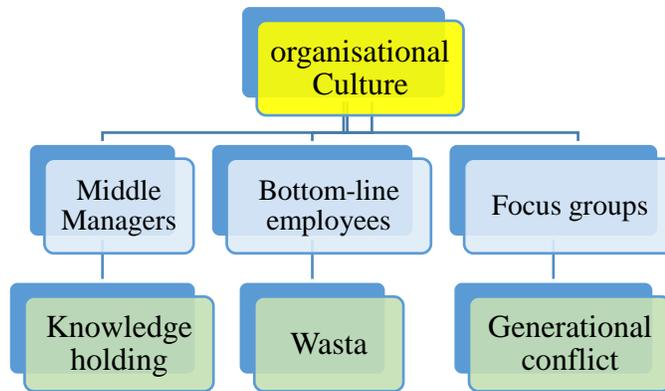


Figure 28 Organisational culture

5.6.2.1 Middle managers' views on organisational culture

Withholding knowledge is an element of organisational culture highlighted prominently by middle managers, who tended to focus on the relationships between local citizens and expatriates. Two managers in the IT and State Service departments (Respondents 16 and 37) explained that withholding knowledge was a practice that could be readily observed, one manifestation of which was that senior expatriates would limit local employees to office work and not take them on site visits. According to participants, the expatriates practised this exclusion in order to enforce their control and dominance at work, in the belief that knowledge is power and that withholding knowledge means retaining power.

Evidence that expatriates tended not to share knowledge because they believed it to be a source of power was offered by a State Service Department participant (Respondent 45), who reported that some expatriates were cautious and unwilling to exchange knowledge because they felt threatened by providing their knowledge to others. They would sometimes prefer to do the work for local people rather than showing them how to do it themselves. Another SSD manager (Respondent 48) cited the example of an expert who refused to share his experience and who would always explain this by saying that he was too busy with work schedules to do so.

On the other hand, the expatriates' attitude might not be the only factor inhibiting the sharing of experience, as some bottom-line employees claimed; alternatively, the latter may have underestimated the value of the expatriates' experience and failed to pay sufficient attention to them, especially if the expatriates in question were in higher positions than the local people.

5.6.2.2 Bottom-line employees' views on organisational culture

The focus of bottom-line employees' concerns regarding OC was on nepotism and the destructive damage it would do to relationships between employees. Nepotism, or unfairness in dealing with people, also labelled 'wasta' in the Middle Eastern context, was said by bottom-line employees at SAFORG to have many facets. Every manifestation of wasta may be seen to reflect cultural factors inherent in the organisation (Ahmed, 2008). These do not arise overnight, but represent an accumulation of employees' practices over such a long time that they become patterns which gradually become ingrained as part of organisational culture.

An example of a practice reflecting the operation of wasta, as described by Respondent 56 from the Logistics Department, would occur when an employee was promoted to a higher position than someone else who was more capable of doing the job, on the basis of his personal connections. It would be normal in this situation to react by displaying a sense of frustration, both on the part of the aggrieved employee and among others in the work environment more generally. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that staff might be driven by the perceived injustice to manifest a reluctance to cooperate in learning.

Examples of wasta include giving the most important work tasks to a particular person and ignoring the rest of the staff, as reported by Respondent 54 from the Logistics Department. Favouring some employees by welcoming their ideas and allotting them task considered to be central to the successful operation of the business while ignoring the rest of the employees and

giving them routine tasks, might readily create an atmosphere of frustration and lack of interest. Employees' engagement within and outside the organisation is dependent on the extent to which their ideas and participation are welcomed (Stavros & Saint, 2009). Furthermore, institutions must be built on teamwork, not on the theory of individual supermen who can do everything. Assigning most of the organisation's important work to a few chosen employees does not guarantee its viability or competitiveness with other organisations.

5.6.2.3 Focus groups' views on organisational culture

The focus groups all raised the issue of the generational conflict that they perceived as occurring between long-serving employees of the organisation and younger recruits and as having serious implications unless systematic efforts were made to integrate their experiences to the benefit of the institution. The new generation was viewed by the IT focus group as less rigid and more willing to share knowledge compared with the older generation. The level of education was seen as a milestone between the ability of older employees to keep up with changes and their ability to interact with the new generation. The Security focus group expressed the view that when a manager and someone on his staff were at the same level of education, this might create hidden conflict and inhibit interaction.

Older employees insisted on sticking to the tasks to which they had been assigned, whereas the new generation preferred to know about other activities going on around them, making them more flexible and ready to take challenges. The older generation was inclined to follow fixed instructions, according to the Training focus group. For example, some older and more experienced employees needed direct instruction and could then do the job, while others were not able to achieve the tasks they were given without continuous guidance; they would repeatedly

return to ask further questions, but were not eager to learn and explore things for themselves, unlike younger employees.

The literature has shown that employers pay less attention to the old generation and ultimately provide insufficient opportunities for their training and development, which could lead older employees to become less confident about learning and unenthusiastic to share their expertise (Beck, 2014). If enough attention is not given to older workers' development, it is reasonable to assume that they will become reluctant to share their expertise with others, to avoid disclosure of their learning deficits.

These forms of generational conflict at SAFORG were seen to have the potential to create a gap between experienced employees on one hand and less experienced ones on the other. The older generation was inclined to follow clear instructions to achieve the task at hand, while their younger colleagues' propensity was to search for the best solution. Although each of these approaches can be said to have its pros and cons, they yielded different learning styles.

5.6.3 Organisational Policy

The final set of factors that participants identified as potentially affecting OL falls into the category of organisational policy, which can be seen as a set of frameworks and legislation enacted by the organisation, along with the behaviours adopted in response to them, becoming an integral part of the organisation's way of doing things. Figure 29 shows that the following subsections discuss a total of eight OLFs, identified by individual managers and by focus groups. Senior managers mentioned innovation, incentives and unity; middle managers spoke of the clarity of procedures, workload and physical boundaries; and the focus groups offered views on two key points: putting the right people in the right place and training. It is an odd coincidence that in the same way that senior managers offered no evidence of the influence of organisational culture on OL, bottom-line

employees did not talk about the impact of organisational policy. This reticence may be explained by the fact that they will have been excluded from decision-making and therefore had little understanding of policy matters.



Figure 29 Organisational policy

5.6.3.1 Senior managers' views on organisational policy

Senior managers opined that for employees to learn, space for innovation must be provided. Forcing employees to follow specific instructions and forbidding them to act beyond them would stagnate their minds and make them unable to be innovative. For example, a senior Security Department manager (Participant 26) explained that an employee of an American company which had embarked on a collaboration with SAFORG had suggested that military uniforms should be adapted to the hot weather in the Middle East and this had been accepted, yet when the same suggestion had been made on more than one occasion in the past by SAFORG employees, it had been rejected. The conclusion to be drawn from this incident is that no matter how important an idea may be, it will not come to the surface unless supported by the organisation. Furthermore, if employees conclude that their ideas are worthless, they will not be interested in learning and sharing knowledge with others in the work environment. Although it is believed that the military context is very rich and can provide a good understanding of OL theory, little attention has been given to it (Drobnjak, 2013).

The second factor highlighted by senior managers at SAFORG was the importance of monetary and non-monetary incentives to promote the firm's learning culture (Skinner, 2011). An interviewee from the IT Department (Respondent 23) argued that linking incentives and promotion to knowledge sharing could contribute to employees' motivation to participate in OL. Conversely, equal pay for employees regardless of performance level would create a sense of dissatisfaction and lack of interest. The staff needed encouragement, attention and support to fit in with each other. Moreover, the practices that made them feel divided and in competition against each other would cause them to concentrate on personal benefits rather than the good of the team.

