



Can a start-up become a “learning organization”? The employee perception of continuous learning in a start-up business

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Start-up companies are dealing with constant change and often the main business strategy of a start-up is continuous growth. The beneficiary of this thesis is a start-up company operating in Finland. The start-up leadership and management wishes to take into consideration the employee perspective when planning and implementing future learning initiatives. The empirical part of the thesis consists of qualitative and quantitative mixed methods research, which consists of qualitative interviews conducted with management and a quantitative survey for the employees. The interview aims to better understand the start-up environment and the purpose of the survey is to find out the opinions and attitudes of the employees toward learning related subjects.

The theoretical framework consists of discussing the concept of a learning organization, organizational learning theories, and the organizational learning management field. The thesis considers what the start-up environment is like, and how entrepreneurial qualities are important. The literature review provides guiding principles for the partnering start-up that clarify, how all stakeholders, leadership, and employees, individually and collectively can contribute towards an environment that is conducive to learning.

The results showed that the start-up environment in itself, enables continuous learning even though no formal framework for learning previously existed. Due to the lack of people, resources, and traditional structures often found in well-established businesses, a start-up can create an environment that naturally promotes learning. Start-up employees are expected to work hard and possess entrepreneurial qualities. The start-up employees' daily work involves performing tasks beyond their title and scope of work. They are busy, but they know how to organize their work so that they do not get overwhelmed with work. The respondents showed motivation toward future learning initiatives and were open-minded toward different methods. The respondents were satisfied with the work environment and were generally trusting towards leadership and coworkers. Turnover and being disconnected from others because of the remote nature of the work were viewed as challenges from the management perspective. Communication, internal processes, and job security were aspects where development needs arose from the employee perspective.

Keywords: Learning, learning organization, leadership, entrepreneur, start-up

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1 Introduction

We live in a fast-paced world, where business environments are constantly changing. Globally, businesses encounter serious challenges posed by political upheavals, climate change and new diseases, that cause unstable markets. Customer demands can grow or change abruptly, also the advancements in technology, fierce competition, globalization and an aging workforce cause uncertainty and risks to the existence of businesses. In these circumstances it is difficult to grow and be profitable. Leadership and management are under continuous pressure to adapt to change and lead change, but the changing conditions affect employees as well. It is commonly agreed, that employees are the most important asset in a business because they help organizations to thrive and be successful (Maylett & Wride 2017, 19, 24). However, the understanding and skills an employee once has acquired through formal education or training can become insufficient and outdated when faced with the growing demands and challenges of the future. Professional expertise in working life requires certain qualifications, skills, characteristics, and qualities that need to be continuously developed and updated (Vilkkä 2021, 13). Many organizations have embraced the concept of a learning organization to meet the challenges of the future. Studies have pointed out, that companies that offer continuous learning opportunities to its employees are better able to meet the demands of the future and stay competitive (Farrukh & Waheed 2015, 73-75). Large and well-established organizations often offer structured and organized learning and development opportunities for the employees through human resources departments and as a part of company strategy.

This thesis considers the case of a start-up, that wishes to incorporate formal learning in the business agenda. The business environment of a start-up is hectic and often uncontrollable. Employees have to cope with an environment that is constantly growing and changing. A mixed qualitative and quantitative methods research will be conducted by interviewing the start-up management and sending an electronic survey to the start-up employees. The purpose is to understand the challenges in start-up environments and to find out the employee opinion and attitudes towards learning related subjects. The survey intends to find answers to questions such as: Is the hectic start-up environment a place where learning can be incorporated? Would the start-up employees have the energy and motivation to commit themselves to formal learning and development initiatives? What is the employee perception on leadership, working environment and company culture? What development areas would the employees find of interest? The purpose of the survey is to find out the employee perspective, so that the leadership can take it into account when making strategic plans for future learning and development in the organization.

The theoretical part of this thesis first considers the start-up environment. Second to follow, the thesis discusses the concept of a learning organization, organizational learning theories and the organizational learning management field. The survey results, together with the literature review on the subject of learning in organizations produces guiding principles to support the partnering start-up leadership, when making future plans for formal learning.

2 The purpose of the research

The partnering start-up company wanted to find out the general level of commitment of the employees for future learning and development initiatives. The business environment of a start-up is hectic and employees face pressures to keep up with the ever growing and changing environment. By finding out the employee's opinions, attitudes and needs towards learning, the business can decide which direction they can take for future learning and development activities. With the help of the results from the electronic survey, the company management can map out a strategy for learning that meets both the needs of the employees and the start-up organization.

