



ScAIEM 2025

Exploring informal learning leadership at a global consulting firm through the lens of management and knowledge workers



Työsuojelurahasto
Arbeterskyddsfonden
The Finnish Work Environment Fund



OONA VUORIO - UNIVERSITY OF OULU | CGI FINLAND

CO-AUTHORS: ARTO REIMAN, PÄIVI KEKKONEN & HANNELE LAMPELA

BASED ON THE ARTICLE: DIVERGING AND CONVERGING PERSPECTIVES: EXPLORING THE LEADERSHIP OF INFORMAL LEARNING IN KNOWLEDGE WORK

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TYÖSUOJELURAHASTO ON OSALLISTUNUT HANKKEEN RAHOITAMISEEN

Doctoral research overview: Four sub-studies (2024–2026):



Article 1 | Year 1

RQ1: What individual and organizational factors have been identified in literature as enabling or hindering informal learning in the workplace?

RQ2: How do different leadership styles and management practices influence informal learning processes in organizational settings?

RQ3: What theoretical and empirical knowledge gaps remain in current research on informal learning in the workplace?

Methodology: Systematic literature review

CURRENT STATE

Article 2 | Year 1

RQ1: In what ways do managerial and employee perspectives on informal learning and its management converge and diverge?

RQ2: How could informal learning be supported through leadership and by organizational practices and processes?

Methodology: Interview study with management and employees in case organizations & thematic analysis to identify key factors | Qualitative data analysis and comparative examination of perspectives

DIFFERENCES OF VIEW

CURRENT STATE

Article 3 | Year 1

RQ1: How do employees and managers perceive and differ in their views on the factors that influence informal learning in a knowledge work context?

RQ2: How are informal learning experiences and expectations across managerial and employee roles perceived in hybrid work environments?

Methodology: Interview study with management and employees in case organizations

ENABLERS AND DELAYERS

Article 4 | Year 2

GOAL

Develop a leadership model

RQ: How could informal learning be better managed from the perspective of different contributing factors?

Methodology: Validation of a leadership model - Interviews with potential system experts

RECOMMENDATIONS

What is informal learning and why this type of learning matters?

Coombs & Ahmed (1974)¹ distinguished informal learning from formal and non-formal learning, laying the foundation for later theoretical developments.

Marsick & Watkins (2001)² later defined it as experiential, unstructured, and embedded in everyday work practice.

Why it matters:

- Up to 90 % of workplace learning occurs informally^{2 3}.
- Drives organizational agility and adaptation^{4 5}.
- Essential for innovation and performance, yet rarely visible in management systems.
- Often invisible and undervalued in organizations^{6 7}.

How does informal learning appear in your own work as researchers?

When discussing ideas, reflecting on results, or learning new tools you are already engaging in informal learning.

¹Coombs P H and Ahmed M. *Attacking rural poverty: How nonformal education can help*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974. ²Marsick V J and Watkins K E. *Informal and incidental learning*. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *The new update on adult learning theory* (pp. 25–34). Jossey Bass, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.5>, ³Callanan, M.A., Cervantes, C.A., & Loomis, M. (2011). *Informal learning*. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 2(6), 646–655. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.143>, ⁴Billett, S. (2024). *Learning across working life: Educative experiences and individuals' participation*. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 46(2), 143–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2023.2221650>, ⁵Argote L, Lee S and Park J. *Organizational learning processes and outcomes: Major findings and future research directions*. *Manag Sci* 2021; 67(9). <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2020.3693>, ⁶Zia M Q, Bashir M A, Mangi R A, et. al. *A person-situation perspective of informal learning: The role of supervisor feedback environment*. *Eur J Train Dev* 2021; 46(1/2): 120–138. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-09-2020-0142>, ⁷Aurrekoetxea-Casaus M and Díez F. *Facilitators of informal learning in the workplace: the case of two cooperatives in the machine tool sector*. *REVESCO. Rev Estud Coop* 2020; 134: e69166. <https://doi.org/10.5209/reve.69166>

Research gap and purpose (article II)

RQ1: In what ways do managerial and employee perspectives on informal learning and its management converge and diverge?

RQ2: How could informal learning be supported through leadership and by organizational practices and processes?

- Existing literature focuses on either leaders or employees ¹
- Few studies compare perspectives across levels of the organization
- Purpose: Bridge this gap by analyzing how perceptions of informal learning leadership diverge and converge.

