Guest editorial

Employee learning path strategies

This special issue on learning path strategies appears during a time of widespread disruption in corporate, governmental and non-governmental organizations that reaches across nearly every sector of the global economy. Examples abound, from the rise of the internet giants and the demise of brick-and-mortar retail to shifts in the manufacture and distribution of consumer and durable goods to changes in energy production and transportation systems. In the wake of these shifts, ironic inconsistencies have proliferated: social networks empower individual and community agency (Arab Spring; Black Lives Matter; Me Too, etc.) while, at the same time, amplifying fragmentation and dissension (trolling, doxxing and bullying).

In this mix of uncertainty and irony, the papers included here argue that workplace learning is undergoing similar drastic shifts in both its conceptualization and operationalization. From the perspective of learning network theory (LNT), these shifts and the organizational mechanisms that sustain them are rooted in long-standing relationships between learning systems and work systems. These relationships must be negotiated, managed and, ultimately, kept in balance – a challenging proposition for workers, managers and HRD professionals. A common theme among these papers is that LNT presents an opportunity to explore and understand the nuances that connect researchers and practitioners in that goal.

In total, 20 years on from van der Krogt's (1998) formalization of the LNT and 10 years after beginning to acquire empirical case studies exploring it in the field (Poell *et al.*, 2018), the HRD community is learning to parse the complex interweavings of learning elements and motives that comprise individual learning path strategies. LNT's aim is to ask pragmatic questions about managing workplace learning and its effects and about deploying those effects in real-life organizations. The goal, as van der Krogt (1998, p. 158) argued, is that "learning systems become both humane and work-relevant".

The competitive tension between organizational learning and work systems (i.e. learning versus labor) has been discussed previously (Poell *et al.*, 2000; Poell and van der Krogt, 2007, 2013), but always with the caveat that in the absence of robust empirical evidence, conclusions and recommendations for practice were provisional. The papers presented here start to remedy that deficit by building empirical support for LNT, suggesting that today's HRD professionals might yet bring those competing interests into balance, that is, as these papers suggest, operationalizing workplace learning as individual learning path strategies might help rebalance workplace learning systems – shifting them away from an instrumental focus on existing practices (i.e. as a tool of management) and toward professional development opportunities that might strengthen relationships between workers and organizations.

Organizing principle

To explain these complex shifts in workplace learning opportunities, and the changing relationships between individual learning paths and organizational learning systems, these five papers are each organized around network theories of social interaction. As described by the LNT, learning path strategies are emergent and recursive and are co-constructed in the interplay between an organization's work and learning systems and between individual workers and their colleagues, managers, facilities, attitudes and tools, among other elements

of the learning system. Salient issues addressed here include the relationship of the individual and the group, the role of reflection in consolidating or activating learning and matching practice with theory to understand and analyze those relationships.

The authors in this issue also question the influence of primary and secondary actors on the shape of individual learning paths, on the choice of learning activities and on the transformation of the path into a strategic learning process. Each paper explores these dynamics by considering specific mediators in different contexts – for instance, individual perceptions of opportunities from employees of a software development company, a communications services organization and a telecommunication services company (Boomaars *et al.*, 2018); customer-facing professionals (CFPs) at a corporation and their clients (Hendriks *et al.*, 2018); dominant actors at a health-care institution and in an executive development program (Franken *et al.*, 2018); and teachers and their team leaders at a technical school (Van Bussel *et al.*, 2018). And, as a more broadly focused introduction to LNT and learning path elements and strategies, Poell *et al.* (2018) look at ten years of MSc theses to explore the variety of learning path strategies across a variety of different professions.

Overlaps and intersections
All five of these papers overlap in their examination of learning path strategies' relational dynamics. This exploration touches on multiple aspects of the LNT, including an analysis of the learning path as strategic or, by contrast, as emergent, and as an individual feature of workplace learning or, on the other hand, as a prescribed intervention from management. For instance, three papers explore reflection as a mediator in learning path formation; Franken *et al.* (2018) and van Bussel *et al.* (2018) examine reflection explicitly and Hendriks *et al.* (2018) strongly imply that reflection plays a role in learning path effectiveness. Four papers discuss intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the effectiveness of learning path strategies: Franken *et al.* (2018), van Bussel *et al.* (2018), Hendriks *et al.* (2018) and Boomaars *et al.* (2018).

In addressing the complexity of these overlapping systems, these papers avoid simplistic conclusions, perhaps because actors and mediators cannot be fully isolated from the networks in which they are embedded. This complexity indicates a willingness to hold loosely to limitations and to trust in the messy process of field research. It also suggests support for the LNT because its unpredictability is consistent with Van der Krogt's (1998) description of workplace learning as generated from the conflict between non-complementary systems – e.g. learning versus labor. As Van der Krogt explains, workers are often tasked with managing their own personal development, while also being required to justify that development as enhanced productivity. This shift in the learning system, from a tool of personal development to a tool of management, creates competition that must be kept in balance. As Van der Krogt suggests, LNT addresses that tension "systematically and inclusively" (p. 158) by giving HR professionals a theoretical tool with which they can better understand the nuances and mediating variables that connect theory and practice.

For instance, for Boomaars *et al.* (2018), the relationship among learning motives, perceived learning opportunities and employability activities was not as linear as hypothesized, and some effects were not observed at all (e.g. social pressure had no influence). Additionally, their paper recognizes that higher validity might have resulted from the use of different instruments (e.g. their survey was very long, which might have discouraged participation) and if better definitions had been available (e.g. "employability activities" needed a "more robust definition"). Further, Boomaars *et al.* explain that several potential mediators were not adequately explored, including cognitive ability, previous

learning success, personality, work ethic, need for achievement, organizational support and guidance (mentorship).