2.1 Description of the partner organization

The partner organization for this thesis has operated in Finland for 10 years. The business operates in the field of logistics, importing and selling products and services related to logistics. In the first few years of operation the start-up was operating as a simple "working out of a garage" type of company. Since 2020 the company has been able to get investors onboard to grow and expand further. The objective of the company is to grow within Finland and also abroad. The business has small scale operations in other European countries. Start-up X has competitors, but the competitors are usually smaller in size and operational scale. According to EU standards the business is classified as an SME or small business, as it employed 30 people (spring 2022) within different departments (Hill 2016,16.) Some employees have been in the company since its beginnings, others have joined later. The company has no official human resources department, but one person is employed to be responsible for human resources related tasks in addition to other responsibilities. The company has not previously incorporated official learning goals or learning and development plans.

2.2 Start-up environments

Businesses are important to societies as they serve several functions that benefit all, for example; creating jobs, being taxpayers in society, buying and selling products and services, being at the forefront of innovation and providing different and sometimes new solutions to people's needs. Start-ups are needed in all economies, to regularly bring forward new products and services and new innovations and financial prosperity (Hill 2016,18,19.) In Finland businesses employ 1,5 million people. Businesses pay taxes and the general population benefits greatly, by getting free services that are possible because of taxpayers. (Suomen yrittäjät 2022).

Any new business venture is always a risk. Many businesses fail because our world is complex and interrelated and humans have a limited capacity to understand the environment and cannot predict the future. (Flood 2014, 2.) Entrepreneurs know there is uncertainty, but they are willing to take the risk. Entering the market is risky because there is so much competition. Businesses also fail because they are not able to generate the profits needed to sustain the business or they are unable to get the needed financing. (Hill 2016,40.) During the year 2021 in Finland a great number of 41955 businesses started their operations and 28568 ended. As a

comparison; In 2018, 35389 new businesses were registered and 19832 ended their operations. (SVT 2022)

A start-up business differs from traditional businesses in several ways. The definition of a start-up can vary, depending on the country, laws and markets. Generally, terms such as “young”, “innovative”, “risk-taking” and “growth seeking” are associated with start-ups. A start-up is a new venture, a young business that has come up with a new product or service, a new way of thinking or operating to fulfill a specific customer demand. Any new entrepreneur also fills that criteria, but a start-up is generally a business that is seeking to grow exponentially often with the aim of being listed on the stock market. An innovative start-up often seeks financing not just from traditional banks like traditional entrepreneurs, but from any source willing to invest in a new and risky venture. (Baldrige R. Curry, B. 2022; Moilanen 2013.)

All businesses operate in uncertain environments, but start-up businesses often face greater uncertainty because they operate beyond local. A local business such as a flower shop, grocery store or a restaurant that does not belong to a chain usually have local customers. The environment is easier to manage because operations are local and employees are local. In a start-up the aspiration is often to grow beyond local geographic boundaries, which poses a great personal and financial challenge to the start-up leaders. The environment is more complex and often unknown, and cannot be controlled the same way as in local businesses. (Feld & Hathaway 2020,9,23.) Becoming an entrepreneur and setting up a business requires courage, hard work, and mastery of many different fields. Some entrepreneurs become drawn to the excitement of start-ups, becoming serial entrepreneurs who love to start businesses. The serial entrepreneur gets the business to a certain stage and then goes on to start new ones. A start-up requires a person with innovative abilities and a deep understanding of the target market. The start-up leadership can put up with a risky and uncontrollable environment and years of hard work with the dream, that one day their start-up will become a “Unicorn”. The term “Unicorn” is widely used in the start-up circles and refers to a private business that is valued a billion dollars before being listed on the stock market (Goetz 2015). Many start-ups do not have the time and resources in the beginning stages to implement formal organizational learning. Learning rather happens through trial and error. (Baltrunaite & Sekliuckiene 2020,71.)

2.3 A start-up leader

Many books have been written on leadership and there exists endless opinions on what skills, traits and leadership styles are the best for a business leader. The discussion about what qualities are the most important for an entrepreneur is still debated among researchers (Hill 2016, 50). However, it is commonly agreed that an entrepreneur needs to possess at least the following traits: 1. A strong belief in the vision, believing that the product or service that will be offered has great potential, 2. Communication abilities regarding the vision. 3. The ability to guide and influence others to believe in the vision. 4. The ability to steer the direction. 5. The ability to apply knowledge in practical ways. 6. A problem solver. 7. The ability to map

out a strategy and implement it. In addition to these personality traits, the entrepreneurial leader has to be able to get along with people, have the right skill set, have insight and experience in the field, that he will be operating in. In addition, self-awareness is also a very important characteristic of an entrepreneur. In entrepreneurship education, most entrepreneurial studies begin with the self-awareness portion, which helps to expose whether the person has the right traits and abilities to start an entrepreneurial venture. Self-awareness aids a person who is contemplating a start-up, to be honest in the forecasting of what they actually can and will achieve. A person needs to be aware of their own strengths and limitations. Self-awareness includes having the understanding of what we really are like as persons and what perception others have of us. (Hill 2016,52-53.)