The third factor highlighted by senior managers was unity in the workplace, meaning how relevant employees felt themselves to be to each other across the different departments and sections. At SAFORG, there appeared to be strong relationships between employees within the same department, but sharp divisions, amounting to near segregation, between employees in different departments. For instance, some procedures such as requesting leave should be standardised because contradictory procedures would create many problems, such as the difficulty of sharing knowledge between departments if each had distinct procedures. Participants recognised that the organisation had a major role in creating the right environment for staff to communicate and share knowledge among themselves, whether or not they were in different departments or disciplines.

5.6.3.2 Middle managers' views on organisational policy

According to middle managers, the factors related to organisational policy which contributed to OL were clarity of procedures, workload and physical boundaries. An IT manager (Respondent 19) noted that because procedures were unclear, employees did not know what they ought to be doing and were therefore unable to determine what type of knowledge they should be seeking. In order to be clear about the procedures, employees should not simply have a checklist; instead,

there should be a clear understanding of the tasks that the employee must undertake, as well as what he or she should focus on to build his or her abilities within the team.

Other middle managers reported that being busy with workload sometimes left employees too little time free for learning. Two Training Department interviewees (Respondents 11 and 12) explained that because of the workload, employees had no time to see what others were doing. According to Massingham & Diment (2009), employees search for learning only when they face a problem or are inclined to learn something new. Although those who are too busy with completing their routine tasks might sustain their position for a short time, they will not be able to do so in the long run, because the world is changing and employees' knowledge becomes obsolete if they do not dedicate sufficient time to learning.

The existence of physical barriers has been identified as a factor impeding OL. Walls between offices are sometimes barriers to relationships. The more face-to-face meetings between staff, the greater the possibility of sharing experiences. An IT Department manager (Respondent 19) emphasised that building a close relationship with others required meeting them regularly, which made it easier for employees to ask for help in the workplace.

One of the negative manifestations of physical boundaries is the tendency to use official written communication rather than direct verbal interaction. A middle manager in the Logistics Department (Respondent 52) identified the separation of employees into their respective offices as having created an atmosphere of psychological isolation which had made them unwilling to communicate in any direct way. Another issue which was raised was that knowledge requires constant communication between the staff so that harmony prevails, which is impossible to achieve if people are physically separated. Proponents of physical boundaries claim that organisations can achieve their goals by relying on communication among employees using written or electronic

means; however, while this will enable the transfer of visible knowledge, it will make it difficult to transfer implicit knowledge, which is the most important component that OL focuses on.

5.6.3.3 Focus groups' views on organisational policy

The focus groups saw organisational policy as affecting employees and their motivation to learn through two important factors: putting the right person in the right place and training. When a person works in a place that suits his or her orientations, abilities and qualifications, his motivation to acquire new knowledge in the same field is significant, compared to being placed in an inappropriate position in relation to his or her abilities and qualifications. The IT focus group explained that assigning employees to work somewhere against their interests might demotivate them and make them reluctant to share their knowledge. One of the causes of putting people in the wrong place was the recruitment process, according to the Logistics focus group. When recruits with certain qualifications were employed in the wrong place, they were unable to utilise their experience and knowledge to serve the aims of the organisation. Therefore, such employees would feel increasingly frustrated and their passion for the work would disappear.

As to the second factor, lack of training, organisational policies were blamed for not providing employees with proper training opportunities. If they did not receive adequate training through the organisation, they would resort to self-reliance by participating in specialised programmes for which they would be willing to pay themselves. However, such employees, self-reliant in terms of training, would often refuse to share what they had learned. In addition, this practice of self-financed training would engender a sense of individuality and a desire for personal excellence, rather than teamwork being the dominant atmosphere of the work environment.

Conversely, when employees sensed that the organisation was paying full attention to their importance and the value of providing them with the necessary training, their loyalty to the

organisation would be very strong and they would seek to raise the capacity of their colleagues. The reality at SAFORG, according to an IT focus group participant (Respondent 16), was a shortage of professional training programmes. The consequences to be expected from ignoring employees' training needs were that they would tend to become unmotivated, unconcerned about improving their skills and unwilling to take responsibility.

5.7 Summary: Organisational Learning Factors

A number of conclusions are to be drawn from the above analysis of data on the organisational learning factors dimension and discussion of the specific factors related to human resources characteristics, organisational culture and organisational policy. Consideration of the human resources pillar identified a set of factors highlighted by individual interviewees of all ranks and by the focus groups. Senior managers identified various factors that could positively or negatively influence OL at SAFORG, namely trust, accountability, sociability, neglecting experts and promoting individual initiatives for learning.

The middle managers provided a seemingly deep and thorough explanation of the elements related to human characteristics that they perceived as driving OL at SAFORG. Among these were factors related to knowledge, including knowledge sharing, withholding, underestimation and saturation, and others related to employees, including their commitment to learning and communication among them. Bottom-line employees identified two factors: trust and the withholding of knowledge. Thus, they shared with senior managers the view that trust could strongly influence OL and with middle managers the insight that withholding knowledge was a common factor making employees uninterested in sharing their knowledge with colleagues. The literature indicates that a learning environment built on trust in the abilities and potential of employees leads to the creation of a workforce whose members tend to think outside the box and are inclined to

adopt teamwork and knowledge sharing more than individual behaviours (Vaiman & Vance, 2010).

Interestingly, the focus groups concurred with the middle managers and bottom-line employees on the significance for OL of knowledge withholding. The sharing of similar views between middle managers and bottom-line employees may explain the extent of convergence and similarity of the work environment and conditions. Furthermore, the focus groups identified some of the factors associated with withholding knowledge, such as arrogance and competition.

The second pillar of the OLF dimension is organisational culture, which can be seen to have a close and mutually influential relationship with the human characteristics pillar. Surprisingly, senior managers perceived human characteristics as having a greater impact than the culture of the organisation on OL. The view of a particular group of employees was sometimes based on blaming others rather than taking responsibility. Middle managers believed that withholding knowledge had a direct impact on employees' attitudes and desire for cognitive participation. The focus of much of the discourse was on the reasons for withholding knowledge, particularly among expatriates, and the main factor identified was their desire to maintain power over others. This is consistent with the widespread belief that knowledge is power, which has received much interest in the literature (Rhem, 2016).

The bottom-line employees expressed the view that OL could be influenced by *wasta*. Providing some employees with advantages in preference to those who were more deserving could create an environment of frustration and unwillingness to participate in learning. The *wasta*-related practices mentioned concerned promotion and recognition at work, both of which were found to affect OL. The focus groups highlighted the influence of generational conflict and the extent to which the attitudes of older and younger employees could create an unpleasant culture for OL.

The third pillar of the discussion was organisational policy, which explored OL factors related to innovation, incentives and unity from the senior managers' point of view, while the middle managers identified clarity of procedures, workload and physical boundaries as having a significant effect on OL. Finally, the focus groups discussed two factors in relation to organisational policy: putting the right person in the right place and training.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed and discussed the empirical findings of the current research in terms of three dimensions of organisational learning: the OL environment, the OL process and OL factors. The data on the first of these dimensions was categorised under three pillars, as related to employees' attributes, leadership and organisational culture.

The first item discussed was collaboration, which was shown to be more closely related to employees' attributes than to the organisational hierarchy and to have some positive effects in enhancing collaboration among employees. The discussion also showed that employees' attributes have a significant impact on learning. Among employee's attributes found to influence OL was the feeling of saturation, which drives employees to work on their own and to ignore the value of communicating with others. Saturation is a prevalent phenomenon in public organisations where employees have secure jobs, unlike private firms. Moreover, OL was found to be influenced by individual traits or how employees' perceived themselves, for example as lacking personal and professional capabilities, which are directly linked to underestimation and absence of interest.

Another employee attribute emerging as significant is motivation, which was found to influence employees' inclination to learn. It was shown that employees' motivation for learning was affected by the behaviour of the leaders and the extent to which they supported that learning. Other influential factors were workplace conditions and the extent to which employees were rewarded

and recognised for their work. The third issue raised in this context was employees' style and whether they were introverted or extroverted.