¹Lee J Y, Yoo S, Lee Y, et. al. *Individual and organisational factors affecting knowledge workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of informal learning: A multilevel analysis.* Vocat Learn 2019; 12: 155-177.

Research design ¹/₂ (article II)



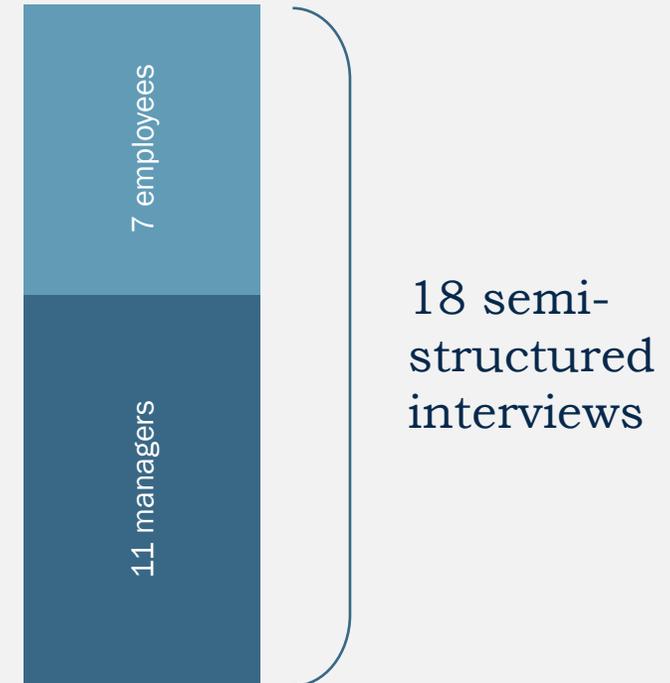
Qualitative, cross-sectional case study
Multinational IT and consulting organization



Inductive thematic analysis ¹
Using NVivo



Research focus
Focused on visibility, leadership, modalities, and outcomes of informal learning



¹Braun V and Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol* 2008; 3(2): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