Another factor that is important is a person's attitudes and beliefs. A person's outlook in life makes a difference. It is crucial for entrepreneurs to view matters positively, believing in the vision although others might not. Entrepreneurs often have in common the willingness to work beyond normal working hours and the courage to take risks. These qualities separate entrepreneurs from the conventional managers and employees. Hill (2026,53-54) argues that entrepreneurial qualities are developed as a result of a person's socio-economic position in life. A person's background, the daily activities and environment the individual is brought up in, ethnicity, culture, national heritage and the norms and values of the society a person is cultured in. When a start-up is growing and more people are needed onboard to share the workload, challenges might arise. Entrepreneurial leaders have the challenge of leading in an environment that needs to keep moving forward and inevitable change is encountered. People are often afraid of change, they resist change and lack the imagination to see that change can also be positive. (Furr, Nel & Zoega 2018, 2,3.)

2.4 Start-up employees

Entrepreneurs need other people to build successful companies. Literature on start-ups unanimously gives advice on the importance of hiring team members that are very energetic and ready to put in their 100% to make the business succeed. The employees need to be committed to the cause, they should be an extension of the start-up leader, have similar entrepreneurial skills and mindset and be innovative. (Hoffman 2021,25.) An employee with an entrepreneurial mindset has its own term. Intrapreneurship" is a term used to portray people who do not own a business themselves, but who possess qualities like entrepreneurs while working for someone else's company. A person who is an intrapreneur is proactive, enthusiastic, committed, innovative, has excellent interpersonal skills, takes responsibility and takes the initiative to suggest improvements. (Kansikas 2007,61-62) A business can support the intrapreneurship of employees by delegating power and fostering a company culture where personal growth is encouraged. If leadership shows a learning attitude and encourages personal growth by giving time and resources to learning, intrapreneurship can flourish. (Kansikas 2007,66-67.)

The intense nature of a start-up venture requires everyone in the organization on every level to be giving their absolute best. From sales to marketing, from secretaries to administrators and management, everyone needs to have a winning mindset for the business to be

competitive. A start-up needs people who are committed to the concept and ready to work hard to make the business succeed. When hiring, it is important to find the right person and not settle on a person who does not have the enthusiasm or motivation. (Hoffman 2021,25-27.)

Even though it is important to have people onboard that share the same vision and motivation as the leadership, diversity is also needed. Companies that have diversity are more likely to succeed as there is more innovation and more different backgrounds bringing forth different aspects to understand a variety of needs in the market. When diversity exists in a company, people question, think differently and challenge existing practices, actions or ideas resulting in change. (Hoffman 2021, 28.)

In order to attract talent and retain talent emphasis should be put on employee experience and wellbeing. Treating employees better than the average company, if possible paying even better salaries than the industry average is a tactic to have loyal and dedicated teams. (Hoffman 2021, 30-31.) However, often the reality in a start-up environment is far from the theoretical ideal presented in literature. Many start-ups do not have the financial means to hire the talent that is the exact match to a position. (Bosch et.al 2013,2; Hoffman,2021,23.) A willingness to learn is important, as the needed skills can be developed through formal or informal learning (Hoffman 2021, 237). Baltrunaite & Sekliuckiene (2020,71,76) argues, that formal learning practices should be implemented from the early stages of a start-up, to promote a learning culture that gives a competitive advantage.

3 Organizational learning and learning organization

The scope of the organizational learning field in literature is wide and complex. Organizational learning and organizational knowledge has appeared as a topic for studies for a long time. The two terms organizational learning and learning organization have separate meanings although they are often used as synonyms (Easterby-Smith & Lyles 2011,1-2.). Easterby-Smith & Lyles (2011,3) points out, that organizational learning refers to the academic study of the learning activities that are taking place in organizations, whereas a learning organization is the “ideal” where an organization aspires to be in terms of learning. According to Farrukh & Waheed 2015, 75) The term organizational learning refers to the learning activities in the organization and the “learning organization” refers to the ideal or “metaphor” that explains what the organization is or wants to become through learning.

