

Abstract

Title: Workplace learning and interaction between individual identity, social relations and organizational environment: A comparative study between Micro and Small Companies.

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This study aims to investigate how individual identities, social relations and organizational strategies interact in the workplace learning of SMEs. The practices within the micro and small financial consulting companies in Hong Kong are compared. The influence of the owner-manager, learning culture, power and emotion on learning will also be investigated. A qualitative approach was adopted and semi-structured interviews accompanied with observation and document analysis were used. A total of thirty respondents from 2 small and 3 micro companies were involved in this study. All companies were subsidiary of two mother companies. Data from interviews, observation and documents was analyzed.

An inclination towards formal learning at organization level was found. However, both formal and informal learning were seen as central to professional development. Multi-dimensional Identity evolved as career and life span change and this impacted on the learning behavior of respondents. Learning helped to build a better professional image. Learning also occurred when respondents participated within a community. The influence of the owner on learning within the firm changes with the formation process and company size. Small firms, with greater formalization and specialization use formal training more frequently than the micro firms. In particular, externally-provided formal training is used to supplement in-house training. Power distribution is affected by size and formation process. Also emotion affects learning from individual to company levels.

Ultimately, the findings support the conclusion that the factors influencing the small firm's approach to learning are highly complex. Specifically, social relations at group level in combination with subjective individual dispositions and the structural organizational environment are implicated in orientating the small firm towards particular types of learning. Workplace learning cannot be properly understood without an appreciation of these multi-level influences and the interaction between them. Furthermore, the findings indicate that preferred modes of learning in some types of small firm may be of a more formal kind than the literature on learning in small firms has sometimes assumed.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The main aim of this research is to investigate the subjective, social and organizational factors affecting learning in small businesses. Recent research on workplace learning has emphasized the importance of the social and organizational context (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991; Billet 2004a), and it is against this background that this study aims to investigate the influence on learning in small firms, using financial consulting firms in Hong Kong as the empirical context. Specifically, there are two primary objectives: first, to clarify the nature of learning processes in small and 'micro' –sized companies. Second, to explore how that learning is affected by individual identity, social and organizational factors and to find out the possible interrelation between them.

Research Background

The literature on workplace learning has started to show that the influences on learning take operation at a number of levels. For example, at the individual level, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) have shown that personal attitudes are important in influencing participation in learning. The broader social and organizational contexts also seem to be crucial. Brown and Duguid (1991) argue that learning and knowledge sharing take place within workplace contexts in forms of experience sharing and storytelling etc. They point out this type of activity takes place within a community.

Belonging to a community is therefore increasingly seen as an important part in knowledge sharing. The idea is similar to the theory proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). In their book "Situated Learning", Lave and Wenger famously proposed that learning is profoundly shaped by the community within which it occurs. Individuals can learn effectively only when they gain access into the community. This highlights the importance of the social aspect of learning.

At the organization level, practices like peer sharing, social meeting, job rotation, building a cooperative community, creating an open culture, flattening the organization structure and implementing reward system are often used to promote knowledge sharing within the organization (McAdam & McCreedy 2000). Many organizations invest their resources and implement strategies to assist employees to learn. This forms the organizational environment for learning. The effects of such strategies and policies on workplace learning could of course be positive or negative. Finding out what factors affect employee's perception of organizational policy could help to improve learning efficacy. Power and emotion are two issues that seldom come across in small firm literature, their impact in workplace learning is not clear. Understanding their effect on learning is also the purpose of this study.

Thus, as will be seen in further detail in later chapters there is a growing literature on the factors that impact on learning at individual, social and organizational levels.

However, there has perhaps been less research into how these different levels operate in concert- particularly within the small firm sector. Addressing this gap is one of the aims of this study.

The target population

There are various definitions of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) across the world.

In Hong Kong, service sector companies with fewer than 50 members and industrial sector companies with less than 100 members are considered as SMEs. There is no official distinction made between the small and medium companies. In contrast, the definition used by European Union clearly define micro (less than 10 members), small (10- 50 members) and medium (50 to 249 members) sized company. The definition of the European Union is adopted in this study.

SMEs comprised about 98% of the companies in Hong Kong in 2010 (Support and Consultation Centre for SMEs). They employed over 60% of the working population in Hong Kong. This emphasizes the importance of the small firm sector to the economic health of Hong Kong, and is a situation also found in many other parts of the world.

However, despite the importance of SMEs in the economy, relatively little attention is paid to them. Research on skills and learning in the region has tended to focus on larger organizations. Yet some research has shown that small firms tend to have different learning preferences to larger firms- for example, relying more on informal

and social types of learning (Dawe and Nguyen, 2007). There is thus a gap in the research base that this research aims to address.

The study focuses specifically on small firms in the Hong Kong financial sector. To provide some background information on the sector, the financial industry is a big and fast growing industry in Hong Kong. At June 2010, there are a total of 170 insurers and 32,381 individual agents in Hong Kong. The gross premiums in 2009 were 185 billion Hong Kong dollars (Office of Commissioners of Insurances, Hong Kong). Financial companies are trying to increase their market share by expanding their product ranges and improving the service they provide to the customer. Financial consultants are responsible for selling insurance related products, investment products and provident funds etc to the customer. As a result, financial consultants are requested to acquire more products, insurance and investment knowledge on one hand and to polish their customer service skills on the other hand. In the past there was no special requirement for selling insurance or investment products. However, to improve the standard of the profession, The Hong Kong Government sets up a professional regulation structure for the sector, involving an examination, registration and continuous learning program to regulate and promote the industry more than 10 years ago.

Any Individual who would like to provide insurance and investment services has to pass the exams of the Insurance Intermediaries Quality Assurance Schemes (IIQAS). There

are a number of papers each addressing a specific product. Consultants need to pass the paper on Mandatory provident fund before they can sell related products to their customers. After passing the exam they have to register with the Insurance Agents Registration Board (IARB) and under their supervision.

Annual registration is required for members to continue their business. In addition a Continuous Professional Development Program (CPD) has been developed to promote professional standards. Only by participating in activities approved by The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualification can individuals obtain CPD credits for registration. Each member has to earn 10-20 CPD hours yearly.

As a result, financial consultants are required to develop and record their learning when they join the industry and this is monitored yearly. Thus, there is a highly formalized and standardized professional development structure for finance professionals to engage with: this may, on the face on it, appear to contrast with the more informal approach supposedly favored by small firms. This research will aim to investigate how such firms manage this tension (if there is such a tension).

Finally, it is worth noting that the relationship between individual agents and their employing financial company is not straight forward. Big financial companies usually would not manage their agents directly. Instead, there are many small units within the organization, which in most aspects function as separate companies. They recruit their

own people, have their own management style. The parent organization provides office space, products, administration and some training to the members. Most of them are micro and small size companies. This type of company has many of the characteristics of an independent small firm but it also has some influence from the large organization. The nature, extent and impact of this influence on learning is explored in later chapters.

Research Questions

The research aims to clarify the vocational and professional learning process within the SMEs. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions

1. How do employees learn within the organization? Through formal, informal or social means, or a mix of all?
2. What are the subjective influences of individual identity on learning?
3. How is organization strategy ,policy and culture affecting employee's learning?
4. How do social relationships between employees within the workplace affect their workplace learning?
5. What are the effect of emotion and power relation on workplace learning?
6. To what extent does professional learning occur differently between small and micro companies?
7. What is the influence of large organizations on their affiliated small firms?

In addressing these questions, the structure of the thesis is as follows. The next chapter reviews the relevant literature. In this chapter existing research on the factors influencing learning at individual, social and organizational levels-particularly within small firms-is discussed. Gaps or ambiguities in the literature are identified in order to demonstrate the rationale for this research. Then the methodology of this research is explained. This section offers the reasons for choosing semi- structured interviews and observation to offer a more holistic view on the issue, how research tools are designed and the administration procedures. The following chapter provides the background information of the participating companies.

The finding and discussion section that follows is divided into four parts. A model explaining how different factors affecting workplace learning is developed. The first part reports participants views on knowledge and how they learn. Factors affecting individual learning motivations are listed and discussed. The second part describes participants' views on individual professional self- concept and the impact of identity upon learning. Third, the social relations between participants and their group members are reported. The effect of these social relations and how they affect learning and group function is discussed. The pros and cons of the Community of practice model as a means of explaining learning within small finance companies are discussed. Last, organizational policy and strategy and their effect on learning are inspected. Also

the influence of emotion and power and how they impact on the learning process is described in this part. Finally, the Conclusion chapter draws these themes together and provides a clearer picture on how different factors influence vocational learning within small firms. Some possible recommendations are also suggested.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Increasing attention has fallen upon learning at organizational and individual levels and how such learning can improve work performance. As will be seen the result of learning is the acquisition of knowledge to improve work. Investigating into workplace learning involves the understanding of knowledge, learning and how personal, social and organization factors influences on it.

This chapter serves the purpose to discuss the factors that related to workplace learning, particularly in small business, and how they are related to each other. First a brief review of the nature of knowledge and learning is provided in order to provide a base from which to proceed with the following discussion. Then the influence of individual, social and organization factors are followed. Third, a description of small and medium sized firms and how they conduct workplace learning is illustrated. The relation between these topics and how they inform this study will be explained in the last part of the chapter.

Knowledge and Learning

Knowledge and learning are directly related to each other. When discussing learning it is first necessary to understand what kind of learning can generate what kind of knowledge. According to Eraut (2000 p114) learning is 'the process whereby knowledge is acquired' and 'when existing knowledge is used in a context or in new

combination'. Billett (2004a) defines learning as permanent or semi-permanent changes in how individuals think and act. In most definitions of learning, the main theme is the creation of new knowledge that will bring about changes in thinking and behavior. This then prompts the question; what is knowledge?

There are different classifications of knowledge; for example, in an influential account, Nonaka (1991) classifies knowledge into explicit and tacit counterparts. Explicit knowledge is the kind of knowledge that can be readily codified into written record. In contrast, tacit knowledge (a term first used by Michael Polanyi) is related to everyday experience, it therefore cannot be spoken out easily. Explicit knowledge exists within books, manuals and computer data. This type of knowledge is often described as general and not related to specific context. Nonaka (1991) described tacit knowledge as highly personal, context specific and rooted in action. Drawing on Polanyi's original work (Polanyi, 1983), he argues that people do not know what they know and learning is often a form of tacit knowing. Explicit and tacit knowledge is acquired differently and they also function differently. Eraut (1997) explains that the distinction between experts and others is their ability to utilize tacit knowledge in understanding situations and make appropriate decisions. Eraut (2000), following Wagner and Stenberg (1986) argues that the difference in performance between experts and novices is the amount of tacit knowledge they possess. This directly affects their context interpretation and

decision making process. Wagner and Stenberg (1986) even argue that tacit knowledge is most directly related to real world performance.

According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) tacit knowledge could be converted to explicit knowledge through the use of metaphors and analogy. If this assumption is correct, then all knowledge could potentially be codified and stored. Their studies suggested that data warehouses or internal networks could help to store and retrieve information efficiently (Dilnutt 2000). However, the knowledge required in these cases is explicit in nature, they are easily codified. Thus, writers such as Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) question the possibility of converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. Failure of using IT tool to effectively retain the tacit knowledge is frequently reported (ZEDA 2004, Gupta, Iyer & Aronson 2000, Hammer et al. 2004). Since computer database, learning software and instruction manual could only record the explicit part; most of the tacit elements are missing from the formal knowledge system. Even the experts have difficulty in identifying the knowledge they possess, thus it is arguable that converting all tacit knowledge to explicit may not be possible.

These discussions of different types of knowledge are important to this thesis as they can help us to understand how different types of knowledge are acquired, learned, stored and applied, and how social influences impact on this process. For example, besides formal organization knowledge, employees sometimes create their own ways

of doing things. This informal type of knowledge (heuristic knowledge) is generated from action and experience then transfer by stories shared in community of practices (Tsoukas & Vladimirou 2001). Informal or tacit knowledge are still learnt and shared within the organization. Brown and Duguid (1991) showed that workers are not depending on organization formal knowledge. They learn, share and build their own informal knowledge through storytelling and forming informal community of practices.

Such studies indicate that social interaction is a way of gaining informal knowledge.

Knowledge is gained through participating in social activity. We might ask: where is knowledge actually stored? Is it stored inside one's head or within the social interaction?

Is knowledge an individual possession or is it collective in nature? These are questions that have been asked for some time. For example, Polanyi (1958) argued that

knowledge is personal although he did acknowledge the importance of social factors in the construction and sharing of knowledge. Wittgenstein (1958) stated that knowledge

is fundamentally collective. Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) argue that tacit knowledge is both personal and collective. Personal knowledge is stored within one's head.

However, when in an organizational context, knowledge is also embedded in work practices and routines. Organization members acquire the common standard and knowledge through their daily interaction. This kind of knowledge is shared and

collective in nature.

In organizations, knowledge embeds not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and norms. People within a community develop shared understanding about specific events and contexts. This collective knowledge helps people to make judgments within certain contexts (Barnett, 2000). Tsoukas and Vladimiron (2001) state that such collective understanding is crucial to useful organizational knowledge, and is rooted in social influences. Therefore, we can begin to see how social influences might be crucial to the way in which knowledge is constructed and shared within organizations.

Learning formally

It is dangerous to confine learning to a single condition. In particular, a distinction is often drawn between formal and informal learning. While formal learning is generally described as having a structured and organized context (often within a specific learning context such as a classroom or seminar room) and as intentional, informal learning is related to daily activities and often unintentional, in comparison non-formal learning is embedded in planned activities and is intentional (Colardyn & Bjornavold 2004).

Most people have some experience with formal learning like attending school and formal vocational training. Marsick and Watkins (1990) described formal learning as learning inside formally structured, institutionally sponsored, classroom-based

activities. Formal learning is a structured event where the content of formal learning is bounded by the institution or the instructor/trainer. Formal learning episodes often (though not always) result in some accreditation or qualification. They also occur with the primary purpose of promoting learning – something which distinguishes them from instances of informal learning.

It is worth noting that the government is currently promoting the expansion of formal learning in Hong Kong. The building of the new qualification framework in Hong Kong at 2008 is a step to encourage academic, vocational and life-long learning. Only quality assured qualifications are accepted for registration in the framework. Accreditation is related to working experience, academic and vocational training of a specific person.

Of course, organizations have a long history of providing training internally, through interventions such as workshops, seminars, short courses, mentoring and on-the-job training (Elsey and Fujiwara 2000). Other than providing training to their staff, some organizations also encourage employees to take outside courses to further develop their skill and knowledge.

Thus, both governments and organizations have an important role to play in supporting and delivering training. Government itself might act as the course provider or subsidize their citizens to enroll in formal learning courses. In Hong Kong, the government has chosen to focus its subsidies on participation in language, computer and logistic

courses as a way to increase levels of competence in the fast growing industries.

Professional bodies and organizations might even compel their members or staffs to take up a certain amount of formal training courses per year as pre-requisite for registration and part of performance management program.

Therefore, the government seems to be focusing its efforts on promoting formal learning. Yet many writers have pointed out that formal learning has its own limitations. First, what is being learned is restricted by the curriculum and the teacher. Learners are not normally supposed to acquire knowledge outside the course content. Second, formal learning does not generally occur within the context in which the learned skills and knowledge are to be used; this creates the problem of application of knowledge in the real context (Marsick and Watkins, 1990).

In formal learning situations, the main focus is on explicit knowledge transfer from the instructor to the learner; which according to some writers is not necessarily conducive to the application of the learning to the work context. As criticized by Engestrom (2001) learning some identifiable knowledge to achieve change in behavior in a classroom situation, or in the training room, often leads to an inadequate preparation for the ever-changing conditions of the workplace. Similarly, Fuller and Unwin (2003) study of apprenticeship training also demonstrated that confining learning within a particular setting is not beneficial for the apprentice. Also, formal learning only focuses on

knowledge acquisition, it lacks the activities for learners to work within a community and this minimizes their chance to become part of the community. This might hinder the workers in building their own working identity (Lawy and Bloomer 2003). As learning is out of context, learners might find it hard to relate what they learn to what they do. This in turn could decrease the learning motivation of workers, as they find no value inside the learning process.

Felstead et al (1998, 2004) raise further doubts about an excessive focus on formal learning. Referring to the use of training statistics by British and European governments, they argue that the data mostly investigate into the formal aspect of learning like the qualification acquired, time spent on training courses and number of certificates obtained. This builds up an incomplete picture of training needs and how different training methods affect workplace learning. The problem in only measuring formal learning activities is that it loses the trace of other forms of learning in the workplace and their importance.

A learning continuum

While, as already noted, many writers have distinguished between formal and informal learning, some have argued that this division creates the illusion that they are fundamentally distinct ways of learning. Billett (2002a P.59) points out that describing workplace learning as informal or formal “is negative and ill-focus”. He argues that

describing or simply classifying learning into different categories or boxes does not help to improve learning quality and characteristic. It can also incorrectly promote the view that informal learning is inferior to formal learning. Perhaps, Billet suggests, it is best to see learning as a continuum between informal and formal poles, with neither extreme necessarily being less valid than the other.

Malcolm et al (2003) remind us that in all learning situations, there are both formal and informal elements. Whether there is more degree of formal or informal learning depends on the nature and context of learning. Sfard (1998) points out that to only address one end would lead to distortion and undesirable practice. Van der Heijden et al (2009) study how non academic staff of open university increase their employability and they show that learning covered both information and formal elements. Rather, the careful combination of all might be the best approach to adopt.

Informal learning

Informal learning is in the opposite pole of the learning continuum to formal learning and, as will be seen in later sections, is important particularly when understanding how learning occurs in smaller businesses. It is different from formal learning in terms of structure and planning. Eraut (2004) states that learning in the extreme informal end is implicit, unintended, opportunistic, unstructured and without any teacher. Similarly, Marsick and Watkins (1990 p.15) describe informal learning as experience-based,

non-routine and often tacit. The above definitions point out that informal learning is mostly unintended; the learner often acquires skills and knowledge without his/her own knowing. Since learning is occurred by chance, there is no pre-set goal or syllabus and the outcome depends on what happened during the activity. People can learn from other people by observation, storytelling, knowledge sharing and consultation (Brown and Duguid 1991, Eraut et al 1998). They can also learn from doing the job on their own. According to Eraut et al (1998), informal learning often leads to the development of tacit knowledge.

When compared to formal learning where knowledge is normally decontextualized and transmitted into individual learners, therefore being an individual possession, informal learning often develops knowledge that is context based and belongs to the group. Eraut et al (1998) stated that learning from other people and from real working situations are of the most important dimensions of learning. Thus, we can begin to see the importance of informal learning and its connection to social factors in the workplace. As will be seen, organizational cultures and individual identities are thought to be particularly important in this respect.

According to some writers however, informal learning does have limitations. For example, informal learning has no pre-set goal or curriculum; some even describe informal learning as ad hoc (Billett 2002a) and the outcome of learning is said to be

unpredictable. Barber (2004) also discusses the problem of inconsistency when attempting to standardize the learning of mechanics in an Indian case study. The unpredictable outcome leads to the issue of lack of formal recognition. The third problem with informal learning is the lack of indicators for measuring the effect of informal learning in workplace (Skule 2004). Also as the knowledge transferred through informal learning is often tacit in nature, this further hinders workers' awareness of their own learning which in turn makes it difficult for workers to reflect on and apply that learning in the most effective way.

Social learning

As noted above, workers learn from observing others in work, consulting others when they are in doubt. In such instances, learning is not a personal issue and is closely related to interaction with other people within the workplace (Eraut et al 1998, Brown & Duguid 1991, Fuller & Unwin 1998). As such, some writers (e.g. Sfard, 1998) have referred to the importance of 'participation' within social groupings in the workplace to the way in which learning occurs. Indeed, Billett (2002a) suggests that learning is inter-dependent between individual learner and the social practices of the workplace. Van der Heijden et al (2009) study shows that social networking is important to improve employability. Learning is highly a social process. Lave and Wenger (1991) put forward the communities of practice model to challenge the emphasis on individual

learning that was popular at the time. They proposed that people do not learn individually rather they learn when involved in social activity. Learning is described as a process, an integral part of generative social practice in our everyday life. The 'communities of practice' to which individuals belong in their working lives shape what and how they learn.

Following Lave and Wenger's example, Billett (2001) discusses the importance of understanding social practice in work. He argues that occupational expertise mainly learned from the social context. This kind of learning is rooted in social practice of the group and only can learn from participating in the group activity.

This short overview of Lave and Wenger's work is expanded in later sections, but its inclusion here illustrates some recent thinking in social learning theory. It is worth noting that their work has received some criticism- this is also addressed later on.

1) Individual and learning

While the social influences on workplace learning are important, we should not forget factors operating at the individual, subjective level. For example, Huczyniski and Lewis (1980) studied participants of two management courses and found that participants who take the initiative to enroll were more willing to transfer the new knowledge back to their work. In a similar study, Noe and Schmitt (1986) defined motivation to transfer as trainees' desire to use the knowledge gain in training or other activities on their jobs.

They found that the effectiveness of training depended on trainee's attitude, interests, value and expectation (Noe and Schmitt, 1986). Studies such as these begin to reveal the importance of internal, subjective influences in shaping the workplace learning process. One of the most significant ways in which this seems to happen is through the impact of individual identity.

Identity

Traditionally, particularly in anthropological studies, identity has been used to classify people; it is a tool to understand the taxonomies of the society and to explain social phenomena (Widdicombe 1998). Thus, individuals and their 'identities' have been classified into different gender, race and social class categories. Research in recent years has suggested that these and other facets of identity can have a powerful impact on learning behavior. For example, Evan and Furlong (1997) drew on the notion of 'trajectory' to describe the common learning and career pathways followed by people from the same social class. The choices made by individuals seem to be influenced by aspects of their class identity. However, the stable and fixed qualities of identity encounter problems when it is used to define people's identity in real situations. For example, Costello (2005) pointed out that it is difficult to properly identify individuals with mixed racial background into any specific racial group. She further explained that individuals have the power to consciously choose their own identity; which is different

from traditionally assigned identity. Furthermore, Widdicombe (1998) argued that globalization, and the use of Internet help individuals to create new identities through their own consumption pattern. The increase in social mobility heightened the chance of life change thus making identities more fluid. Consequently, the construction of identity reveals the ever- changing characteristic. Thus, while most writers still consider identity to be important in shaping individual choice and action, it may be problematic to assume that it is inevitably structured along lines of social class, race or gender.

Perhaps in recognition of such criticism, Bourdieu (1990) put forward the term 'habitus' to explain how individuals' life is affected by the dispositions generated through their past and ongoing experience. The habitus shapes individuals' value, their tastes and how to handle emotion. These often operate at a semi-conscious or unconscious level. Bourdieu's concept of habitus has grown in popularity and has informed more recent writing on identity. For example, Lawy and Bloomer (2003) similarly pointed out that identity construction is always in progress and dynamic in nature.

Identity is an ego structure according to Marcia (1966), it is an internal, self constructed, ever-changing classification of personal belief and history. Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that identity is constructed by the individual only. Rather it is a product of the individual's interaction within the social world. In a widely-cited study of

educational and career choice, Willis (1978) investigated the phenomenon of 'why working class kids get working class jobs', and he concluded that this is because of the choices they make based on their working class identity which is shaped by their social environment. They learn from the language, physical interaction, clothing and context to accept working class identity. Banks et. al. (1992) study also suggests that gender, social background, class would affect individual's choice, action and their self identity. It is related to the group the individual belongs to and the social context where the interaction happened. Any study that seeks to understand the whole picture of identity and its impact on learning, needs to include the person, the group and the context they engaged in. As Alvesson (2010) points out there are different theories or ways to describe identity, identity is discrete and subjective in nature. Using images to is a way to breakthrough boundaries in constructing identity.

Personal identity therefore consists of multiple dimensions. One can have working identity, professional identity, learner identity and relational identity etc. at the same time. Furthermore, these identities are not necessarily always resonant with each other, crises occur when dissonance arises (Costello 2005). The discussion will now consider the different aspects of identity in terms of how they might impact specifically on workplace learning. In particular, the focus will on 'professional identity' and 'learner identity'.

Professional Identity

Completing a professional course and obtaining a professional qualification does not equate to acquiring a professional identity. Developing such an identity involves a more subjective commitment to the values, outlook and culture of a profession (Costello 2005). Puurula and Lofstrom (2003) studied the formation of professional identity among employees in 175 SMEs. They argued that professional identity consisted of three subordinate identities: being a self-directed active human being, a skilled professional and a member of work community. Crucially, it was found that the development and coherence of the professional identity was shaped significantly by aspects of the organizational environment (e.g. opportunities for career advancement) and also impacted on the individual's commitment to the learning and development.

Other studies have shown how occupational identity can develop through social interaction in the workplace. Billett and Somerville (2004) studied coal miners and found that their identities evolved over time as they experienced different workplace incidents, practices and situations. Billett (2004a) expands on this and argues that such involvement in social practices in the workplace is crucial to both collective learning and the identity formation process. In support of this, Eraut et al (1998), Brown and Duguid (1991) point out workers learn to do their job and become a competent worker

by doing the work and learn from other co-workers. Billett (2004 b) stated clearly that the learning depends on the chance provided by the workplace and the individual's willingness to participate. Socialization is highly related to learning and identity formation.

In a similar way, Lave and Wenger (1991) tied identity formation and learning to participation in community of practice, and other writers have extended their work.

Jesen and Leif (2005) studied the issue of professional identity formation of nursing students. They found that, through participation within the workplace community, the student nurses would both develop an emerging professional identity which assisted and motivated them to learn continuously.

In a similar study, Ohlen and Segesten (1998) also find that the professional identity of nurses is developed through occupational socialization within the workplace community, and is closely connected to the development of professional competence.

Thus, the issues of professional identity, socialization within workplace community and workplace learning seem to be closely inter-connected. The next section will extend these themes and explore identity specifically in terms of how it relates to learning.

Learner Identity

In the last 25 years, studies have begun to suggest that individuals often seem to develop a view of themselves in relation to learning. For example, Boud and Solomon

(2003) explored the labeling of individuals in the workplaces as 'learners', and found that this often conflicted with their own pre-existing identity as (competent) 'workers'. In such cases, the resulting identity clash caused an aversion to participation in further training and development.

Weil (1986) was the first to use the term 'learner identity' to refer to the way in which individuals consider learning in relation to themselves and their lives. It represented the value and beliefs about learning which include personal, social, experiential and intellectual dimension accumulated over long period of time through learning experiences and social interactions. The context (formal or informal) where learning takes place, learners' past experience and their other identities (sex, class, racial...) all would affect the learning process. In extending this theme, Bloomer and Hodgkinson (2000) conducted longitudinal research on young people transformation and proposed that individuals' learning is not only affected by learning related issues like past learning experience also highly intertwined with all aspect of life. Through taking part in the individual social world, individuals make sense of their own action and this further shapes their orientation towards learning, create their own learning career. Mostly, these dispositions and orientations are tacit in nature. In a further study, Crossan et al (2003) pointed out that learning identity and career are fragile and multi-dimensional subjected to sudden change.

Studies such as those outlined above have promoted a consensus that participation and attitude towards learning are strongly influenced by subjective dispositions developed, often tacitly, through experience over time. Depending on the nature of these dispositions, individuals might consider learning irrelevant to them, or they might see it as an essential part of their personal and occupational lives. Yet learner identities may do more than simply promote positive or negative attitudes towards 'learning'. There are, after all, different types of learning, and different people may have a preference for one particular type. As Campenelli (1994), Eraut (1997) and Pillay et al (2003) point out; many people do not recognize informal learning due to its often tacit nature. Conversely, some people may prefer to learn informally and experientially than formally.

The importance of learner identities in orientating individuals and organizations towards learning, and particular types of learning, is illustrated by Bishop (2006). In studying the small firm's participation in training Bishop reveals the influence of managers' own learner identities upon the approach to training and development adopted by the firm. For example, in firms where managers had developed a dislike of formal training providers, the emphasis would fall on informal learning. As this brief review of the evidence has shown, it seems that individual identities and subjective dispositions can impact on workplace learning in a number of ways. The next section

will shift the discussion and expand upon the social factors that influence such learning.

II) Social relation

In recent years, increasing emphasis has fallen upon the social influences on learning, and in perhaps the most influential example of this, Lave and Wenger put forward the communities of practice model to challenge the traditional emphasis on individual learning. As noted previously, Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that people do not learn individually rather they learn when involved in social activity. Learning is seen as a process, an integral part of generative social practice in our everyday life. Lave and Wenger point out that knowledge and learning are produced and situated within a specific context. Knowledge is context specific. The two most important constituents of their social learning theory are legitimate peripheral participation and community of practice.

Community of Practice

Legitimate peripheral participation means “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practice of a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p.29).’ As learning is rooted in everyday social practice, people learn when they interact with other people. Newcomers are normally

located in a peripheral position within a group and have little or no power or knowledge. They have to participate in group activity in order to learn. Only when they acquire the appropriate knowledge can they move into the center position and gradually become expert.

Wenger (1998) points out Communities of practice is not a new idea, but defines it as a group of people with joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire.

People within the group have common goals, they work together and develop their own way of talking and doing things. Lave and Wenger (1991) use examples to illustrate the social learning process. Yucatec midwives is one of those. There is no formal apprentice position in Yucatec midwifery. Girls just follow their mother or grandmother's footsteps to join the occupation. As a young child, the girl just observes and listens to what other midwives do. Eventually, the girl acts as an assistant by passing on equipment or purchasing items for the midwives. After having her own child, the girl might take up more important tasks like conducting massages to the pregnant woman. Finally she will be qualified as the midwife and practice on her own. Thus, through social interaction within the community, the newcomer becomes gradually more competent and eventually an expert.

Lave and Wenger (1991) also raise the issue of power relations within the communities of practice. Being a newcomer is different from being a core member. Core members

would have more power and this imbalance of power could affect the learning outcome if the core members decide to exclude those on the periphery. Learning will be limited if the newcomer is not given the chance to participate in different tasks and they will not proceed to full participation. If the newcomer is given the chance to participate, they will be able to learn more effectively.

More recent studies have gone some way towards supporting Lave and Wenger's model. For example, in a study of apprentices in both traditional (e.g. engineering) and non-traditional (e.g. business administration) sectors, Fuller and Unwin (2003) argued that traditional apprentice sectors have clear skill and job connection. The skills that apprentices learn are strongly related to their occupational identity. For apprentices taking non-traditional courses, training was focused on general key skills. Fuller and Unwin concluded that the more effective participation and learning occurred within the traditional sectors where there was a stronger formation of identity within the communities.