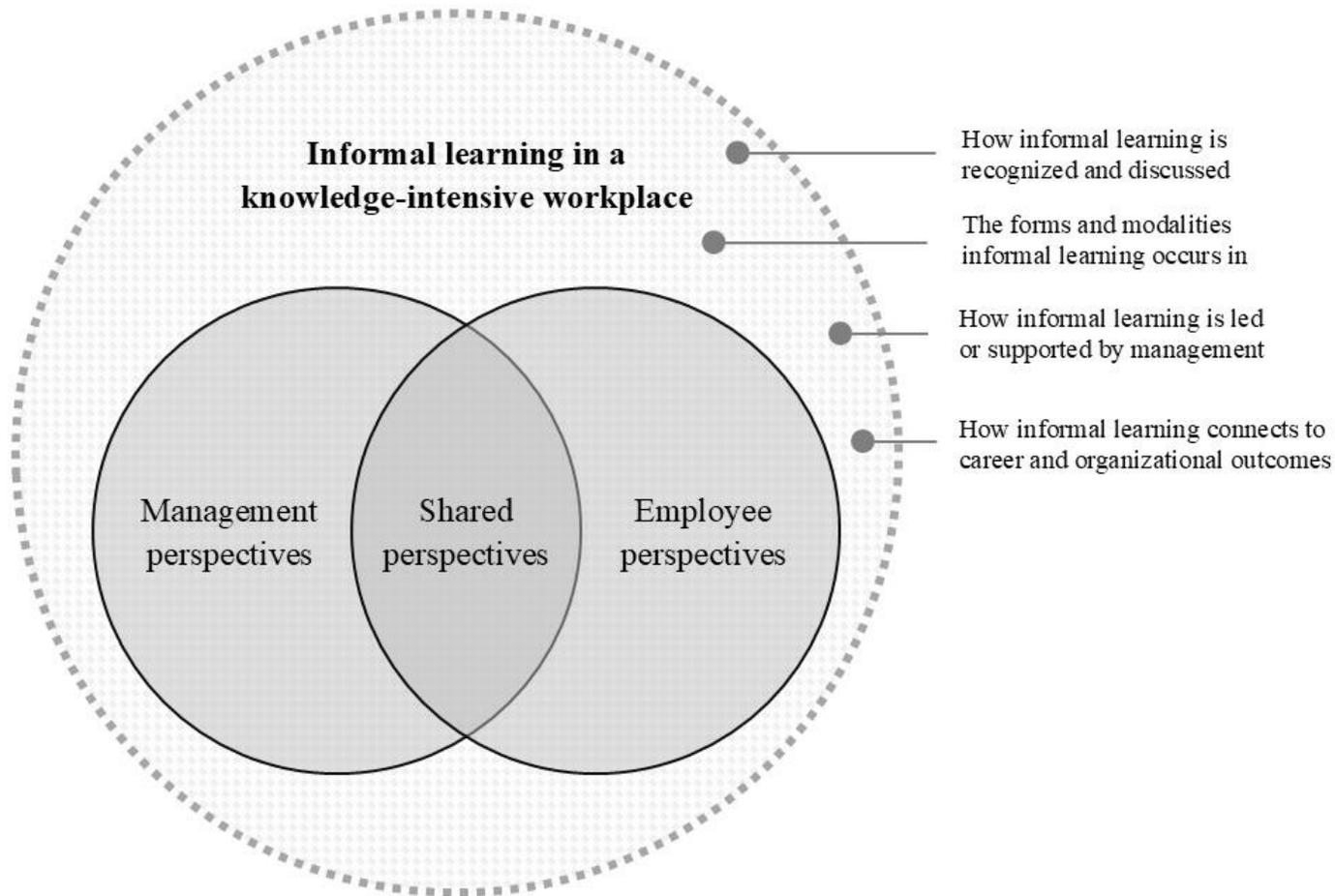


Figure 1. Research approach illustrated as a modified Venn diagram.

- The diagram highlights overlapping and diverging perspectives of managers and employees regarding informal learning leadership.
- By comparing these views, the study uncovers how informal learning leadership is experienced across organizational levels and how it can be strengthened in practice.
- The article is structured to build a layered understanding of informal learning leadership: it begins with a review of relevant literature, presents the empirical findings, and concludes with theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical framework

- Marsick & Watkins (2001): Informal learning as *experiential and socially situated*
- Schugurensky (2000): *Self-directed, incidental, and tacit* learning
- Tynjälä (2013): 3P Model (*Presage – Process – Product*)
- Leadership as a Presage factor (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011)