3.1 The concept of a learning organization

Learning is a process where an individual modifies or changes their mental models after receiving new understanding. The term “learning organization” refers to an organization where knowledge is acquired, shared and created. (Hess 2014,14). Argyris (1977) argued that the people in the learning organization continuously question their actions, find flaws and fix them, renewing themselves and their organizational functions. Senge (1990) defined the learning organization as a place where every individual has the possibility to develop themselves continuously. The term “learning organization” has become widely used and depending

on the era and author has many sub-notions (Corley, Gioia & Nag 2011,361). In this thesis we view a learning organization based on Farrukh and Waheed's (2015, 73) overview of organizational learning literature as the following:

... "learning organization is an organization which learns through its members individually and collectively to create competitive advantages by developing a facilitative system through the process of self-development and information sharing by empowering the employees."

A learning organization allows people to learn together, creating new ways of thinking and new goals. In a learning organization learning and change can happen after previous mistakes and wrong practices are recognized. At the same time, it is important to have an atmosphere that creates opportunities for individuals. (Virtainlahti 2009,229-230.)

Farrukh& Waheed (2015,77) mention, that a learning organization has at least implemented the following factors in place:

"Innovation, facilitative leadership, self-development, empowerment, and information sharing and collective collaboration"

Senge promoted the idea of 5 disciplines, that need to be practiced in an organization to constitute a learning organization. To practice a discipline, entails the idea that techniques are mastered, applied and put into use. The first discipline is called "Personal mastery"- which is the mindset for learning on an individual level. The second discipline is called "Shared vision", it highlights the importance of communicating shared goals and visions. Bringing people together through a shared vision inspires and helps people to be more committed. The third discipline according to Senge, is "Team learning". To improve performance in a team, learning is needed. Learning on a team level, is viewed as more important than individual learning. The fourth discipline is called "Dialogue", which refers to collective learning, where conversations are held and meanings are found and sought without defensiveness. The "dialogue" brings together multiple viewpoints and perspectives, to solve problems. "Systems thinking" is the fifth discipline and it is a perspective that takes the whole picture into consideration with all its complexities. (Senge 2006,5-11.) According to Senge (2006,10), a learning organization is never finished when it comes to learning, no more than humans can say that they know everything. Learning is viewed as a lifelong process.

A learning organization can be viewed as the ideal to strive for. It is a process that takes time. Although the term is broad and has several meanings the core concepts of a learning organization can be described practicing the following values:

1. A learning organization has clearly communicated and defined goals and visions.
2. Shared values guide each members' actions
3. Knowledge has value and it has rewards.

4. The personnel understand the organization's functions and understand their own role in the organization.
5. The personnel understand how to reach future goals
6. People have possibilities and the authority to develop their own work
7. All have opportunities for continuous learning and development
8. Mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities
9. Leadership sets the model for learning and leading learning
10. Knowledge is shared and transferred from top down to bottom up and across boundaries and departments.
- 11 There is a flexible and flat hierarchy with operational teams even across boundaries
12. The organization is open and external stakeholders are involved in the learning culture. (Virtainlahti 2009,229-230.)

Lipschitz et al. (2007,24) talks about “productive “organizational learning that is tied to action. Productive organizational learning means that past behavior and mistakes are evaluated and then new action and behavior is invented and implemented. Hess (2014,7,32) describes a highly performing learning organization to have the right people, the right environment for learning and the optimal processes in place for learning. To become a learning organization, individual learning as well as organizational capabilities must be considered. From an individual perspective, the cognitive aspect, the emotional side, the motivations, attitudes and behavior of a person all generate an impact. From the organizational perspective, the environment is important and the right processes and practices that are implemented by the leadership and management, which reflect their behavior and disposition towards learning. (Hess 2014, 7,8.) An organization that wishes to transform into a learning organization has to undergo some changes in its identity. The identity change does not necessarily require a formal strategy. The changes can take place over a period of time and can be subtle. (Corley et.al 2011,359.)

3.2 The origins of the learning management field

The idea of organizational learning being important in a business environment surfaced as early as the 1930s and 1950s. (Easterby-Smith& Lyles 2011,10.) The origins of organizational learning date back to the sixties when Cyert & March (1963 84,100-101) wrote about an organization's ability to learn and store knowledge. Cyert and March introduced a model for learning using the term “adaptive learning”. The Cyert and March model proposed that an organization can adapt to change through learning, an organization can learn from feedback and previous experiences to change its future target and course. These interventions would result in more realistic future goals. (Calhoun et al. 2011,230.) Others have also impacted the field. Cangelosi & Dill (1965) argued that the Cyert and March Model was applicable to established environments but not for organizations that were continuously going through change.