In an expansion of their earlier research, Fuller et al. (2005) study the learning outcome of two occupational groups – apprentices of the steel industry and secondary school teachers. Their result shows that apprentices with more exposure and interaction with different group of people develop better skills and work identity. Those who interact with less people, could only learn fragmented skills and have problems in building their

professional identity. The teachers' groups also show different working and learning practices. Bertels et al (2011) study shows that the increasing in group proficiency and supporting community of practice practices are essential in facilitating tacit knowledge transfer in dispersed collaboration team. Manager needs to build an open climate for risk taking, trust and open interaction. Those communities that offered greater opportunities to participate were those that promoted a greater sense of common identity and provided more opportunity to learn. Thus, not all communities are the same; the nature of their social practices and interactions will impact on the learning process in different ways. Exploring these variations is one of the aims of this research. The studies outlined above show that learning takes place within a particular social context. People learn when they are exposed to the right skill, environment and colleague. Workplace learning is not only limited to skill learning but also in building identity. The failure in forming a common identity could also affect the learning process. It is important to note the differences between each community, since each one has its own belief, style, language and ways of doing things. Such differences appear to have an important impact on workplace learning. More attention is being paid to learning across community of practices. Company can be viewed as a single community but careful investigation would reveal the existence of sub communities within the company.

Learning across communities is not easy and face various difficulties. Mørk et al (2008) observe that radial differences between existing knowledge and the new one would produce barrier in the learning process. The essences of learning across communities are to negotiate a common goal and learn to talk with the same language. The building of common goals and language is far more important than getting knowledge across (Oborn and Dawson, 2010).

Even in small and medium enterprises, there is still sub group within the company. Organization learning might not only related to a single community but also at the inter communities level. Examining the relations between groups and their influences in work place learning is another issues in these study.

Weakness of the model

The communities of practice model brings new insight to our understanding of the social contexts of learning but it is not without criticism. Fuller et al. (2005) state that the apprenticeship examples used by Lave and Wenger are of different cultures and are extreme cases. They question the generalizability of the theory to modern society.

Roberts (2006) questions whether the group interaction principles that underpin the communities of practice model would apply in the same way in different cultures.

Hofstede (1991) proposed that there are societies in which people like to act and think individually (individualism) while some like to act and think in groups (collectivism).

Roberts (2006) predicts that societies with high individualism might have difficulty in applying the communities of practice model, since people might not be willing to conform to group values.

Lave and Wenger have also been criticized for over-emphasizing the continuation of practice within communities. Fuller et al. (2005) point out that the practice of the communities can be regenerated or changes across time. The change might result from external pressure, which is not addressed in the model. Also the predispositions and boundaries set by the well – established communities might hinder their future development (Roberts 2006). Fuller et al. (2005) further criticize the assumption that all learning within communities of practice is a one-way process; Lave and Wenger neglect the ways in which experts learn, and in which novices can still bring in new knowledge and skill to the community. Even core members continue their learning after they achieve the full status. Also the pathway from peripheral to full participation is problematic in nature. They argue that not all members can obtain full membership. Furthermore, the role and contribution of formal education is arguably neglected, as evidence from Fuller et al (2005) and Fuller & Unwin (2003) suggests that apprentices do benefit from attending off the job training classes. Formal Education might be good at delivering academic knowledge while on the job training might good at delivering more practical knowledge. The working context where workers interact with the owner

and other workers is an important site for identity building and learning. As noted above, however, this process may not be a simple one and its form may be dependent on the specific nature of the social practices and interactions of the community. Different communities may support and shape learning differently and this is one of the issues that will be explored in this study.

III) Organizational environment

Strategy and policy

While the apprenticeship examples outlined above demonstrate the importance of the social and community context to learning, they also bring out the importance of organizational policy in learning. Research has suggested that organizational strategies and policy have an important effect on employee's learning and performance (Holton et al 2007).

A common example of this is the use of knowledge management systems, and some writers have advocated the management of knowledge *workers* rather than knowledge itself (Alvesson and Karrman, 2001; Kakabadse et al, 2003).

Other aspects of organizational structure, policy and process have also been cited as influencing learning (and performance). For example, some writers have claimed that performance depends on the design of work process, job duties, and policies to promote motivation etc. These are affected by organizational strategies and

communication. Building a cooperative community, open culture, flat organization structure and reward system could help to promote knowledge sharing within the organization (McAdam & McCreedy 2000).

Other writers have also suggested ways in which organizations could change their strategy and policy to encourage learning in the workplace. Engestrom (2001) argues that it is not possible to meet the needs of the ever-changing workplace by applying a traditional learning approach that focuses on individual formalized learning. According to Engestrom expansive learning emphasizes the involvement of responsible actors in the real situation to collectively learn to develop new forms of work activity. Workers should be placed in real situations and interact with responsible parties so as to develop competence to deal with unstable conditions. Strategies to build an expansive learning environment would include job rotation, forming of working and sharing groups etc (Fuller et al 2005). Also instituting a reward system for knowledge sharing could assist and motivate workers to engage in informal learning. In contrary, in the restrictive learning environment, the learner is only confined to learn in classroom or learn to do a few work processes which highly reduce their understanding of the functioning of whole working situation. This fragmented knowledge is not enough for workers if they encounter any difficulties or for promoting innovation in products or work processes. From this short overview, we can begin to see some of the ways in

which organizational systems, policies and processes can impact upon learning. In the next section, the focus will fall upon the role played by organizational cultures.

Culture

What is culture?

Culture is deeply interwoven into our daily life. As a member of society or a social group one might not notice the functioning and importance of culture. “What is culture?” is a frequently asked question but it has no definite answer. LeVine (1984) stated that culture is a shared organization of ideas that include the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and which shapes the meaning of communicative actions. He stressed that culture provides a common framework for members to perceive incoming information. Friedman (1994) pointed out that culture is a product of stabilizing properties in social reproduction itself, tendencies to the production of similar kinds of experience of the social world or similar frameworks of interpretation.

Hofstede (2001, P.9) described culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”. At the heart of most of these definitions is the idea that culture seems to consist of set of values and is manifest through every day practices such as routines or language use. The core of culture is the values system. The often implicit values we have affect our

beliefs (for example about learning) and how we act. Values are at the centre of culture and beliefs and practices are the outer manifestation of it.

Hofstede (2001) is famous for conducting research into culture for IBM during 1970s to 1980s. . He generated four bipolar cultural dimensions: power distance,

individualism-collectivism, Femininity - Masculinity and uncertainty avoidance and argued that the data generated are representing national values. His model presents the idea

that a nation's culture trait could be represented by the score on the four dimensions.

Hofstede claimed that the ranking of the dimensions of different nations are relatively stable and can be used to predict and explain the behavior of people from various nations.

Hofstede's study is influential but is not without criticism. Baskerville (2003) and

McSweeney (2002) pointed out that it is not appropriate to use nations as a unit for

cultural comparison. There are many sub groups underneath the level of nation; which

might be more coherent, stable and important to the way people think and act than

the national one. Subgroup culture is therefore largely ignored under Hofstede's

model. Furthermore, data from one company cannot be generalized to all contexts.

Also, the use of middle class clerical and technical worker as subjects cause

generalization problems. Hofstede suggested the stability of the national culture.

However, Chiang (2005) argues that the rapid changes that have increased with

globalization make this assumption problematic. Thus, Hofstede's work has been criticized on both methodological and conceptual grounds. However, his work has been highly influential and his essential model of culture (values at the centre and visible behaviors and practices on the outside) has been widely adopted. Many writers have taken this model forward and explored the ways in which culture impacts on various work and learning-related activities.

Culture, Learning and Work

The culture of an organization evolves with its history. Culture affects how employees think, interpret events and behave. Each organization has its own culture which affects the way people communicate, set work standards and the daily routine. Freling and Fichtner (2010) argue that organization culture is an informal coordination mechanism that used to draw connection between individual and organization. This helps to maintain structural stability and reliability. Culture provides a direction for organization and people involved. The notion of managing culture becomes popular as this might help in improving organizational performance. Increasingly over the last 20 years or so, writers have noted that promoting real change in organizations requires more than simply altering policies and procedures; changing cultural beliefs, values assumptions is also crucial. In particular, the building of a learning culture is believed to have a positive impact on organizations (Popper and Lipshitz, 2000). This notion first became explicitly

promoted with the advent of the 'learning organization' concept (Senge, 1990).

There is no one single definition of a 'learning organization', but Senge(1990) was at the frontier of developing the concept and he proposed five disciplines to achieve the goal. They are the personal mastery, mental models, building shared visions, team learning and system thinking. Senge explained that the five disciplines constitute the legs of the three leg stool, which represent the capacity to aspire, the capacity to conversation and the capacity to understand complexity (Gary 2005: 47). These are the foundation for creating a learning organization. Crucially, the success of the learning organization requires the involvement of every member of an organization, it requires the commitment and cooperation of its members. They have to share their own thinking with others and be ready to face conflict in a constructive manner. In order to facilitate this consensual drive for change, argues Senge (in Fulmer and Keys, 1998), it is necessary to create a counterculture to stimulate the existing one. Thus, change becomes a central underpinning for the learning organization.

Senge's fifth discipline is an example of an attempt to formulate the correct values, norms and practices that could constitute a learning culture. But, given that culture is not something with a solid form and is instead embedded within daily practices, there are different views on how culture can actually be managed. Because it is a product of the whole organization, some argue that it is extremely difficult to induce change in

organizational culture (Legge 1995). While others believe that manipulating culture is possible and is essential to organization success (Maull et al 2001). A middle position also exists as some take the view that small changes could be induced to organizational culture through the changing organization practice (De Long and Fahey 2000).

In addressing this issue, with specific reference to culture and learning, Bishop et al (2006) ask what cultural features (e.g. values and practices) might be beneficial in supporting learning within organizations. They propose a three-level model of a learning-supportive culture. In doing so, they put forward a set of tacit values (or assumptions, e.g. that learning enhances performance), explicit values (e.g. that learning should be rewarded) and practices (e.g. systems that reward learning) that can support learning in organizations. Of course, as Bishop et al point out, cultures can also suppress learning in organizations if the features of the culture are not favorable to it. The importance of their work is that it shows the potentially powerful impact that culture can have on learning.

The hidden barrier: power and emotion

But organizations are not only about policy and culture. Where there are people there is very often- perhaps always- a power relation issue. Emotion is part of human life, workers do have emotion. As a result the workplace is often a site where power struggles and emotions play out. Some research has explored how this impacts on the

experience of work, and learning at work.

Emotion in the workplace

The high popularity of the book "Emotional Intelligence" written by Daniel Goleman (1995) raise public's interest in emotion. What is emotion? Emotion is biological driven reaction to our daily encounters. Increases in heart rate in anger, body freezing during fear are ways for us to deal with different situations. It is important to note the psychological foundation as Cote (2005) says particular emotion arises after people appraised the situation, that is emotion is a choice we make after comparing what we perceived to what we expected. As Goleman (1995) says individual's behaviour is governed by two brains, the rational one and the emotional one. Individual's irrational response might be triggered by one's emotional part.

Some argue that emotion is intra personal issue but as Gopinath (2011) argues that emotional play exist in individual, group and organization levels. Elias studies the civilizing process of Middle Age Europe and discovers that change in personal manners is highly related to the change in society. People become more peaceful due to the development of interdependency of life. According to Elias' definition, being civilized means having better control over one's emotions. (Elias 2000, Mennell 1992).

Elias (1978) points out that emotions are still an important part of social life. People form bonds with each other and need emotional satisfaction from others. This also

applies to workplace relations. Workers not only work for wages, they work to gain emotional support. Unfortunately, emotion is often rated as inappropriate in organizational life (Putnam & Mumby 1993). People tend to mask their emotions during work. Short and York (2002) point out professionals need to mask their emotions to protect their professionalism. Cote (2005) discusses that emotional regulation during work might cause strain in workers. Vince (2001) stated the importance of emotion in organizational learning. It determines the possibilities and limitations of learning outcomes. Vince's (2008) study on hospital managers supported that emotional state of managers can make learning possible (in action) or cause learning problem (inaction). Hughes (2001) argues that organizations develop emotional climates within them. Employees who cannot find emotional satisfaction within this climate might generate negative feelings which filter throughout the workplace and affect other people, perhaps affecting the overall mood of the organization in a negative way and causing conflict.

Some writers have shown how employees need to conform to team pressure and follow the rules imposed by organization. The alignment of organizational, team and personal values indicate the mixing of work and personal values and blurring boundaries between personal and work life (Garrick & Clegg 2001, Hughes 2001). The intimate relationship in teamwork can cause individual tension. Some research has

indicated that personal and organizational values are often in conflict, and this has the potential to arouse emotional disturbance among employees (Garrick & Clegg 2001). Gopinath (2011) stated that organizations use policy, rules and HR practices to control employee emotion but there is not much attention paid to employee's every day emotion during work. Hughes (2001) argued that such psychological and emotional complexities are potentially powerful barriers to building a successful learning organization. Employees might refuse to learn or to share their knowledge with others. The study by Shorts & York (2002) further suggests the issue that personal dispositions might induce fear in the learner and that the trainer's (or manager's) ability to recognize and handle emotional problems is vital to success of any training or learning experience. Cote (2005) stated that the problem with emotion is the uncertainty in how receiver interpret the incoming event and how they react to it. Yet the connection between emotions and workplace learning is still far from completely understood, and this is an area that this research will aim to explore.

Power relations

Coopey (1995) argued that authors of the learning organization (such as Senge) neglected the power issue within organizations. They have little to say about the form of government and the role of political activity within the learning organization. Coopey argues that the power imbalance and the urge to gain power and resources

causes management to convey meaning through careful use of language to form new organizational norms which would turn the learning organization into a tool to facilitate managerial control of employee's thinking and behaviors. Thus, according to Coopey, the learning organization actually becomes just a tool for managerial control; it has little to do with genuine learning aims. Control and influence is exerted on workers under the name of Human Resource Management. Managers would try to oppress workers opportunity to learn in order to safe guard their own interests. Coopey (1998) concluded that the trusting relationship for learning does not really exist in modern organizations. Similarly, Contu and Willmott (2003) revisit the photocopying company of Brown and Duguid's (1991) study and they discovered that the community of practice approach is used by management as a way to control workers. Job rotation is an excuse to increase workload. Knowledge sharing is a way for managers to steal the knowledge from workers to protect their power. This coincides with Coopey's prediction that HRM practice and learning-intensive organizational models are designed to protect the management.

This resonates to some extent with the work of Foucault (1980 cited in Alvesson & Kärreman 2001) who states knowledge and power are interrelated issues. Knowledge breeds power and power makes knowledge possible. Knowledge is never a neutral entity. Managing knowledge therefore means managing power within the organization.

Billett (2004a) brings out the issue that the extent to which employees have access to learning and development opportunities depends on their race, gender and affiliation.

One also needs to consider other factors that would affect the outcome of learning.

Even under managerial control and being relatively powerless, employee can employ or respond to learning to undermine the authority of management. For example, they can learn to speak appropriate wording to show their conformity even though they disagree with the policy or mission of the organization (Garrick & Clegg 2001).

Furthermore, Mckinley (2002) study showed that employees could utilize passive resistance like not actively participating in the knowledge management activity to decrease the effectiveness of the program. Lawrence et al (2005) point out learning within organization requires different types of power in order to bring new knowledge from individual level to team level and even organizational level. The power to make other accept the idea, the power to influence organization policy, the power to turn idea into real practice are necessary for knowledge spreading.

This phenomenon of power struggle is perhaps best explained by Elias figurational sociology. From Elias point of view people are not living independently in this social world. Individuals are directed towards and linked with each other in the most diverse way (Elias 1978: 15). As a result all the people are interdependent with each other.

There are power struggles within these bondings. Game models are used to illustrate

how power relations change as the number of player involved changed. In games only with two players, the stronger player has more power in controlling the game. The weaker one still could make his/her own decision and force other to follow his/her direction. As the number of players increases, the power relation becomes more complex. It becomes more difficult to predict the next move. The individual player cannot see the bigger picture of the game; the outcome may not match the expectation of each individual player. As Elias said, "no one is in charge"(Elias 1956: 232). Each player is involved in interdependent power relationships with the others. The structure, the figuration of the game is similar to the society and organization (Elias 1978).

This seems to match with what Billett (2004b) discusses in his work. He pointed out that the opportunities to participate in workplace activity (and therefore to learn) depend both on the management decision and also the worker's intention.

Management does technically have the right to decide what individual workers should do at the workplace. On the other hand, workers with their own interests and priorities would also have a role in deciding their own participation and learning. This agrees with Van der Vegt et al (2011) view that team is a place where learning take place, even with power asymmetry learning could be stifled or even stimulate within team. This is further supported by Collin et al (2011) as they reported that formal hierarchies and

order of power between surgeon and nurse can be contested situationally. This types of power is embedded in daily social interaction, which always reproduce and redefine during interaction. Thus, participation in learning becomes a process of negotiation within power relationships. This study will aim to explore how this process operates within small firms.

Learning within the Small and medium size Enterprise (SMEs) context

Small and Medium size Enterprises (SMEs) employ a large portion of population around the world. Yet there is not a common used definition for SMEs. In Hong Kong, the government classifies company in the service sector with under 50 members and in the industrial sector with under 100 members as SMEs. The European Union classifies companies with 1 to 9 members as micro companies, 10 to 49 members as small companies and with 50 to 249 as medium companies. The present study employs the EU classification as it aims to investigate into the differences between micro and small companies.

As the EU definition suggests, the concept of SMEs really consists of three different size companies. It is not correct to assume they share the same characteristics. Ashton et al (2005) study compares the skill formation of micro, small and medium-size companies and finds that formalization, differentiation and delegation increase as company size increase. Similarly, learning processes also formalized as company size increased. Small

and micro firms were characterized by a tendency towards informal learning (e.g. learning by doing or by observing). Kotey and Sheridan (2004) study also suggested an increase in hierarchical structure, documentation and administration process when the number of employees increased. The results indicated that differences exist between micro, small and medium companies.

Research in SMEs is growing partly because of its economic importance and the understanding that they are not simply scaled down versions of large companies. With regard to HRM and learning, the strategies and theory of large companies cannot directly apply to SMEs. There are a number of characteristics of SMEs. First, the owner-manager influence is strong. Their attitudes, values and beliefs are therefore of prime importance. Annette and McDougall (1999) reported that the attitude of the owner-manager determines, to a large extent, the training and development practices of the company. Dalley and Hamilton (2000) similarly observe that owner-managers tend not to trust outsiders to train their staff, preferring to do it themselves. This is supported by Bishop's (2006) study which shows that the firm's approach to training is highly affected by the owner-manager's personal preferences. Second, SMEs are often being described as lacking resources for training and as having no policy and strategy for human resource development. An investigation conducted by Sheldon (2001) showed that SMEs seldom implement any knowledge management strategy. Marlow

(2000) finds that there is little evidence for use of strategic Human resource management (HRM) in small firms. The HRM practices tend to be informal (Kotey and Sheridan 2001), the communication is similarly informal, and social in nature (Dalley and Hamilton 2000).

Third, as noted above, training in SMEs is normally informal, ad hoc and short term in perspective. Ashton et al (2005) reported that the resources input by SME on training is decreasing and suggested that SMEs tend to rely on informal means in training their staff. Similarly, Vinten (2000) studied 300 SMEs and found that training was mostly practical and on-the-job in nature. Dawe and Nguyen (2007) and Kotey and Sheridan (2004) found that both formal and informal learning are used in training but most of the companies they studied displayed a preference for informal learning. Doyle and Hughes (2004) also emphasize the importance of informal learning in small firms although they also claim that it is often combined with more formal learning. In addition, Lorenzet, Cook and Ozeki (2005) argue that SMEs are more informal and flexible rely more on on-the- job training. Another characteristic of learning in SMEs is its short term perspective. Learning is mainly used to fit the immediate need and not related to business development (Kotey and Sheridan 2004, Annette and McDougall 1999). Thus, learning within SMEs seems to be unplanned, informal and may not support strategic organizational development.

We need to understand the nature of learning in small firms in terms of the challenges that such firms face. For example, Lange et al (2000) propose four barriers for formal, strategic skill development in SMEs. They are cultural barriers, financial barriers, access and provision barriers and awareness barriers. As discussed in the previous section, the culture in SMEs is highly influenced by the owner-manager. Evidences show that the owner-manager sometimes shows resistance to outside training opportunities (Dalley and Hamilton 2000). For financial barriers, it is difficult for SMEs to release employees to outside training as they have to pay for the fee and suffer from the resulting decrease in man power. The problem of poaching further decreases their desire for training.

Another issue is the problem in finding the suitable training provider. SMEs often claim that training courses provided by outside sources does not fit their needs (Vinten 2000) and is not related to the context. They prefer to seek advice from other SME owners and not from educational institutions (Berry et al. 2006). Social networking (Dawe and Nguyen 2007) or mentoring programs (Barret 2006) are reported to be beneficial to the owner-managers. The last barrier is their difficulties in gathering suitable information about training opportunities and training availability.

SMEs as discussed above seem to prefer informal ways of learning. The owner-manager's style has a big influence on the culture and policy of the company.

Learning heavily depends on co-workers, and socialization becomes an important issue.

Other than the learning issue, the power and emotional aspects of SMEs are not well addressed in the literature. The small is beautiful (Birds 1989) and bleak house (Wilkinson 199) description only describes the two extreme conditions within the SMEs. This could not explain the underlying dynamic behind the SMEs. The strength and the type of bonding between members of the firm and the relationship with learning are in need of further study.

Further investigation

From the research outlined above it is clear that the available evidence suggests that learning is related to individual trainee characteristics, social factors within the group and the organizational environment. The studies listed only build a fragmented picture of the learning process. As most research has investigated into one or two of learning factors. Many studies are quantitative in nature and so the data obtained could only indicate the relationship between various factor and learning but cannot really explain the underlying interaction between different levels. We still require a more complete account of how individual, social and environmental factors interact with each other from the employee's perspective.

The present study aims to find out how the three levels interact in the SMEs settings.

SMEs are said to rely on informal learning or training with a short term perspective, the

kinds of learning involved and knowledge generated in the workplace will be investigated in order to explain the learning happening in the SMEs and participants' awareness of different learning and knowledge types. At the individual level, what is the individual learner and professional identity? How do past experience, and relationships with co-workers affect the identity? What is the effect of learning in identity building? In the SME context, how do workers structure their identity as a professional financial consultant and how does this shape their approach to learning?

Socially, the relationships between workers and their effect on participation in social activity will be studied. In a place where informal or social learning play an important role, social relations might take up a very important role to determine the outcome of learning. SMEs are often described as having no formal HRM practices. The practices between the micro and small companies will be compared to find out any differences for example if greater formalization occurs as firm size increases. The influence of the owner-manager will be investigated and the effect of this on culture and learning within the organization will also be studied. Finally, power struggle and the emotional climate will also be investigated. Does power struggle increase as size increase? How does emotion affect learning?

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

The aim of this section is to clearly explain and justify the choice of research method.

The reason for employing qualitative methods to address the research question is examined. A detailed description of interview question design and the research procedure is included. Information about the research setting, participating organizations and respondents are presented to build a holistic picture of the research strategy. Choice and procedure of mode of data analysis are discussed in detail. Ethical issues and reflections on the research are also included.

Choice of Research Approach

The purpose of conducting social research is to have a better understanding of our social world. This understanding relies on the knowledge we obtain from research. The type of knowledge being acquired is different when different research methods are used. As a result in designing social research two fundamental issues need to be considered. First is how different research method generates specific type of knowledge and second is what kind of knowledge the present study aims to generate.

I) Epistemological debate

Our own beliefs affect the way we think, act, perceive and interpret information. How we believe the social world functions will determine what kind of knowledge is useful

to understand our social world. Epistemology is associated with what constitutes as acceptable knowledge (Bryman 2001). Classically there are two main streams of epistemological position: positivism and interpretivism (Bryman 2001) although, as Bryman points out, these should be seen as different ends of a sliding scale, rather than as the only two options available to researchers. Positivism stresses the importance of using a natural scientific research approach in the social sciences. In its purest form, valid knowledge is said to be derived from carefully controlled experiments to eliminate any distortion and interference. The kind of knowledge generated is claimed to be objective and is often considered to have a high degree of generalizability.

Interpretivism takes a contrasting view on studying the social world. Rather than concentrating on finding facts and eliminating interference, interpretivism values the meaning behind the interaction. Taking an interpretative point of view, each social action is unique and one cannot understand this action simply by attempting to delineate a series of objective variables that 'cause' the action. It is claimed that the human actor him/herself does have influences on creating this action. Social action is subjective in nature according to this perspective; one can only understand the meaning by investigating into individual actor's thinking. Social research's primary aim is to find out the meaning behind the action. Only through understanding the meaning

of their actions and thinking, one could understand our social world (Mason 2002). The present study focuses on how individual, social and organizational factors affect workplace learning. Research needs to explain the interrelationship between various factors within the context. The sense making process occurs through participants' action and expression to reconstruct their own version of workplace learning. Based on these broad concerns therefore, an interpretive approach is employed in this research.

II) Research Strategy

The type of research that is to be followed depends largely on the type of knowledge that the researcher hopes to obtain. Bryman (2001) observes that a quantitative research strategy emphasizes quantification in collecting and analyzing data. It is used to test theory and to find the objective reality of the social world. Flick (1998) points out quantitative research strategies are useful in finding cause and effect, quantifying phenomena helps to reach generalization. Quantitative research strategies are also associated with a hypothesis-testing approach, where broad theories are first broken down into specific concepts that are supposed to reflect a social reality (Bryman and Cramer 1990). These concepts are operationalized to form measurable indicators for research purpose (De Vaus 1996).

Qualitative research strategy views the social world from a different angle. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) point out qualitative researchers normally seek to investigate into the

creation of social experience and its meaning. The qualitative school of thought does not see as much validity in quantifying people or social phenomena. Separating people and their context could not produce the whole picture of the social world. Qualitative researchers tend to focus on gathering data about subjective phenomenon such as perceptions, feelings and social relationships and stress an in-depth understanding of each participant and their connection to the social environment. The contexts in which events happen play a major role in the research. It generates data to find out meaning and explanation of the social world. To have an in depth understanding of workplace learning in context and respondents' perceptions of it, quantitative kind of research is arguably less appropriate. Rather a qualitative research approach is used as a way to reproduce a holistic picture of the real situation.

III) Present Research and Tools

In deciding which research strategy to employ in this study, it is necessary to examine the research topic and find out what kind of data is required to address the research question. The present study aims to find out how individual's professional and learner's identity, social group interaction, organizational policy and atmosphere affect participant's learning. It is an enquiry about why and how these factors influence the individual's learning. My major interest is to find out how individual participants perceive learning and the interaction between these factors. The aim of the research is

therefore to investigate subjective meanings, social relationships and their connection to learning. There is no specific hypothesis to test in this study; rather a set of exploratory questions about individual subjectivity and the social and organizational environment. To suit this purpose, a qualitative research strategy, which is targeted to discover meaning and value is employed in this research.

As discussed above, a qualitative research strategy is employed to search for the factors affecting individual perception. But within the scope of qualitative research, there are plenty of research methods like interview, focus group, observation etc to choose from. The choice of qualitative research tool must be based on the need of the present study. By considering the kind of data required and the possible practical problem, appropriate research tools could be selected (Bryman 2001, Polkinghorn 2005).

My study aims to find out how individual respondents perceive learning, their professional, learner's identity, their relationship with their peers and supervisor and their understanding and the effect of organization policy. The data needed to reflect the subjective dispositions of the respondents and the ways in which they attach meaning to learning. With this in mind, it was felt that having conversations and discussions with participants is the best way to obtain the required data. Research tools like interviews, and focus groups could be used to generate this type of data.

At the beginning the focus group was considered as a way of collecting data. A focus group is a kind of group interview and the main benefit is the interaction within the group (Morgan 1997; Field 2000). Through group discussion participants could raise their opinions and make clarification if necessary. Observation could be done at the same time to know more about in group relationships and dynamics. The main problem with using group design is the possibility of hindering the individual in expressing his/her opinion. Respondents might be afraid to expose their true views on the organisation or other team members. For these reasons, focus group was not used. On the other hand individual interviews focus on questioning the individual about specific topics, the data collected is more personal and in-depth in nature (Fontana and Frey 2003). Therefore individual interview was chosen to elicit information from the respondents.

Interview

The possibility of using either telephone or face to face interviews was considered. Telephone interview serves the purpose to obtain data from the respondent through telephone conversation. The researcher can explain and clarify any questions raised during the interview. However, it is more difficult to collect extra contextual information through telephone interviews. Meeting participants in person and in their workplace has a number of advantages. First observation of daily work processes could

be done when meeting participants in their workplace (Goodwin & Horowitz 2002).

Second any problems and queries can be solved and clarified during the interview

session to minimize any misunderstanding. Thirdly other information like body

language and facial expressions can provide extra cues (Fromkin and Rodman 1983).

Face to face interview is chosen as the way to conduct the research interview.

Essentially, types of interview can fall between two extremes: the structured interview,

which is more akin to a questionnaire and rarely, if at all deviates from the set

questions; and the unstructured interview, where few if any questions are scripted and

an open discussion, constructed between interviewer and interviewee, is pursued

(Mason 2002). This study did not employ either of these types. As being too structured

would hinder interviewees to express their point of view. Depth interviews can be very

fruitful but it is not easy to take full control of the interview session. With only limited

time available, it is important to guarantee all the information from interview is

relevant to the study, so the depth interview was considered inappropriate.

On the other hand the semi-structured interview can provide a mid way between the

previous two methods. A question list is prepared to make sure relevant information is

included in the interview. The interviewer can refer to the list as a reminder to keep the

interview on track. Also clarification could be done immediately to prevent any

misunderstanding. Questions are prepared but the interviewees have the opportunity

to express their own view and go beyond the restrictions that a more scripted approach might impose. It was therefore chosen as the interview method used in this study. As Wengraf (2001) points out the semi-structured interview is not simply a short cut to both structured and unstructured interview. It requires well designed questions and could generate rich and in-depth responses from interviewees. More time is spent on designing questions and analyzing data.