Trust is connected to the widespread idea of knowledge withholding, which was seen to have a negative influence on OL. In this research, trust was found to be associated with several issues such as employees' personal characteristics, experience, cultural background and level of education. Level of education was found to affect negatively the cooperation between employees and their willingness to share knowledge. The above-mentioned employee attributes of collaboration, dialogue, motivation and trust seem to be connected and they could have a major influence on OL, either collectively or separately.

The second pillar of the environmental dimension is organisational leadership. OL requires some leadership qualities to give employees the physical, psychological and emotional motives for learning. It can be concluded that the connection between the two notions of power and knowledge shapes the relationship between employees across organisational levels. For instance, perceiving knowledge as equivalent to power makes employees reluctant and hesitant to share their expertise. This research has shown that OL cannot happen in the absence of participative decision-making, self-awareness and collective reflection.

Open-mindedness and empowerment were found to be authentic characteristics of leaders in SAFORG that are necessary for a successful OL environment. Being open-minded implies the intention to empower employees to learn and not to restrict them. It also means moving as a leader from acting as the centre of focus and the only valued source of information to performing the function of a learning facilitator and acting as a role model. However, for a leader to be a role model may have both positive and negative consequences; for example, employees may imitate their manager in a particular behaviour which hinders OL, such as withholding their knowledge or

restricting employees to particular work tasks. Discussion of the organisational leadership pillar emphasised the importance of middle managers as mediators and facilitators of OL, as they could minimise the conflict between senior and bottom-line employees and help to enhance employees' productive learning.

The third pillar of the OL environment dimension was that of organisational culture, which cannot be separated from employees' attributes or organisational leadership as all three pillars are connected and together constitute the environment in which OL occurs. Organisational culture is a complicated issue, as it is integrated with almost every single attribute of the organisation and thereby drives employees' inclination towards learning. An important finding of this research is that each groups and department within SAFORG can be said to have its own sub-culture, reflecting differences in employees' attributes and leadership styles.

The analysis has shown that the culture of an organisation can be influenced by organisational inertia or frozen thought, which has a direct connection with OL. In contrast, SAFORG's culture was likely to have integrity, which appeared to promote dynamism between employees at the same level, but unlikely to have integration between employees at different levels. One of the advantages of this characteristic of culture is that it promotes internal learning in the organisation, while its serious negative consequences are that it does not facilitate the communication between the levels of the organisation required in order for OL to occur and more importantly, it does not support learning across organizational boundaries, which makes the organisation closed to itself and unable to benefit from best practices to improve the efficiency of its employees.

Discussion of the second facet of OC, issue orientation, showed that this affects learning when attention is paid to issues other than learning. This research shows that certain considerations, such as the level of employment, or perhaps the university or institution from which a staff member

graduated, may hinder staff learning, reflecting the likelihood that these considerations are given a higher priority than learning itself. Although issue orientation is amenable to benefitting from existing knowledge (exploitation), it does not support the notion of exploration as the main focus on issues rather than productive learning.

Accountability and transparency are concerned with giving employees opportunities for taking charge of their learning. The pitfalls associated with those two facets of OC are the fear of punishment and the underestimation of employees' capabilities. Employees who have a fear of making mistakes or of being punished are unlikely to become inclined to accept responsibility and accountability for their actions. This research has shown that employees can become reluctant to take a course of action that is connected to learning, such as taking a risk to apply a new solution, if they fear the consequences of failure. A culture of fear holds back learning not only among employees at the lower level but also among mid-ranking and senior managers, who will not benefit from the learning process if they are constrained by a high level of cautiousness. In summary, it can be concluded that the behaviour of senior and middle managers in not authorising bottom-line employees to participate in decision-making is related to trust, which controls most of the actions in the workplace. It could also be related to the desire of decision-makers to retain power and not to share it with bottom-line employees. The issue of organisational culture will continue to have a significant impact on OL and it requires a collective rather than personal transformation for a generative organisation, which cannot be achieved without a genuine community of commitment (Kofman & Senge, 1993).

The second dimension of this OL to be discussed was the organisational learning process. Individual learning was seemingly more common in SAFORG's various departments than collective learning interactions. This research has shown that homogeneousness helped to increase

the occurrence of learning interactions within groups in those departments and to reduce it across groups in different departments. Collaborative learning across groups and departments appears to have been affected by competition between groups across departments and the protection of information for security reasons, which indicates an absence of vision or at least that the vision was not communicated broadly across SAFORG departments. Several theories have been proposed to explain the process of learning, including knowledge creation theory, which treats learning as occurring in sequential stages.

The first pillar of OLP is learning from past experience, which emphasises the importance of using the reflection process to benefit from accumulated experience. Reflection on past experience should not happen only as a reaction to problems, as was reported to happen at SAFORG. Instead, such reflection must benefit from both success and failure; it should occur continuously rather than occasionally. The danger associated with limiting the benefits of experience to the occasion of problems is that this, rather than the desire for development, will remain the only catalyst for learning and that the learning process will therefore remain limited to identifying temporary solutions for these problems. The advantage to be gained by re-examining past experience lies not in recalling problems, but in developing the capacity to generate knowledge that is useful to the organisation.

It can be concluded that SAFORG has only partially benefited from past experience, these benefits being limited to reactively developing some rules and regulations to solve immediate problems. The main reason for the lack of access to expertise was found to be poor communication between staff across different levels of the organisation and this justifies the finding of this research as to why middle managers were more effective than senior staff. This analysis draws attention to the

contention that productive learning is the result of reflection on experience, rather than the recollection of the experience itself.

The second pillar of OLP is learning from current experience, where the organisation aims to benefit from the day-to-day experience of its members to generate learning. This research shows that learning from current experience is constrained by physical and metaphorical boundaries. The findings support the contention that proximity is an ideal catalyst for learning interactions. In contrast, technology, for example, acts to hinder face-to-face interaction.

Chapter 6 Conclusion and contribution

6.1 Introduction

This research has aimed to identify the types of *environment*, *process* and *factors* that could help to generate productive learning at the organisational level in the context of the Middle East. The purpose of this chapter is to look back at the aim and objectives of this research and to identify the extent that these have been met. Therefore, the following three sections will highlight in turn the most important findings addressing each of the research questions set out in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.2.3, as related respectively to the OL environment, process and factors. This exercise will be followed in each of these sections by consideration of the research contribution and implications for practice in respect of the OL dimension in question. The chapter ends by making a number of recommendations and recognising the limitations of the research.

6.2 SAFORG as an Organisational Learning Environment

The first objective of this research was to identify and evaluate participants' perceptions of SAFORG as an OL environment. Understanding the organisational learning environment is essential for ongoing learning (Nonaka, 1994; Permana & Astiti, 2018), as this dimension focuses on employees' attributes, leadership characteristics and finally organisational culture. The first pillar of the OLE dimension, concerning employees' attributes, represents the necessity for employees to have some essential characteristics in order to be able to transfer learning from the individual and group levels to the organisational level. Figure 14 in Chapter five discussed four employee attributes that are essential for productive OL, namely collaboration, dialogue, motivation and trust. It is challenging to prioritise which of these attributes as more important than others, given that they depend on each other. Employees cannot interact productively unless they trust each other and have the inner motivation to establish such interactions for productive learning (Argote, 2012).