Argyris and Schön (1978) discussed and defined the whole field of organizational learning. The writers made a clear separation between organizations that have the ability to learn and organizations where people put up defensive barriers to avoid learning. In the 1980's Hedberg (1980) Shrivastra (1983), Daft & Weick (1984), and Fiol and Lyles (1985) also made significant clarifications to subjects, terms, and different viewpoints in the field of organizational learning. (Easterby-Smith & Lyles 2011, 11.) The concept of a learning organization became extremely popular in the 1990s introduced by Peter Senge. Senge's book "The fifth discipline" became widely spread and defined the concept of a learning organization as:

"Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together". (Senge 1990)

Senge defined five components that constitute a learning framework in an organization, but as expressed previously, he was not the founder of the concept of a learning organization. He based his five disciplines on ideas that had emerged over several decades from other academic and non-academic scholars. (Calhoun, Starbuck, Abrahamson 2011, 226). David Korten (1982) and Bob Garratt (1987) were the first known authors to use the term "learning organization" before Senge. (Calhoun et al. 2011, 230.) Senge made the concept widely known, and his ideology has spurred further research into the subject. After Senge's five disciplines, there have been countless others writing about the topic of learning organizations. The widespread interest has resulted in positive outcomes such as new knowledge, clarifications, more specific definitions, diversity, and new ideas on the topic. (Easterby-Smith & Lyles 2011, 2.) Others have been updating or adding to Senge's disciplines or critiquing Senge's writings. Some critiquers' feel that Peter Senge's book was vague and ideological and offered no practical or specific suggestions on how to implement his ideology. (Calhoun et al. 2011, 240.) Lipshitz, Friedman & Popper (2007, 17-18) argues that the concept of organizational learning has been mystified because of the wide array of scholars from different theoretical disciplines producing research from their perspective on the matter. Critiquers point out that organizations should not be viewed as human beings, attributing the same kind of human abilities such as "learning" to an abstract entity. Critiquers also argue that a "learning organization" cannot be clearly defined, as organizations cannot learn anything on their own, but only the people working in organizations can learn. There is no common sense regarding the number of employees that have to be learning, for an organization to be called a learning organization. (Lipshitz et al. 2007, 19; Shipton & Defilippi 2011, 75.) Although critiquers might feel "a learning organization" is a business technique among others, the concept has become an integral part of the business management field (Calhoun et al. 2011, 243).

3.3 Organizational learning theories

There exists a wide array of organizational learning theories, that seek to explain how learning happens in organizations. We are discussing these complex and diverse theories through a four-quadrant model (or typology) introduced by Shipton (2006, 68-69) which aids to see how

learning can take place in organizations. This typology categorizes organizational learning theories into four dimensions; learning that takes place on an individual level and learning that is collective and takes place in a social setting. The other two perspectives in the typology consider learning theories that argue learning takes place controlled and theories on the opposite end that argue learning evolves naturally. (see Figure 1.)