Dey (1993) points out the information and meaning provided by individual respondents is related to the context and the process of the social event. To make sense of the information from the interviewee and to understand the whole picture, contextual information is needed for interpretation. When it comes to organization and group issues, information from respondents alone is not enough to understand the real situation. Other ways of gathering data were needed to fill the existing gap.

To obtain context and social process information two methods were employed. First is observation and the second is gathering organizational publications, documents and website information. Publications and documents related to organizational training and development policy could help to find out the organizations' goals and what they have done in this area. Other than the public website designed for public information, the intranet could also be useful in providing internal organization information. Group and social dynamic information was gathered through observation.

Observation

Observation is one of the commonly-used qualitative methods in social sciences. The aim is to have a thorough understanding of the target group/society. By observing and (in some instances) getting involved in people's lives, researchers can have a more holistic picture of the real social life. There are two main ways of conducting observation, one is direct observation and the other is participant observation (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2003). During direct observation, researchers stay within the context of the subjects, they try to take up an un-intrusive position and try to minimize their effect on the people and the context. Researchers would record down the detail of the context, the behaviors and speech produced by the participants for further analysis. The major difference between participant observation and direct observation is the role taken up by the researchers. Researchers in the participant observation study would immerse into the immediate context and have interaction with the participants. The role of the researcher was a matter of great debate in the literature. Traditionally, observers could take up a non-invasive position and should not interrupt the natural setting and people involved in direct observation (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2003). Adler and Adler (1994) proposed that the observer could act as a participant within the context, interact causally and non-directly with the subjects. It was difficult to remain absolutely neutral during observation. It is difficult to constraint

the observer's level of interaction within the context and the extent of change and interference caused by the observer. Participant observation was chosen as the way to conduct observation in this study. Staying in the context, interacting with the people could gather more data and have a better understanding of the situation.

Observation can be done publicly or privately. The observer could take up an overt or covert role during observation (Bryman 2001). Conducting Covert observation would cause serious ethical problems. Furthermore, since all the respondents met with me during the interview, it was not possible to conduct Covert research. Overt observation was chosen to serve the research purpose.

Data Collection

After considering the research strategy and method employed in this study, the data collection procedure is discussed in this section. The sampling method, pilot interview, the access issue, interview schedules and observation procedures are described below. The ethical issues raised from this study are discussed at the end of this section.

I) Pilot interview

After construction of the question list and consent form, five pilot interviews were conducted to test the suitability and effectiveness of the research tools. It was also important for the researcher to practice the whole process and be familiar with the questions for future administration of the research (Hermanowicz 2002). The five

respondents in the pilot interview were from different occupations. Two were social workers, one physiotherapist, one radiographer and one clerical officer. They worked in school or hospital with education background from O level to Masters Levels.

Differences in education level and occupation helped to check if the tools were suitable for respondents from various backgrounds.

Respondents were invited to take part in the pilot study with the aim to provide feedback about the research tools, the process and interviewer's performance. The interview was being video- taped. Video-taping helped me to reflect on my own performance (facial expression, social and language exchange with the respondents).

All sessions were conducted with the same procedure of the research interview.

Consent for video and audio recording was asked. The same set of question list was administered. At the end of the interview respondents were asked to comment on the consent form, questions, the procedure and the interviewer. All feedback was recorded for improvement. I viewed recordings of myself during interviews. Judgement on the facial expression, voice quality, speech rate, choice of word, the technique in replying questions were noted for improvement.

II) The sample

This study aimed to compare work place learning within small and micro companies. It was about the influence of individual, social and organisation factors on learning.

Fifteen participants were from small companies and fifteen from micro companies. The sample was from 2 small companies and 3 micro companies. The reason for choosing participants from only a few companies was because it was only possible to study the effect of group and organisation when the participants were from the same company. If participants were from different companies then it would not be possible to gather the in-depth information required. Such an approach does of course result in a relatively small sample. However, achieving a high level of generalizability was not one of the aims of this research. As a qualitative study, it was not designed to collect large amounts of data to represent the whole sector. It was a study to understand the meaning, and interaction behind between these factors. In-depth investigation of a few companies was more appropriate than surveying a large number of respondents and companies.

However, it was felt that the sampling strategy should be more ambitious than simply selecting one small and one micro firm. A broader sample would help in the identification of organizational characteristics that impact upon individual attitudes towards and participation in learning. Therefore at least 2 of small and micro size companies were chosen as subjects of the study.

At the end there were 2 small and 3 micro companies participating in the research. The sample was obtained through snowball sampling method. Using this method a key

informant was found and s/he would provide contacts of other related people.

Snowball sampling is a non- probability sampling method, which means the sample is not randomly chosen from the desired population. It is often argued that such a approach can lead to bias within the sample, and reduces claims of generalizability (Leedy 1997). As explained above, representativeness was not the primary concern of this study, it was more important to find people within the same working group; therefore snowball sampling is a suitable way in locating the required participants.

The first informant was the owner of a small size company. She was a friend of the researcher and was willing to take part in the study. This informant provided contacts of her subordinates, the owner of another small size company and the owners of three micro size companies to the researcher. Other contacts were obtained from the owners of the small and micro companies. A possible problem with snowball sampling is that informants might refer people who share similar views with them. Also they might not be willing to refer people who were different from the mainstream which might affect others impressions of the company. To minimize the effect the informant was made aware of the aims of the research, and asked to provide contacts that represented a diversity of backgrounds and attitudes within the company. Most informants did not reject the request but they often reminded researcher that certain referrals might not

accept the invitation for interview and they might not be friendly and cooperative as well.

A total of 32 people were contacted and 30 of them agreed to take part in the study.

The other two did not directly reject to be interviewed but they could not book any

appointment as one of them said he was extremely busy, the other one was sick and

travelled abroad later. The background information of the participating companies was

listed in table 1. The fifteen participants of the small company section, 8 were from

small company 1(S1) and 7 from small company 2 (S2). Fifteen participants from the

micro sector, 6 were from micro company 1(M1), 7 from micro company 2(M2) and 2

from micro company 3 (M3).

Table 1. No. of Participants from different companies

Company	S1	S2	M1	M2	M3
No of participants	8(23)	7(42)	6(9)	7(7)	2(3)

()-total no of employee within the company

Affiliation

It was found that all the companies were subsidiaries of larger companies after the

research started. This kind of affiliation is common in the financial industry. The large

financial companies recruited people to sell their product in something similar to a

franchise arrangement. Office space and product information were provided to the recruits, the amount and type of training provided varied between companies. The recruits were generally on their own to decide what and how they do their business. Nearly all participants said that they were working on their own business. When they were doing well they could attract other people to join them and build their own team/company. They usually called the owner of their company their boss. Each company had their own management policy. Training methods and schedules were normally decided by the owner.

All the five companies were subsidiary of one larger and one medium size companies. One is a locally founded investment company, the other one is a multi-national company. The local company worked as commercial agent for other companies, it sold a variety of products from different organizations. There are about 200 employees within the company. The MNC is one of the largest financial company in Hong Kong. It has around 9,000 employees in Hong Kong. It only sells products of its own company. The size and resources of the two mother companies are vastly different. Three participating companies were subsidiary of the local company and the other two were subsidiary of the MNC (Table 2.). Comparisons can be made between the two mother companies and how their support would affect learning within the small and micro companies visited.

Table 2. Participants from affiliated companies

	Local	MNC
Participating company	S1, M1, M3	S2, M2
No. of participants	16	14

III) Getting Access and Permission

Initial telephone contact was made with the owner of S1. She was a friend of the researcher and already knew about the study. During the telephone conversation, the purpose of the study was explained and an appointment was booked. After the interview with this informant, the researcher asked her to provide contacts details of her staff and people from other companies. She wrote down the name and contact details of her staff and asked them to come inside her office. Then she introduced the researcher and asked them if they were willing to help the researcher to finish her thesis. All her staff agreed to participate in the study and the researcher thanked them and would contact them in person to make appointment with them later.

The first permission to all other companies was gained through the owner of S1. After clarifying the kind of companies required in the study, the informant then telephoned the owners of other companies. She told them about the research and asked them if they and their staff would participate in the study. Finally the informant told them the

researcher would contact them later and left the name and telephone number of the researcher with them. Other employee referrals were sought at the end of the owner's interview sessions. People with diverse style and performance were requested for interview. The owners agreed to inform their employee about the interview. All except the owner of M3 were not prepared to provide contact details of her staff. She explained that one of their members was having serious personal problems and they were not in the right mood to participate in any interview.

Compared to the smooth contact with the owners, it was more difficult making appointments and building trust with the employees. The process of contact generally followed the same procedure. After obtaining the contact, researcher would call respondents 2 to 3 days after interviewing the owner. This was to ensure the owners had enough time to inform the employees about the interview. Most employees were willing to participate in the study after they knew it was their boss who referred them to the researcher. During the telephone conversation they were invited to participate in the study and were reminded they had the right to reject the invitation. But some respondents said "It's my boss instruction, how can I reject it". Once again they were assured that they had the right to choose whether or not to participate. This was only an academic piece of research which was not related to their companies and career. The most difficult issue was booking appointments with the employees. A number of

time slots were provided to the employees for the appointment booking and still about 50% of the appointments had to be rescheduled due to various reasons like clashing of training sessions, urgent appointments with customers or just not being available on that specific time. It was necessary to telephone the employees on the appointment day to confirm the interview time. The researcher could not book any appointment with two employees on the contact list. Another two employees were invited to fill their vacancy. Since the researcher had visited the company many times, other team members did know what was happening. Two replacements were found as the researcher visited the office and verbally invited them to take part in the study.

IV) The Interview Process

All interviews underwent a similar procedure. All interviews were conducted inside the office of the respondents. It was important to make the respondents feel secure and comfortable during the interview to encourage them to talk more. Interviewing within the workplace helped respondents to remember and recall events, instances and actions with regard to their work and learning (Goodwin and Horowitz 2002). For the owner and manager grade respondents, interviews usually took place in their room or working booth. Other interviews were carried out in the meeting room, training room or even in an empty managerial booth. There was the problem of conducting interview within an open working booth as people in the nearby booths might hear the interview

content. This might affect respondents' motivation to share their opinion and thought.

On one occasion, no suitable room available and an open booth was the only choice. It was noted that the volume of the respondents were lower when they were interviewed inside the open booth.

The interviewing process was divided into four steps as described by Warren et al (2003). They were the greeting and introduction, the interview, after the interview and the leave taking. Most data are gathered during the interview session. Informal exchange could occur during the "after the interview" session. The researcher usually arrived five to ten minutes before the appointment time and set up the equipment and material for the interview. As the respondent signalled to start the interview the researcher would first introduce her name and the program of study. Then the respondent would be thanked for their kindness to participate in the study. After that the topic and purpose of the study were explained. Usually the employee respondents liked to ask questions, for example relating to the researcher's relationship with their boss, why they are chosen. All questions would be answered to clear the uncertainty of the respondents. The researcher stressed that this was only an academic piece of research related to workplace learning and there was no standard or correct position about this area.

After the introduction a consent form was presented to the respondent for a number

of purposes. It was to gain respondent's permission to audio tape the interview. Also the researcher explained how the data would be managed at the later stage. The respondent was reminded of their right to reject being interviewed or audio taped even after the interview session. The interview started after the respondent signed on the consent form. No respondent refused to be audio taped. All the interviews were audio taped by 2 MP3 machines. Personal information like age range, job title, academic and professional qualification was collected before the interview. A question list was prepared and questions were asked according to the preset sequence. The detail of the interview question list is discussed in the next session. Before asking the last question the researcher would inform the respondent the interview was coming to an end. Researcher would thank the respondent once again after the last question and start chatting with the respondent about their work and related topics. Sometimes useful information was gathered during this phrase of interview. At the end, the researcher would end the session and left the room or booth. The length of interviews ranged from thirty minutes to an hour ten minutes with an average of forty- five minutes.

Interview Questions

The interview questions were formulated to find out what factors affect individuals learning. Three levels of factors: individual, social and organisational factors were

identified based on the literature reviewed and questions were designed to elicit each respondent's perception on these areas. The question list was divided into three sections and each with specific areas to look for.

The first section of the interview aimed to understand how individual experience, learner and professional identity influence learning. Part I was the beginning of the interview. The questions were mainly about the nature of the job. Respondents were asked to describe their post, the daily routine and their career history. This helped to identify the kind of skills required to perform the job. Second part of the questions asked respondents to reflect on their past learning experience like how they learned to do their present job and their most remarkable learning experience. They were asked to evaluate their past learning experiences and the factors influencing their attitude towards them. This information enabled an insight into whether respondents were aware of different types of learning and the influence upon their past experience in learning. The third part was related to learning in the present moment. This investigated the respondent's learner's identity and how they perceive the knowledge from training courses, workshops and the possibility of applying the knowledge on their job.

Part four focused on respondent's professional identity. By asking them to describe their perception of a successful financial consultant and compare themselves with the

ideal this helped to understand their professional status. Narrowing the gap between present and their ideal status might indicate the existence of a learning need. Could respondents identify the needs and what action would they take? The last part of this section investigated the motivation of learning. The factors arousing learning motivation are discussed. Motivation and learning outcome between self chosen and assigned training was discussed. Respondent's views on knowledge sharing was explored.

In section two, the main theme is on group relationships. Questions concentrated on finding out the relationship between company members. Respondents were asked to evaluate their relationship with other members. This was counter checked by asking about their participation in group activity, their conversation topics and who to look to for assistance etc. The influence of other group members in work and learning was discussed. The learning and sharing atmosphere was explored. The information helped to build a holistic picture of the group dynamic and its influence on individual learning.

The last section focused on the organisation issue. Since all companies were subsidiaries of a larger company, the questions asked about their own company and the mother company's policy and atmosphere. Part one checked the respondent's understanding of company training policy and strategy. They had to talk about the training program and other training or sharing strategy used within the company. Also

they were asked to comment on the training culture, strategy and sharing atmosphere of the company. Respondents had to evaluate the company's development plan and any conflict between the organisation and self -development. The second part asked respondents to compare the importance of company, group and self -factors on their own learning motivation and work. This aimed to find out what individuals perceive as the most important factor in pursuing learning. Their understanding and agreement with their company's strategy could be a determinate factor in learning.

For company owners one more set of questions was added to understand the company's training strategy. Since they are the one to design the training and management system, they were asked to explain the training strategy of their company. Information like what kind of training is provided to the employee. The frequency and the one responsible for the training were questioned. The reason and purpose for the existing training system were also probed. The support provided for training by the mother company was also discussed.

V) Observation

The observations conducted in this research were not following a fixed procedure. The role of the researcher and place of observation varied across companies. This phenomenon was caused by the relationship between the first informant and the

researcher. As the researcher was friend of the first informant, employees from S1 had seen her in the office before. Employees working in M1 and M3 all knew the first informant and they were more accepting of the presence of the researcher in their office. The condition was not the same in S2 and M2 where no-one was familiar with the researcher and only the two owners knew informant one.

Observation was primarily done at the office. After determining the working routine, the researcher had thorough discussion with the owner about the time of observation. All the employees would attend daily meetings, contact their customers and did their paper work in the morning. They went out to visit their customers in the afternoon and at the evening. As a result, half-day observations were scheduled in the morning with all the companies except M3. Interviews were also carried out if respondents were available and in the office. As mentioned in the previous section, one member from M3 was suffering from personal problems. They had cancelled the morning meeting and most of their group activities. Observation could not be done on this company. The researcher also visited the offices during afternoon and the evening to conduct interviews. Observations were also done in these time slots. Other than the office area, the researcher also joined the lunch gathering of S1 and M1 companies.

The observations performed a number of roles. First it was to find out how respondents performed their job like booking appointments by telephone, preparing

policies and proposals. Second, the researcher would observe the interaction between the employees. Would they chat with each other? What were they talking about? Who would they ask for help or advice? Did any sub groups exist in the company? Third, the organizational atmosphere was also observed, as the employee's attitude and reaction during training and group discussion could provide a useful cue in this area. Observing the physical environment provided information like whether the company posted their goals, vision and organization information openly to the employees. Anything observed was written down in note form. The notes taken were related to the work, social interaction, organizational culture and environment. These notes helped to gain an insight into the social and organizational environment of the firm, and of the skills used by employees in their daily tasks. This also helped to inform the questions asked during the interviews.

For example researcher stayed in a working booth in Mood Company and observed how employee move around the office, who they talked to and what their conversation about. Their topics were about customer's problem, difficulty in handling client, places for lunch and family issue. People mostly visit their in-group members, they seldom visit members of other groups. During interview researcher would also ask about their office interaction like who to visit and what's their conversation topic etc. Researcher could compare the data from observation to the data from interview to create a fuller

picture of the group interaction.

About the lunch gathering members of Blue Company went to the restaurant in several

group, they would not wait for every members even most of them were in the office.

At the beginning they were all aware of the present of researcher and only talked to

the one next to them. Only when their boss formally introduced researcher, they

started to discuss about their stage performance. One of the member mentioned

that she need a basket and wanted others members to find it for her. The other

member then reply "what don't you ask me in the office?" and she promised to bring

the basket on the day of performance. Actually since most members were in the office

in the morning, it seemed strange that they did not talk to each other about their

problem.

Researcher made a written record on each observation session and during interview

visit. Sometimes special issues related to individual, social and organization were

spotted after the observation and researcher could clarify or gathering further

information during the next interview or observation. The relations between Blue

Company is not that close during the lunch gathering, researcher would talk about the

gathering with respondents and ask them to clarify question like do they talk to others

during the office to gather further information in this aspect.

VI) Collection of organization document and information

Each company's websites were visited (if any) before interview. Organizational documents were collected in two ways. Documents posted openly in the office were read and notes were taken for future analysis. Freely available brochures were given to the researcher during the interviews. The researcher also asked for booklets, monthly reports and internal circulation material during interview. One of the respondents logged in to the intranet system and explained the training program provided by the mother company and this helped to get deeper insight into the organizational training and development strategy.

VII) Ethical Issues

It is important to ensure this study was ethical to all participants. Ethical problems were considered in all stage of the research. The following was used to explain the reasons and procedures used to protect the rights of participants.

This research was designed to be an overt. Being overt meant all participants knew they were engaging in academic research. Access to the company was gained by introducing and explaining the purpose and procedures of the study. Other than getting each company's permission, informed consent was obtained from individual respondents before the interview. All questions related to the research were answered to make sure respondents felt secure and confident about the interview.

Considering the power relation problem, all participants were reminded that they had the right to refuse taking part at any stage of the study. The data they provided during the interview would not be exposed to their boss and colleagues. Also the place where the interview took place was chosen by the respondents. This was to make sure that respondents felt safe and comfortable during the interview. Also to minimize any potential conflict and embarrassment caused by the interview. The data handling and analysis procedures were explained in detail. As all data was kept confidential by the researcher and anonymity was promised. All tape- recorded data was transcribed and stored in the computer of the researcher only. All the audio recording and transcriptions would be destroyed after completion of the doctorate course.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed without the use of data analysis software. The reason for this is that even the most powerful computerized data analysis tools cannot really interpret nuances of meaning in interviews; this is something that only the researcher can do. In studies like this, where an in-depth understanding of subjective states is required, this is an important consideration. As Gillham (2000) explained that respondents could express the same point by very different ways. There can be an important difference between the latent and manifest meaning of a sentence (e.g. "its hot today"-surface –it is really hot/ deep-switch on the fan). A computer program could only read the surface

meaning and miss the real deep meaning. The paralinguistic features of speech like voice quality and tonal changes could convey a different meaning which is not detectable by a computer program (e.g. the boss is good-flat tone (the boss is really good) / my boss is good-rising tone(showing disagreement)) Hong Kong people tended to use both English and Cantonese in their conversation, this kind of language switching or even combination make it more difficult (去 training- attend training) to analyze conversations with the computer program. Therefore, it was felt that the analysis of interview data could be most effectively achieved without the assistance of computer-aided analysis programs.

I) Handling data

The interviews

All interviews were audio taped by 2 MP3 machines. The interviews were fully transcribed and recorded using Microsoft Word. Audio files of the interviews were stored in the MP3 machines and the researcher's computer. The written files of the interviews were stored in the researcher's computer, memory card and a print out version. Each interview was given an individual file name with some respondent's particular description. For example, the file name for owner of small company 1 was S10.

The working page of the work file was divided into two columns. The left column was

the transcription of the interview. The right column was left blank initially. The column was used to note down the theme and code according to the coding system developed (explained below). For example the past learning experience affected the present learner's identity and this was one of the codes under the theme of individual factors. A word file was opened for each code (learning experience). Code files under the same theme were clustered to form folders (individual factor). Extracts relating to the specific code were then copied and pasted into that specific file for later analysis.

The Observation and Document

Notes taken during observation and the extracts from organization documents and websites were also coded under the same system. A column was added to include the source of data, for example if it was from observation/document/website, as well as the venue and time that it happened or was obtained. Related data was then copy and pasted to that specific code file for further analysis. For example the notes taken during the lunch gathering like "members not talking to each others in the office" and "members not willing to wait for other" (people with close relationship usually go to the restaurant) together were recorded under the social relation-company relation-Blue Company column. These incidents become a prove of members' relationship in Blue Company.

II) The Coding System

As Dey (1993) states, a simple descriptive approach to qualitative analysis is not normally sufficient to excavate the meanings behind the data. The integration of context, meaning and process provided a systematic way of understanding the phenomenon being studied. The initial step required was categorization of the data. Through categorizing the data from interviews, observations and documents, connections were made.

The first step was to determine a system by which the data could be categorized (Gillham 2000). Categorization of data required a well-developed coding system. As described by Weston et al (2001) the process of developing a coding system was a dynamic one. Codes were first developed before the data analysis stage according to the themes identified in the literature review. The system was an open system and would change overtime. Old codes were changed and new codes were developed as the researcher read the transcription over and over again. Taking the relationship between organizational policy and learning as an example. The coding system was as below:

There were three main themes within this area: the organizational policy, organizational culture and individual perception. The category of organizational policy was further divided into four sub-themes: the promotion of training, the resources

used in training, the course provided and other facilities for learning. It traced how the organization put its policy into practice. How many trainers were employed? What kind and level of courses were provided? How they promoted the training and any facilities or method to promote learning and sharing.

The second theme was about organizational culture. It aimed to find out the learning and sharing culture within organization. It was important to know about the existence of sharing activity and who organized it. The learning culture was estimated by the percentage of people taking in house and outside training and from participants' perception of their companies learning culture.

The third theme was related to individual perceptions of organizational training policy. The perception could be positive or negative and its relation with content and amount of courses provided. Internal communication affected employee's reception of training news. The reason for enrolling in internal and external courses could help to reflect the pros and cons of in-house training. The commitment of employees to the organization was a reflection of their satisfaction with the organization. Similar coding systems were developed for individual and social factors. Transcription, observation notes and documentation were analyzed according to the coding system.

Reflection on the study

Encountering problems is normal in conducting research. The choice of method and field work experience generated issues for reflection. Problems in the research approach were reconsidered.

The main theme of this study was about learning within the SME workplace. In this study a qualitative approach was employed. The number of respondents participating in this research was relatively small. Even though in qualitative studies, generalization is not the main purpose of research; the small number reminded that care should be taken when applying the results to other SME and financial companies. Originally the intention had been to explore learning within SMEs as discrete, independent entities. As discovered during the research, these companies were subsidiaries of larger organizations, so a separate level was added and this further complicated the study and affected the representativeness of the participating companies. Major reflection on this research was related to the researcher's relation with the first informant. The close relationship caused two controversial issues. First was the researcher's role and the second was the different level of trust gained from different companies.

One of the major issues that impacted on this study was the relationship between the first informant and myself. On first reflection, this relationship could be viewed as a

positive. Some of the first informant's working colleagues knew about me before the study. As a result my presence in the office was not something special. Even newly contacted respondents felt easy when the researcher was around or during the interviews. Similar situations were found when the researcher was interacting with respondents from M1 and M3's employees. The employees from these companies were more friendly and even initiated conversation with me. Conversation topics varied from present research, researcher's work, the first informant, computer- device and idols etc. They even invited the researcher to join their lunch gatherings.

On the other hand, the interaction between employees from S2 and M2 and the researcher was more formal. Employees usually treated the researcher as their customer. Some even stared and talked about researcher's presence. Since only few people knew about the reason why the researcher kept showing up they found it strange as they saw the researcher time and time again in the office.

The role of the researcher was different in the two situations. Researcher picked up a participant's role in situation one and more like a quiet observer in situation two.

Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2003) pointed out that the observer could take up different roles that negotiated different identities across communities. The role and identity variation inevitably produce different observation results. This led to problems

in trust levels, affecting responses and later in data analysis stage (Declercq 2000).

Respondents from M2 were very aware of the researcher's action. When one of the respondents was contacted by the researcher she immediately replied that "You just called respondent 2 and who are you going to call next?" The most frequent asked questions in S2 and M2 were "You know my boss?" "Why s/he chose me?" Many of them replied that they had an appointment after the interview and requested to finish the interview within a specific time frame.

Since respondents treated the researcher as a friend of their boss. They might have a false perception that they had to please the researcher so as to maintain a good relationship with their boss. They might have altered their answers to suit researcher's need. Also if the respondents chosen by the owner were not truly representative of the company then the result obtained would be biased and could not represent the true picture of the phenomenon being studied. The owners were reminded by the researcher about the purpose of the research and requested them to provide referrals with different backgrounds and performances.

With all the potential problems discussed above, it was necessary to find out if they really impact on the research to any significant extent. The data obtained from interviews suggested that the above factors did not affect the results. Respondents

from M2 and S2 were cooperative and willing to extend the interview time when necessary. Also they expressed different views on learning with their boss. Some replied that they really did not like to attend seminars. One even said he thought he had attended enough training after working in this field for more than 19 years and he needed to take a break first. The respondents were willing to share their own opinion and feeling. They even criticized their company and group members. This was a sign that they had enough trust with the researcher and the respondents chosen were not biased. The data obtained should be broadly representative of each company.

Lastly, it was still a problem with the researcher's role. More participation and interaction generated more information in context building and the interpretation of data. The difference in role and identity during observations might have an effect at the data analysis stage. The participant role in S1 and M1 produced more fruitful contextual information than in the other companies. This discrepancy might have impacted on the data analysis phase.

Conclusion

The methodology chapter served to explain and outline the research process of this study. Analyzing the research question from the epistemology perspective revealed it

as a quest to understand the effects of individual, social and organizational factors affecting learning within SMEs. A qualitative approach was adopted to find out respondent's views on workplace learning and the influence of past experience, professional identity, group dynamics and organizational policy and their interaction.

Semi-structured interviews accompanied with observation and document analysis were used to collect data. A total of 2 small and 3 micro companies were involved in this study. Fifteen respondents from small and fifteen from micro companies were invited for interview. All companies were subsidiaries of either one local company or one MNC. Data from interviews, observation and documents was analyzed with a pre-set coding system. The system was subjected to change and amendment during the data analysis stage.

Possible ethical issues were considered all through the research process. Open consent, anonymity, and data protection were ensured. The major issue was to protect the rights of the respondents, and to avoid their social and political risk within the workplace. Reflections on the research method and data collection were conducted. Factors affecting the researcher's role and identity were discussed. The potential problems were considered. There was no evidence showing that these were substantial problems that skewed the findings of the study.

After considering how the data was collected and analyzed, the findings are described in the following chapters. The background and context of the companies are outlined and findings on individual, social and organization levels are presented and discussed.

Chapter Four: Background

The aim of this section is to outline and discuss the findings that emerged from the interviews and observations. It is divided into two parts. The purpose of the first part is to provide some basic background information about the participating companies.

Such information is useful in understanding the empirical context and organizational settings within which the data were collected. Basic information such as company size, structure and training policy is included in this section. The second part of this section discusses in detail the findings relating to individual, social and organization-level influences on respondent's learning.

Background

I. The affiliation

Financial consultants can work for banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions. The titles adopted by consultants differ from one company to the next.

They were called insurance agent, in the past as they only sell insurance product. Now they are able to sell insurance, fund and provide trust service to their client. The relationship between financial consultants and their companies is not straight forward.

Financial consultants working in commercial banks would be directly employed by the bank. For some other insurance and financial institutions, their relations with financial

consultants are not so direct.

There is a hierarchical structure within the financial institution. The largest unit is called the agency or district. With smaller units call company or team. Financial consultants with three or more years of experience can start to recruit their own subordinates to build his/her own team. As team members become more experienced they could recruit their own subordinates. Some teams grow fast and some teams remain small or even disappear as the members resign or the team leader left the institution. As a result, there are large agencies and small teams within the institution.

The financial institution provides office space, fax, telephone, internet services to the consultants. Training and administration works are partially provided by the institution. Daily operation, routine, yearly goal and consultant management are left to the team.

Mostly there is no basic salary and the income is based on the sales volume of each consultant. Each team has its own name and they function individually. Sales targets, training content, meeting schedules, and recruitment are designed by the team leader.

This type of affiliation decreases the direct impact of the mother company on it's subsidiaries.

The performance of financial consultants is evaluated in terms of two aspects: individual sales volume and the building of their own teams. Top performers would achieve recognition as members of the million dollar round table (MDRT). Professionals

whose income, commission or premium can reach the MDRT organization standard (e.g. Basic membership requires income of US\$150,000.00 in 2011) can apply for the membership. Less than 1 percent of the world's financial professionals are members of the organization (MDRT Organization). Direct supervisors can earn commission on their subordinate's business. Therefore the supervisor with more and high performing subordinates has more income.

II. Participating Companies

A) The Mother Company

There were two mother companies within this study. Both were involved in financial services business but they were different in a number of aspects.

1. Trust Company

Trust Company is a locally found organization. Originally Trust Company was the local office of a US multinational insurance company. The original company had only sold financial products of their US head office. In 2002, the local president broke away from the US Company and founded the Trust Company. The new company still provided insurance, investment and trust services to its customers. The major difference was Trust company now sold products from a number of insurance and investment organizations.

There are about two hundred affiliated financial consultants with the company. It has

administration, marketing and training departments. It also hires financial analysts to work for the company. Trust Company still employs the training strategy used by the original company. New recruits from companies affiliated to the Trust companies have to participate in an initial training course. This one week program provides participants with basic product knowledge, selling and self management skills. In-depth training is provided by immediate supervisors not by the Trust Company. Financial analysts would regularly provide seminars and workshops to all financial consultants to introduce new products and latest market trends.