Before seeking to illustrate in depth the most significant research findings and contributions concerning each of the employee attributes, as shown below in Figure 30, it is worthwhile to provide some general observations. The core characteristics of the attributes of collaboration, dialogue, motivation and trust are engagement and participation; in particular, the failure of engagement could lead to the failure of learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Naot et al., 2004). Involving and integrating employees into all parts of the work makes them feel confident, gives them motivation, enhances their interaction with their peers and provides them with the ability to construct a meaningful dialogue. Noting that employee attributes such as emotion play a significant role in OL success (Scherer & Tran, 2003), this research emphasises that employee attributes seem to have a significant impact on productive learning at the internal level, compared to the other features of the organisational environment such as culture and leadership. According to the research findings, the structure, policies and culture of the organisation could be said to have more impact on inter-organisational learning and less on internal working groups within the organisation. This finding is in alignment with calls in the literature for organisations to create the right structure to support OL (Collien, 2018; Shipton & Defillippi, 2011). For instance, motivated employees with a high level of trust can establish dynamic and productive learning at the internal level among group members. However, all groups do not need to be at the same level of collaborative learning, especially when the group members lack the trust and motivation needed for collective learning (Pritchard & Woollard, 2013).

In reference to the discussion in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.2) of the 4I model introduced by Crossan et al. (1999), the collaboration of cross-function workgroups and group members can be enhanced by constant participation between different groups (Frey & Osterloh, 2001a). When there is dynamic interaction between the members of different groups, this can contribute positively to the sharing of learning between different departments in the organisation. In

parallel with the findings of Snell & Hong (2011), this research has identified harmony among members of the same group as the main factor ensuring a high rate of learning interaction. The less harmony there is between individuals in different groups and in the absence of a shared organisational vision, the more difficult it becomes to find channels of communication for learning among the organisation's departments. This research has confirmed the close connection between employee attributes such as collaboration and other organisational features such as a shared vision, consistent with the assertion of Offermaann (1998) that collaboration is advanced by sharing the vision.

In contrast, collaborative, trusted and motivated employees can be obstructed from establishing a productive learning process at the inter-organisational and organisational levels by the strong influence of organisational attributes. In other words, while employees' attributes have a definite impact on internal interactions, the structure of the organisation is more likely to influence the learning process at inter-organisational and organisational levels. More generally, institutional features such as organisational structure and culture have a significant impact on learning interactions at the organisational and inter-organisational levels.

This research has contributed to the literature by showing how some employee attributes can influence learning in an organisation. It has also demonstrated that employees' desire to work on their own rather than in a collective manner can outweigh their more productive attributes and may be caused by organisational policy. Encouraging and rewarding employees for their individual achievement drives their preference for working on their own. Also, when employees do not trust their colleagues, they become cautious in order to avoid embarrassment. A final remark to be made in relation to collaboration and employee attributes is that learning collaboration requires constant harmony, which triggers learning among the team members.

Another way to view collaboration is in terms of transmitting learning through technological means. Those who view OL merely as exchanging knowledge believe that technological means

can replace direct personal collaboration. However, OL collaboration goes beyond knowledge transformation to the matter of building and generating employees' skills and abilities to reshape and produce productive knowledge that is useful for the organisation. The view of OL as a means of building employees' capacity to shape and generate knowledge underscores the importance of the second employee attribute, which is dialogue. From this point of view, the understanding of OL goes beyond the sharing of knowledge to the desirability of challenging the traditional way of thinking in order to make employees more capable of dealing with change and adopting continuous development.

One of the outcomes of this research is the identification of a sense of cognitive complacency or *saturation*, which may reduce employees' inclination to learn as they believe that their existing knowledge is sufficient to get their work done effectively. Although some of the work does not require extensive knowledge, the role of dialogue in OL is to provide employees with the opportunity to develop their mental skills and to become capable of creating and developing work methods that may be appropriate and productive.

It can also be concluded that employees' individual attributes are not the only factors affecting OL and not necessarily the most influential. What may at first blush appear related purely to attributes such as frustration, lack of self-estimation or fear of taking on a challenge may in fact be caused by organisational policies or culture. This conclusion confirms the need stated by Joiner (2005) to harmonise and align the organisation's policies and structure with the individual characteristics that shape and determine the course of employees' behaviour in regard to learning. At the same time, an organisation's policies can play a significant role in disrupting interaction and dialogue between its employees if they result in work being designed to be done individually and without the need for teamwork.

One detrimental practice that may arise from ill-conceived organisational policy is punishing employees for making mistakes. The literature warns against this, because the analysis of errors

that have been committed can be considered a valuable source of knowledge (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2017). A policy of punishment and blame is also likely to create fear among employees and reduce their desire to pursue improvements to their work. Thus, according to this research, the policy of not tolerating mistakes has led to the emergence of negative behaviour that does not enhance the learning process in the organisation. Moreover, it also tends to demotivate employees from building a learning organisation.

Related factors found to contribute significantly to employees' lack of readiness to be involved in a learning dialogue are their poor motivation and interest in their work, as well as the sense of job security associated with the obligation merely to attend the workplace, rather than to deliver meaningful performance. The situation prevalent in the public sector, whereby employees feel that they are safe from dismissal regardless of their performance, is counterproductive in more ways than one, extending as it does to the suppression of any interest they may have in developing their abilities by learning from others.

This research has indicated that the important attribute of employees' motivation is closely linked to the behaviour of their leaders. However, this finding departs to some extent from the assertion in the literature of the importance of the leader in building an OL culture (Coopey, 1995; Örtenblad, 2002). Leadership behaviour was found to vary from one department to another at SAFORG, causing the departments to differ in the extent of their support for OL. Some leaders appeared eager to learn and to encourage their followers to interact and learn, while others focused narrowly on getting the job done. According to this research finding, employees' motivation to learn was also influenced by the regulations in force within the organisation, which obliged managers and employees to act according to set patterns, regardless of whether these regulations were in alignment with support for OL.

A further issue related to staff learning motivation is professional development. A staff member who does not feel that his or her professional development is a priority of the organisation will

be less motivated to learn and share his knowledge with others. The purpose of professional development is to allow employees to participate in various aspects of the work in order to learn and to be given sufficient training and the opportunity to learn from external sources.

The level of trust, the fourth employee attribute discussed in this research, seems to be connected both to employees' personalities and to organisational policy. The literature indicates that a lack of personal trust can impair the motivation to engage in learning (Pritchard & Woollard, 2013). At the personal level, SAFORG employees who were inclined to show their capabilities and superiority over others believed that knowledge is power (Rhem, 2016) and therefore tended not to share it. At the organisational level, the withholding of knowledge was attributed to an institutional system which designed work to be achieved by individuals rather than teamworking, with the same result of withholding knowledge. In both scenarios, whether individual characteristics or organisational policy was the primary cause, the result was to diminish the level of trust among employees. Conversely, this trust can be strengthened by increasing integration and interaction, which contributes to the convergence of views and workplace harmony, thus leading to spontaneous learning.

Having identified research findings and contributions related to employee attributes, this discussion now turns to the second pillar of the OLE dimension, namely organisational leadership. Among the many qualities that a leader may be said to need in order to promote an OL environment, this research has focused on two prominent ones: open-mindedness and empowerment. In fact, these can be considered to underlie various other qualities such as insight, strength of character, responsibility, innovation and development.

Openness is one of the key factors that allows employees to know the experiences of others; therefore it is difficult to succeed in the OL process if the management of the organisation relies on blind obedience to commands and orders (Weir & Örtenblad, 2013). This research has shown that the key to creating and maintaining communication channels between employees

at different organisational levels is openness, without which no dialogue is possible between senior and bottom-line employees. When fear replaces openness, employees become reluctant to ask questions or share their experience, because they are afraid of making mistakes and being blamed for the consequences.

This research has shown that leadership can influence learning in some parts of an organisation without affecting it in others. Managers in some departments of SAFORG tended to support OL practice, while others contributed negatively to create a learning culture. As a result, some departments become less actively engaged in supporting OL, despite the fact that all departments were under the same corporate umbrella. In other words, it can be concluded that the power of leadership attributes can play a significant role in either creating or destroying the OL environment. Furthermore, the variation across SAFORG's departments signifies the importance of promoting the dissemination of best practice across the hierarchal levels of all departments.