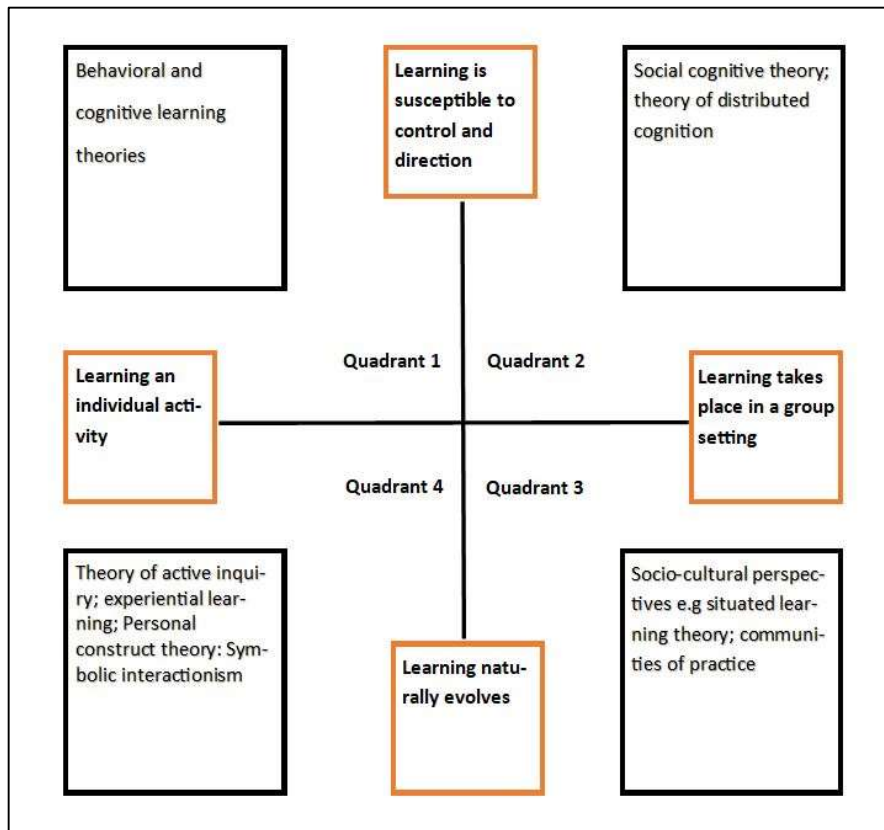


FIGURE 1: Adapted from “The Four Quadrant Framework”, by Shipton & Defilippi (2011,69)

Quadrant one is focused on individual learning and it can be viewed as a behaviorist or cognitive perspective where learning is dependent on control and direction. The learner is passive, and both the behaviorist and cognitive perspectives point out that external stimuli are needed for learning to take place. Behaviorists stress the environment and surrounding, while the cognitive perspective highlights that a mentor is needed that can support an individual's learning. Reinforcement and external rewards bring out the desired learning outcome. (Shipton & Defilippi 2011, 71,77.)

Quadrant two considers learning from a positivist theory perspective: learning in a group setting still focuses on control and direction. The external influence from a social group, observing peers, or receiving reinforcement from peers aids an individual in personal mastery. Salomon (1999) notes that by involving oneself in a social system, the individual can reach a higher level of competence, which results in the ability to apply the learning in similar future situations. Simon (1991) argues, that an organization learns in two ways; through the people learning that are working in the organization, or through new employees or individuals that bring in the knowledge that has not previously existed in the organization. A similar emphasis is reoccurring in literature; creative individuals in dialogue with a group, influence the

extended group or organization. Through an interplay of reflection, feedback, and shared cognition individuals change thought patterns, and organizations build capability. Searching for answers together on a group level and making sense of things, results in shared understanding and change on an individual level and organizational level. (Shipton & Defilippi 2011, 72.)

In Quadrant 3, learning is viewed as a naturally evolving process. The third quadrant summarizes all the theories of learning from a constructivist aspect in a group setting. The constructivist perspective views learning as a process where the learner actively builds their knowledge. Societal and cultural norms mold individuals. (Puolimatka 2002,82,93.) The learner is a product of the social environment. Learning and knowing are absorbed almost subconsciously. Knowledge is created in a social setting rather than managed or enforced by external stimuli. Constructivism from a group perspective emphasizes the social interaction in groups. Learning happens by groups giving meanings to artifacts. (Shipton & Defilippi 2011, 73.) In social constructivism, there is ongoing testing of a hypothesis. To test the unknown. One cannot rely on previous mental mindsets or previous experiences, because that would lead to the repetition of old ways of operating. The purpose of the learning is to create new knowledge and new ways of operating. (Puolimatka 2002, 93.) In Quadrant 3, learning theories mean that the depths of tacit knowledge and learning are supported and the sharing of knowledge is implemented. A great amount of organizational learning literature relies on constructivist ideas. (Shipton & Defilippi 2011, 73.)

Quadrant four considers the theories relating to naturally evolving learning on an individualistic level. Quadrant 4 continues on the constructivist theory where the learner is active and learning can be subconscious. Quadrant 4 considers practice-based learning, such as project-learning, learning in teams, mentoring, and coaching. Kolb (1984) talks about experiential learning and emphasizes that an individual need to reflect, think in abstract meanings, and experiment to learn from experience. Mead (1938) argues that learning is something that happens in everyday life, as a result of a curious mind. As mentioned in Quadrant 1, organizations learn through the individuals who are working there and learning. With time the organization's culture and actions have accumulated from the legacy of the people who have been involved in sharing mental models. (Shipton & Defilippi 2011, 75.) This typology with its four quadrants is simple and clear and gives a quick and overall understanding of the numerous organizational learning theories.

4 Becoming a learning organization

Experts on organizational learning agree that learning is very important to the performance of businesses (Farrukh & Waheed 2015,78). However, because the field of learning organizations and learning in organizations is so vast, and many scholars from different fields have put their twist on it, it has become rather difficult to define the only meaning of the concept. It is challenging to know how to implement learning initiatives that truly make learning happen. It is also unclear how learning can be measured or when an organization has become a learning organization. (Garvin, 1993.) In this section, we will consider the organizational context, how

leadership mentality and actions make a difference, what is the individual's responsibility and why collaboration and group learning is important. We will also peer into some of the tools that can be used for learning in organizations.