It is worth noting the low level of resources available for training in Trust Company, and the impact that this has on the central provision of formal training and development.

Only one part-time trainer is employed to provide training. There are no extra financial and human resources made available for the development of affiliated Financial Consultants.

2. Multi Group

In contrast to Trust Company, Multi Group is the local branch of a US multinational company. The US Company is one of the biggest financial companies in the world.

Multi Group has over 9000 affiliated Financial Consultants and is one of the largest financial companies in Hong Kong. Its business ranges from insurance to investment and trust services which are similar to Trust Company. The main difference is that Multi

Group only sells products of their own company.

As Multi Group is a large company, it has administration, marketing, underwriting, claims and training departments etc. Unlike Trust Company, Multi Group has a large training department and it provides training to all Financial Consultants at different levels and in different roles aspects. There are over 70 trainers within the training department. All new recruits have to participate in an initial training program. All Financial Consultants have the right to access the official web site of the company.

Training programs are listed on the web site and consultants could enroll their desired training session through the intranet system. Training includes skill and product knowledge training for Financial Consultants, recruitment and team building training and agency management for management level staff. Other issues like communication skills, personal image and financial knowledge are also provided. The training provided is free of charge. Some training is compulsory and other is free to apply.

Despite their common business in the financial sector, Trust Company and Multi group are different in size, with different training policy and resources available. As will be seen, these differences are important in shaping the human resource development strategy. It is possible that this factor would affect their affiliated companies and the employees.

B) Small company

1. Mood Company

Mood Company is an affiliated company of Trust Company. It consists of 23 employees.

The owner of Mood Company “Sally” was a senior financial consultant who had worked in this field for more than twenty years. Personally Sally’s performance as measured by key indicators was good and she had been a qualified MDRT member for several years. She appeared to have a very positive attitude towards training and learning and was now studying in an EMBA (Executive Master of Business Administration) course.

The formation of Mood Company was not through recruiting. It was formed by grouping existing Financial Consultants within Trust Company. The Financial Consultants with no supervisors were grouped in an attempt to provide a more effective management structure. In the past Mood Company’s training sessions were run by all the experienced staff within the company. All new recruits were trained together no matter who their supervisor was. This training strategy was no longer applied as Sally found it difficult to ask all supervisors to cooperate in the training issue. Now each team holds their own training sessions.

The overall performance of Mood Company’s employees is fair with two to three displaying very high levels of performance (attaining MDRT standard). As described by

Sally, most of the employees were able to earn an income beyond the basic requirement but she said it was not possible to force people to work harder if they did not want more.

2. Star Company

Star Company is an affiliated company of the Multi Group. It consists of 42 employees.

The owner “Donald” was an EMBA classmate of Sally. He was also a senior and successful Financial Consultant himself. During the research, it became clear that continuous learning and training was considered by Donald as an essential part of career success. He stressed how he acted as an example to encourage his employees to take part in learning.

Unlike Mood Company, the formation of Star Company was through recruitment. New recruits were from other companies, existing customers or referral from friends. Initial training was provided by the Multi Group. Follow up training was provided by Management of Star Company, immediate supervisors and Multi Group. There were many opportunities for sharing between Financial Consultants. High performing members were asked to share their experience with other companies. The members decided whether to take part or not. Sharing events were held by Multi Group, between affiliated companies and within Star Company itself.

The performance of Star Company was good according to most indicators. They ranked in the top section within Multi Group and nearly half of their Financial Consultants have reached the standard of MDRT with their certificate hanging on their office wall or printed on their name card. Outstanding performers were often invited to share their experience with other companies. As reported by Star Company employees, they were all aware of others performance and they did feel pressure from working with high performers. With regard to management, Donald would like to maintain good working relationships between the employees. He had held a Christmas party, Chinese New Year gathering, gourmet party and even built a football team within the company.

C) Micro Company

1. Blue Company.

Blue company was relatively large when compared to the other two micro companies. It had 9 members and all were experienced Financial Consultants. The owner "Cindy" was a senior Financial Consultant with over 20 years experience. As a high performer, she started to create her own company for more than 10 years. Recently she was studying a BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) course.

Even though Cindy started to form her own company 10 years ago, the present Blue Company was formed during 2002 (establishment of Trust company) by gathering Financial Consultants with no supervisor together. This was similar to the way in which

Mood Company members were grouped together during the reformation of the mother company. Regarding the training and management issue, Cindy explained that she would like to keep a distance from her subordinates. This was a conclusion from her past experience. She believed that a close relationship could not help to improve individual employees' performance and would only create management problems. The performance of her Financial Consultants was fair to good as they all met mother Company's standard. The consultants had already developed their own client networks, so Cindy felt that close monitoring of their work was not necessary.

2. Elite Company

Elite company owner "Audrey" was an EMBA classmate of Sally and Martin. There were all together 7 members within the company. Audrey herself was a high performer with an unusually good record. She worked as a Financial Consultant for 16 years and was qualified as an MDRT member for more than 10 consecutive years. The experience of other Financial Consultants varied from one year to 6 years.

Audrey recruited all her subordinates by herself and all of them were her friends or customers before. Elite Company started about two years ago but the performance of each member was high when compared to other Financial Consultants. At least five members were qualified for MDRT. Audrey stressed her close relationship with her subordinates. In contrast to Cindy, she felt that a close working relationship between

herself and her consultants would enable her to motivate them more effectively, thereby hopefully having some impact on performance. This sometimes caused management problems as Audrey found it difficult to divide time between team management and personal work. She believed that learning could help to improve individual performance and always encouraged her subordinates to extend their learning.

3. Tree Company

“Paula” was the owner of Tree Company. Like other owners she was a high performer herself. Tree Company had three members and was the smallest company in this study. The experiences of other members were unknown as Paula refused to disclose any information about her subordinates.

As a small company, it did share a similar routine with other companies. Paula found it hard to manage the training by herself and she liked to combine training events with other companies or groups if a common training need was identified. She had a strong belief that learning was the key to improve one’s performance.

Paula started her company about 11 years ago but as the turnover rate of her Financial Consultants was high the size of the company remained similar for the past ten years. By all indications that could be obtained over the course of the research process, the relationship between company members appeared relatively harmonious and

productive. All the activities of Tree Company were stopped during the research period as one of the members was suffering from personal problems.

Chapter Five: Knowledge and Learning

The focus of this chapter is to identify what kind of knowledge was acquired in the workplaces visited, and how it was acquired. The learning experience of respondents is explored in the first part. Factors that affect learning experience are also discussed.

Then the role of informal, formal and social learning in the workplace is discussed. The possibility of integrating informal ,formal and social learning is followed.

Common themes in Knowledge and learning

There are in total thirty people who participated in this study. They can further be divided into three groups. These groups indicate three distinct phrases of their career life. The first group comprises of participants with one to three years of working experience. They are treated as freshmen within the company. Initial training is given when each new recruit joins the company. Follow up training is provided after six months or one year depending on the company. The turnover rate is relatively high during the first three years. More advanced training is normally provided to remaining financial consultants as their turnover rate is lower when compared to the juniors. The advanced level training is divided into two paths; one is for financial consultants who intend to concentrate in doing their own business. The other one is for financial

consultants who would like to become supervisors and build their own team. Financial consultants with over ten years of experience might go through both paths.

Financial consultants in the first group are under intensive training in order to build up their skills and knowledge. Those in the second group are choosing their career path and this inevitably leads to further training and learning opportunity. The backgrounds of people in the third group are more complex. Some of them are successful supervisors with a growing team of subordinates. Some might have previously been supervisor but concentrate on their business now. There are also people who are managers but their teams remain small for a long period of time. With such different needs and experience, it is interesting to see if they would view learning in a different ways.

Different aspect of learning

In the first part of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on their own learning. They were asked to recall how they learned to do their job, their most memorable learning experiences and how they view formal and informal learning. This helped in determining whether participants were aware of different types of knowledge, learning methods and their perception of learning.

Broadly speaking six ways were identified by the participants in terms of how they learn to do their job. They are:

1. Training provided by the mother company
2. Training provided by supervisor or manager
3. Observe others during work
4. Ask others for help
5. Learn from their own work
6. Taking courses outside the company

Nearly all participants stressed the importance of learning from work. About half of the participants reported the help of organizational training. One third of them mentioned the training provided by immediate supervisors and managers. A few of the participants reported that they like to ask or observe their colleagues. The finding supports Eraut et al (1998) observation that learning from others and from work are a central part of professional development. The result indicates the importance of learning from work and one's experience but we should not neglect the importance of formal training.

It was mainly participants with less than 10 years experience who highlighted the helpfulness of formal, organization-provided training. This can largely be explained by the fact that there was no or minimal training provided by such organizations until

around ten years ago. As reported by Zoe (Blue Company), a financial consultant with over 13 years of experience “...there was only half day training for calculating the premium another half day for proposal presentation. I had to ask my manager when I encountered any problem...” In contrast to Lily (Elite Company), a financial consultant with 18 months experience, the difference is easy to see “The Company provides training to help us to pass the license exam before we really join the company. After we pass the exam the company will provide initial training and follow up training after six months...” The two mother companies provide one week to three weeks initial training for their new recruits and follow up training after six months or one year. As a result it is easy to understand why only those with less experience will report the help of organizational training. This is a reflection of the change in organization strategy. This suggests that companies are becoming more concerned with the standard of their new recruits. It is also a response to new government requirements.

In the past, there was no special training or accreditation requirement for people who sell insurance. More than ten years ago, a simple written test was introduced as a requirement for new entrants to the industry. Now, there are in total six different papers for different professional areas. Paper one and three are pre requisite for selling life insurance. Paper four is necessary for selling investment products. The change in professional requirement is part of the government’s effort in improving the

professional standard of financial consultants in order to provide better services to the customer. This is mainly because the previously popular informal learning approach had come in for some criticism for not having predictable or standardized outcomes. Formal learning is therefore preferred by government organizations when it comes to large scale standard elevation and maintenance. When it comes to the organization level, formal training is also a measurable reference to show the organization's effort in developing the human resources. Therefore, it is important to determine how the recent emphasis on formal training provision has worked alongside the more traditional means of social and informal learning.

Basic and work related training can be provided by company and team. Participants also enroll in courses, seminars and workshops held by outside organizations. Of course, as will be discussed later in the chapter, other than receiving formal training, knowledge and skill are also acquired through group interaction. It can be asking a colleague for help or just observing what others are doing.

When discussing participants' most memorable learning experience, respondents generally referred to formal training events, and two main issues repeatedly emerged.

They are the content and format of the event. According to the participants, the usefulness of content is essential in making a deep impression. For example Sally the owner of Mood Company recalled that she learned the essence of management from a

management course. She said the trainer stressed that people could not be controlled but you could try to care for them. Besides usefulness the shock and freshness of the content also affect people's impression. Daisy (from Star Company) reported that she was shocked when she joined a personal growth course. During the course the trainer pointed out trainees' weakness and tried to direct them to a new person. She said it was a shocking experience and she had never tried anything like this before. A similar experience was shared by Catherine and Joyce (members of Elite Company). They found a training course about team work was very interesting as they used to work by themselves alone and this concept was new to them.

The second element that affects the learner's impression is the format of training. For instance, role play exercises and outward bound activities are examples reported by participants as impressive. David (Mood company) recalled his remarkable experience as joining the DSA (Distinctive Salesman Award) competition. He had to undergo special training to attend interview and a role play contest. He reported this as a memorable experience from which he developed some crucial sales skills. Participants responses point out the importance of context and content to make training memorable.

When discussing about formal training, both positive and negative opinions were reported. In the positive side, respondents agreed that formal learning courses

provided basic knowledge for attendants. Amy (Mood Company) said “Formal training is useful especially when it helps to increase the pace of learning”. Formal training courses provided by the mother company or outside companies had a curriculum that covered all the fundamental knowledge to attendants. As described by Sylvia (Star Company), formal training was generally systematic, it might help attendants to understand and organize the incoming information more easily. The results therefore seem to indicate that formal training could be useful to SMEs. This reminds us that we should not perhaps go too far in emphasizing the role of informal learning in SMEs.

Beyond providing basic knowledge and skills, formal training was also often seen as a way of broadening one’s horizon. Donald (owner of Star Company) stressed that the content of the course or workshop might introduce new insight and promote higher targets for financial consultants. This could encourage others to set higher goals in their career. For experienced participants, attending courses could help them to revise their existing knowledge. Sylvia (Blue company) said “...its a kind of revision for me and it helps me to deliver training to new recruits.” Some of them said that the course content could be used to support their presentation with more factual information. This made them more professional and informative in front of their customer.

However, nearly one third of the participants expressed negative impressions of formal training. The most frequently mentioned problem of formal training was that it was too theoretical in nature and this accords with much of the research on learning in small firms. The content was only about ideal situations and therefore, according to some respondents, failed to acknowledge the range of practical problems that emerge in reality. It can tell you how to present the proposal but it could not teach you how to handle problems from every customer. As Daisy (Star company) said formal training could only build up a two dimensional representation of work, it was not close to real life. The most heard complaint regarding formal training was that it was not practical enough. Gordon (Mood Company) pointed out that the content of formal training might be too broad and he could not apply all in his work.

Turning to informal learning, it was perhaps not surprising, following the current literature on learning in small firms, to find out that all participants valued the knowledge they gained from their work. This type of learning was generally viewed as practical and very close to their daily needs. Lily (Elite Company) explained "...thirty clients that you meet are all different, there is no standard solution and you have to try different methods..." Different financial consultants had their own client niche and it was not thought possible for any formal training course to cover such a great variety. Furthermore, informal learning was seen by respondents as being grounded in specific

issues and problems, rather than broad and abstract in nature. When they asked for help they had a definite question. Elaine (Elite Company) reported that “I learn a lot when I work as Audrey’s personal assistant. I learn how to deal with clients when I attend her appointments.” Sylvia (Blue Company) said “I asked my supervisor whenever I encounter any problem and this really helps me in building skill and knowledge in handling client’s objections.”

However, there were acknowledged draw backs with informal learning. Amy (Mood Company) clearly described one problem “it just like walking with your eyes covered, you can’t see what’s out there and you don’t know where to find the answer.” The learning target and outcome were not as specific as the formal learning she had experienced and it depended on the individual to find their own answer and being able to recognize when learning had actually occurred. The other problem raised was that informal learning was sometimes too closely related to work. The focus might be too narrow and the individual could not see a bigger picture him/herself. Donald (Star Company) stated “people only see what they are doing and it does not help to advance into a higher level.”

About one third of the participants commented on the relationship between formal and informal learning. Kelly (Mood Company) explained that formal and informal learning were like the hardware and software of a computer, where the proper

functioning of the machine depends on both parts. Formal training built the foundation for participants; it provided the basic framework for daily work. Also it helped them to identify important point for further learning. As a result, they learned faster and better if they could synchronize both parts.

The importance of Both Formal and Informal Learning

Source of Knowledge

The answers of the participants helped to illuminate where knowledge is from. In general, the respondents' accounts indicate that their professional and vocational knowledge came from formal training, their self experience and from others (colleague or client). This accords with Nonaka's (1991) classification of knowledge. The knowledge gained from formal training is in written text, note and general in nature. This is the explicit knowledge. While the knowledge gained from work or others is context specific, personal and rooted in action; this is the tacit knowledge. For most respondents, learning experiences that involved the contextualization and application of formally-acquired knowledge seemed to have the most effect. This does normally not involve a high technology or expensive training experience. To the contrary, these moments tend to involve the application of information in real contexts or seeing the knowledge working in the context. Thomas (Elite Company) recalled his

experience in outward bound training where he understood the real meaning of team work. Michael (Mood Company) learnt a big lesson from a client's complaint and Joyce (Elite Company) remembered every interview and took it as a chance to improve her own communication skills. The importance of context-related learning came through powerfully in the interviews. Working in a related context helps people to discover what knowledge really is and how it functions. As Daveport & Prusak (1998) observe, knowledge is context and experience dependent.

Explicit knowledge from formal learning tends to be generic and not close to the real life context. While most respondents saw some value in formal training sessions such as simulation, many felt that in itself it was insufficient due to its de-contextualized nature. As Katy (Star Company) pointed out "the training class is theoretical in nature and is not practical at all." Participants could gather factual information about their job but while this knowledge remained de-contextualized, it would be only of limited value.

The process of contextualizing that knowledge required informal workplace learning.

This supports the criticism of formal learning as not sufficiently related to the real context (Marsick & Watkins 1990). This leads to a further issue raised by Engestrom (2001) as the knowledge generated by a restricted environment is not necessarily applicable in dynamic and changing workplace situation.

Learning informally therefore involves personal work experience, questioning and

observing others during work. Such informal learning can, sometimes, be intended and goal oriented. For example, new comers might accompany their supervisor to find out how their supervisors close the deal or ask colleague how to fill in the form. On the other hand, they might just observe their colleague without specific purpose and pick up skills for their own job. This potentially presents a problem as it can lead to the individual receiving different accounts. When you ask one person, he/she gives you one answer, asking one or a few persons could often provide a fragmented image of an issue. The learning outcome is not predictable as according to Billett's (2002a) finding. Different individuals encountering the same situation may react or learn differently. As stated above only about one third of the participants reported learning from other people, this pointed out that people might not be aware of the social and informal learning event and outcome. Several respondents raised this as a problem, and this perhaps suggests a need for individuals to be given time and structure to reflect on their informal and social learning.

Indeed, this was one of the key themes emerge from the data. To only rely on informal learning might limit the scope of learning. Formal training is often out of context but it always includes broader content. If financial consultants only learn from their own client group, the possible outcome is that knowledge acquired is restricted and disordered. In the case of a new consultant just graduated from the university, the

clientele might be limited to young people in their mid-twenties. Their needs tend to be very different from a forty year old with a housing loan and family responsibility. On the other hand people over fifty might need more retirement planning and trust information. Knowledge that only comes from one's own clients might hinder the consultant's career development since there is no chance of working on retirement planning and trust service. Creating an expansive learning environment as proposed by Fuller and Unwin (2003) is important for all professionals and this should include opportunities for both formal and informal learning- and for combining the two.

The findings revealed that work place learning involved formal, informal and social learning. Accounts given by respondents remind us that learning is not only a single person activity. Descriptions were frequently given of how participants learn when they work with their colleagues. Learning occurs through observation, asking, sharing and when working together. Through belonging to a group participants can join in the social practices and learn within the social environment. This is similar to Billett's (2002b) suggestion that learning is inter-dependent between individual learner and the social practice.

Summary

Taking a more holistic view of workplace learning in these firms, findings support that it

is not possible to exclude either formal, informal and social learning out of the organization context. The hardware and software metaphor proposed by the participant describes the possible relationship between all types of learning. Arguably, the most effective way of learning is the incorporation of formal, informal and social learning to produce a broader in-context and experience related learning event for the employee. It is not sufficient to focus on only one form of learning as raised by Billett (2002a) and Sfaed (1998). Relationship of different types of learning found in the work place can be illustrate figure 1..

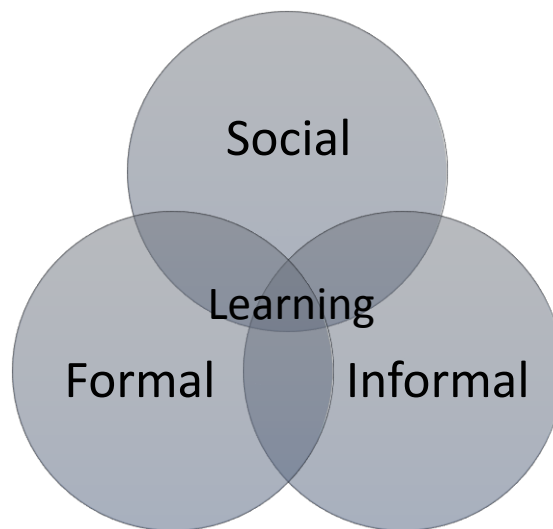


Figure 1. Types of learning and their relation in the workplace

Within the workplace environment formal, informal and social learning coexist as reported by respondents. They can ask other for help (social learning), attend a training course (course) or finding new way promotion method by reading a magazine (informal

learning). In another level different types of learning can take place within a single learning event like joining a workshop and learning something while talking with other students. This outlines the relationship between different types of learning, they could work individually but also inter-related to each others. Trying to separate or to ignore anyone of them is not favorable for workplace learning.

The steps taken by the mother companies and government reflected an inclination towards formal learning. This could be dangerous as informal and social learning would receive less attention which might further affect the training outcome. Paying more attention to formal learning might not only hinder government and organization's policy in promoting holistic workplace learning (Flestead et al 1998, 2004). It also would affect individual perceptions of learning. Other than formal learning, people might be less sensitive towards informal and social learning in turn build up a larger barrier in workplace learning. For all organizations, helping employee to learn within context or applying knowledge in a real context are more effective way of training.

The owners of the participating SMEs all claimed to be very keen on learning. Training courses were not only provided by the mother company, all participating SMEs provided employee development schemes. These findings, which reveal extensive use of formal training programs, might lead us to question some of the recent literature that arguable neglects the current importance of formal training in SMEs (e.g. Marlow

2000; Ashton et al 2005). And, in contrast to the findings of some other studies, the managers did seem willing to devote resources in order to enhance employee development. Further analysis would reveal the difference between micro and small company types and this will be discussed in the later chapter.

Perhaps one of the main conclusion to be drawn so far is that both formal, informal and social learning, and tacit and explicit knowledge, were seen by respondents as central to their professional development. The broad and de-contextualized explicit knowledge and the practical work related tacit knowledge were considered vital for improving individual performance. Perhaps the most effective learning was seen to happen when the importance of integrating informal and formal types was recognized by the managers of the SMEs.

Chapter Six : Individual identity and learning

In this chapter the focus is about individual identity and its relation to learning. The respondents' inner perceptions of their own performance, motivations to learn, and their learner identity are examined in terms of how they affect individual's orientation towards learning. The first part of this chapter reports the finding from the interviews. The second part discusses in more detail the finding concerning identity and its effect on learning.

I. Self perceptions of Professional Success and Motivations to learn

The responses from the interviews suggest that individuals have a variety of perceptions of what it means and takes to be a 'successful' financial consultant. The respondents were first asked whether, by their definition, they considered themselves to be successful. The results are listed in the table below.

Table 3. Self perception of successfulness

Participant's perception	Percentage	Number of respondent
Successful	17%	5
Partially success, on the way to success	50%	15
Not successful	33%	10

From the data, it was clear that only less than one fifth of participants would regard themselves as successful. Half of them said they are on their way to success and one third of them said they were not successful. This raises the question of who would regard themselves as successful? It was generally not those with the highest status or longer years of experience. Sally the owner of Mood Company who managed over twenty staff and had been qualified for MDRT member for several years reported “...sometimes it is really awful you know, my daughter has her exam and I need to do the revision with her, I really need to spend more time with her. I usually take the afternoon off but those at the office also need my assistance. I am really tired of it.” On the contrary, Joyce from Elite Company said “I think I am successful as I achieve the MDRT standard this year and this is the first time I get this title.”

The two examples stated clearly that although both are financial consultants, they might employ different criteria in measuring whether they were successful or not. It might relate to which career and life stage they are currently experiencing. Catherine (Elite Company) stated “Sales performance is the only thing that bothers me” while Lily (Elite Company) said “I have a baby girl now and I really want to spend more time on her”. Balancing between family and work was not the goal for Catherine but it had become crucial for Lily. According to participants’ responses, a number of criteria are found in measuring the success of a financial consultant.

Table 4. Criteria measuring successful of a financial consultant

Criteria	%	No. of participants
High income (MDRT)	67%	20
Provide high quality of service to client	60%	18
Build their own team	33%	10
Company recognition	17%	5
Self development	13%	4
Balance of life / Being famous	10%	3
High moral standard / Good knowledge	3%	1

Analyzing the results disclose what the respondents considered to be the prominent indicators of a successful financial consultant. As a profession heavily related to sales, the most frequently –cited indicator of success is the sales volume, those with higher sales income are regarded as successful, and the majority of respondents constructed their professional identities and judged their status firstly in relation to this. Another important way to increase income and therefore to increase status was to build their team. Supervisors and managers could have a portion of commission from their subordinates, therefore building a bigger team means more income. Moreover clients are the source of present and future business. They might buy different products at

different phases of life and getting referrals from present clients is a good way of extending business. As described by Sylvia (Blue Company) "...some of my clients are preparing for retirement, my knowledge in retirement planning becomes useful now." The change in the client's life span creates further opportunity for the financial consultants.

But raising income was not the only important dimension of respondents' professional identities. Some participants would like to achieve public recognition, like winning a prize from the company and becoming famous within the company or in the field. Also personal development and maintaining high moral standard are concerns for a few participants. Some want to have a balance life between work and family. Cindy (Blue Company) was very concerned about her own moral standard "I am really proud of myself and my team as we all have high moral standard, actually not everyone concern about it." Zoe (Blue Company) , the mother of two children said "I need to take care of my family, taking formal courses seems impossible for me but I know I have to balance between the two."

In general, however, the level of sales income (either at the individual or team level) was the most prominent indicator of success for the respondents. As such, where learning was considered, it was most often (though not exclusively) in relation to

obtaining knowledge or skills that would enable the maximization of sales income. The majority of respondents explicitly stated that they wished to take steps to advance their own professional knowledge, and it emerged that essentially there are two ways to increase their knowledge. The first method focuses on individual, self-directed learning, whether through formal or informal channels. For example participants would take courses and update themselves through internet. Katy, a new member of Star Company said "I take this course as a way to enrich my professional knowledge.' Daisy (Star Company) stated "...I visit the internet every day try to learn something new..." Alternatively, many respondents highlighted learning from others-social learning- as an important way of acquiring professional skills and knowledge. Some had deliberately formed close working relationships with more experienced or top performing colleagues for this very purpose. Donald (Star Company) pointed out that by interacting with outside high performers; it was possible to develop new insight and direction for himself. Amy (Mood Company) stressed the importance of observing her more experienced colleagues in learning to serve her clients in a more effective way.

II. Learner's Identity

As noted in the literature review, the existing evidence suggests that a negative learner identity is likely to hinder the individual's learning. In an attempt to explore the respondents' learner identity, they were first asked whether they were currently

engaged in any formal learning. All participants said that they were still learning (though not necessarily formally) and it was a lifelong process. The replies were “yes”, “sure,” and “of course”. They all said it was very important to keep on learning so as to keep up with professional requirement and market developments in order to survive within the industry. Then they were further asked about their present learning condition. Twenty five percent reported that they were taking long term courses like MBA, CFP and French etc. Another twenty five percent said they were taking short courses or often attend seminars. Half of the participants said they were not taking any formal courses at that current time. A few reported that they would inform their clients about their learning activities and this would help to build a positive image of them. Fion (Mood Company) said “I would put my learning activities inside the newsletter to my clients and they give positive feedback about it.” Admitting oneself as a continuous learner did therefore have beneficial consequences in this type of situation.

There appeared to be a connection between the respondent’s experience and their involvement in formal learning. Most participants taking long term courses were people with over ten years of experience (four company owners Sally, Donald, Cindy and Audrey) and those with less than three years of experience. The majority of those who were not taking any course were those with more than three years but less than ten years experience group. For less experienced participants, most would take up

some professional related courses; attend seminars or workshops to improve their knowledge and skills.

As the existing literature suggests, previous learning experiences can contribute towards the construction of current learner identities. Bad experiences might hinder one's intention to keep on learning. Good experiences might encourage a person to learn. The previous learning experiences of the participants were generally of two extremes. Approximately half reported predominantly favorable experiences of previous learning, while the rest reported more negative experiences. It was interesting to find out that the "bad" experience was generally about the school years. Even though Daisy (Star Company) and Catherine (Elite Company) had a master and bachelor degree, they both showed a very negative feeling about their primary and secondary school years. This seemed to have affected their attitude towards formal training and development. Catherine even claimed that she hated to attend any other kind of lecture even now. Reports of favorable learning experiences were very often related to participation in professional training courses. On the whole, therefore, respondents tended to remember vocational learning episodes more favorably than their general schooling; something that perhaps reflects their emphasis on maximizing their professional knowledge and sales income. Their learner identities, therefore, seemed to be heavily influenced by their professional identities.

Motivation to learn

Thus, most if not all of the respondents were positively inclined towards professional and vocational learning in general; but what specific drivers motivated their conscious intention to learn?

The most common answers can be summarized as follows:

1. When they face a new problems
2. The world is big and it is better to learn more
3. Learning is a daily action to prevent one from falling behind
4. Learning is for gaining satisfaction
5. Learning is for continuous improvement
6. Individual is not content with the present situation
7. Learning is for one's interest
8. Learning is to gain qualification to meet job's requirement
9. Other people learn so must I

The majority said learning needs rose when they encountered problems at work. This meant they had to find new ways to solve existing problems. Some took a more proactive approach and saw learning as a way to improve themselves even before they

encountered any problems. Satisfaction was another issue related to learning motivation. When people were not satisfied with their present situation, for example, if they would like to generate more business or to take up management work, they would see further learning as a tool to fulfill their needs. Also completing a course and gaining a new qualification brings satisfaction to the participant. Catherine (Elite Company) was not willing to participate in specific professional training. She said she would only enroll in more general courses that she had an intrinsic interest in, like psychology. According to Catherine, she had already participated in many professional training courses and she had adequate knowledge to handle her work. Learning should not relate to her work but to her own interest. Others were reluctant to participate in professional training for more practical reasons. For example, Matthew (Mood Company) reported that "I don't have time to take formal course and I will force myself to read more books if possible." Reading was seen as a more flexible and less time-consuming way of learning by the respondents.

On the other hand, social pressure and a sense of competition can also motivate people to learn. Elaine (Elite Company) said that if her colleague enrolled in a certain course or workshop, she might follow. For her, the main point was not to fall back and to do what other is doing. Learning motivation of this kind is social in nature and this will be explored more fully in later sections.

Another reason for participation in formal learning is of course to meet professional development requirements. Every year each financial consultant has to accumulate 10-20 CPD hours (Continuous development program for the profession). Martin (Star Company) said “frankly speaking I attend the workshop because I need the CPD hours.” The yearly registration policy of the professional body effectively forces consultants to participate in some form of formal learning. As noted by Martin, this has the potential to generate a fairly cynical and instrumental orientation towards such training, which essentially the individual has little choice over.