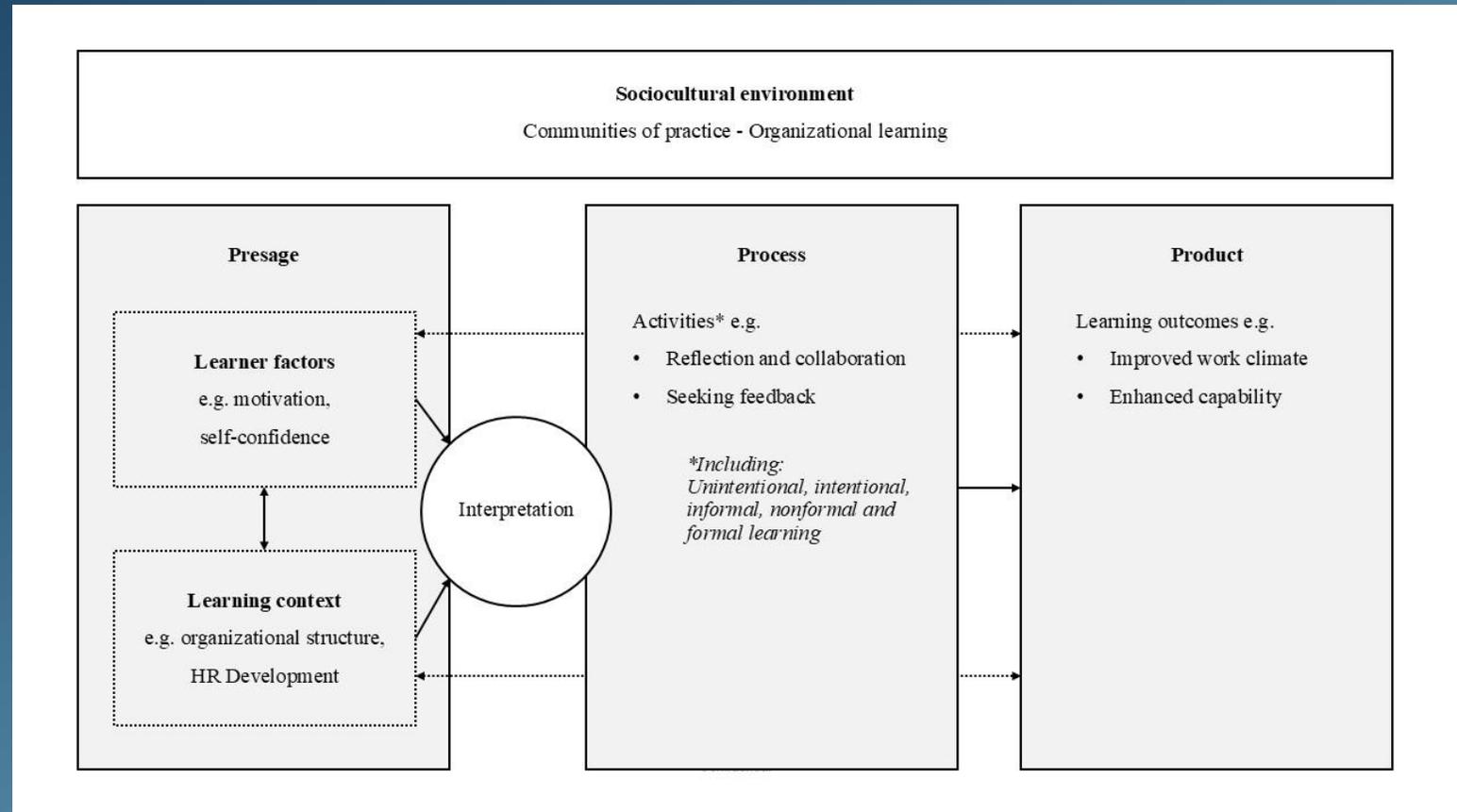


Figure 2. The 3P Model adapted for informal learning leadership. Leadership influences the *presage* conditions for learning; employees' activities form the *process*; and outcomes such as capability and climate represent the *product* within a sociocultural environment.



Four themes emerging (Article II)

1. Perceptions of informal learning
2. Learning modalities
3. Leading informal learning
4. Organizational impact

“It’s part of how people develop; by doing, reflecting and adjusting.”
– VP

Key findings – Convergences

Informal learning is essential and pervasive

Occurs through interaction, reflection, and hands-on work

Seen as key for competence development and adaptability

Key findings – Divergences

Learning remains largely invisible and undervalued.

Managers assume autonomy equals support; employees see lack of feedback and structure.

Leadership practices vary — learning often reactive, not strategically guided.



From divergence to synthesis: Building the bridge to the model

Key findings from Article II:

- Informal learning is essential yet often invisible.
- Leadership support frequently rhetorical — “symbolic autonomy.”
- Balance needed between autonomy and structure.
- Learning valued but not systematically supported.

Synthesis and implications:

- Leadership must move from rhetoric to action.
- Informal learning needs visibility, structure, and shared accountability.
- These insights form the foundation for the leadership model developed in Article IV.

Early reflections: Leadership model in progress

Current phase

- Will refine through new expert interviews across sectors.
- Being developed into a practical tool for leaders and HR.

Conceptual goal

- Move from symbolic autonomy → active scaffolding.
- Make learning intentionally enabled, not incidental.

Status & next steps

- Model under refinement and validation.

→ Your feedback welcome at the end of the presentation: How could this model be applied or validated in your contexts?

Emerging dimensions of the model (*Early leadership model*)

1. **Visibility** – Making learning processes and outcomes observable.
2. **Integration** – Linking learning to HR and career systems.
3. **Structural support** – Balancing autonomy with guidance and feedback.
4. **Time** – Allocating protected time for learning and reflection.
5. **Accountability** – Clarifying leadership roles and shared responsibility.



From insights to model development

Bridging theoretical insights from Article II to the emerging leadership model in Article IV.

- Article II revealed the gap between rhetorical and real support for informal learning.
- Leadership of informal learning is relational and systemic — not only individual autonomy.
- These insights inspired the next phase — building a leadership model that bridges this gap.
- The model seeks to turn **symbolic autonomy into active scaffolding**.

Next steps

- Article II provided the evidence base — showing why leadership of informal learning matters.
- Article IV translates that evidence into a leadership model.
- The model is being refined — your feedback is welcome.

Question for discussion:

As the model evolves, I'd greatly value your insights —How could such a model be applied, validated, or tested in your own contexts?

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Thank you – Q&A



Oona Vuorio

oonavuorio@student oulu.fi

- Doctoral Researcher, University of Oulu
- Senior Business Consultant, CGI Finland