The findings of this research show that the consequences of leadership attributes including open-mindedness and empowerment appear to encourage employees in self-reflection, which can in turn enhance their self-awareness. This demonstrates the need for a leader to have the self-awareness to be able to promote OL (Crossan et al., 2008; Rosenbach, 2018). The absence of open-mindedness and empowerment among leaders may have caused a lack of uniformity in the leadership methods adopted in the various SAFORG departments, driving some leaders to discard the actual experience of the organisation in favour of starting from scratch. Ignoring organisational experience in this way may obstruct the continuity of experience that could help employees to benefit from the experience of others.

The third environmental pillar, organisational culture, has been shown to have a particularly crucial impact on OL as compared to the individual attributes of employees and leaders (Rebelo & Duarte Gomes, 2011), reflected in the analytical framework of Chapter 5, where it was

considered as a pillar both of the OL environment (Section 5.2.3) and of OL factors (Section 5.6.2). Similarly, some aspects of OC will be examined in more detail in the discussion of OL factors in Section 6.4 of this chapter. The culture of any organisation comprises its beliefs, language and work patterns; thus, each work environment is unique to its culture, which may differ from or resemble some features of other work environments. SAFORG, as a Middle-Eastern organisation, is affected by the predominant culture of Islam, whose impact on organisations goes beyond belief to the practices of its adherents, as the themes of religious belief tend to drive or constrain employees' behaviour.

The effects of the organisational culture on employees' learning can be divided into two parts, depending on their scope. At a general level, organisational culture was found to affect all of SAFORG's departments, with a partial impact on some departments. For instance, information confidentiality was considered essential in some departments and maintaining it tended to prevent employees from coordinating learning. At the internal level, organisational culture was found to have an impact within the departments on understanding the subject of information confidentiality and the way to deal with it, which varied from department to department. This research adopted the cultural facets model of Lipshitz et al. (2002), distinguishing the effects of integrity, accountability, issue orientation, transparency and inquiry.

Consideration of the first facet of organisational culture, integrity, showed that some departments of SAFORG experienced a lack of mutual dialogue. The main reason for this deficiency was the disinclination to provide and receive feedback between employees across departments. In reference to Figure 17, integrity levels across most departments were assessed as moderate, with the exception of the Logistics Department, where leadership support for learning integration boosted integrity to a high level. Conversely, the geographical distance between workplaces and the absence of an organisational culture supportive of OL may have reduced levels of integrity elsewhere.

The second cultural facet is issue orientation, which means a focus on supporting learning irrespective of status-related distractions such as position, gender and religion. Therefore, when the focus and interest shifts to learning, it is possible to overcome the difficulties of the organisation. Figure 17 shows that none of the SAFORG departments reached a high level of issue orientation because it was not possible to confirm that any of the departments was free of the influence of status, either internally among employees themselves or externally across the departments.

The third cultural facet drawn from the Lipshitz model is accountability, which refers to a balance in authorising, allocating responsibilities and holding employees accountable for their actions. This equation provides employees with enough flexibility and at the same time, makes them vigilant and responsible for their learning. This research has shown that senior managers' view of employees as unable to manage their work efficiently affected negatively their inclination to take accountability for their own learning. Moreover, uncertainty and unclear work procedures made employees less able to make the right decisions and take responsibility for their work. The core issue which has been emphasised in several places throughout this thesis is the paramount importance of participation among all levels of staff. Making decisions or drafting work regulations in isolation from other employees creates separation and makes staff unwilling to take responsibility for dealing with unexpected events.

The fourth cultural facet, which was found to be a fundamental premise for OL, is transparency, through which employees become able to express their ideas and thoughts and to share them with others. The difficulty associated with transparency identified by this research was that it tended to reveal employees' weaknesses and mistakes, rendering them liable to blame and possibly punishment. One of the most significant obstacles to transparency is to treat employees as executors only and not as people capable of thinking creatively. Therefore, it can

be concluded that cultural attributes, including transparency, are insufficient alone to support OL without constant support from organisational leadership and employees' attributes.

The final cultural attribute is inquiry, at the core of which is the ability to think, key element that distinguishes between the mere transfer of knowledge and OL. Inquiry is about generating knowledge, which has to be through socialisation. The main tools for inquiry are critical thinking and reflection. Employees must reflect on their experience to generate productive learning. It can be said that the process of inquiry is a representation of double-loop learning rather than single-loop learning. This research found that the culture of SAFORG did not support inquiry sufficiently to reach the level required for productive OL. In other words, most of the practices at SAFORG appeared to be based on seeking quick solutions, which represents single-loop learning. In contrast, the inquiry process requires employees to utilise their critical thinking to reflect on the current experience, determine the underlying causes of the problem and generate innovative ideas. It is not enough to ask employees for their opinions without involving them in authentic dialogue; instead, employees must have continuous participation with ongoing feedback to ensure constant learning.

Figure 30 summarises the findings of this research regarding the organisational learning environment, the associated contributions to knowledge and the implications for practice.

Chapter Six: conclusion and contribution

Figure 30 Summary of organisational learning environment findings, contribution, implications for practice

Dimension	Pillar	Category	Findings	Contribution	Implications for Practice
Organisational learning Environment	Employees attributes	Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmony among group members was the main contributor to the high level of learning collaboration. • Lack of harmony and of supportive policies could inhibit collaboration across departments in SAFORG. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational attributes have a significant effect in enhancing or hindering learning collaboration. • Organisational attributes have more influence on learning collaboration at organisational and inter-organisational levels than the internal learning environment. 	Organisational policies should be aligned with employees' attributes to support learning collaboration.
		Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal dialogue was more active than learning dialogue across departments. • However, internal dialogue did not challenge employees' mental models. 	The notion of dialogue in Middle Eastern organisations is still confined to knowledge transformation rather than developing employees' ability to think and engage in productive learning.	Continuous dialogue should be encouraged among employees, promoting it as a process of developing employees' ability to think and generate knowledge.
		Motivation	Leadership style shapes the work environment and employees' inclination to learn.	Leadership style is a powerful influencer in creating sub-learning culture across departments within one organisation in the Middle East.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote OL process across hierarchical levels in order to transfer best practice.

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Dimension	Pillar	Category	Findings	Contribution	Implications for Practice
					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on employees' professional development by promoting engagement, training and external learning.
		Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of interpersonal trust drives employees to withhold knowledge. • An organisational system that designs work to be done individually rather than teamwork contributes to a low level of trust among employees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust should be built at the personal, community and organisational levels. • Organisational system design may influence employees' inclination to learn and trust of OL. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing employee conflict that could damage trust is essential to promote OL. • Paying attention to the organisational system and whether it supports individual or teamwork patterns.
	Organisational leadership	Open-mindedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-minded leaders positively influenced employees to share their knowledge. • Leaders encouraged employees to discuss workplace challenges openly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive leaders make it possible to create an OL environment in some parts of the organisation. • In order for employees to express themselves and their ideas, they need space and freedom of decision-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leaders must be encouraged to support OL and to learn from each other across departments. - These attributes could encourage employees' self-reflection and realisation.
Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different views were presented, revealing leadership variations across SAFORG departments. 				