The right and ability to choose one’s training does seem to have an effect on learning motivation. Respondents described both instances where they had little or no choice over participating in training, and where they could exercise more choice. On one hand both mother companies provide designated training programs that all related financial consultants are required to attend. Other than this type of training, financial consultants could choose and plan their own learning form a range of opportunities. Participants’ attitude toward force and self choice training did vary.

Some participants mainly those owners and new financial consultants would have a more positive feeling about designated training. Amy (Mood Company) said “I am new and every training opportunity is useful and meaningful to me.” Cindy (Blue Company)

explained "...no matter what the training is about, you still can learn something from it."

For participants with less experience, each training opportunity is important for them.

Where choice of training was more restricted, however, the most common attitude (particularly among employees with a little more experience) was a different one.

When talking about appointed or designated training, most respondents expressed a very negative feeling. Commonly, their first reaction was they did not want to attend the event. Martin complained that the contents of those training interventions were mainly of a basic type that did not meet his need. Howard explained that the topic of the training is not of his interest but he was given no choice but to attend. Michael said "...I will go as I need the CPD." It is only for CPD but not for learning purpose. Charles was not willing to go but he said he would listen first to see whether the session is useful or not. Elaine said "I hate to go and I would bring along my iPod with me, so I can take a rest during the session".

Attitudes towards self designated training were largely the same for all participants.

Their attitude becomes more positive as the more choice they have over their training participation. They choose their training courses based on both intrinsic interest and fulfillment of vocational skills needs. They observed that they are more willing to attend the class and pay more attention during the session.

Discussion

I. Professional self image

According to the literature, professional identity building is highly related to learning and socialization process (Puurula and Lofstrom 2003, Billet and Somerville 2004). The result of this study showed that professional success and its relationship to learning did not consist of a single criterion. This is a rather complicated issue that cannot easily be understood by outsiders. In the main, sales volume and income was seen as the main indicator for professional success. As revealed by participant's responses, mostly single and junior participants would choose this as their only indicator. Those female respondents with family and with children would take a slightly different view of success that incorporated finding a balance between family and work. Zoe (Blue Company), Daisy (Star Company) and Lily (Elite Company) all pointed out that they were still searching for the balance point between family and work. Sally (Mood Company) found such a balance extremely difficult to obtain, and expressed feelings of being worn out by the demands of both.

Expanding one's business was also a goal for some participants. Usually these were goals for more experience or high performing participants. Some experienced participants stated that they found it difficult in finding their professional direction and this sometimes impeded their professional development. Sylvia (Blue Company) said "I

did not enroll in any courses or involve myself in learning for a period of time, I lost my direction and I don't know what to do?" Michael (Mood Company) also mentioned " I am not very successful and I do want to develop my own team, I used to have one before but you know they all left."

But high income and business expansion were not sufficient for many respondents; recognition from others was also seen as a significant indicator of success. This showed that other than personal satisfaction, recognition from others does play a part in making one feel successful.

The findings reveal three very important issues about professional self image. First professional self image is not identical for all people within the same profession.

Second this type of professional image is not only personal in nature, it also has a social element (e.g. when consultants define themselves, their success and their identity in relation to other consultants). Third professional self image is not only related to the work itself, rather it is a mixture between work and other parts of a person's life (e.g. their family life).

It is clear from participants' responses that individuals with different backgrounds, experience and performance levels would have different expectations about what a successful financial consultant is. From gaining high performance at the beginning to building team for more experienced members and achieving a balance of family and

work for those with family. In this respect, the respondents' self-perceptions with regard to their relative success and position within the profession were not static. The finding accords with Lawy and Bloomer's (2003) point of view that identity is continuously undergoing a shaping process. It changes as the person changes to a new environment, or enters a new life stage.

The second point is the social element of professional self concept. Knowing oneself to be a high or good performer is not enough. Many want to be known or recognized by other people. Winning awards, gaining recognition and become famous show the need for acknowledgement and appreciation. Providing better service to clients means gaining recognition from the clients. Billett and Somerville (2004) stated that taking up a job is also building a new relationship. The relationship with colleagues and other financial consultants, and the positional competition between them, is important. Being accepted as a good professional does mean gaining the recognition required for access to the professional group. The same is true for client group. As a financial consultant, it is necessary to build good relationships with the client. Only when the clients trust the consultant will they begin to recommend him or her to colleagues, family or friends. From this interaction, the financial consultant could confirm his/her relationship with the clients. Thus, success means the entry to a new social group.

The third issue for discussion is the complex nature of identity. The potential for competing aspects of identity and self-concept to cause subjective dissonance have been discussed in the literature (Costello 2005). The mother identity and the financial consultant identity are always in conflict for most participants who were mothers. In contrary only one respondent reported his difficulty as being a father. But when they referred to the problem between work and family, some of them would not separate this into two specific issues. Rather they would put them under the same topic. They would regard themselves as successful only when they could achieve a certain state of balance between work and family. Putting family into consideration is mostly a female participants' characteristic. This might intersect with female identity as the main care giver of children. This makes it hard to talk about pure professional identity across male and female. Child rearing is highly regarded as the duty of female. Nearly all mothers reported their responsibility to take care of their children. It is not only to tidy up the house or to cook for them. Rather they had to take care of their academic performance, emotional and psychological development. For the male counterpart, they also would put the responsibility of child rearing to their wife. Michael (Mood Company) said "I have to thank my wife who takes care of the whole family and children so I can put all my attention to work." Even though the sales volumes of some female respondents were high they still believed that they were not successful. The result accords with

Meeus and Dekovic (1996) finding, the improvement in one identity would not help to improve the other identity.

Professional self-concept and learning

In order to claim their identity as a professional, learning was seen as a necessary process for the participants. At the beginning, new or junior financial consultants depend on learning to equip themselves with adequate knowledge to do their work. Formal training is available for all new members and they might even take outside courses to further improve their knowledge. Puurula and Lofstrom (2003) pointed out building up knowledge and skills and being able to perform the professional work is the key for identity formation. Learning is definitely seen as the way to reach the goal.

According to participants' response, learning does not occur only formally or isolation from others. Learning can also occur through observing senior members and asking them for help. Katy (Star Company) said " I ask everyone for help and no one will say no to me." Stella the junior from Mood Company said "...they are (senior members) like my brother and sister and they will remind me of important issue." This type of learning needs the assistance of other members. Only through building relationships with other experienced members, could junior members obtain their acceptance in order to access this kind of informal, social learning. Joining the group, gaining

professional knowledge and building their professional identity is therefore social in nature. As describe by Lave and Wenger (1991), getting access into the group is an important way to learn the required knowledge. Through comparing with other members and getting advice within the community, respondents could find out what they have to learn in order to advance within the community.

II. Learner's identity

Admitting oneself as learner could be negative for some people (Boud and Solomon 2003). However, the participants in the study all admitted that they are learner and a lifelong one. It seems plausible that this phenomenon may be in part be related to the policy and strategy of the Hong Kong Government. In 2002, the government instituted a Qualification Framework organization to responsible for the development of lifelong learning culture in Hong Kong. It acts as a way to improve the quality of different professions. Also a framework is developed to define standards for different qualifications which include academic, vocational and continuing education (Qualification Framework 2010). The generally positive attitude of the respondents to professional learning could indicate that this policy strategy is having some success.

To ensure the standard and quality of the profession, a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Program is employed for quality assurance in the profession

(Officer of the Commissioner of Insurance). The program requires people working in this profession to gain 10 to 20 CPD hours per year according to business nature. CPD hours can only be gained through accredited organizations or programs. This is the reason why every participant would claim themselves as learners and still learning. As mentioned in the previous section, participants were forced to join some form of designated training. Some react negatively toward this type of training and they might not regard themselves as learners in those events.

Formal learning is the main focus of the participants. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, only formal type of training is recognized for professional accreditation and can be used to gain CPD hours and being noticed by others. This movement definitely shifted respondents' attention to formal learning as proposed by Felstead et al (1998, 2004). All participants said they were lifelong learner, but only a number of them were taking formal courses. An interesting issue came out from participants' responses on their perception of learning. To fulfill the CPD hour requirement, every consultant has to enroll in some form of formal training. It can be seminars, workshops, short term courses or professional courses. Many of them would not count those designated training events as learning event. They only report self decided training events as learning events. The responses of participants leads us to question whether the effectiveness of implementing professional development schemes to improve

professional standards might not be as high as previously thought.

Those reporting that they were participating in learning could further be divided into two categories the rookies group and the owner's group. Gordon (Mood Company) and Thomas (Elite Company) were taking the Charter Financial Planner (CFP) course. Katy (Star Company) was studying a long term course about insurance. They joined the profession less than 2 years ago. While Donald (Star Company), Sally (Mood Company), Audrey (Elite Company) were Executive Master of Business Administration students and Cindy is Bachelor of Business Administration student.

Those in the middle comprise a very different group. Some of them think they possess enough knowledge to handle their daily work. Fion(Mood Company) said she had studied some courses in her junior year but not now. She did not show any urgency or need participate in any more courses now. Sylvia (Blue Company) reported that she studied a long term course a long time ago. In the present moment she was lost without a clear direction and this also hindered her from taking up any form of learning.

High performers like Joyce (Elite Company), Catherine (Elite Company) and Martin (Star Company) were not thinking about enrolling in any course at all. The main reason was they were too busy that they had no time in thinking about it.

The major difference of the above learners is the necessity of learning at that particular moment. Juniors need knowledge and recognition to continue their work. Owners

need the knowledge to manage their company. Those in the middle without new goals or immediate needs would not have the intention or motivation to learn. Thus, the individual's identity in respect of learning seems to be heavily influenced by developments that occur at particular points in the unfolding career course. At some points, clear needs and motivations stimulate participation in learning; at others, a loss of direction inhibits it. This finding supported the suggestion that learning is a mixture of past experience, immediate needs and life span change as proposed by Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000). Participation in learning is a choice of the individual, and life changes can be sudden and unexpected (Crossan et al 2003).

Learner's identity is subjected to influence by a numbers of other factors (Weil 1986).

As noted in the existing literature, past learning experience is one of those. When recalling negative experiences of learning, respondents referred mostly to general schooling and education. School teaching is not like commercial services, students must attend school and even if they do not understand or like the way of presentation, they have no say in it. Professional training courses, on the other hand, were more positively remembered, and respondents showed more desire to repeat these experiences, particularly where they had some degree of choice over their learning participation. The nature of previous learning is therefore crucial to understanding how it impacts on the individual's learner identity.

When participants were asked directly why they participate in learning, their answers clearly explain what embody the meaning of learning for them. The first and most important reason for learning is to solve problems. Whenever they meet a new problem, they would try to learn something new to fix it. Another reason to learn is in order to improve performance. Indeed, the majority of respondents appeared to see a genuine link between professional learning and improved performance. This is why junior members and owners are keen on learning. This was particularly true of more junior participants. For junior members, they are at a new stage of their career and as owners they have to face managing new problems as their company expands. Other participants who remain in their present position for a long time and do not want to change would not have a strong desire to learn. Again, we can see how career stage can be important in influencing attitudes towards learning (Bloomer and Hodgkinson 2000).

The individual's social environment-particularly the peer group-can also be crucial in orientating the individual towards learning. Some mentioned that learning was a way to assist them to compete and stay in the top position. By comparing themselves with other consultants, it reminded participants of the importance of learning. Others were convinced by recommendations from colleagues to participate in training. This was particularly true where such recommendation came from a supervisor or friend.

However, in some instances, the social and peer-group influence on learning becomes less important. It was observed that participants over 40 years old or in management positions were generally less likely to be influenced by others. Other than the owners, senior consultants like Martin, Michael and even juniors like Katy firmly stated that others would not affect their learning decisions. They all said they were old enough to know what was good for them. This agreed with Bourdieu's description of 'habitus' (1990). Dispositions based on the participant's past experience (habitus) affected their values and how they make judgments. People with more experience might have a relatively fixed and closed value system to evaluate their own learning needs and preferences. This could explain why those older and experienced respondents were keener on making their own decisions.

The findings also suggest that individuals will be more positively orientated towards learning opportunities if they feel that they can exercise choice over their participation. Only a few participants' motivation would be the same for both designated and self initiated training. Most of them were very negative about their participation in designated training. As designated training was not tailor made to meet their needs, they felt it was useless and a time wasting activity. This was particularly true of their attitudes towards 'enforced' CPD training.

In agreement with Weil's (1986) definition, the individual's learner identity is closely

related to personal, social, experiential and intellectual dimension of a person. The findings strongly support the conclusion that each person's learner's identity is interwoven of all these dimensions. Personal need is a big factor as it directs participants to decide learning or not and to choose what to learn. The effect of social influence varies across the participants. Participants with less experience and younger in age were more easily affect by others. The effect of social influence increased as the relationship between members was closer. Experience does make a difference in this respect but it is not only the past learning experience, rather it is the personal experience that affects learning. More experienced and older participants would rely on their own judgment in choosing their learning direction.

The identity is multi- dimensional; it is not possible to have a consensus even on a single one. The identities of respondents evolved as their careers and life spans changed. The situation is the same for both professional and learner identity. Learning is a way of building a better professional image but learning itself is highly influenced by past experience, changes in life and environmental effects.

Furthermore, learning is not an individual activity. Learning occurred when respondents participated within a community. Participation also means building an identity within the group. Prizes, learning opportunities and referrals from the clients were all grounded in getting access into the community. Even identity is often treated

as a single person's issue but rather it is very much social in nature.

Summary

According to the result, learning is proved to be a way in improving identity. Through gaining more knowledge, improving one's performance individual could in turn improve their professional identity. Information collected shows that every individual has his/her own criteria to define self-image and identity. Since identity is the product of personal experience, immediate reflection of life stage and social relations with other people, it is dangerous to describe identity in a number of fixed terms and this might result in failure in understanding the true identity.

Evidence from the study shows that even with the problem of shifting the attention to formal learning, the promotion of life-long learning, professional registration, continuous development program etc could shape people's learning habit. Everyone seems to accept that learning accompany with their work life. This definitely could help to lower the barrier for promoting work place learning.

Another barrier for learning is the switching nature of learner's identity. Some respondents said they would not pay attention in designated training and no learning would take place in such situation. This signals a potential problem in learning efficacy. Government and organization should reconsider what is a better way in providing training. Rather than counting the frequency and time of attendance, it might be more

practical to consider the usefulness and relatedness of the training content to fulfill the needs the employee.

Through unfolding the professional and learner's self images, a series of factors affecting identity are found. Past experience, personal education background, career needs, family responsibility and social pressure all are reported by respondents and this supports the literature that identity is ever changing and affected by life stage (Lawy and Bloomer 2003, Weil 1986).

Making decision or taking action to learn seems to be very individualized issue like switching the learner's identity off at designated training is an example of this.

Moreover, in informal and social learning events, it depended on individual's ability in finding out the learning element within the situations. Individual does play an important part in work place learning. This influence is described in Figure 2. below.

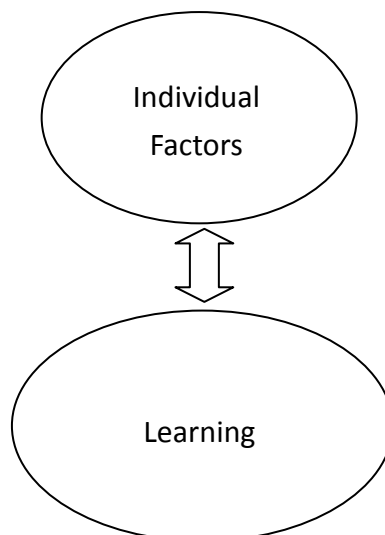


Figure 2. Relation between learning and individual factors.

Learning is highly affected by individual's choice and decision. The decisions are influenced not only by person's past experience, social pressure and life span responsibility all are intertwined with other people in their life. Example like respondents refuse to take part in formal learning event is the result of poor teaching technique of their school day teachers. The negative impression as a result of other's poor performance. It is important to find out this is a two way relationships as stated in the beginning, learning is a way in improving identity. Learning in turns could also change personal education level and experience. Individual factors have effect on learning, the social and organization influences will be discussed in the next few chapters.

Chapter Seven: Social relation and learning

In this section the focus falls upon the impact of social relationships (particularly within work teams) on learning. As was seen in previous sections, learning is not only influenced by individual factors. People's learning motivation and choice are often affected by interactions with their colleagues. This chapter begins with an exploration of the various interpersonal relationships within each of the companies, and their impact on learning. The second part is a discussion about learning and social relationships with reference to how the emerging themes connect to the literature, particularly on communities of practice which seems particularly relevant here.

I. The relationships

Micro Companies

1. The Blue Company

The Blue Company formed about 4 years ago and all members have 10 or more years of experience. Cindy, the owner of Blue Company, observed that "I care about my members, I discuss with them about work and family but not everyone wants to talk about their family even if they have serious problems." She would describe the relationship between the members as "O.K.". Cindy said there was not much conflict, nor were the staff overly friendly and some could even be described as "cool". Zoe felt "O.K." being in Blue Company. She said the team was happy and now it was getting on

the right track and members could cooperate together. Sylvia reported that "...now the situation is much better, there was more conflict at the beginning, you know we all have different personalities and we were grouped together because of Trust Company's transformation."

Zoe said since each person had his/her own style, they would not always choose to socialize or work closely together. As some morning meetings were not compulsory, members would not often see each other. Some members of the team formed interpersonal relationships around particular interests and activities. For example, Sylvia and other Christian members formed their own Christian group and would pray together. Betty raised an important observation "The atmosphere of the group is ever changing, sometime good and sometime bad." Cindy's comment on her relations with others revealed some hint about overall relations "...my subordinates teach me a lesson, manager and subordinate should not be too close. Some of them refuse to get closer and there is always conflict between the two levels."

With regard to learning Cindy said her teammates had very little influence. Focusing more on formal learning, she said that she would refer suitable training courses to them. In contrast, and focusing more on informal learning, Zoe said her teammates definitely would affect her learning. Similarly, Betty reported that she felt motivated to learn when other colleagues brought new knowledge to the workplace and shared it.

When she encountered any problem she would normally turn to her teammates for help. Sylvia reported "I like to bring knowledge to my teammates and I like to share with them."

All respondents from Blue Company agreed that most of the members were willing to share their knowledge with others and that informal learning occurred as a result. For them sharing could happen in two ways. They could bring their own problem and asked for help or they could provide an answer to someone else's problem or introduce some completely new knowledge or information into the firm. While attitudes towards formal training were less positive, the climate of the firm did appear to support and promote collective informal learning between staff of similar seniority. If respondents encountered any problem, most of them would ask other senior people but not their own boss.

As observer I stayed in Blue Company for 3 half days and had lunch with all company members. During this period of time they were busy preparing for a stage performance. In office they work independently and a few of them would go into Cindy's room for discussion or help. Usually they would not talk to each other and work individually inside their own place. Cindy explained to me that lunch or dinner gathering was not a usual practice for the group. They would only gather once or twice every year at special occasions. While at the beginning of the meeting some members preferred to say

nothing or make fun of others by comparing their performance levels (perhaps the presence of a researcher disturbed the normal operation of the group), eventually there emerged a more co-operative and supportive atmosphere.

2. Elite Company

Audrey, the boss of Elite Company was a very successful financial consultant in the field.

She has been qualified as an MDRT member for more than 15 years. There were a total of six people working within the company. All of them had been invited by Audrey to join the company; they were her past customers or co-workers. Audrey reported that all of those who worked in the firm were very supportive to her. The overall spirit was good. One thing that bothered her was all members were too dependent on her for direction and leadership. According to Audrey members always required her to lead or motivate them during work. This was the case especially during high seasons or end of the year time. She found it hard to distribute her own time for management and personal business.

She pointed out that the pressure on group members was high. As nearly all members were or had been qualified as MDRT members, comparing oneself to others was unavoidable. However, respondents did not refer to such internal group competition as leading to decreased trust. Probing these responses further revealed that the group – and in particular Audrey – had developed various social practices which had the effect

of strengthening social cohesion. Despite the working pressure for example, Audrey would have breakfast, and also dinner gathering with others. They might even go on trips together.

One thing that all respondents in this firm expressed was their admiration toward Audrey. She was like an idol and everyone wanted to follow her and they trusted her.

Lily said “ I only want to follow Audrey and I won’t think of working for other people.”

Elaine stated “I really trust her. Audrey said I can change to work as a financial consultant and so I change from working as her assistant to her subordinate.”

Whenever they encountered any problem, they would ask Audrey for help. The relationship between members varied a lot. Thomas the only male in the company said he was fairly friendly with other members but not so close. Occasionally they would go out for a drink. Mostly they would talk about business and training. He was currently taking a CFP course.

Lily stated clearly that her relationship with other members was not quite as amicable as described by the others. She observed that Audrey was the only reason that she stayed in the company. She did not care about the others and saw them only as competitors. The other three members, Catherine, Elaine and Joyce were very close friends with each other. They knew each other’s schedule and they even talked about my telephone contact and interview sessions between themselves.

There was evidence to suggest that the general culture of the firm supported learning – to some extent. Audrey and Thomas were taking long term courses themselves but others were not. Audrey said she had influenced in members’ learning but answers from other respondents conflicted with this view. Other than Thomas most members were not apparently enthusiastic about their learning. Elaine explained “... I can’t follow other’s lead, the gap between us is too big and I only want to learn more English.” She had not finished her secondary school course and her language ability hindered her in learning more advanced subjects. Lily said she used to enroll in short courses or seminars but she had a baby now and she found it difficult to balance between work and family. Catherine and Joyce expressed an extreme aversion to attending designated training which they saw as an unnecessary and unhelpful diversion. To them work was much more important than training. On the whole all members except Lily stated that they were willing to share their own experience and knowledge with others. The only problem was finding the time to do it.

3. Tree Company

Tree Company was the smallest company in the present study. Paula was the owner and she employed two people. The two members were invited by Paula to join the company and they had been Paula’s clients in her previous organization. The members all had less than 3 years experience while Paula had been a financial consultant over 18

years. As mentioned before this was not Paula's first team, she started to build her own team about 15 years ago. She had difficulty in keeping her own team and at times she had been a lone operator and later she recruited new members and started her company again.

In general, the respondents described an amicable and sociable climate within the company. Paula observed that "We are good friends of each other, we talk about everything and we care for each other." Jackie the member said "Paula treats us as friends she teaches us selling skills and product knowledge. I really want to be like her, you know she is a successful financial consultant." By observation, Paula and Jackie were both happy to stay in the Tree Company. Jackie said she would ask Paula for help if she encountered any problems.

None of the members were taking any formal training courses at that time. Paula said she would recommend some external training courses for her members as Trust Company could not provide further training for them as there was only one part-time trainer within the company. She claimed that her members would not affect her own learning. Jackie was not an experienced member and she said she needed Paula's assistance to determine her own learning direction. When asked about the third member of the company, Paula stated that this member was having some personal problems at the moment, and that the firm's group activities had been suspended as a

result.

Small Company

1. Star Company

Star Company was a small size company and there were a number of sub groups under the company. Other than the company boss financial consultants in the company often have another immediate supervisor. All members were invited to join the company.

The forming of multiple layers made it different from the simple micro company where flatter hierarchies make interaction and communication a more immediate and simple matter. When interviewed, Donald (the owner) saw this as a problem within Star Company. Communication can only occur through meetings and personal appointment.”

Usually company information, news and goals were communicated through company or group meetings. Personal appointments were used to discuss individual situations.

There were some overseas trips like annual MDRT meetings and Donald would also use this type of opportunity to communicate with his subordinates. He would hold parties and gourmet gatherings for members. He described the atmosphere of the company as good as members were willing to discuss their work and join company gatherings after work.

All interviewed members agreed that the atmosphere of Star Company was good.

Martin said they were like family, Howard said people motivated each other and

Jennifer stated that each member could find his/her own way of survival within the company. Apart from company activities, the various groups had their social activities.

Martin said he would go out with his own group members for a drink or karaoke. Other groups would go out for BBQ etc. Within these groups, therefore, relationships were close, but this did not always translate at the company level. The existence of different groups meant more separation and problems in communication. The organization of financial consulting work therefore potentially makes these groups-rather than the firm itself- the most important social unit in terms of interaction and collective knowledge-sharing.

Participants sometimes claimed that their firm operated like a family but as observed from their work, people mostly would interact with their own group members.

Observation was done during the interview visits. Members were generally polite and helpful for example they would lead me to the conference room or to participant's work station. If they were asked about a person from another group, they usually had only limited knowledge. When they encountered any problem, they would first ask their immediate supervisor or Donald. However, there was still a high degree of loyalty to the company. They were all very proud of belonging to Star Company. The performance levels of Donald and most of the members were very good; more than half of the company members were qualified for MDRT membership.

Opportunities for participation in formal learning were relatively plentiful in Star Company. The mother company and Star company provided various training sessions, workshops, seminars and courses for members. However, participants were not always passionate about training and learning. They had different views on the learning issue (as noted in previous sections). Katy was in her 40s but she was a freshman in the field. She was taking a long term formal course and recently preparing for her examination. She was motivated about learning since she felt that she lacked the professional knowledge for work. Katy insisted that no one could influence her learning as she was old enough to find her own way. Howard and Martin both were very successful financial consultants with different years of working experience. They were not really interested in training and stressed that they use informal learning like learning from work, asking others for help, instead of relying on formal training. Martin even stated that he thought he had learned most of the knowledge he needed to do his job and did not want to waste his time in some preliminary course or workshop. Johnson said "Donald is very keen on learning; he always has a book with him. You know, it is really hard to be like him."

Donald would refer different seminars, workshops or courses to his members. Less than half of the participants were interested in joining any of them. The responses instead indicated a culture of informal knowledge-sharing within the company.

Everyone was willing to share with others. Some of the high performers were frequently invited by the mother company to share their experience with others. Katy said "When I have problems, I ask anyone within the company and no one will reject me." The only problem about sharing was time. As is common in small firms, time is short and opportunities to focus on maximizing knowledge-sharing are limited.

2. Mood Company

The structure of Mood Company was similar to Star Company. The only major difference was the formation process. It had been formed by gathering existing financial consultants as opposed to previous clients and friends. Sally, Mood Company's boss talked about how she had changed of her own management style. In the past she used to be very close to her members but now preferred to leave a distance between her and her members. For her, it was more important for her members to try their best rather than focusing too much on their performance figures. Her intended direction was to lead not to manage her members. In general, while Sally felt that her relationship with some members was better than with others, she observed that within the company, the atmosphere was still in harmony.

However, responses from other members of the firm indicate a divergence of view on this. Different members had different interpretations. Amy a junior financial consultant took a positive view and described Mood Company as a family. Other people treated

her as the younger sister. In contrast, Gordon (another junior member), felt that relationships were much less close, and observed that "...we usually talk about work."

Fion an experienced member said everybody was friendly and nice, but they seldom talk about private issues. In contrast, Michael and Kelly shared the same feeling that the relationship between members extended beyond professional concerns. Kelly said "...we talk about everything like our family; computer and we are one family." David's attitude was different from them. His relationship with his own group is fine and he was very busy and had no time to interact with others. When he described Mood Company "...I won't care for other groups, I am too busy and have no time to participate in any activities." Charles pointed out that not everyone was willing to take up company's responsibility and they simply ignore others' needs.

In a broader sense, however, there was more agreement over the constantly changing nature of the atmosphere within the company. All members agreed that the atmosphere changed frequently. They described it as "sometimes good and sometimes bad". Michael explained the changes as "...if the in charge person is not in a good mood, you better run..." This illustrates the importance of senior figures in setting the atmosphere of the company. The problem in cooperation might also induce conflict and disharmony within the company. Amy directly pointed out "...our boss really affects us very much, if the atmosphere is bad, I don't really want to go back to the

office.” Sally honestly confessed that she was not always in a good mood and sometimes she had problems in motivating herself to go to work. The factors that affected her emotion could be both from work and family.

The problem in cooperation was further manifested by the change in training. In the past all groups within the Mood Company would hold their morning meetings together.

The situation changed and now each group had their own morning meeting. Still she insisted on training all new financial consultants together.

Most members expressed the view that interactions with other members had been important to their own learning. Junior members depended on supervisors or experienced members to direct their learning. More senior members took another perspective. In particular, there seemed to be a degree of competition between them in terms of participation in training events. If another member attained a particular qualification or attended any course, they would feel more highly motivated to take up new learning and they did not want to fall behind. It was interesting to find that Sally and David stated firmly that they learned very little on an informal basis from their colleagues.

However, all members stated that they were willing to share knowledge with others.

For senior members, they said they would like to do so but they did not have time. For junior members, they said that they did not feel that they had sufficient knowledge to

share with others. Where it does happen, sharing seems to become an ad hoc activity.

Thus, while there was a generally positive attitude towards knowledge-sharing within the company, there was a lack of structure to facilitate it.

I. Discussion

1. The importance of Social, Informal and Collective Learning in Small and Micro Firms

The five companies are different not only in the number of people but as well as in their formation, interpersonal relationship and member's experience etc. The story of each company discloses more information about learning and how it is affected by social relationships within the workplace.

The findings resonate with much of the relevant literature in that they emphasize that social and informal learning play a significant part in SMEs. Learning from observing, asking colleagues for help or sharing with others are the major ways of learning.

According to respondents, social learning is essential for more experienced participants.

More than 10 years ago, formal training in financial consultancy sector was not always available and the duration was very short. The only way to learn was through work. As stated in the previous section, people learned primarily from their supervisor and colleague. Although (as noted in previous sections) formal learning is more popular in recent years, there is still considerable reliance on informal learning from colleagues.

As some of the respondents noted, the training content may not be relevant and is generally out of real context. Application of this type of knowledge is far more difficult than that learned in context. This is not certainly to say that formal learning was insignificant or played no part for the respondents; while they tended to rely more on informal learning, many also saw the importance of formal learning and the different roles the two types had to play (a feature also noted by Doyle and Hughes, 2004). Informal and Social learning were primarily seen as relating to immediate working needs and practical in nature (Annette and McDougall 1999, Kotey and Sheridan 2004, Dawe and Nguyen 2007). Formal training, in contrast, was often seen as fulfilling longer-term strategic skills needs and career development objectives, particularly in the slightly larger firms.