4.1 Organizational context

When learning is planned and designed for an organization it is important to take into consideration that organizations are different and their needs are different. Senge (2006, 11) stated, that great organization's do not have to copy each other. Organizations need to analyze their own situations, and identify the best practices for their own circumstances.

Several things have to be taken into consideration, such as: What is the sector? Who owns the business? What industry does the business operate in? Where is the business located geographically? What is the size of the business and what is the external market? Some sectors are more profit oriented than others. For example, the private sector is more profit oriented than the public sector. In the public sector such as education, healthcare and law enforcement profits are not important, which allows more time and resources to be given to learning. Business ownership also has to be taken into consideration when planning learning initiatives. Large public organizations are interested in share price for the long term and short term, which means any learning initiatives can also be planned for the long-term and the learning does not necessarily have to be generating profits. When the organization's ownership is entrepreneur based, serial entrepreneurs are usually interested in the generation of profits in the short term, therefore learning activities will be linked to practical things and to shorter term goals. In an entrepreneurial setting learning initiatives are often tied to action that might have a positive impact on generating revenue, such as employees learning new technology. If an organization is owned by shareholders, often the interest lies in the finances, such as stock price in a certain timeframe. The interest is not focused on long term wellbeing of the management and employees but rather how well the business performed in the stock market during "quarter 1". Learning and development interventions cannot be measured in a short period, as the capability of employees is built over time.

The geographical position of the business determines employee rights, also the rights to learning and development. Some countries have no such regulations and learning is not viewed as a must. The size of the business also matters, as smaller cannot find substitutes for the work that needs to be done. As a result, learning and development plans are needed that don't take the employees time away from the actual work. Money is tight in smaller businesses so there is a want to keep the costs down for learning. (Page-Tickell 2014,26-30.)

In bigger organizations leadership has assigned and shared the implementation of learning initiatives to HR (Human resources).HR is often responsible for designing and implementing a learning and development strategy. The purpose of HR is to take care of the people aspect of an organization. HR has different responsibilities, such as recruitment, ensuring company

diversity, promoting retention and instituting reward systems and programs. (Page-Tickell 2014,45-46.)

The learning of a new employee starts immediately when the employee has signed the work contract. HR usually takes care of the onboarding of a person. Onboarding is important so that the new person can become familiar with the business and all its functions. A thorough onboarding prevents unnecessary mistakes or accidents. (Kauhanen 2007,88.) An onboarding that is well done, should be the first step in a series of learning and development opportunities. A Learning and development strategy can help to promote the business wellbeing. Employees that are satisfied with their work and workplace, are usually giving their best to the company (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021,19) A learning and development agenda promotes retention in a business. There are natural reasons why employees leave a company, such as retirement (Kauhanen 2007,88,92). Employee turnover is needed in companies to a certain degree, as new employees bring with them new innovations and practices that benefit all. However, too much employee turnover can be damaging for a company. It is costly to hire new people and to train them. (Page-Tickell 2014,45-46.) Old employees often take with them skills and knowledge that a new employee might not possess and it may take years to build up that understanding (Virtainlahti 2009,109). The learning and development strategy should take into consideration how to get employees to share knowledge within the organization, to prevent valuable information to be lost if an employee leaves. All learning and development initiatives that an employee benefits from, should also be included and made visible in the benefits package when a person is hired. When a company puts a price tag on the learning opportunities, the employee will likely view the learning as a reward. Combining other rewards such as bonuses and pension plans together with the learning rewards, makes the employee also more likely to commit to the learning. Research shows that a person is more willing to work for a company offering learning opportunities as a benefit, rather than for a company that is not investing in the employee's learning and development. (Page-Tickell 2014,45.)

Learning styles are important to consider when determining what kind of learning initiatives employees would best benefit from. The term VAK stands for visual auditive and kinesthetic People learn in different ways. Some have clearly a stronger emphasis on one learning style, but often people mix at least two different styles when learning. A person who is a visual learner uses the vision and memory linked to impress the thoughts into the mind. A visual learner benefits from pictures charts, lists and videos to remember. An auditive learning style means, that a person benefits from listening and hearing things. The person is usually fluent in their speaking abilities and learns well hearing sounds, listening to seminars, discussions or recordings. A kinesthetic learning style means that, the person learns by doing. It is important that a kinesthetic person can feel and do things in practice. when people recognize their learning styles they can pay attention and act in accordance. For some people, it means taking notes is important to better the learning outcome. Others might want to hear a text read out aloud. When learning initiatives are being offered or presented the one in charge

ensures better learning outcomes when the different learning styles are taken into consideration. (Virtainlahti 2007, 237-239.)