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Dimension	Pillar	Category	Findings	Contribution	Implications for Practice
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowering employees to learn requires collaborative efforts and less restriction. Therefore, learning could be supported even in a hierarchical structure, as long as it allows collaboration across organisational levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different leadership styles between departments means leaders differ in willingness to rely on the expertise of the organisation or start from scratch. Hierarchy need not inhibit OL, as long as it allows communication across all levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is important to guide leaders to benefit from the actual experience of the organisation and exchange their expertise with other leaders.
	Organisational Culture	Integrity	SAFORG exhibited a lack of integrity at the inter-organisational level because of a lack of mutual feedback and reflection.	The presence of staff in the same spatial environment makes their chance of communicating for learning much higher than in different places, especially in the absence of an institutional culture that encourages learning.	Promoting communication and mutual dialogue among employees across organisational departments.
		Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Underestimating employees' ability to do work probably obstructs accountability. Uncertainty in work procedures could also obstruct employees' accountability for their learning. 	Cultural facets could obstruct OL when reinforced by leadership behaviour such as underestimating employees' abilities and when organisational policies do not support and encourage employees to be accountable for their learning.	Trusting employees in doing their job and providing them with more responsibilities as well as clarity in work procedures probably would enhance employees inclination for accountability.
		Issue orientation	SAFORG departments focused on other cultural facets rather than issue orientation.	Issue orientation seemingly supports the exploitation process rather than exploration, as employees are encouraged to focus	Reduce the impact of distractions that affect learning support and give it the highest priority.

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Dimension	Pillar	Category	Findings	Contribution	Implications for Practice
				on existing knowledge that is related to the issue.	
		Transparency	Transparency discloses employees' weaknesses, making them hesitant to be transparent, especially if the organisation tolerates mistakes.	Cultural facets like transparency are sometimes the result of the organisational environment such as mistake-tolerance.	It is important to provide a supportive organisational environment that promotes transparency.
		Inquiry	The inquiry process at SAFORG was a representation of single-loop learning.	Inquiry requires critical thinking skills as well as constant reflectivity in order to move from single to double-loop learning.	Employees must be given the opportunity to be involved in authentic dialogue and use their critical thinking to provide reflective and productive learning.

6.3 SAFORG's as Organisational Learning Process

The second dimension explored in this research is that of the OL process. Learning generally occurs in all organisations more or less consciously, while organisational learning needs to be a deliberate process (Kim, 1993). In other words, organisations learn whether they plan to or not, regardless of whether the learning is advantageous or harmful to them. Even when employees refuse to learn, they learn habits to avoid learning or to counteract its effects. Therefore, for learning to be beneficial, an organisation must establish a learning process, set in an appropriate environment and a value-driven culture; most importantly, it must make its employees inclined to learn and to share what they learn.

The literature has viewed learning from two main points of view: as a process of knowledge acquisition and as a continuous interaction process. Although these two processes meet in some respects, the philosophical view of the desired outcome is central. Supporters of the view that OL is limited to the acquisition of knowledge have suggested many models which include various stages of acquiring knowledge. Others have added a new trend of applying knowledge in the workplace while neglecting an important aspect, which is the processes that contribute to the development of the mental abilities of employees so that they become able to generate knowledge, rather than merely gaining it. One characteristic that distinguishes successful organisations from others is the philosophy adopted by the learning organisation to develop employees' capabilities so that they can benefit from the body of knowledge existing within the organisation, as well as from external knowledge, to serve the objectives of the organisation.

Organisational learning cannot be understood purely in terms of an information processing model concerned with *why* employees perform specific behaviours, which can also be reinforced through

their interactions with each other. Therefore, information processing and participative interaction models are insufficient to produce organisational learning. Instead, they must be linked with the notion of application, referring to employees' knowledge of *how* to do something. Hence, when employees possess knowledge (know-why) and apply it (know-how), then receive feedback (know-why-and-how), they become able to change their mental models or to question the acquired knowledge through the processing and participative models. The process of information transformation differs from the process of conception transformation. The latter requires continuous interaction with the constant development of employees' perceptions through dialogue and collaboration.

The broad depiction in Figure 18 (Chapter 5, Section 5.4) of the level of interaction across SAFORG's departments shows that the extent of learning interactions decreased from the individual and group levels to interactions across groups and at organisational level. The main reason for the relatively low level of interaction among groups in different departments, as well as between organisations, including those outside the territory where SAFORG operated, is the absence of learning processes.

There is clear evidence that SAFORG's departments facilitated various forms of learning processes which promoted individual learning, such as in-house training courses and one-to-one experience transformation. However, there is no clear evidence of some forms of learning processes aimed at promoting learning at the group, inter-organisational and organisational levels. Besides, the learning practice at SAFORG can be characterised as single-loop rather than double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978), as evidenced by the tendency to react to the detection of errors by seeking swift solutions, which had started to have severe and direct consequences for the organisation.

The organisational reaction, which was usually manifested in a set of instructions and rules that operated within the governing framework to solve a problem (Yang, 2008), does not imply a willingness to change organisational norms or restructure organisational policies (Linstead, 2009) and is therefore an example of what Fiol & Lyles (1985) call 'lower-level learning'. In other words, SAFORG was successful in changing workplace procedures in ways that would help to create short-term solutions, representing single loop-learning, but not successful in creating long-term solutions designed to change the organisational norms and policies underlying the problems, which would represent double-loop learning (Hollnagel, 2005).

The difficulty for an organisation in moving forward from single-loop or low-level learning to double-loop or high-level learning lies in the discrepancy between the espoused theory and theory-in-practice introduced by Argyris and Schön (1978), whereby any ideas that challenge the status quo are ignored and the organisation manipulates reality so that learning at a higher level does not occur (Linstead, 2009). The remainder of this section considers in turn the findings, contributions and implications for practice related to the four pillars of the OL process: learning from past experience, from current experience, from external sources and for innovation.

Learning from past experience begins with retrieving that experience, which according to the research findings, occurred at SAFORG in response to problems. The reaction process varied across the five departments, based on employees' inclination and leaders' encouragement, rather than identified policies. Moreover, employees referred to past experience for the sake of finding solutions. In contrast, OL involves employees interpreting their past experience in order to define the learning required in the current situation and to determine what they should do in the immediate future (Daft & Weick, 1984). Individuals are the medium and means for the interpretation process, as organisations cannot interpret information in isolation of individual employees. While modern

technology also has the ability to interpret information, this is not to say that it can substitute for human interpretation.

Studies reported in the literature have focused on the role of leaders in creating the right environment to facilitate OL (Healy, 2020). However, these studies do not determine the level of proximity of the leader to the staff. This current study found that middle managers or those in direct supervision of employees were more influential than others in creating a learning environment. The role of this particular group is significant. If they are not committed to fostering interaction among employees, there will be no learning environment, however interested higher-ranking managers may be in producing it.

An important characteristic of learning from previous experience at SAFORG was that employees benefitted only from the explicit experience connected to the incident, while the more valuable tacit knowledge was ignored. Moreover, the main focus in referring to previous experience was the knowledge itself, whereas the most valuable thing would be the process of reflection involving both experienced and inexperienced employees. The problem associated with this reflection process was that employees were afraid to criticise the work of former employees, especially if they were in higher positions, because it would create sensitivity and disagreement among employees.

The second pillar of the organisational learning process dimension is learning from current experience, which was found to be influenced by geographical factors. Thus, employees working in the same place were more able to communicate cognitively, while those in departments located in another geographical location were less able to learn. This research has observed the absence of a mechanism to facilitate communication and interaction among employees in different departments regardless of the spatial dimension.

Learning from current experience was also affected by employees' abilities and their inclination to share their expertise across SAFORG's departments and sections. According to this research, employees sometimes lacked the critical thinking skills necessary for engagement in constant dialogue to learn from current experience. Some managers considered that one of the reasons for poor communication in the transmission of knowledge between departments was the lack of common interests among these staff members, resulting in them having no inclination to discover what their peers were doing in other departments.

Another reason for SAFORG employees' reluctance to engage in real communication in order to benefit from current experience across departments concerned the use of documentation and advanced technology. Official documentation was the preferred means for employees to transfer knowledge across different departments. It was relied on in the absence of alternative channels of communication and because of the ease with which information could be preserved and archived. This finding indicates that technology was used primarily to provide innovative ways to facilitate knowledge transformation, rather than to enhance the physical interaction between employees that is fundamental for OL.