As noted by Ashton et al (2005), the structure of SMEs becomes more formal and hierarchical as the number of members increase. As described above, the micro-companies were characterized by very flat management structures, consisting basically of two levels; the owner and the employees. Structurally, therefore, the formal organization of these companies was fairly simple. The situation is more complex for a small sized company. The existence of sub groups makes management and communication become more challenging. The chance of face to face communication between members decreases. Communication of company goals and

strategies is through general meetings, sub group meetings or memos. This accords with Ashton et al (2005) and Kotey and Sheridan's (2004) findings that learning processes formalize as company size increases. The findings also support the conclusion that training opportunity does increase as company size increases. The training in Tree, Blue and Elite Companies (all micro companies) is far less than in Mood and Star Companies. The managers and supervisors in both small size companies shared the responsibility in providing training to their members. For Tree Company only the owner could provide training to her staff and it was not possible for her to provide frequent and comprehensive training to her staff. The problem of proficiency as discussed by Bertels et al (2011) truly affect the learning within the group. This indicates the differences in resources between small and micro firms – even though they are sometimes classified within the same bracket.

Therefore, formal organization shows a trend for hierarchical and formalization with increased size. However, the issue of informal organization was not always so simple.

Tree Company's members were very close and united together as a group. Blue Company had more members but they were not so close to each other. They had no particular grouping within the company and everyone worked individually. The case of Elite Company was more complicated. With only seven members, the company was divided informally into 2 to 3 loose parties. In Star Company, there were more sub

groups and independent workers within the group. The overall atmosphere of the company was good. There was no incident indicating conflict or a lack of cooperation. The circumstance for Mood Company was more pressing. As described by different members the atmosphere within the firm was quite volatile, seemingly due to the actions of the owner and some sub-group leaders. The findings therefore suggest that small is not necessarily simple and in harmony. The complexity in interaction provides an opportunity to understand the effect of owner-manager influence and employee-employee relations on learning.

Owner-Manager Influences

The existing literature suggests that the owners of SMEs have a considerable influence in the functioning of the organization. Annette and McDougall (1999) and Bishop (2006) indicate that owner-managers determine the training and development of SMES according to their own preferences. Findings of the study do support this conclusion.

Owners of all participating companies were big supporters of training and they all implemented training in their company. The difference was due to the availability of resources. They all encouraged their members to enroll in outside training courses.

With the owner-manager more positively oriented towards formal training, it becomes part of company's routine.

However, while owner-managers were highly influential in shaping the formal training

provision offered by the company, they often had less impact on the subjective dispositions and learner identities of their members – particularly those members whose attitudes towards training were negative. Even Audrey (Elite Company) and Donald (Star Company), who were highly respected by their members, could not always encourage negatively-inclined others to take part in formal learning (taking formal courses or reading more books). Recommendations given by owner-managers would be judged by a number of criteria. First is the degree of trust between owner and member. If the degree of trust is high members would take their advice. On the other hand if degree of trust is low, members would not listen to owner manager's advice. For example Amy from the Mood Company who once was Sally's assistant, her trust toward Sally was high and would consider Sally's recommendation seriously. David in the same company with Amy, who was in conflict with Sally, would not consider her recommendation at all. The second issue is the needs of the individual. Even with a high degree of trust, members still would consider their own condition before making any decision. In the case of Elaine (Elite Company), she would not take any course suggested by Audrey because of her low academic foundation. The extent of the influence of the owner is highly affected by the organization size and company formation process. Members invited to join the company usually shared common goals. They would agree the goals and targets of the existing company before

they join the company. In addition, there must be some attraction within the company that draws them to the company. In the case of Elite and Star Company, the owners Audrey and Donald were the main attraction. Their track record and personality were highly praised by their staff. Paula's staff also commented that she was friendly, professional and successful. Companies formed by restructuring do not share the above characteristics. In such instances, individuals had officially been given a say in whether or not to join particular groups, but in reality had little choice in the matter. Sally described "...I have no choice, Kevin asked if I can accept certain members, I want to say not but I can't ..." In this instance, the act of forcing reluctant and dissimilar individuals together resulted in a conflict of goals and working styles. The formation of Blue and Mood Company showed that the level of trust was lower when people were forced together rather than invited to join the company.

The existence of sub groups and hierarchical structures decreases the chance for interaction between owner and members. Members from larger SMEs are mainly interacting with their own group members and not their owner or other people. Usually they believed in their own group members or people with similar situations or backgrounds as they can better understand their needs and usually shared common goals. This finding suggested another important relationship in social learning and that is the employee-employee relationship.

Social learning highly depends on the chance of participating in group events. For most respondents the main interactions were with other employees especially the work group members. Their relations with other members would affect their opportunity to engage in learning event and to learn from others. This is clearly resonant with Lave and Wenger's (1991), Billett's (2004a) and Fuller et al's (2005) observations concerning the need for effective participation in the work and life of a community in order for situated learning to take place. Members in Mood and Blue Companies were highly aware of other people's learning. Sylvia (Blue Company) sought advice from other group members regarding her learning choices. The group comprised of Elaine, Catherine and Joyce always would talk, share and join together in learning events. Getting access to the group does indicate a better chance in learning from others. In some instances, individuals did not want to become part of the group community, and this impacted on their learning. Lily from the Elite Company and David from the Mood Company refused to interact with other members; the chance of learning socially from others is lowered. This supported Billett's (2004b) findings that some individuals will choose to exercise their right not to participate in social activity and even limit their own learning. Sub groups are like different communities within an organization. With their own goals, belief and practices. It becomes harder to penetrate learning across groups as Oborn and Dawson (2010) state that the main

issue of cross communities learning is to reach mutual goal and language before learning can take place.

The influence of social and networked learning - also noted in the small business literature - was a strong theme to emerge from the findings. Respondents could learn how people do their business, what courses they attend and they could even gather information about people they do not know from people within the social network. This is best illustrated by Gordon's situation, his immediate supervisor David was in conflict with Sally but he had quite good relationships with juniors of other groups and he said "...I often talk with other junior members and we would exchange our information and knowledge".

The same was also seen to be true for the senior managers. The owners of the five companies admitted that they would join professional associations, outside training courses and functions to meet more people. They also formed small groups with other owners to discuss and share problems, information or just want to know what others were doing. Building a social network is a way to break through the information barrier and to find suitable training opportunities a feature also noted by Lange et al (2000), Dawe and Nguyen (2007) and Barrett (2006).

2. Functioning of The Community

The ideas of communities of practices is employed to describe learning within a community by writers such as Brown and Duguid (1991), Billett (2002a), Fuller and Unwin. Lave and Wenger (1991) demonstrate the importance of learning within a social group in their book (Situated Learning). They proposed that legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice are the mandatory issue in social learning. Without being accepted to the group one could not learn through the daily practices and routines. This type of learning is mainly informal in nature.

However the right to join in the group is not only a personal matter. Power conflicts involving senior members sometimes would affect the learning opportunity of the junior members. The case of Mood Company signifies a more serious outcome with regard to this. The break up between Sally and her sub group members forced the company to change the training strategy. In the past all members were trained together but now each group holds their own training. The chance of meeting more professionals and to therefore learn from each other is minimized. The training becomes fragmented and it is hard to build the group or common professional identity (as noted by Fuller et al 2005). The opportunity to integrate, interact and participate “legitimately” (in Lave and Wenger’s term) did seem important to developing the necessary professional skills, and the tensions and power imbalances that were seen to

restrict such opportunities therefore impeded some respondents' learning.

Arguably, one weakness of Lave and Wenger's (1991) description of power imbalance is that it mainly focuses on a concept of core and peripheral members. This kind of description could not be applied in all companies. In Blue Company as all members were experienced financial consultants and their bonding was not so strong, other than Cindy there was no other core member. Members felt they remained in the peripheral part only and no intention to move to the core. In Mood Company, the power was not all within the hands of the owner. David said he was in the periphery of the group but actually his power struggle with Sally caused serious management problems. He could not be called a core member but he still had the power in altering practices within the company.

The findings also suggest that social learning opportunities are highly appreciated by the participants. In particular, junior members who are newcomers of the profession affirm the value of social learning. To them experienced members were like treasure houses where they could find what they need. They could ask for help and in most cases got immediate feedback. If they wanted to know how to do something, they could observe an experience member performing the task. This helped them to apply what they learned directly to their own work. For experienced members with one or two exceptions they appreciated the chance to discuss and share their problems with

others. As well as discussing specific problems with their colleagues, they would also share book they read, the course they attended with others. This reliance on informal, social and networked learning has been noted in the literature, as observed above. However, these findings do perhaps emphasize that such learning is more explicitly recognized and valued by learners than has normally been appreciated.

This kind of learning is however not without limitation. Junior members or newcomers will find what they want from their experienced partners. For those who are not in the peripheral position, they might find their learning is rather limited within the group.

Like the members in Blue Company, because everyone was experienced and of a similar level the amount of new knowledge learned from other members would be restricted. The number of members of micro and small companies is relatively small and the knowledge that exists within the group is far more restricted than in larger groups. Martin (Star Company) said "You couldn't just stay in the company, you need to go out and learn from other people, to find something new..." It is the problem of depth and width that this type of social learning could provide to the company members. Consequently, even in Star Company, those experienced and in senior position did have difficulty in finding appropriate learning opportunities within the company.

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that relying on social learning alone could not

satisfy the needs of all members. Fuller and Unwin (2005) point out that the community of practice model neglects the value of formal learning. This is further supported by the findings of this study that without the support of formal learning, learning to become a professional (particularly for more senior employees and owners) in a micro and small company might be very difficult. The lack of suitable trainers, resources and knowledge within the firm make it difficult for them to ensure the further development of experienced professionals.

On a related point, it is perhaps worth noting that the potential training role played by newcomers that is emerging in response to the recent raising of entry-level qualification requirements within the profession. In the past newcomers were mainly secondary school graduates. Their average level of education was not high. In the last few years the number of newcomers with a university degree is getting higher. As Elaine said "...it changes a lot in this few years, now there are many university graduates who join this field, those without qualification and not performing well cannot stay in the company anymore." It is interesting to see some newcomers like Gordon and Thomas taking professional courses with higher recognition (Chartered Financial Planner). There are some professional courses that required bachelor degree for entry, and more experienced members with lower educational qualifications could

not take this kind of course. This means some newcomers might possess more advanced professional knowledge than their experienced members meaning that old timers now potentially have more to learn from newcomers. For example, Audrey said she would often ask Thomas to explain some professional issues to her.

For those more experienced members in the core position, learning is still an essential part of their career life. The company owners needed to improve their knowledge in management. Those who want to take up a supervisor's role also need to learn more about management. If they want to expand their business by selling other products, they have to learn new product knowledge and management skills. Most of the more experienced respondents were increasingly of the conviction that learning was not simply a privilege for the newcomer but is instead an ongoing part of professional life and development.

Another significant issue with Lave and Wenger's model of the community of practice is the continuation of practice. As Fuller et al (2005) note, practice is subject to change. For example, practice within different groups changed as the nature of social interaction changed. The power conflict within the Mood Company induced a big change in practice within the company. The reconstruction of Trust Company forced the formation of Blue and Mood Companies. In this respect, the examples used by Lave

and Wenger arguably reflected more stable occupations. For example, The Yucatec Midwives only allow family members of the existing midwife to join the group. The group is self contained and it is not easy to get access into the group. For those groups with higher turnover rate and which are easier to access the continuation of practice seems less applicable. The speed of change in financial industry is fast, the turnover rate is high, and changing community practices in order to adapt to circumstances is generally accepted as a way of life. This swift rate of change brings with it continuous learning requirements that even old-timers must meet in order to remain competitive.

Summary

The findings reflected that importance of engagement in social practices in building knowledge and skills within both small and micro firms. However, the influence of the owner changes with the formation process and as the size of the company increases. Influence from in-group members also plays an important role in learning. Furthermore, social learning is heavily influenced by the nature of the relationship between members. In particular, the presence or absence of trust, familiarity and a supportive atmosphere was seen as crucial in this respect. Other findings indicated that the choice of participation is both in the hand of owner and the employee. In addition, the findings promote the conclusion that, within the community of practice power imbalance, role of new comer, continuation of practice are not as static as described by

Lave and Wenger (1991). The existence of sub groups with the organization indicates members might have different goals. To mobilize learning within the organization the first and most important thing is to negotiate mutual agreed goals within the firm. The failure of owners to build a more intense learning culture demonstrate a goal not accepted by other members could never turn into reality.

Finally it was seen that the building of social networks for learning purpose within and outside the company prove to be beneficial for individual and company and that such informal networks seem to be more explicitly valued than has sometimes been acknowledged.

The findings proved that small and micro firms did rely heavily on informal and social learning. These types of learning requires good social relations and chances for observation and exchanges. It is clear that social context is an important place for learning to take place. Joining the community means increasing the chance to meet, observe and discuss with others. The opportunity of learning increases as well. The relationship between social relations, individual factors and learning is illustrated in Figure 3. below.

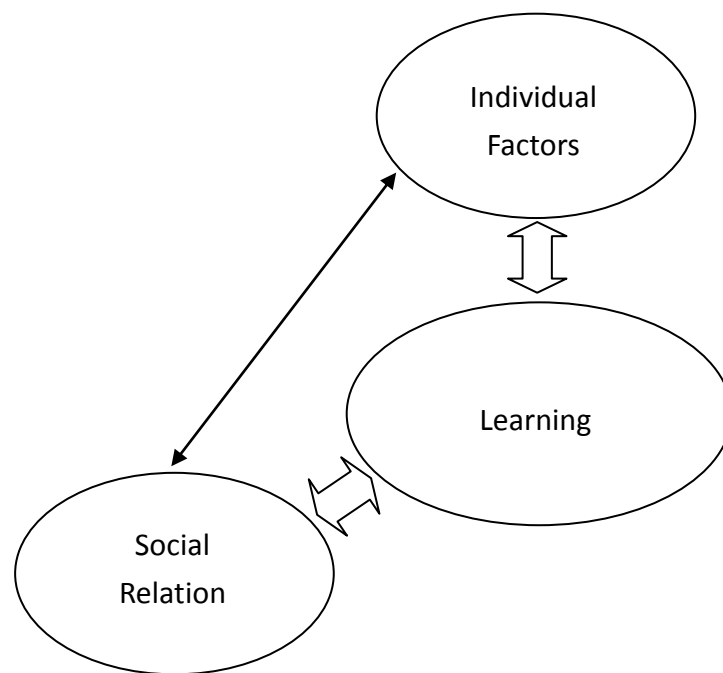


Figure 3. The relationship between learning, individual factors and social relations

Individuals are interconnect with people around them and build a social context where learning takes place. Other than providing the site for learning, getting recognition and comparing oneself to others could help individuals to detect learning gap and heighten their motivation to learn. Gaining information from others help to widen their choice in learning. These example proved that social relations effect on learning as show in Figure 3.

Other than learning within the group, social relations have influences on individual. For example respondents report that they might take up a training course due to supervisor or colleague's recommendation or they did not want to fall behind their

colleagues. Social relations affect individual and in turn influence the learning.

Individual learns new information, knowledge and brings it back to the group might induce changes within the group. As described by Lave and Wenger (1991) member could move from peripheral to core position as they acquired knowledge. The change in position reflects learning does have effect on social relations.

While this chapter has focused on the social group-level influences on learning, the next chapter turns to the more formal aspects of organizational life and structure, and how these impact on learning.

Chapter Eight: Organization and learning

The aim of this chapter is to go beyond the team level and explore organizational training policy and strategy and the influence on participants' learning. As previously noted the SMEs participating in this study are owned by 2 large companies. Blue, Mood and Tree Companies are owned by Trust Company and Star and Elite Companies owned by Multi Group. First, the employee development policies and strategies used by the mother companies and individual SMEs will be described briefly to provide some context. Participant's views on these policies will then be explored. Also the effectiveness of strategies and the nature of organizational learning cultures are investigated. The effect of power and emotion on learning is also discussed in relation to organizational strategy.

Brief description of organizational approaches to training and development

According to the literature, organizational strategy and policy might not only direct learning within the organization but it could also help to build a learning- supportive culture (Bishop et al 2006). In these instances the policy of the mother companies and the resources that each mother company and SMEs devote to the training and development of their members are different. This seemed to affect the outcome and the ways in which respondents perceived organizational commitment to training.

Furthermore, the support that each business received from its mother company varied significantly. Would such differences influence the learning culture of a company?

1. *Mother Company*

Multi Group

As a branch of an international financial company, Multi Group had considerable resources when compared to Trust Company. The company had about 70 trainers to provide training to their financial consultants. The training content covered financial consultants from all levels and addressed different aspects of their professional life. There was training for new recruits who were going to take the license examination. Initial training classes were for those who had just passed their examination. Follow up training is provided after 6 months of work. Training courses were also delivered for financial consultants aiming to take up a supervisor post and who would like to expand their own group. Courses for developing selling skills or personal image were also offered by the central training department. For example there were sessions on improving conversation skills and building a professional image available for all members. Updates of recent financial market development and new product information were also part of the training provision.

Monthly magazines, newsletters, special booklets were published to promote Multi Group's policy and goals. A booklet about MDRT members in the Asia region was used

to encourage members to achieve professional excellence. Also this booklet acted as a way to share and disseminate the experience of the high performers. Within the office, there were posters, mission statements and performance records posted on the wall to remind members of group's goals and policy. Other than formal training, the organization would invite high performers to share their experience with other members across the organization.

Respondents acknowledged the comprehensive, inclusive and well-resourced nature of Multi-Group's training program. Thomas (Elite Company) said "Training is comprehensive and includes all level of members." Elaine (Elite Company) stated that "...it has long term planning, suits the needs of different members and it really provides a strong support for us." No respondents voiced any negative views about Multi Group's training.

Despite the fact that within Multi Group, there was lots of support and opportunity for training, the learning culture was apparently not very strong. The participants expressed both positive and negative views on this. Daisy (Star Company) said that the learning culture was quite good and she frequently heard about other members enrolling in different courses. Martin (Star Company)said "...its good and people are willing to share what they learnt." About half of the Multi Group members described the learning culture as good.

However, there are also people with a different view. Audrey (Elite Company) commented that "...I guess there is too much sharing and you know it is not very close to other people's need and many feel fatigue by it." Joyce (Elite Company) said "I seldom join any training course; I will join only if I am interested in it." Donald (Star Company) pointed out that "...they would only join those compulsory seminars or workshops, only a few would join other courses." In some ways, the large size of the mother organization, while supporting investment in formal training, inhibited the development of a genuine learning culture. Catherine (Elite Company) said "Multi Group is too big and how could I know anything about it." She admitted that she had little idea of the overall learning culture of Multi Group.

Trust Company

On the other hand, Trust Company with only one part-time trainer could not provide such comprehensive training for its members. Training within the company was only exclusive to new recruits or those with 3 years of experience. One week initial training was provided to all new recruits. Advanced training was also provided to financial consultants when they reached their third year. This was the first turning point of their career life, they had to choose their career path either to develop their own business or to become a supervisor and form their own team. But the fact was that training was not always available as it depended on the availability of the part time trainer. Talks on

recent financial conditions are held once a month by Financial Analysts and occasionally training was provided when the company launched new products. Other material related to the company's goals or strategy was not found within the office.

The majority of the members from Trust Company agreed that it did not have any long term training goals. As Cindy (Blue Company) commented, for example "...the training is not effective and not well planned." Zoe (Blue Company) said "There is no long term planning only for the first three years and no more resources for senior training." Sally (Mood Company) pointed out "...it has the idea but there is no planning, no trainer and no management development..." David said he depended on his own effort in learning and he could not rely on Trust Company for any help. These were the opinions from senior members. Junior members had different views on the training issue. Fion (Mood Company) said Trust Company provided enough training for juniors like her. Gordon (Mood Company) agreed that "...it puts lots of effort on training. It has long term training for the members and the initial training is very useful."

Participants were asked to comment on their understanding of the strategies adopted by the mother and their own company. All members of Multi Group agreed that they were aware of and understand Multi Group's goals and strategies. Like Thomas (Elite Company) said "we go forward with the same pace." Elaine (Elite Company) said "we support each other." None of Multi Group members expressed any negative feelings

about the group. They were all proud of being with Multi Group. Howard (Star Company) commented "The company is good, it has a clear direct goal and good supporting systems like marketing, training..." which was really helpful for the members. This suggested that members of Multi Group knew and supported organizational goals and policy. The relationship between Multi Group and the immediate companies seemed to be good and a positive one.

For Trust Company's members, only 3 said they know the company's goals and policies.

David (Mood Company) reported " ...they have talked about it but I really don't know

much about it." When asked about the goals and policy Gordon (Mood Company)

replied "I know about the head count but not others, we are going in different

directions..." Michael (Mood Company) stated his opinion about the company's overall

goals and strategy "...it is not clear and both the product and the administration parts

are going in a different direction." It is clear from participant's responses that Trust

Company had not communicated its goals and policy effectively to its members. Some

members do show a negative feeling about these problems in communication.

In contrast to Multi group, most members reported negative feelings about the

development policy of Trust Company. Also they did not know about the goals and

strategy of the Company. Other than formal training support, informal training

support was not found within the company. The relationship between Trust Company

and immediate companies was not good. Cindy (owner of Blue Company) said “ We will work according to our own abilities and not according to their wish (Trust Company)”. Sally (owner of Mood Company) also said, with regard to the overall strategy of Trust Company “I am not totally agree with it. We need more support from the marketing department but we don’t have it...” Charles (Mood Company) complained “...they (management of Trust Company) know nothing about the business, they don’t listen to the experts.” Disagreement and conflict were found within the Trust Company.

The learning culture of Trust Company was reported as mixed. Fion (Mood Company) stated her observation that many members had professional qualifications and the learning culture was good. Amy (Mood Company) said “I know many of them are taking professional courses and they are all willing to share with others.” Gordon (Mood Company) said if he had any problem others would be willing to answer his question. Michael (Mood company) commented that sharing and learning were mostly among those supervisor grade members. Cindy (Blue Company) said “We do have sharing but the problem is we don’t have time to do that.” Zoe (Blue Company) described that members were passive in learning. They did not take spontaneous action.

The considerable differences between Multi Group and Trust Company do affect member’s attitudes and their relationship with their mother company. Multi Group

provides plentiful learning opportunities to its members and conveys its goals clearly to them. Interestingly, however, such attempts to build a learning-supportive culture do not seem to help to increase member's intention for learning. On the other hand, members of Trust Company generally either do not know about or and even disagree with its goals and strategy but this does not appear to constitute a hindrance to learning. This perhaps indicates that the availability of in-house training would not increase members training need. Even without in-house training support, Trust Company members' training needs could be fulfilled by their own group and outside training organizations. They already accepted minimal support from Trust Company and would not expect extra support from it. Many of them depended on informal and social learning to improve themselves as described by Brown and Dugid (1991) and Eraut et al (1998).

2. Learning Within The SMEs

The training content provided by the individual companies is similar to other SMEs. The main focus here was to develop financial consultant's potential in running their business to handle their daily needs. Such training is about selling skills, communication skills, self-emotional management and problem solving skills. Such training is often provided through morning meetings, though such meetings fulfilled other functions too. Monday meetings were usually for planning, Wednesday for

management and Friday for review. Training can be held in Tuesday or Thursday. For example the session might teach closing techniques like how to encourage customers to make decision and make use of imagination to create a perfect future for the customer. Sometimes they utilized role play activities. They would choose difficult cases and ask members to comment on the skills, and the approach of the participants. There were also reading sharing sessions where one of the members would share some reading material with others. The depth and width of the content of each training session had to depend on the knowledge and experience of trainers. Further exploration of the data revealed some significant differences between small and micro firms in terms of the training provided.

Mood Company

The daily routine of Mood Company started from 8:30 a.m. each morning. The morning meeting usually lasted for one hour and the whole company or individual teams used the time for training, reporting and work management. Nearly all Financial Consultants would stay in the office during the morning section. They would do their paper work like filling in forms, submitting documents and handling complaints. Also they would contact their existing or potential customers to make appointments. Sally would reserve the morning section for her staff for signing forms and solving problems. Financial Consultants would go out for lunch meeting and came back during the

afternoon and out again for later afternoon or dinner appointment.

Sally would like to provide training to all financial consultants within her company. In the past she grouped the experienced financial consultants and asked them to deliver training sessions to all members. The training strategy was undermined to some extent by what she described as uncooperative subordinates. At this moment the only training that she could organize was induction-level training to all new financial consultants.

She said she would like to create a sharing atmosphere within her company to encourage exchange across teams. This was her approach to counter act the opposite power. She always encourages her members to join outside courses to further their knowledge as both Mood Company and Trust Company could not provide enough training for them. Therefore, Mood Company's predominant policy on employee development was to outsource training activity when required by the firm or by individual members.

Sally felt that the strategic problems of Mood Company were mainly due to her, she said "I should have fixed the goals and strategy at the end of last year, but I was not in the mood to think about it, I need to fix it now." As a result, the members of Mood Company frankly reported that they did not know their company's goals and strategy

for the coming year.

When Sally was asked about the learning culture and employee attitudes within the

firm, she said "...some are really aggressive but some don't want to do anything."

Within the company most participants agreed in principle about the important of

learning and had taken up outside courses at various times. At present time, however,

only the junior members were taking outside courses. The more senior and

experienced members showed much less willingness to seek out and participate in

such learning. They were fully aware of Sally's motivation and enthusiasm in learning

but did not follow her lead. Most said that they had enrolled in formal courses

previously, but not now.

In Mood Company, the problems that affect member's learning can perhaps be

described as two folds. First the lack of overall strategic planning signified there is no

goal or strategy guiding member's development. The content of formal training could

not be easily planned which in turn hinders the training progress. Second the decrease

in groups gathering means a consequently decreased chance of seeing, talking and

observing others. Informal and social learning opportunity decreases. In addition, the

political discord within the company did also not assist social learning processes as

members would run away to escape from negative atmosphere.

Star Company

The daily routine of Star Company was similar to Mood Company which also started with morning meetings at 8:30 a.m. The meetings were about skill training, case discussion and work management. Financial Consultants had the right to plan their own daily schedule. Other than Monday to Friday morning, there was also a meeting on Saturday morning for staff at supervisor grade or above.

Everyone had to attend the meetings. Toby (Star Company) said “You must attend the session unless you have good reason not to.” Senior members and Donald were responsible for the training. Even though Star Company had relatively plentiful resources for delivering training in -house, Donald still encouraged his members to join training provided by Multi Group or outside organizations. He would aim to act as an example for his staff to direct them towards become active learner. All members from Star Company reported that they were familiar with the company’s goals and agree with its development strategy.

Donald with the support of senior members and Multi Group did find it hard to create a more intense learning culture. He felt that he had had some limited success in promoting a learning culture within the firm. The major problem he encountered was his more able members did not want to learn more. Indeed, most of the members did not show any enthusiasm about learning and frankly admitted that they could not work

like Donald.

Blue Company

Blue company shared similar routines with other companies with daily meetings starting at 8:30 a.m. each morning. The content of these meetings normally included skill training, case discussion, and employee management. Usually the members were responsible for planning and conducting the meeting and occasionally they would invite people from Trust Company to provide product and marketing training. After the meeting all Financial Consultants were free to plan their daily activities.

In some important ways, the situation for Blue Company was different from other companies. Cindy said all members were over ten years of experience; the training needs would therefore be very different from companies with more new recruits. The bonding between members was not close. The social influence of the owner and other members on individual's learning was apparently small. Only Cindy was taking a formal course (a BBA course) at the present time. As described by members the learning culture is not strong within the company. During the morning meetings, members had to choose suitable training goals and contents for themselves. As such, they all were responsible for training within the company. Cindy was not the only one to design and conduct training sessions for the company. But the problem was not only the training

content, it was the attendance. All members were required to attend the Friday morning meeting but they could apply not to attend the other meetings. Within this voluntarist training environment, members generally opted not to attend.

According to Cindy and others, it was rare for full team gatherings to occur. Again, this creates a problem for informal and social learning within the group. Members with similar years of experience did have knowledge and experience to share with others but this also meant spending time away from more urgent work matters.

Elite Company

The daily routine started at 8:30 a.m. each day. Morning meetings were about skill, product training and case management. After meetings Audrey would occasionally have a breakfast meeting with individual Financial Consultants. In Elite company, Audrey provided much of the training herself, although members would also attend training delivered by Multi Group and external training organizations. As the leader she preferred to guide and support rather than teach her members. She observed that all her members would come to her when they had problems but they need her encouragement to motivate them to move on. She viewed her role as being more like a spiritual leader rather than a trainer.

The learning culture did not appear to be good within the company. Audrey and Thomas were taking long term courses but the other members were not enthusiastic

about learning. They had the chance and opportunity to learn but even with the encouragement from Audrey still they found it boring or not necessary to take part in formal learning.

Tree Company

As a small company, Tree Company shared some of the characteristics of the other companies. Paula found it hard to manage the training by herself and she liked to join other company or group if the topic was useful to each other. She had a strong belief that learning was the key to improve one's performance.

The smallest of the five, there were three members within the company. Tree Company faced greater resource shortages and more difficulty in training. Paula was the only experienced person and she could not deliver all aspects of training to her members. Her choice was to form cooperative relationships with other micro companies for training purpose. Paula said "We (with other companies) might invite people from other departments within trust Company to deliver talks to our members". As there was only one part-time trainer in Trust Company, it could only provide initial training for new recruits. The availability of advanced training for consultants over 3years of experience depended on the trainer's availability. Therefore it was not normally possible to ask Trust Company for assistance. As such, using an outside training source

was the only alternative.

Talking with Paula about their goals and strategy, she said she was not thinking about it now. She said there was some problem within the group and she had to manage it first. One of the group members had personal problems and this paralyzed the whole company's activity. Such a suspension of normal daily activity within the firm inevitably creates a problem for learning. Both formal and informal modes of learning are affected, and this has significant implications, particularly for the new recruits who require more intensive training.

The five companies share some similarities. All owners of the companies are very keen on learning. They support the idea of continuous learning and encourage their members to keep on learning. They try to act as a role model for their members. In contrast, the members from the companies were generally not as enthusiastic as their owners. Similar findings about Multi Group also emerged.

Several common problems were identified with regard to learning. First, the focus of learning is again at the formal end. Owners evaluate the learning of their members in terms of participation in formal courses. The strategy they generally employed was to provide formal training in the morning meetings and to encourage other members to enroll in outside training courses. Most of the owners and the members lack the awareness in identifying and promoting informal and social learning which are valuable

to all members.