Franken *et al.* (2018) look at the relationship between the dominant actor (e.g. HRD manager, individual worker, the team or outside professional) and the level of reflection reached (e.g. habitual, understanding, active and critical). Overall, individuals reached higher levels of reflection when left to their own devices, but team interactions produced the highest levels of reflection. However, results did not follow expectations, perhaps because the role of context and other factors were too difficult to control for (e.g. the influence of HR management decreased levels of reflection because not much attention, if any, was paid to reflection as a process that might enhance learning in the workplace). On the other hand, Franken *et al.*'s interest in the role of the mentor in reflective learning path design and their introduction of the "co-reflector" points to potential expansions of the LNT.

Hendriks *et al.* (2018) focus on the role of tools in informal and incidental learning paths – in this case, the digital networks that CFPs use in their jobs. One conclusion of the paper is that customers play an important role in the CFPs' formation of learning paths, extending the network outside of the organization and blurring the boundary between what counts as an organizational learning system. Hendriks *et al.* identify reflection as a key mediator in this process, and similar to Franken *et al.*'s "co-reflector," they define reflection as a relationship or interaction with others. Hendriks *et al.* also name a new motive – drive or ambition – and pin it to self-motivation, explicitly indicating the effect of intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic mediators, perhaps as a response to the tools in question, namely, the digital networks.

Van Bussel *et al.* (2018) look at vocational teachers and their team leaders to ask about the alignment and influence of teacher/team leader relationships on learning path strategies. Poell *et al.* acknowledge that over the years, the preponderance of case studies about teachers might have skewed observations and interpretations of learning path structures, as teachers could reasonably be considered to have a sensitivity to learning strategies, which makes this paper on the teacher/supervisor relationship unusual and interesting. In that regard, Van Bussel *et al.*'s observation of a disconnect between team leaders and teachers' preferences reprises the learner versus labor effect discussed above. Perhaps consistent with that finding, team leaders did not appear to have much influence on teachers' learning path strategies, although teachers said they valued their team leaders' advice, which conflicted with teachers' reports about how their team leader supported (or did not support) their learning goals. Van Bussel *et al.* also identified a new learning strategy – social didactic – which might be a merger of social pressure for teaching and the need to teach a specific content domain.

From a meta-reflective level, these papers also share a concern with their role in naming (or characterizing) what has not yet been consistently observed in the field (e.g. a particular cluster of learning path components or motives), and each critiques their analysis by acknowledging doubts and biases. This is understandable given the lack of empirical research on LNT and learning paths. Poell *et al.* (2018) is the most explicit in their articulation of such doubts. In looking at individual learning paths across organizations, they found 12 new clusters and a considerable amount of variation across professions. They also confirmed earlier studies by finding that learning paths are best described as complex entanglements of individual motives and organizational requirements, rather than as independent choices of any single individual. Revealingly, however, the authors acknowledge that as a first attempt at applying new terms and labels to this much empirical data (23 MSc theses), their target might have been incorrect. They write, "Perhaps we should really be looking [. . .] for some underlying principle. [. . .] [because] we do not know how

much the context influenced the naming of the learning-path types" (this issue). They also cast doubt on the naming enterprise itself, referencing Fenwick's (2000) similar critique of "the urge to typologize observations" (this issue).

What comes next

These five papers present a fearless critique of their own assumptions, even as they argue for the relevance of their findings. This might be a hallmark of researchers who are pushing into new territory: to stick together, they hesitate to arrive at consensus, preferring instead to fashion coherences from disagreements or from multiple perspectives held loosely among them. An example is the naming of learning path structures as a way of creating those structures, which leads to reflective meta-cognitive critiques of the journey itself. As Poell *et al.* (2018) admit, "we do not know how much the context influenced the naming of the learning path types and strategies in their theses," and "in pursuit of making meaning we might have been pushing too soon for categorization". In fact, all of these authors are united in their call for more empirical research on learning paths and on the competitive tension between organizational learning systems and labor systems.

In this respect, perhaps disruption is an ally, especially because new learning (of whatever kind) disrupts the already known. In arguing that workplace learning paths are simultaneously emergent and co-constructed by individuals and social systems – an intertwined, entangled, braided pattern that might appear coherent when viewed from afar, but messy and chaotic when experienced from the path itself – this special issue opens space for pragmatic questions: what value do HR professionals derive from understanding individual learning paths as strategic and how would that understanding help balance "the humane and the work-relevant"? (van der Krogt, 1998, p. 158). How do workers gain if informal or incidental learning is disrupted by self-consciously structured strategies? How, too, might such understanding lead to more efficient use of learning resources in the workplace?

These questions invite new opportunities for greater understanding between learning and work systems, as well as new skepticisms too. In that respect, patience might be called for from both researchers and practitioners. After all, the individual learning path is a new organizational metaphor for workers and management (10 years is not much time in the lifespan of a conceptual structure), so further intersections and divergences should be expected, because complex pathways require dodging and weaving to move forward. Nevertheless, the questions surfaced by these papers are intriguing and encouraging. Despite the discomfort brought by disruption, we benefit by noticing it, tracing its outlines and endeavoring to understand it – which is precisely what these papers have set out to accomplish.

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