Finally, it can be confirmed that learning from current experience took the form of single-loop learning, especially in learning from problems. The organisation consulted employees directly involved with a problem, but did not keep them informed as to how the problem was resolved and whether or not their suggestions were valuable, while other members of staff would remain unaware of the problem and of how the organisation handled it. Therefore, the organisational learning process can be characterised as incomplete.

The third pillar of the OL process, learning from external sources, can be seen as an essential asset, given the importance for the organisation of gaining the knowledge required to guarantee its

survival and competitiveness. The literature stipulates that the ability of the learner to seek knowledge from external sources depends critically on the support of the organisation (Scott, 2011) and of the leader, as well as on employees' capabilities and inclination. However, the capabilities of technology mean that organisations and leaders no longer have control over employees' seeking of external knowledge. Technology gives everyone the opportunity to acquire external knowledge without the need for permission. Therefore, the critical issue that faces employees in seeking external knowledge is to select the right knowledge. The right criteria for selecting knowledge are to satisfy the internal desire of the person himself and to match organisational goals.

Ignoring learning from external sources will prevent both employees and the organisation from benchmarking, which identifies the position of the organisation in the market and the knowledge required for sustainability. Thus, through benchmarking, employees are able to take corrective measures that will enable them to compete and maintain the organisation's position in the market. It was noticeable in some of SAFORG's departments that some individuals had a personal motive to keep up to date with developing knowledge, especially in some technical professions such as IT and engineering which require constant learning.

It is worth mentioning that knowledge may become obsolete sooner in some disciplines, including IT, than in others, making accelerated learning necessary. On the other hand, some jobs do not require much up-to-date knowledge and those who work in these positions may be less eager to seek knowledge outside the boundaries of their organisations, being satisfied with whatever knowledge is available internally.

It is evident from this research that organisational policies and regulation at SAFORG acted to impede the acquisition of knowledge from external sources. It can therefore be said that it is

difficult to benefit from external knowledge unless the management of the organisation supports it. At the same time, organisational policies are less likely to influence internal knowledge-sharing communication. This research found that the State Service Department collaborated with similar institutions and sent its employees to attend some external training programmes. After careful examination of the situation, it can be said that some leaders who were passionate about learning were able to create opportunities for learning beyond their organisation.

The final pillar of the OL process is learning for innovation. In order for employees to be innovative, it is essential to have a clear direction so that they will be fully aware of the level of learning they need to serve the organisational vision. The results of this research indicate that an organisation cannot reach the stage of innovation as long as communication between its employees remains at the surface level. In order for an organisation to be innovative, it must thoroughly address its problems and examine best practices in depth, to ensure its survival and maintain its competitive advantage.

One of the findings of this research is that employees were asked to express their opinions but did not know later if their opinion had been taken into account. In other words, the absence of feedback contributed significantly to hindering the creativity and innovation of staff. Institutional creativity was also hindered by regulations created by some leaders, which stipulated that employees must comply with orders and carry out only what was required of them without having to open the door to discussion on different topics. This research has highlighted the importance of the role of the leader in creating a suitable atmosphere for creativity by creating various opportunities for learning, as well as overcoming all the difficulties faced by employees in seeking to be creative.

Figure 31 summarises the findings, contribution and implications for practice related to the OL process.

Figure 30 Organisational learning process: findings, contribution and implications for practice

Dimension	Pillar	Findings	Contribution	Implications for Practice
OL Process	Process of learning from past experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past experiences were retrieved only to solve problems and subject to specific situations governed by many pressures which limited the possibility of learning because of a focus on problem-solving. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The benefit of past experience is not only about retrieving failure but learning about successes in the organisation. • Middle managers are crucial in supporting learning from previous experience due to their proximity to bottom-line employees and their awareness of senior managers' perspectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is essential to clarify that organisations benefit from previous experience through reflection rather than knowledge transformation.
	Process of learning from current experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning from current experience is strongly influenced by employees' personalities due to day-to-day interaction. • Geographical factors constrain employees' interactions. • Employees' attributes, including their inclination and ability to learn continually, may inhibit learning from current experience. • Rules and regulations created by organisational policies usually act as hindering factors, forcing employees to follow a certain path. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology is seen as a facilitator of learning, but it reduces face-to-face interaction, which is a core requirement for OL. • Organisations create rules and regulations to organise the work, whereas they hold back the organisational learning process. 	<p>Utilise technology to promote physical interaction between employees, rather than inventing alternative means of knowledge transformation and remote interaction.</p>

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Dimension	Pillar	Findings	Contribution	Implications for Practice
	Process of learning from external sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking external knowledge was more of an individual effort than organisational policy. • Some organisational policies prevented employees from gaining knowledge beyond organisational boundaries. 	Learning from external sources beyond organisational boundaries requires a set of organisational policies in order to encourage employees to communicate. Otherwise, it will remain mostly a representation of individual efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Promoting benchmarking strategy to enable employees to identify their personal and organisational status and accelerate their learning process. * It is necessary to create institutional policies that serve and support communication outside the organisation in order to acquire best knowledge practices.

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Dimension	Pillar	Findings	Contribution	Implications for Practice
	Process of learning for innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning for innovation requires a clear direction to enable employees to work towards achieving the vision. • Employees’ communication remained at the surface level, inhibiting innovation in the organisation. • Absence of feedback obstructed the creation of an innovative learning environment. • Some organisational policies could hinder innovation, as employees were asked to be executors rather than thinkers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders play a significant role in either creating or destroying the learning atmosphere for innovation. • Organisational policy has a stronger influence than employees’ capabilities on driving innovation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In order to encourage employees to innovate, it is essential to identify the organisational vision clearly. • It is essential to direct the organisation’s policy and leadership to support the learning process for creativity, with the need to find the right mechanisms to support this orientation.

6.4 SAFORG Organisational Learning Facilitating and Hindering Factors

The third research question concerns factors facilitating and hindering organisational learning, which this thesis has examined in the context of the environmental and process considerations discussed above. In particular, this third dimension of OL has been explored from the viewpoints of participating senior managers, middle managers and bottom-line employees, to determine the extent to which SAFORG's employees across different categories recognised the status of learning. Participants' responses indicated that they recognised significant effects on OL of factors falling into three broad categories, namely the personality traits of employees, the culture of the organisation and its policies. This section therefore examines each of these pillars in turn.

The first pillar of the OL factors dimension comprises human resources characteristics. Among these, trust can be considered to lie at the core of the OL process. Trust is connected to accountability, as employees would be unwilling to take accountability without being responsible for their work. Moreover, employees cannot learn unless they are trusted and accountable for their learning. According to senior managers at SAFORG, trust and accountability were among the most critical elements affecting OL.

Differences were found in participants' recognition of the necessity of trust between employees at the same level or across hierarchical levels. For instance, middle managers focused more on knowledge and its related features than on staff characteristics, whereas senior managers and bottom-line employees shared their views on the importance of building trust to support OL. Bottom-line employees also shared views with middle managers on the importance of some practices related to knowledge, such as knowledge sharing and withholding.

This research has shown that employees in the same profession had high levels of shared learning because of high levels of interaction among staff members in the same profession and with similar

competence. Therefore, the organisation should increase staff involvement and take other steps that could help to get employees together. For example, formulating the work to be done collectively would probably contribute to supporting teamwork and OL.

As mentioned above, middle managers focused on knowledge itself as the core of OL. In doing so, they identified four knowledge-related factors: knowledge saturation or complacency, the underestimation of knowledge, knowledge sharing and the withholding of knowledge. Focusing on knowledge rather than on interaction reflects the prevailing understanding that organisational learning is merely about the transfer of knowledge, which the literature refers to as a focus on knowledge acquisition. This narrow emphasis may help to explain employees' reported tendency to withhold knowledge and experience in order to retain power, so that the organisation remained in constant need of their expertise.