Second, training provided by individual companies faced similar problems. New or junior members expressed higher levels of satisfaction with regard to training than more experienced staff across all companies. Amy from the Mood Company described how she learned within the group “Sally and other senior members provide training during the morning meeting session. I always observe how experienced members carry out their work and I will ask them when I encountered any problem.” Lily from the Elite Company also said “ ... training started even before you join the company, I will ask Audrey if I need help.”

Unfortunately, this type of training might not meet the needs of more experienced members. Howard was not a very experienced member of the Star Company, but he was granted permission to perform stock and investment trading. Daily training was not very meaningful for him as both his clientele and business natures were different from ordinary members. Michael (Mood Company) said “You can get some basic training in here but not for advanced level.” Sylvia (Blue Company) talked of her attitude in attending the morning meeting, training was not the first priority “I will try to attend the meeting, you know we can’t see each other often, this is where we can meet together.”

Discussion

Influence of Mother Company

Increasingly, organizational performance is believed to be related to learning (Lahteenmaki, S. et al 2001). In turn, the broader strategic, cultural and structural environment of the workplace is seen to impact on learning. For example, Fuller and Unwin (2005) highlight the characteristics of an 'expansive' (as opposed to restrictive) learning environment. Providing training, sharing opportunities and job rotation could help members to develop and acquire skills and knowledge through both formal and informal learning. Even with the opportunity to learn, it depends on individuals to take action in learning. With this in mind, the organizational culture might help to encourage members to learn. To promote learning within the organization, building a learning –supportive culture (Bishop et al 2006) is a way to improve member's motivation to learn and share. In this study, Multi Group and Trust Company provided two examples of how organizational strategy affects culture and learning.

Trust Company and Multi Group could be described as two opposite poles. Multi Group has a clear strategy and policy to develop its members. It devoted considerable resources to training them. Other than formal training, Multi Group also held dedicated sharing sessions for members to enhance their learning and performance

through less formal means. Trust Company in contrast lacked the strategy, policy and resources in training its members.

The feedback from members was different for the two groups. All Multi Group members provided positive feedback about the infrastructure and support available to facilitate their training and development. In contrast, feedback from Trust Company varied from negative to positive. Junior members usually appreciated the initial training provided by the company for example Gordon (Mood Company)said “The training is good and comprehensive.” More senior members took a contrasting view that there was no long term planning and resources for further training.

As seen above, both organizations adopted different strategic approaches towards member’s development. Multi Group showed its effort in building a learning-supportive culture (comprehensive training courses, dedicated sharing sessions) but in general had only limited success in this respect. With such diverse choice and opportunity, levels of enrollment in the in house training courses were not high. Audrey said “...not many people enroll in the courses. Many courses are cancelled because of low enrollment rate.” Furthermore, simple encouragement or recognition for participation in training did not seem to have much effect in terms of motivating participation. The usual reason for not taking part is “too busy”. Respondents did not complain about the course content and subject and they reflected that it was a time

management problem. Most respondents only participated in formal training when it was absolutely unavoidable, preferring instead to learn in less formal ways as and when specific needs arose in the workplace. As reported by Howard "I could ask others or observe how they do it, training is not always necessary." Informal learning therefore could substitute formal learning in some situations. This emphasizes the crucial point that informal and social learning play an important role in workplace learning particularly with the small business workplace (Brown and Duguid 1991, Eruat et al 1998& Billett, 2002a). However, formal learning was preferred in terms of organizational policy. There were very few or no initiatives in promoting informal and social learning within the workplace.

A distinct answer from both Donald and Martin was related to the limits of in house training and the benefit of receiving training from 'outsiders'. Donald said "Attending outside courses can widen your own horizon." Martin explained "It is better to go out and learn something new and different from other people." Such responses indicate that training provided in-house, in contrast, was considered as limited. In order to excel in the profession, mastering the skills of other successful people beyond the company could help in achieving the goal. This echoes Dawe and Nguyen's (2007) findings relating to the small's firm tendency to draw on external sources and networks for learning.

Trust Company experienced problems in implementing a learning culture through formal channels, largely due again to resource constraints. Observation and response from members indicated that learning was mainly received from outside providers.

Carson (Mood Company) a senior member explained his own view “The Company has no resources and manpower to do the training. There is no long term planning at all. Of course the training for me is zero but I never expect anything from the company and you need to go out and take a look at the real world. You can’t rely on in house training.”

Carson brought out a main issue and this was expectation. Members from Trust Company were used to this lack of training condition. They would not expect any formal training from the company and that is why they would not find it disappointing.

Here again, responses indicated that outside training could provide an enriched environment for the learner. They could meet people from different companies and fields. Their exchange and exposure were described as wider and richer. Trust Company members could obtain different accreditations after completing the outside course which in house training might not provide. Some Multi Group training programs could provide CDP hours for participants but not professional qualification. In this respect, outside training courses do have an advantage when compared to in house training.

Such findings indicate that external training providers actually can have much to offer

the small business, if the training is delivered in appropriate ways (Barrett, 2006).

The results of the study indicated that building a learning supportive culture was not an easy task. The owner-mangers acted as the role model to set the norm and preached the positive value of learning. Also trainings were provided by both mother companies and SMEs, attending training became usually practices for members. All these initiatives could not increase members' motivation to learn. As discussed in the previous section, owner- mangers might not be as influential as members with close relationship. The value and goal decided by senior, owner might not match with members and they might just disagree and ignore them. The degree of trust further affects this type of influence. Building a culture only using a top-down strategy might not be effective.

Comparing Learning in Small and Micro Organizations

Rarely in the literature have small and micro businesses been compared and contrasted as learning environments. By comparing the five participating companies, however, it is possible to explore the differences between small and micro companies. The companies that took part in the study all stated that they would like to provide training for their members. Unfortunately micro size companies faced more difficulty than their small size counterparts mainly due to resource restrictions and lack of internal expertise. Tree and Elite companies had only one experienced member (the boss) and

this made the owner the only one who could provide training. All members of Blue Company were experienced financial consultants so the knowledge differences between them and Cindy was small. In both cases the knowledge that the company could provide to the member is limited (though for different reasons). For Micro sized companies, it is often not possible for them to have suitable expertise to conduct training.

In contrast, the situation for a small company with more members and sub groups makes specialization possible. In Mood Company for example senior members were given the responsibility to train the junior members. Star company did have this type of delegation. Donald would discuss management issues with senior members or group leaders and then they would carry out the decision or communicate the news to other members. As the company size increase, companies have more resource (expertise) to conduct training. Formalization, delegation and hierarchy are more developed as in small sized company as proposed by Ashton et al (2005).

Taken as a whole, some SMEs do have more initiatives for formal training and a more positive orientation towards it. It is rather the constraints faced by the SMEs that make training difficult and sometimes ineffective. This does not, of course, mean that learning does not occur in these firms. The findings presented above show that informal learning and social learning which take place in the workplace help the

member of SMEs to learn to do their job. Similar to Kotey and Sheridan (2004) and Annete and McDougall (1999) findings, this type of training is important for daily needs but not for future development. An important finding of this study was that formal training provided by outside organizations is an important way for member to learn wider and deeper knowledge. Since in most cases, in-house training was regarded by most respondents as being of less quality and utility, outside formal learning opportunity becomes more important. This suggests that learning within SMEs (or indeed any organization) should not be considered in terms of a simple formal or informal dichotomy. It should be a combination of various learning modes to build a solid foundation for its members.

To improve learning within SMEs, the information and availability of external courses needs to be known to SMEs. As gathering information and finding suitable external training course are problems of SMEs (Lange et al 2000, Vinten 2000). Once again it becomes problematic if only formal training is recognized by the company or the government and if informal learning is considered inferior. This might hinder the development of informal or social learning within the company. Denying the importance of informal or social learning would only hinder the building of a more expansive learning environment for individuals.

Power and learning

The present findings suggest that both power and emotion are heavily implicated in shaping learning within the firm. As discussed in the previous chapter, power is a factor in altering social relation and group learning. The companies demonstrated different types of power distribution, whether they are centralized, with two cores etc. Power is not totally in the hands of company owner. The power could be distributed differently within a group. It is true that more powerful members could have more authority in designing what is to be taught and who should be taught. An individual employee's learning chances are highly dependent on their relationship with the powerful members (Billett 2004a). The training content and targets are normally set by the owner and the senior. However, it is also true that learning occurs informally and socially, and we could therefore argue that the more powerful members of the firm exercise less power over this than they do over formal learning as described by Collin et al (2011).

However, those with power could still set the subjective tone for learning within the firm. Powerful parties had a greater chance of shaping learning processes than less powerful ones. For example, the conflict between David and Sally changed training practice within the Mood Company. The result was mainly due to David's position as a sub group leader and senior member within the company. He had the power to

disagree with Sally's decision. The power relation and the social relation inter-related to each other. Formal power can fix social relation within the firms. On the other hand, changes in social relations could also redefine power relations. The daily interaction reproduce and redefine the power relation (Collin et al 2011). Even relatively powerless persons do have a say in their learning as proposed by Huzzard (2001). For example, those with less power would take a silent way to resist the problem as observed by Drivers (2002). Many participants were very much against designated training but they did not have the right to reject the arrangement. Instead, like Catherine (Elite Company) who brought her i-Pod , they would attend the session but pay no attention to it.

Gordon (Mood Company) form bonding with other junior members and find his way to break away from the restriction of David (Mood Company). Absolute control in learning and knowledge is not possible.

Even in the small firm context, power distribution and struggle is not a simple issue. It is not possible to predict what will happen within the company. This fits Elias (1978)

Game model description of power relations. The outcome of relationships is unpredictable as "no one is in-charge". Learning culture and knowledge could not be spread just by those with formal power. Under asymmetry condition, even powerless individual could learn through informal and social means. Therefore considering power from a single person's position is incomplete. Power is not only conferred by structural

position rather it is determined by the relationship between people.

Emotion and Learning

Turning to the issue of emotion and learning, this is not widely studied in the present literature particularly in relation to learning in small business. Yet the findings emerging from this study suggest that emotion has an important role to play in affecting the way that learning occurs within the small business. The influence affects learning from various levels. For example, Sylvia (Blue Company) was an experienced financial consultant who was not taking any course at the moment. She frankly explained her problem "I lost my direction for a period of time. I am not in a good mood for taking any course or making any decision. I know I have to overcome it and to move on." This helps to emphasize the point, noted in previous chapters, that subjective orientations to learning at the individual level can impact powerfully on learning processes. This impact was further described by Lily (Elite Company). She reported "I could have achieved MDRT last year if I try a little harder but I don't want to so I lost it." The problem with Lily was not her ability. She had qualified for MDRT two years ago but she 'decided' not to make it the next year. Her emotional state was not good. The pressure of pregnancy, raising a new born baby and her conflict with other team members hindered her in reaching her goal and pulled her away from sources of informal and

social learning. Her case highlights the powerful effects that personal emotion can have on individual learning.

The problem with Sally and the Mood Company was also related to emotion. This incident indicates how emotion is not simply an individual matter; it can be closely connected to the climate and atmosphere within the firm. This emotional atmosphere, in turn, can affect the ways in which learning occurs. Sally admitted that she was not in the mood for planning the yearly goal during the end of the year. Furthermore, her emotional state really affected the emotion of other members. As Amy confirmed "The mood of our boss does affect our working attitude." Michael used the analogy of a weather observatory to describe the atmosphere "...you know its just like the observatory; you have to detect what's the weather and to protect yourself from being hurt." Fion said "No matter what's the atmosphere, you have to do your job." David insisted that nothing could affect his own work. He was too busy with his work, family and church issues. Sally delay in the yearly planning affected the training schedule and content of the whole company. As a result some people in the Mood Company became "infected" by Sally's emotional problem and some tried to withdraw from organizational life. The environment for learning disappeared as did their motivation to learn.

Amy was strongly affected by Sally's emotional disturbance. She recalled that "I don't want to go to work when the atmosphere of the company is poor." Amy's learning also seemed highly affected by the company's atmosphere. Before she joined as a financial consultant she was Sally's personal assistant. Their relationship is close and emotional dependency is high. Contrary to Amy's experience, Gordon was also a junior of Mood Company but he did not much affected by Sally's emotional problem. He was under David's supervision and according to Gordon the atmosphere was normal. His social attachment is mainly with David but he still would interact with other members. He was not closely attached to Sally and this lowered the effect of Sally's emotional disturbance upon him. The closeness and dependency between members affect the impact of emotional disturbance.

Another example was the Tree Company. Where the problem of one member affected the emotional climate and running of the whole company. Paula talked about the situation "...we stop our daily routine and it's not the right time to do this."

Observation of respondent suggested that Paula was experiencing high level of stress and she was not very attentive to interview questions and was not willing to talk about the problem. In this instance, the changing of emotional atmosphere did have an effect on some employees' attitude and on the company's operation. No more in-house training or gatherings were held for a period of time.

The members in Elite Company demonstrated how emotion can have impact in other ways. Audrey reported "They all need me to motivate them in their work." All her members agreed that they needed Audrey to lead them. Their responses indicated her centrality to setting the emotional and subjective tone of the firm. In this case Audrey had a positive effect on their emotion which helped them to improve their performance. Even though Lily refused to interact with others personally; she would still attend Audrey's meetings. This helped to create a better environment for exchange and learning. As Vince (2008) discussed the problem of "learning inaction", the case of Sally (Mood Company) and Lily (Elite Company) were good example of this phenomena when tension raised with change and other life responsibility. The emotion issue not only affect personal learning but also team and organization levels learning as suggested by Simpson and Marshall (2010).

As indicated, the effect of emotional disturbance did appear to have the capacity to impact powerfully upon learning within the small firms visited-whether in a positive or negative way. We can perhaps begin to see that emotional conditions within the workplace do impact on learning, but they are not necessarily easy to control or predict in this respect. Cote (2005) explains that it is not possible to predict how one receive, interpret and response to incoming situation. Past experience, individual expectation, social relation and organization policy all have effect on individual

emotion. Like Amy and Gordon from Mood Company, react differently about Sally's problem. It is worth noting that learning itself can arouse emotional response, like attending designated training do arouse negative emotion in some respondents. Managing emotion seems necessary but not easy in the work place.

Summary

In summary, we can perhaps draw out some key themes before moving on to the conclusions. For example, the training policies and broader strategies adopted by the firms reflected the attitudes of senior managers as well as the resources available to them. Multi Group and Trust Company demonstrated two different ways in developing members. The main difference is members' perception about the two companies. Other than learning this perception might has effect on member's performance. Building a learning supportive culture through owner-mangers or management was not particularly effective in promoting learning within these companies. In terms of comparisons between small and micro firms, it emerged that the small firms, due mainly to their greater levels of formalization and specialization, were more likely to make use of formal training. The micro firms, while quite positively inclined towards formal training, lacked both the resources and expertise to make extensive use of it. Informal and social learning is operating within all these companies.

Another theme to emerge was that small firms would often use formal, external training to supplement what they saw as deficient in-house training. It is therefore important for them to have information on suitable training courses for SMEs and this could help members to develop skills and knowledge for further development. In some cases however, there was an excessive focus on formal learning, and this did little to create a positive learning environment and also directed attention away from crucial instances of informal learning. It is important to maintain a balance between the two.

With regard to power, it became clear that senior managers and owners can exercise significant control over formal learning within the firm, but ultimately their power is constrained - both by the importance of less formal learning and by the resisting tactics used by some members. Furthermore, power distribution is not the same for each company. The unpredictability of power distribution increases as the number of member increase and how the group is formed. Also emotion affects learning from individual to company levels. The effects of emotional disturbance can hinder individual learning; alter training strategy and even the company's strategic activity.

People are highly affected by their close working partners. As the number of people within micro and small sized companies is small and relationships therefore generally much more close, the effect of emotional disturbance could paralyze learning within company.

We must not forget that individual and community are all functioning within the organization context. First the government, mother companies and even the small firms owners help to set up the tone of workplace learning. The promotion of formal learning help to improve people's perception of being a learner and a life- long one which in fact strengthen the learner's identity of the members. The heavy input of Multi group and the minimal input from Trust Company do result in a not intense learning culture. Actually they build two different views of external training. Multi group members view it as a way to widen and broaden their own horizon and Trust's group members view them as the only way of professional development. Organization policy, strategy and resources and do have effect on individual's learning as stated in Figure 4.

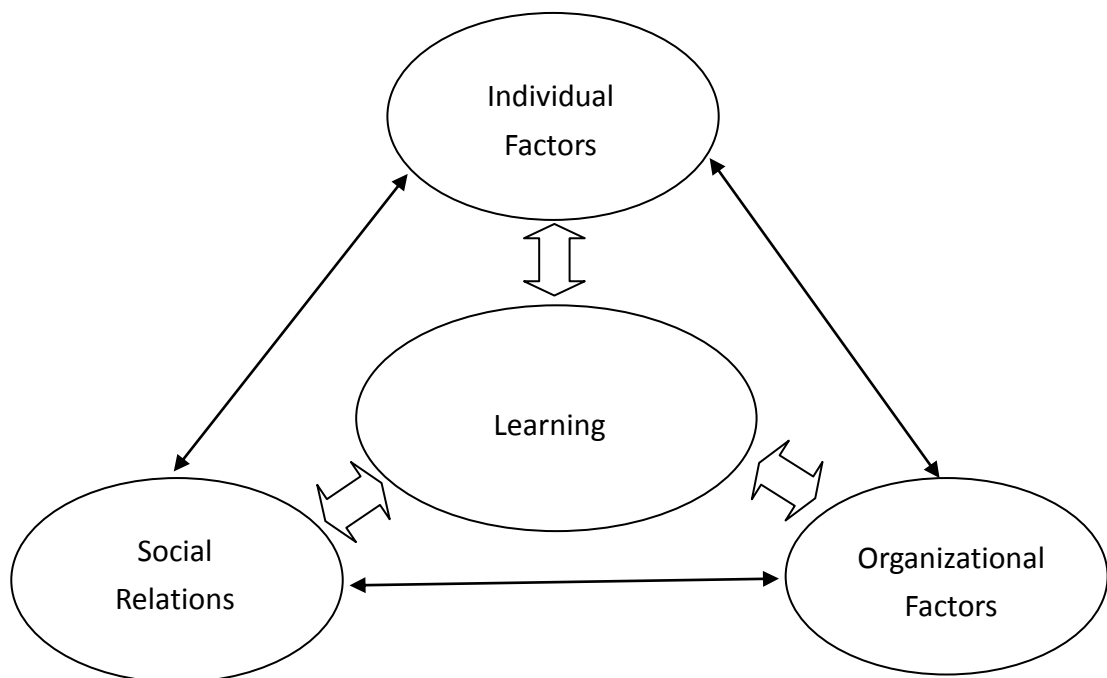


Figure 4. The relationship between learning, individual, social and organization factors.

Organization could set up policy targeted at group or individual members like professional registration requirement which affects all Financial Consultants, the formation of Blue and Mood Companies. In the reverse side, individual like David also could change the training practice of the Mood Company, all these parties are inter-related to each other. The findings show that organization's effort in promoting learning is not always successful. The powerful parties could use strategy, policy to preach and implement their planning but the truth is powerless parties could counteract the movement with their own method. Lily (Elite Company) refused to join other group members, David formed another power centre to fight against Sally in Mood Company and others not paying attention during designated training are examples of power struggle in different levels.

The other factors that also exert influence on learning is the emotion of the employees.

The finding illustrated the positive and negative side of emotion. As Sylvia (Blue Company) is not in the mood for learning, Tree's Company suspension of activities, Sally's postponed year planning and even infected those close to her. Emotion again like power struggle affects all levels of learning. Including power and emotion in the learning framework, a more holistic picture of workplace learning is illustrated in figure 5.

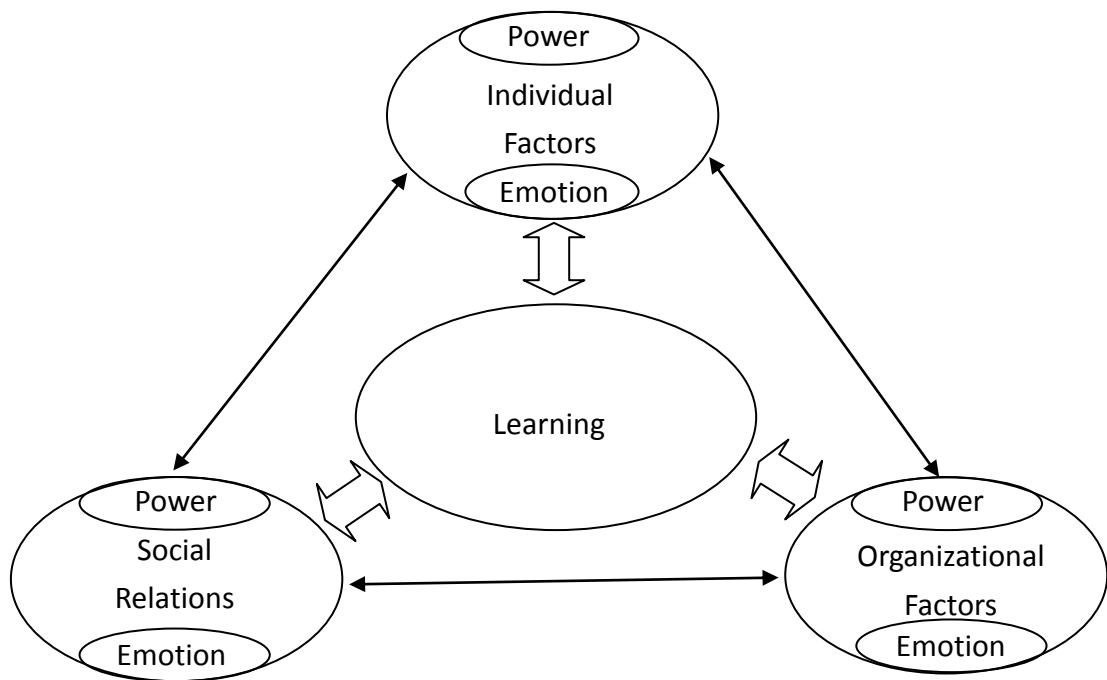


Figure 5. The factors affecting workplace learning and their inter-relationship.

This model demonstrated how workplace learning is happening in the real situation.

Individual learning activities is actually socially based and with the influence of the organization and affecting each others. The power struggle and emotion reflect on the daily social relations embedded in all three levels. This study helps us to understand that workplace learning is not a single person activity, rather it is a complex interaction between individual, social and organization factors, with power struggle and emotion embedded in each levels. Learning in turn also exert influence in all aspect of the workplace.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the contextual factors influencing workplace learning in small firms. The first part of this chapter will briefly review the research context. The next section will consider the findings and implication relating to the impact of individual identity, social relations and the organizational context on workplace learning. The effect of power and emotion on learning is also discussed. A model of workplace learning is developed to illustrate the inter-relation of all factors. Finally, limitations of present research and suggestions for further research are discussed at the end of the chapter.

I. Overview

Learning is increasingly believed to be a key factor in improving employee and organizational performance. Over recent decades, governments and organizations in many parts of the world have put more effort and resources into promoting learning as a means of securing economic success. Managing knowledge, providing training and setting up continuous learning programs are a few examples of such effort. In this study of small firms, learning was investigated in terms of the influencing factors at three levels: they are the individual, social and organization levels. Various studies have

investigated into the three different levels individually. However, the interrelationship between these levels has not been fully understood.

Conventionally, studies of workplace learning have tended to focus on larger organizations. However, the important role of small and medium size companies in most economies has raised people's interest in this group. More recent studies have started to show that small companies are different to larger firms in some important respects and that research based on larger organizations may not be applicable to them. The research on this group is growing but there is still a gap that needs to be filled.

The focus of this study is to find out what factors impact upon workplace learning in small and micro size companies. These factors were conceptualized in terms of the three levels identified above. To create a complete picture each of company, both owners and employees were invited to participate in the study.

The existing literature provides some of the background against which this study investigated the influences upon learning at individual, social (group) and organizational levels. For example, worker's attitudes and learning behaviors are reported to be related to individual experience or their own professional self concept. The community of practice model indicates that social relationships within the group could have a powerful effect on learning. Organizational policy and structure are also

said to have influence on learning, all these factors coexist within the workplace simultaneously. It is not possible to eliminate people out from the context. In addition, more attention has recently been paid to the role of emotion and power within the workplace and the connection between these and learning has yet to be fully understood.

With specific regard to skills development in small firms, the existing research has often reported that they are not willing to take part in formal learning. Informal learning is said to be the preferred mode of learning. This is conventionally explained by their lack of resources and time for formal training. However, others have suggested that formal learning does have an important role to play in small businesses- this represents a tension that has not yet been resolved in the literature. There is also the possible distinction between small and micro enterprises that this study was concerned with exploring.

The methodological strategy was formed with broadly interpretivist aims in mind. The existing literature shows that organizational context, individual's disposition and social interaction occurring within the work place is essential in understanding the holistic picture of workplace learning. As a result a qualitative research approach was adopted. Interview and observation were chosen as the research tools in collecting data.

Interviews were conducted in a semi structured manner. Such an approach provided benefits in terms of allowing space for respondents to express and expand upon their own views. Observation was useful in eliciting data to inform and supplement the interviews.

Two small size companies and three micro size companies participated in this study. They are owned by two large companies. A total of thirty respondents were interviewed. All participants were financial consultants involved in providing insurance, investment and trust services to their clients. Interviews were conducted in the participant's office. Observations were conducted during office visits, interviews and lunch breaks.

II. The Relationship Between Different Types of Learning in Small firms

From literature, small firms' learning has a numbers of characteristics. First is the preference of using informal learning and the acquiring of tacit knowledge for immediate work (Dawe and Nguyen 2007, Vinten 2000). The role of formal learning is not clear even it has been mentioned in a few studies. There is not much discussion in the literature about how small firms react to meet heighten and tighten professional requirement. It forces us to question what is the influence of this movement in small

firms learning.

The findings indicate that the respondents' working knowledge comes from a complex combination of attending training courses, their own work experiences and learning from others. This indicated the co-existence of formal, informal and social learning in the small firms as in figure 1.

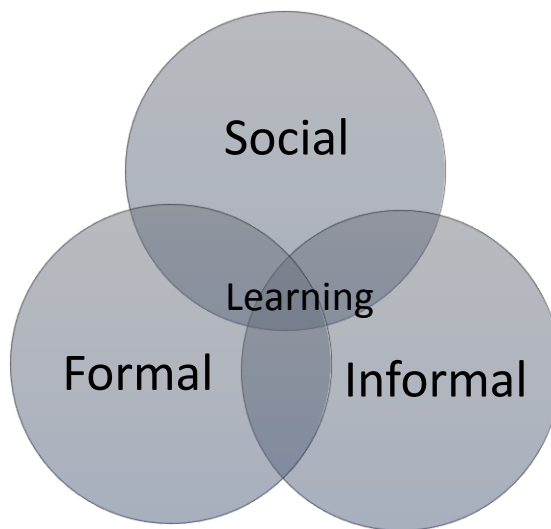


Figure 1. Types of learning found in the work place.

Learning gave rise to both explicit and tacit types of knowledge (Nonaka, 1991), though it tended to be the implicit types, and informal learning (e.g. learning from work or from colleagues) that the respondents claimed was most important and useful to their professional development. This accords with Eraut et al (1998) finding that informal learning plays an important role in workplace learning. The findings support that the tendency and preference towards informal learning in small businesses for immediate needs (Annette and McDougall 1999, Kotey and Shereidan 2004 & Lorenzet, Cook and

Ozeki 2005). However, most respondents also observed that formal training was becoming increasingly prevalent across the financial services sector.

Evidence shows a rapid increase in formal training effort within the small firms and mother organizations which is different from what literature suggested. This perhaps is a way for small firms to meet professional requirement. The pros and cons of different types of learning are reported by the respondents. Formal learning was often criticized as too abstract, too broad and not always applicable. In contrast, the content of informal or social learning is gained in the immediate context; therefore directly applicable and useful to their daily work. Respondents do point out that informal learning is somehow unpredictable in content and outcome. On the contrary, formal learning could involve deeper and wider views which is beneficial for future career development. Importantly, formal training was also seen as a necessary part of communicating key technical aspects of professional knowledge.

The findings support Sfard (1998) and Billett's (2002a) point of view that it is not always helpful to distinguish between different forms of learning. Shows in figure 1. learning can involves single learning method (formal learning) or a combination of two or even three. Workplace learning comprises of different formats and each has its specific function. The findings point out that within small firms-and perhaps within

larger organizations too- learning should arguably be seen as a process that relies on a careful integration of both formal and informal aspects. In correctly drawing attention to the role played by informal learning in small firms, the existing literature on small firms has perhaps, at times, neglected this balance.

A tendency to shift the focus on formal learning was found especially at company and government level. Felstead et al (1998, 2004) suggests that counting only on formal learning would lead to neglect of informal learning. The findings of this study suggest that, while informal learning was broadly recognized as important and useful, there was no specific attempt or policy to facilitate it. In this respect, the learning environment in most of the firms visited could not be described as an expansive one as proposed by Fuller and Unwin (2003).

This implies that organization needs to balance upon these types of learning activities. Tendency towards formal learning is not the best and only choice for organization. The problem of lack of awareness of social and informal learning for both employee and owner might hinder the effect of these types of learning. This supported by the findings as part of the respondents could not relate their own learning with informal and social learning. According to the result of this study, introducing suitable environment and practices to facilitate informal and social learning are an alternative for organization. Organization could build sharing sessions, discussion group and

provide space for social interaction to take place. Skills and techniques like observation, questioning etc could be introduced to members to facilitate them to improve individual learning abilities. Respondents of this study remind us that training content and context are two absolute elements in increasing training effectiveness. Other than using high tech or expensive training activities, relevant content and related context are far more important for learners.

With reference to the research questions, the influences of individual identity, social relations and organization factors are discussed in the following part. A model of workplace learning is generated to illustrate the relationship of learning with factors from the three levels.

III. Individual-level Influences on Learning

Individual level is the fundamental level where learning takes place. Relationship between learning, professional identity and learner's identity is being studied. From literature, learning is a way to improve professional identity (Ohlen and Segesterk 1998, Billetts 2004A). Identity changes according to a person's life stage and situation (Boud and Solomon 2003). Weils (1986) proposed that learner's identity comprised of individual past learning experience, personal situation and learning needs. Knowing what individual factors related to learning is important in promoting learning.

The findings revealed that identity and self concept are complex entities that impact upon learning within small firms. There is not a single indicator for these two entities and they evolve across the life stage as described by Lawy and Bloomer (2003). With regard to identity, the findings showed how individual's unfolding self-concept as a competent and successful financial professional could impact powerfully upon their approach to learning and career development.

The effect of past learning experience was not found to be so prominent. However, it was seen that age seems to have a higher effect on Individual's attitude towards learning and its place in their life and professional development. This suggests that the older respondents had, over the course of their lives, developed a clearer impression of their own selves and their own careers, which in turn gave them a firmer base on which to make decisions about their view of learning and their participation in it.

For junior members sales volume and income is the major indicator for their own performance. Building a larger team and improving team members' performance became an additional indicator for supervisors or managerial grade people. Judging a professional as successful or not is not only determined by the individual alone, social recognition is important as a sign of confirmation. Recognitions or prizes from outside professional bodies are also targets and key identity-forming symbols for participants.

Some female respondent (Sally-Mood and Lily-Elite) demonstrate how conflict in work and family creates tension in learning and barrier in building a competent professional. This accords to Costello (2005) suggestion that conflicting identity is harmful to individual. This signifies that other than personal issues, social relations do have impact on individual identity.

Thus, each individual respondent had goals, shaped to a large extent by their individual self-concept and circumstances. Attempts to describe identity in fixed terms would only create a fragmented picture of individuals. In particular, becoming and being recognized as a successful professional who met or exceeded their targets seemed a powerful driving force for all respondents-and a force that propelled them to learn in ways- whether formal or informal (though mainly informal)-that they considered useful in achieving that goal. Learning is proved as a way to improve professional identity as proposed by Billett (2004A) and Lave and Wenger (1991).

Boud and Solomon (2003) suggested that admitting oneself as learner might have negative effect on learning. The result of present study does not agree with it. No respondent has negative feeling as being a learner. This phenomenon could be explained by the life-long learning campaign and professional registration set up by the Hong Kong government as learning becomes a part of working life.

An interesting issue about the respondent's learner's identities was observed. Many

respondents expressed negative feelings about designated training that it was compulsory for them to attend. They would not regard themselves as learners in this type of event and felt disengaged from it as a result. The learner's identity is being "switch off". Without the learner's 'real' participation, the learning outcome was inevitably less than optimal. This implies that the right of learner to make decisions about their own participation in learning is vital in building up a positive learning orientation. This leads us to question the effectiveness of organization and government's movement in only counting hours and attendance in formal training. How can we justify learning has really happened in these events? This worth further investigation in this issue.

IV. Social-level Influence on Learning

Social learning is getting more attention in the literature studying workplace learning. Brown and Digid (1991) and Eraut et al (1998) all stressed the importance of social context in workplace learning. The community of practice model proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) explain how social learning happens in workplace. Only through legitimate peripheral participation new comers could learn from core members and move to core position.

Some respondents could not report social learning, still they could give example of social learning event like observing others, asking for help etc. An impetus for learning

could also be aroused by social elements. For example, in a competitive environment an individual that does not want to fall behind others would monitor what others have learnt. In addition, learning motivation increases if the individual is encouraged or recommended by good friends or a trusted supervisor to attend learning events. Such learning might not be of immediate utility but because of social pressure, the individual still would participate in learning. Social relations definitely is crucial to workplace learning.

Information from the study reveals that social relations vary across different company.

The differences in social relations shape the learning chances and pattern of the firms.

One factor that was found to affect the arrangement of informal social relations was

the formation process of the company. Blue Company and Mood Company were

formed by grouping financial consultants together by the Mother Company for

management purpose. Blue Company members were experienced and have

pre-existing network, they did not have a close relationship with the owner and seldom

interact with others. In the case of Mood Company, conflict was developed between

owner and manager which affected the management of the company. Training plan of

the company changed people forced to hold training and meeting separately. Such

conflict was minimized in the other companies where a closer relationship existed

between the owner and employees with more agreement. In these companies, where

members are more willing to tolerate disagreement and were more willing to submit themselves to the owner than the owner would be more powerful. The chance for interaction and sharing increases.

The findings of this study go some way towards supporting the idea of learning through participation within workplace communities (Lave and Wenger 1991). Participants report they observe others while they do their work, sharing of experience and problems helped members to gain context related knowledge. Those that are not accepted into the group remained on the periphery and have fewer chances of learning.

On the other hand, there are phenomena that cannot be explained by Lave and Wenger (1991). First they explain the structure of a group as consisting of core and peripheral members. Becoming core member is the ultimate goal of every peripheral member. In case of Blue Company, people generally felt that they were in a peripheral position and they did not show any intention in getting to the core one. Sally (Mood Company) commented "... not everyone is willing to take up the responsibility, some people are selfish and willing to share." David in the Mood Company once was in the core position within the group but had withdrawn himself from the old centre position and formed another centre after he had come into conflict with the owner. Not everyone, it seems, actually wants to make the journey from periphery to core and the choice of

participation is also in the hand of peripheral members.

Second, the conventional description of power imbalance within theories of situated learning is mainly between peripheral and core members. Conventionally, it is recognized that core members could impose barriers for peripheral members to diminish their learning opportunity. However, power is not only within the hand of core members; those at the periphery do have power in altering the situation. For example, David in Mood Company and Lily of Elite Company refused to join the in group training or sharing also decreased the learning opportunity of others. This suggested that power is not only within the hand of core members, there are still many ways for peripheral members to exert their power within the group. The two issues point out that not all communities are the same. It is definitely not proper to assume an ideal pattern exist for community.

Third, according to Lave and Wenger the newcomer is treated as less knowledgeable and has not much contribution to make to the group. As reported by more senior participants, many new recruits' had high-level academic qualifications. They were eligible to study more advanced professional courses. Also younger respondents were more capable in using advance technology. This gave younger newcomers an added advantage in contributing to group learning. On the contrary, core members do have to learn to face the ever-changing professional and market needs. Learning will not stop

even they reach the core position. Newcomers could contribute to the communities

but power granted to newcomers might cause power and emotion disturbances.

Balancing the learning of new and old members is an important issue worth further investigation.

Last, the existence of sub groups is like having different communities working within the company. This brings out the issue of cross communities learning. As Oborn and Dawson (2010) point out the issue of agreed goal, the findings do support the importance of this agreement. Communities formed by force seem to have problems in achieving mutual goals and this causes conflict in Mood Company or decrease in social interaction in Blue Company both create barriers to learning. This implies that the fundamental part of a community is not getting enough attention. Although the mutual agreed goal that is not easy to achieve as demonstrated by the participating firms it is still worth to find ways to negotiate one which would be beneficial for the whole community.

V. Organization-Level Influences on Learning

Organization strategy and policy help to shape culture and practices within the workplace. As bishop et al (2006) suggested the use of value, belief and practice to build a learning supportive culture and Fuller and Unwin (2003) proposed to create an expansive learning environment in the workplace to promote workplace learning. The

strategy, policy and culture of participating firms are studied to find out any relations exist between learning and organization effort .

All participating small firms in this study had their own strategy for developing their members. In many cases, formal training was incorporated into the morning meetings as way to improve their skills and knowledge. Owners or supervisors would often encourage their members to enroll in outside training courses. Even Sally claims that she would like to increase the chance for members to share their knowledge. There was no additional strategy for training in these companies. Informal and social learning were not normally promoted in any explicit way within the firms. This could result in the shift of focus to formal learning and lower the sensitivity of members. Several problems are identified as a result of this trend. First, this predominant focus on the formal aspects of learning did not, perhaps, help in creating an expansive learning environment. Second, this indicates a problem in knowledge about managing learning. If the person in-charge does not have a thorough understanding of workplace learning, it is not possible for him/her to implement expansive training strategy in the workplace.

As reported by the owners and members, the motivation for members to learn was not intense. Bishop et al (2006) suggested using value, belief and practice to building a learning–supportive culture to enhance workplace learning. In this study all owners are

preaching positive value on learning. All respondents seemed to value learning.

Everyone agreed that learning was an important part in their career life. They also felt that participation in learning helped them to improve their work. This seems very much accord with the values and beliefs preached by the owners but take a closer look at the issue reflect a common foundation shared by all that learning is good for them.

Variation even in a small degree results in a huge different. Owners view learning as a way to broaden their horizon for future development while members only think of their immediate needs. The clash in value might cause the members not to follow owner's lead. However, other than the minimal training provided by the small firms and the courses recommended by the owners, there was no extra practice used to promote informal and social learning within the workplace. This create a problem of no practices in to support and encourage members to learn in work. There is no practice to support the spreading of value.

The problem of value indicated that the influences of owner/manager upon employee's learning would not be that strong as proposed in the literature (Annette and McDougall 1999, Bishop 2006). The data suggested owner manager influence was more in formal learning area. Without the supporting of new practices culture building might not be very effective from a top-down perspective. Inclusion of members' thinking and norm might be a critical factor for success. As Oborn and Dawson (2010)

suggest the main theme in promoting cross communities learning is to build a agreed goal. Owner might need to reconsider their own standard and perhaps they also have to trust their members have the ability to find out what they need.

VI. Power and Emotion

Furthermore, there are two issues that are not frequently mentioned in the small business learning literature, they are power and emotion. In this study the effect of power and emotion were seen to affect learning in the workplace. Formal hierarchical structure induce power imbalance within the organization. Coopey (1995) argued that people would try to gain more resources to become powerful in the organization. Also controlling knowledge is a way to manage power (Foucault 1980). These suggested that people at the management level would have more power within the organization. The findings of this study do not support this argument. Not all owners are powerful when dealing with their members. The truth is that power is not in the hands of the owner. Only if their members are willing to submit to the owner can the owner act powerfully. That kind of trust is built on the owner's record, personality, mutual understanding and agreed goals and direction. Lacking any of these would somewhat decrease the powerfulness of the owner. This situation reflects Elias' (1978) game model, where power bases within group settings are in a constant state of change and re-negotiation.

No one person is ever completely in charge of the group, or of access to learning within the group. Absolute control is not possible. Mostly is the formal learning part that can be manipulate by the owners.

There are opinions that powerless could use their ways to fight against constraints and barrier set by the management. The example of Mood Company demonstrated that learning practice can be altered by the power struggles of powerful members. Also, the powerless owner in Blue Company could not force the members to join the training sessions in the morning meeting. Members not paying attention to training is also a silent way to counteract those with more official power (Drivers 2002). The learning opportunity and effectiveness for all members decreased as a result of these struggles. These findings concur with Billett's (2004b) suggestion that participation in learning within organizations is not a simple matter but is instead negotiated through workplace relationships. Using formal hierarchal power to impose absolute control is impossible as individual could build network, or forming sub-group to escape from the barrier. Contesting through everyday social interaction is hard to detect and prevent. The findings imply that imposing control through formal authority might not be effective. As members could counteract silently and this would decrease cooperation. Members might refuse to share their knowledge and causes damage in social and informal learning. On the other hand if gaining cooperation through negotiation, trust building

not only help management to gain more power and cooperation, the improve in social relations could also be beneficial for learning.

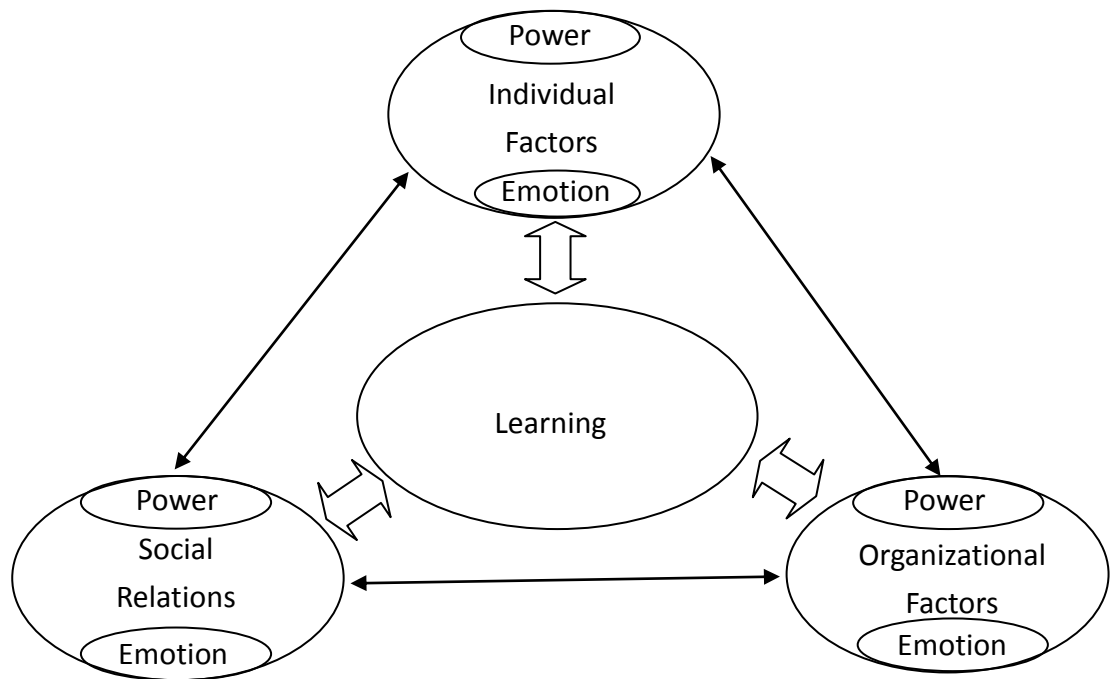
Emotion plays an important part in our daily lives. It is something everyone is familiar with but often have difficulty in managing it. Elias (1978) points out people need emotional satisfaction from others. This is the same in the work place. Unsatisfied emotional needs could generate negative feeling and action (Hughes 2001). This negative emotion could be spread across the work place which hinders member's work and learning. Past literature seldom investigates how emotions function within the small firms. The present findings prove that emotional disturbance could affects learning at various levels within the small firms. For example, the case of Sally (owner of Mood Company) perfectly demonstrated the effect of emotion on learning at company level. Sally was seriously affected by her family burden and this further affected the yearly planning and training sessions. Those who were closely related to her also reported that they felt depressed and would like to escape from this atmosphere. This spreading of negative emotion might further hinder members to take up learning. Second, as members escape from the company social interaction, their knowledge (particularly tacit knowledge) is lost to the organization. This definitely would affect the informal and social parts of learning. It was also seen that the

emotional disturbance experienced by Lily (Elite Company) and Sylvia (Blue Company) discouraged them from taking further step to learn. On the other hand, Audrey's positive effects on her members improve their motivation and even retention rate. Thus, emotional climate within the organization can impact upon individual learning, organization planning and affect the emotional state of others. Cote (2005) raised the problems of predicting emotional response from individual. Result from this study showed that there are a number of factors that could affect emotion like life burden (Sally), closeness of relationship (Amy and Sally), disagreement of goal (Lily with her members) etc. As there are many factors affecting the perception and reaction of individual, it is difficult to predict emotional reaction of an individual. As a result, it seems difficult to control emotion just by manipulating organization policy and strategy. This lead us to reconsider the way to handle employee's emotion. Rather than controlling the emotion of employees, it is better to understanding the emotional needs of the employees.

Learning itself is not a neutral entity. It can also induce emotional distress when learning goals was not clear and not accepted by learners (Vince 2008). Power and emotion are found to be of considerable influence on organization management. However, our understanding is still at a very preliminary level. More investigation into power and emotion issues is necessary particularly within the context of the small firm.

The results of the study proved that Individual, social and organization factors all affect workplace learning. Emotion and power embedded within these levels as illustrated in

Figure 5. below.



Drawing example from the studies, detail functioning of the model could be seen. The case of Government imposing professional registration to the profession is the organizational level directly affect the learning with the outcome of increased formal training for all Financial Consultant. Sylvia (Blue Company) lack of motivation to learn is the how emotion in individual level affect learning (retarded learning). The problem of Tree Company member, arouse emotion disturbance of other members and even suspend the functioning of the whole company. The breakup of Sally and David in the

Mood company showed that the power struggle between two parties within the community affected the organization practices and result in change in training.

With all these example, the models shows that learning is often involves more than one level. If we still consider learning in a single level or single factor perspective, it is not possible to understand what is really happening and cannot find the proper ways to improve workplace learning. With a thorough understanding of the process, individual might find solution to present problems.

VII. Differences Between Micro- and Small-sized Firms

Small and Micro companies are always treated as a single group. There are few researches study the difference between these firms. This study aims to provide a clear picture of these firms. The size of the participating companies can be divided into micro and small and this did induce a difference in structure. Micro Size Companies with their limited manpower usually have a flatter structure. The owner is the only upper layer with employees in one lower layer. For small size companies, other than the owner there are also managers or supervisors. These people make up a middle layer within the company and they form their own sub groups which make the structure of the small company more complicated than the micro one. This presence of multi layers induces the need for delegation of management work. Thus in companies, training and communication works are shared by owner, supervisor and

managers. This is similar to Kotey and Sheridan (2004) findings that small size company started to develop formalized human resource management practices. The trend in formalization, delegation accords with Asthon et al (2005) findings. The amount of knowledge and expertise possessed by the company increased which can be beneficial for all members. Small sized companies started the formalization process but the problem of communication rises as the emergence of sub groups. This increases the difficult to get information across and harder for owner to know each members.

While the structural relations within the firm do seem to be related to size, the less formal social relations appear to be less related to size. Small companies with multiple layers and groups showed a complex social relation pattern. Similarly, micro companies with only a few people could also be divided into different sub groups. The conflict between the owner and manager in the Blue Company and the disharmony between the members in Elite Company are examples of different internal relationships. Small is beautiful or bleak house can only represent two scenarios in small firms. Every company has its own social relations pattern, making an ideal or classifying them in any stereotype is not useful in knowing its real functioning. Small size does not necessarily simple.

Passing professional exams is the first step to joining the profession. This is a formalized

and standardized stage in professional development that all consultants must go through. How can small firms meet the ever changing professional requirement? Providing training to less experienced team members is part of the culture of the profession. Formal training is normally provided by the supervisor grade members. However, there are a number of problems faced by each company when they provide training for members. For micro size companies the knowledge possessed is limited. For instance, in Tree Company and Elite Company only the owner could hold training for members. In contrast, all members in Blue Company are experienced so the knowledge gap between the owner and the members is relatively smaller the amount of training provided is limited. Informal and social learning take up an important role in this situation but there are also limitations for these types of learning within a professional context. As training provided by small firms could not accredit for CPD hours. For yearly registration purpose they have to find another source of training.

According to the findings, in such instances, the gap in training is filled up by outside formal training courses. As noted above, the attitude of company owners' were all very positive towards formal training and they all encouraged their members to take up any types of courses. Both owner and employee could find information from group members or outside organization. They could take up appropriate courses to facilitate

their own learning. The role of external training is important and more welcome by owner which is different from the report of previous studies. As discussed above, formal training could provide broader and deeper views of the profession. This could build up a foundation for future learning and fulfill professional accreditation requirement. With regards to the need of small and micro companies, the building of network to collect information is essential in overcoming the barriers. Owners do support social networking within professional group which is similar to Dawe and Nguyen (2007) findings.

Big differences between small and micro companies are found in terms of management and expertise. They should not be treated as the same. External training is an important part for them to reach professional requirement but care should be taken in relying on formal training alone which was discussed in the previous section. Social networking is beneficial for both owner and employee.

VIII. Ownership by Larger Organizations

The findings also reveal much about employee development in small firms that are not independent- those that are owned by larger organizations. This is an area that has not received much attention in the existing literature. In particular, it was seen that the owning company's approach to learning and development can be crucial in setting the tone for learning in the owned company. The participating companies were all owned

by two large companies, yet the levels of support they received from the owning firms were very different. Multi group is a multinational organization and it is very supportive in providing in house training for its members. Training is comprehensive as it includes the topics and levels suitable for all members. Trust company is more a local company and it only has a part time trainer to train new recruits. Multi group also support sharing within their member companies, for example, members could log on the company web to register for any course. Such differences had an important impact on the ways in which the owned firms approached learning.

For example, the findings showed that the effort involved in making a learning environment did not necessarily increase member's willingness to participate more in learning. On the contrary members of Trust company already accepted their lack of support and they did not find it as problematic. They would search for outside sources for training. In house training was seen as a good resource for members but it is not without criticism. Members commented that the training content might be limited and they would not get formal recognition after attending the course thus confirming that formal training has an important role to play, particularly within the context of professional development. Most Participants in Multi group are high performer their outstanding performance might indicate their ability in handling their work. As a result,

learning might not seem as crucial which further decrease their motivation to learn.

While Trust Company's members requires external support and this might help to

increase their motivation to participate in formal learning.

Even the immediate companies they work for have difficulty in confronting members to

enroll in formal learning. The mother companies which are larger in size and with more

sub groups and various culture make it more harder for members to have a good

understanding of them. The impressions of the mother companies might not be very

influential in learning but its influence in performance or retention rate worth further

investigation.

Conclusion

Overall, this study has demonstrated that learning in small firms is never a simple

matter. The findings reveal a variety of influences upon participation in learning at the

individual, social and organizational levels as shown in the model. This complexity has

sometimes been missing from the literature which often focuses on just one level, but

this study has shown that learning in small firms cannot be understood without

understanding this context. Furthermore, the study has shown that the currently

popular emphasis on informal and social learning in small firms may mask a more

complex reality where informal and formal learning are both popular and widely used

for different purposes. Formal learning that is reported as not so welcome in the literature is well accepted by the companies in this study particularly when it came to the development of technical professional skills and knowledge. The participants, while focusing mainly on formal learning, also appreciated the importance of informal learning but rarely had the capacity to promote it.

Furthermore, this research has confirmed that subjective influences at the individual level (e.g. identity, self concept) impact powerfully on learning. For example, the respondents tend to form an ideal self-concept of themselves as a successful professional, and the desire to develop themselves in ways that enabled them to attain this ideal (e.g. learning to further their sales skills) was powerful impetus for participation in learning. There are also social dimensions to the learning process. Recommendation of close friends, or comparing oneself competitively with others could also push individuals to learn.

The social level is the venue where informal and social learning take place. Social relations within a group have a powerful effect on learning. Being accepted in a group gives one chances to share, interact and observe others. Problems arising from social relations like power struggles and emotional disturbance could drastically affect not only individual learning but can also affect the learning of the whole company.

At the organization level, it might not be possible to arouse learning motivation easily.

Such motivation is vital in providing a good environment and atmosphere for learning.

Building a sharing culture through providing time and space for members, creating an expansive work environment like employing job rotation and cross team projects could help to promote informal and social learning. Crucially, however, the importance of formal learning should not be forgotten, and incorporating formal learning into the company could help future development particularly for more technical skills.

Therefore, designing suitable policies for workplace learning requires attention to both formal training opportunities and opportunities for on-the-job learning (which in turn may affect such things as job design).

Finally, it was seen that size is important when it comes to learning. As the firm size increases, the resources and expertise each company possesses increased also. Small sized firms could provide more comprehensive training to their members while micro-sized firms cannot. It is important to understand that micro and small-sized firms should not be treated as the same.

Limitations and further research

Firstly, this study is based on a single profession. All members in the company are doing the same job. The situation might not be similar to other non professional SMEs in

other sectors. Furthermore, the movement of professional development contributes towards building an open and easy access to information networks. This helps them to find suitable information easily when compared to many other occupations. The small firms were owned by larger companies, which will experience, to some extent, different pressure, problems and external support independent small firms. Also the number of participating companies and individuals is relatively small. Therefore, while some tentative conclusions can perhaps be drawn about small firms operating within this sector, it is unlikely that the conclusions can be extended more widely with much certainty.

The effect of power and emotion on small firms is demonstrated in this study. More thorough investigation into these issues is necessary as our understanding of these issues are still limited. Combining different learning formats-ranging from formal to informal- to create a better learning outcome is the suggestion of the present study. However, there is still much more work to be done in order to determine how different types of learning can be integrated most effectively and what their respective roles should be-particularly within the resource-constrained environment of the small firm.

Appendix I: Research Consent Form (English)

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Number: _____

Research title: Workplace learning an interaction between individual identity, social relationship and organization environment: a comparative study between micro and small companies.

I agree to volunteer in the Graduate Studies research project at University of Leicester being conducted by Ku Mui Sing Alice between 1/10/07-1/8/08.

I understand that the research being conducted aims to investigate into the factors affecting the knowledge transfer process in the workplace. I understand that excerpts from tape-recorded interview with the researcher will be studied and may be quoted in a doctoral dissertation written by the researcher.

I grant authorization for the use of the above information with the full understanding that my anonymity and confidentiality will be preserved at all times. I understand that my full name or other identifying information will never be disclosed or referenced in any way in any written or verbal context. I understand that transcripts, both paper and computer versions, will be secured in the privacy of the researcher's home office and that any audio files of my conversations with the researcher will be erased after the completion of the doctoral course.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw my permission to participate in this study without explanation at any point.

This form had been fully explained to me and I certify that its contents are understood.

Participant's Signature

Date: _____

Researcher

Date: _____

Appendix I: Research Consent Form (Chinese)

參與研究同意書

參與者姓名：_____

參與者編號：_____

研究題目：在中小企業中個人、團隊及公司對知識轉移的影響

Workplace learning an interaction between individual identity, social relationship and organization environment: a comparative study between micro and small companies.

本人經研究者詳細說明研究目的與性質後，同意參加 **University of Leicester** 博士候選人古梅聲於 1/10/07- 1/8/08 期間所進行的研究。

本人明白此研究旨在瞭解個人、團隊及公司方面對員工於知識轉移的影響。本次訪談將被錄音作為研究之用，而錄音帶內容可轉載於研究者的研究報告中。

研究者對本人所提供之錄音資料有保密責任。使用上，只有研究者、指導教授，可在研究中使用。關於訪談內容，研究者將在刪除足以辨識個人背景資料之後，才在研究報告中呈現，並不為其他用途之使用。所有錄音資料將於研究完成後燒毀。

本人自願參與此研究及有權於任何時候退出此研究。

茲證實上述所有事項，已向本人詳細解釋，本人亦充分了解其內容。

參與者簽署

研究員簽署

日期：_____

日期：_____

Appendix III: Question Guide(English)

- I. Individual level
- A- Tell me about your job
- B How long you have you been staying in your job?
- C How you learn to do your job(formal training/ other then formal training)
- D Are you a learner (past, present and future)?
- E Would you describe one most remarkable experience of learning?
- F What's your past experience of learning?
- G Do you attend any formal training course (past, present, future)?Are they useful?
- H What's the value of formal training?
- I Have you ever apply what you learn from training in your job?
- J Do you acquire more knowledge from training, doing your job or from your colleague?
- K How you view yourself as a financial consultant?
- L What's the quality of a successful financial consultant?
- M Are successful financial consultants more knowledgeable?
- N What's the relation between knowledge and power?
- O Are you one of them?
- P How could you achieve it?
- Q What can motivate you to learn?
- R Can you choose the training you want?
- S Any difference exists between the training you choose and the designated one?
- T Are you willing to share your knowledge and experience with others people or any specific group? Why?

II. Social level

- A How is your relation with peers / supervisor / subordinate?
- B Who would you approach if you need help and support?
- C Could you describe the dynamic within your group?
- D Do you have any social gathering with your group members?
- E Please describe peer influence at Work / learning / personal life?
- F What's the content of your daily chat?
- G Are your colleagues willing to share/ teach others? Why?

III. Organization level

- A- What's your organization attitude toward learning?
- B What's your comment on organization policy?
- C Any training provide by the organization? Is it effective? Is it relevant to your job?
- D Could your supervisor and organization motivate you to learn/ help to perform your job?
- E Does your organization has any strategy / planning for staff development?
- F Does organization planning coincide with your own planning??
- G How's your commitment to your organization?
- H How's your commitment to your job?
- I Any planning in changing your organization and job in the near future?
- J What's the learning atmosphere/culture of your organization?
- K What's your own and your colleague's opinion about the learning atmosphere/culture?

Appendix IV: Question Guide (Chinese)

I. 關於個人

請你介紹你既工作/如做什麼 -講下每天工作程序

你現在這份工做了多久

你如何學會做這份工

可唔可講一個你最深刻既學習經驗

你從前的學習經驗如何?好?壞?

你現在有沒有讀書/報讀正式課程/工作坊...?它們有用嗎?

你有沒有將係讀書/課程/工作坊學到既知識運用係工作方面?多或少?點解要將新知識運用係工作上?舉一個例子

你覺得係工作方面讀書/課程/工作坊學到既知識運或者落手落腳做學得多/有用?

你覺得自己係唔你一個學習者

你覺得自己係一個點樣既____

一個成功/好____係點樣

你是否成功

如何可以更好/成功

有咩可以刺激你去學習

你可以自行選擇培訓課程/目的嗎?

指派你去參與及自行選擇參與培訓有咩分別?

你願意同人分享你自己知識嗎?分享什麼?點解?

分享有咩好處/唔好處?

你如何分辨/決定那些知識可以運用係工作上那些不可以
知識同權力有什麼樣關係?

你覺得知識存在係邊度? 個人 / 團隊 / 公司?點解?

你覺得知識屬於邊個? 個人 / 團隊 / 公司?點解?

II.關於團隊

團隊有冇分階級 / 分工

你與同事的關係如何?

如你有冇任何問題會找誰幫忙

其他同事之間關係/互動?

你同同事之間有否私人活動?

同事對你係工作上/學習上/個人上有什麼影響?

每日談什麼話題

你覺得同事們願意與人分享/教人?點解?

有冇比人拒絕分享經驗

團隊內有冇紛爭?權力鬥爭?

舉一個大分享例子

III.關於公司

你團隊/公司對員工培訓既態度係點? 有冇長期計劃去培訓員工?

你對公司/團隊有咩意見

團隊/公司有無提供培訓?對你工作有冇幫助

公司/團隊培訓方向同你自己計劃方向相同嗎?

你上司(經理)/團隊/公司有冇刺激你去學多 d 野?幫你去做好你工作?想將多 d 新知識事物帶返公司?

公司學習氣氛如何?知識分享氣氛如何?你對氣氛有咩睇法

同事對學習有咩睇法

同事對分享知識有咩睇法

你對公司/團隊/個人工作承擔有幾多? /歸屬感幾高?

知識同權力有什麼樣關係

將學習知識運用係工作上面係因為工作需要、團隊需要、公司需要?先後次序

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