Senior employees also tended not to share their experience, because they feared being overtaken by a staff member and therefore being at risk of losing their position. Bottom-line employees expressed the belief that it was essential to build trust between senior and middle managers on one hand and bottom-line employees on the other. The two attributes of knowledge complacency and underestimation seem connected. Employees who underestimated or overestimated their abilities tended not to learn because of a feeling of complacency, or perhaps because they had no desire to share their expertise.

The focus groups perceived competition between employees as one of the characteristics that hindered OL. Employees preferred to compete rather than to share knowledge, which probably had negative consequences for the organisation. This competition drove some employees to see their colleagues' mistakes as signs of weakness and as justifying criticism, instead of using them as the basis for shared learning.

Moving beyond the scope of human characteristics, the second strand of organisational learning factors comprises those related to the culture of the organisation. Surprisingly, senior managers did not highlight the connection between organisational culture and OL, unlike participating middle managers, who identified knowledge withholding as the most prominent issue obstructing OL. Culture was found to influence knowledge withholding through the mechanism of nationality, in that expatriate employees tended to withhold knowledge in the belief that it would help them to retain their posts in the long term, yet at the same time they blamed local employees for not being cooperative and enthusiastic towards learning.

One of the most critical obstacles to OL, according to the focus groups in this research, was generational conflict between long-serving employees and more recent recruits. This appeared to be due to the lack of points of common interest, leading to conflict instead of cooperation and shared learning. The underlying cause of this generational conflict would seem to be the contrasting mentalities and experiences arising from the work methodologies that older employees had become accustomed to. They were used to depending on direct instructions rather than being proactively participative and it would have been difficult for them to change their way of working overnight.

The final strand of organisational learning factors is that of organisational policy. When an organisation has clearly stated policies regarding OL support, its staff at all levels are obliged to support and pursue such policies. More importantly, these become rooted in the culture of the organisation and contribute strongly to OL. According to the research findings, senior managers recognised the need to provide employees with flexibility and space for innovation. However, there was a gap between what they believed and the actual practices within SAFORG. It is essential in order to promote OL to encourage employees to learn by enhancing their work unity. Moreover,

recognition of employees' work, as well as the proper incentives, would be expected to enhance employees' inclination to learn.

The middle managers, on the other hand, described the clarity of the workplace policies and procedures as one of the most essential pillars of successful OL, since employees who were unaware of the organisation's vision and mission would tend to work with blurred goals. Finally, the focus groups asserted that to ensure the success of OL, SAFORG should put the right people in the right place and provide them with sufficient training in order for them to perform their work efficiently.

Figure 32 summarises the findings, contribution and implications for practice related to the factors affecting OL.

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Figure 31 Summary of organisational learning factors (finding, contribution, the implication to practice)

at SAFORG firm in the Middle East.

Dimension	Pillars	Findings	Contributions	Implications for practice
Organisational learning factors	Human Resources Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior managers did not trust their subordinates to work without constant supervision. • Lack of trust led to a lack of accountability. • There was good learning interaction among employees in the same profession because they worked in one place, increasing points of convergence and shared interests. • Communication skills are important to enhance the process of OL. • Employees' inclination to learn was a prominent factor affecting OL. • Knowledge withholding was critical and the most common factor affecting OL. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not possible to have an OL process without trust. • Middle managers are the most critical category in facilitating OL. • Building employees' capabilities, including communication skills, is essential to promote OL. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust is essential to build employees' capabilities. Therefore, it is essential to promote trust in the workplace. • Employees' learning interaction can be enhanced by providing shared interest and building communication capabilities, as well as stimulating employees' eagerness to learn.

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Dimension	Pillars	Findings	Contributions	Implications for practice
	Organisational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior managers did not talk about the effects of organisational culture on OL, to avoid admitting their responsibility for creating a culture amenable to OL. • Middle managers identified knowledge withholding as the factor most strongly impeding learning. • Bottom-line employees highlighted nepotism or wasta as the primary inhibitor of OL. Their learning was strongly influenced by senior and middle managers favouring some employees based on individual interest rather than high performance. • Focus groups in all departments identified generational conflict as impeding OL because older and younger employees were unwilling to learn from each other. 	<p>Building a culture that supports learning requires a transparent system in the organisation governing the process of promotions and rewards, so that negative phenomena such as wasta and knowledge withholding become apparent and can be addressed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is essential for any organisation employing expatriates to create a collaborative learning culture as well as setting a policy that promotes OL. • Organisations must minimise the influence of nepotism by providing specific criteria for rewarding employees based on performance and work quality. • The success of OL depends on strengthening interactions between employees with shorter and longer service and on enhancing points of convergence.
	Organisational Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior managers insisted on the need to provide employees with space and flexibility for innovation. They also identified incentives and promotion as significant facilitators likely to enhance workplace unity and OL. • Middle managers focused on policy transparency, minimising workloads and allocating a particular time for learning. 	<p>Organisational policies can facilitate OL when appropriately aligned and can hinder it when they slow or prevent learning interactions among employees.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations should design policies that support OL by enhancing employee interactions. • Employees must be given free time for learning.

6.5 Recommendations and limitations

This exploration of three dimensions of OL (Environment, Process and Factors) is expected to provide insightful thoughts for practitioners. Despite an extensive literature on OL, which theoretically provided a solid foundation for this study, the field is still lacking a framework for action (Garvin, 1993; Krebsbach-Gnath, 2003). One of the fundamental problems in understanding OL is that it is seen as an extension of individual learning and dependent on the development of tools more suited to individual learning; therefore, many organisations find significant problems in moving from this to true OL. They also fail to find practical tools that actually help them reach out to learning organisations.

The findings of this research reveal the relative importance of the middle management category in promoting OL compared to other categories of employee across the organisational hierarchy. Investigating the similarities and differences in the roles of senior managers, middle managers and bottom-line employees in promoting OL could help organisations to design proper plans to promote OL.

This research is limited to a single organisation operating in the Middle East. Although the data were collected from five different departments, the findings and conclusions are limited to one particular context. Conducting similar research using qualitative methods in different organisations might enrich the data and provide a deeper understanding of organisational learning environments, processes and factors. The context of the Middle East has a variety of characteristic features which may affect OL in particular ways; in particular, the influence of religion and leadership are promising areas for a thorough and extensive exploration.

In short, this research has emphatically concluded that organisational learning is more than just knowledge transformation; instead, it is a journey of building a learning capacity which requires

constant harmony among employees across organisational levels. It is a journey of building employees' capabilities and skills to be able to generate knowledge. Ensuring that employees develop such capabilities and skills requires a particular learning environment that promotes a learning culture. It also requires an active process of internal and external learning interaction. Moreover, the success of organisational learning requires highly motivated staff to learn and ambitious leaders to strengthen the abilities and skills of their staff. It also requires an organisational structure supportive of learning and a system that promotes learning from the mistakes of the organisation.

This concluding chapter has set out clear answers to the three research questions, which can be summarised as follows. A successful OL environment is one in which policies support the development and maintenance, among employees at all levels throughout the organisation, of collaboration, dialogue, trust, transparency, critical thinking and external learning. An effective OL process is characterised by benefitting from past experience through reflection, by encouraging physical interaction rather than technology-driven knowledge transformation, by promoting benchmarking, by strengthening both internal and external communication, by clarifying organisational vision to encourage innovation and by leveraging creativity. Finally, among the factors most strongly influencing the success of OL are trust, the role of middle managers, employees' communication skills and transparent fairness, rather than favouritism. To the limited extent to which it is possible to generalise from the case of SAFORG, it can be concluded that an organisation which takes all of these findings into consideration is likely to improve its chances of achieving and sustaining valuable organisational learning.

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