According to Lipshitz (2002, 87) learning in organizations requires members of the organization to be committed to the organizations and willing to share their knowledge and expertise with others in the organization. Lipshitz (2002,87) indicates, that the commitment can mean that an individual experience, that they themselves and their coworkers are a part of a greater cause, and together are aligned with the organizations' values. To achieve this kind of commitment to an organization leadership and management have an important role. (Lipshitz et.al 2002,92.)

4.2 The leadership aspect

In organizational learning literature the right kind of leadership is the essence for a learning organization as the leadership can either promote or hinder learning and change. Leadership research has previously solely been focused on the leader alone. The majority of historical texts discuss the accomplishments of great men and heroes. Physical traits, personality qualities and effective skills were viewed as something great leaders were born with (trait theory). The focus of the research has thereafter been on action, situations and context. In the 1980's a new direction was taken that is called the "New leadership". (Marcela & Jarenko 2017,96-99.) The ideal of a leader has changed drastically. In the past, organizations were hierarchical and leaders were expected to give directions and orders from above. Today the leader promotes more teamwork and less control. In a learning organization the leader is expected to be supportive and encouraging, more like a coach or mentor. A leader leads change and drives innovation by inspiring people. (Luukkainen & Vuorinen 2002.143.) Farrukh & Waheed (2015,77) emphasize, that leaders facilitate learning by designing learning opportunities, drawing and motivating people to learning and acting as mentors in the process and overseeing the learning. The new leader is one who empowers people and shares responsibility to lower levels. The leader focuses on the future, directing in a future centric way, and empowers people, believes in them and knows they can do the work. In many technological firms this has already been practiced as many of them are flat organizations with employees that manage their own workload. For technology companies, low hierarchy works well making the companies highly competitive. Leadership training and education is given to all, empowering people to take charge. (Kotter 2012, 176-177, Farrukh & Waheed 2015, 77), Leaders in organizations need to nurture potential and encourage people to grow in abilities by sharing responsibility. This kind of action requires a change in management attitudes and a willingness to share and let go of power. Creativity and leadership potential can be destroyed with micromanagement, making people afraid to take risks and make mistakes coupled with a narrow work scope. (Kotter 2012, 174-175) Kotter (2012,183) argues that the old way of thinking that people are born as leaders with leadership qualities is outdated. In the 21st century it is not enough that just managers develop leadership qualities. All people in the organization from top to bottom need to develop leadership understanding in order to keep up with

dynamic change. (Kotter 2012,184.) To promote employees to be self-directed and reflect leadership qualities, means that they are allowed to prioritize, take responsibility and act accordingly. It means employees are encouraged to look at the whole picture, challenging them in a way that energizes them to be active. In hierarchical organizations this does not happen, rather people are taught to ask for permissions and what to do next. (Martela & Jarenko 2017,215-217.)

In a learning organization leadership communicates the goals and vision to the employees. A vision is not the same as purpose. A vision is future centric, a tangible destination. Such as by 2030 every one will have electric cars. A purpose is more abstract, such as:” creating sustainable technologies”. In a learning organization it is important that employees know the vision and purpose, and that the whole organization is moving towards these common goals. The vision pulls people forward, wanting to be aligned with the future goals. (Senge 2006,138-139.)

In organizational learning, leadership views mistakes as learning opportunities. Mistakes happen at all levels of organizations. Sometimes people are afraid to speak about failure or shortcomings because they are afraid to be criticized or viewed as incapable. Leadership needs to promote a culture of care. An understanding atmosphere that allows for mistakes and a coaching approach in correcting errors. Leadership is not afraid to show their own fallibility. Learning happens through up building criticism and self-evaluation. (Russ & Yiannis 2011, 344-345.) This is also something tied to national culture or occupational identity. Certain cultures tolerate shortcomings better than other cultures that have the habit of needing to “save face”. The topic of leadership in organizational learning is important as leadership can promote learning and change. The topic is also very complex because emotions and power relations are involved in organizational cultures. Leaders in organizations have to use their power to make decisions and steer organization’s forward according to strategy. Russ & Yiannis (2011,342) argue, that leadership is operating in the boundaries of people’s reality and fantasy, which has an impact on dynamics in the organization. Different people have different viewpoints about leadership. Based on a person’s previous or current experiences with leadership, (or lack of experience) the person can view the leader or manager to be a certain way. For example, a person can feel that the manager is a caring person or a listener, and someone else might view the same person as indifferent or outright evil. These emotions can surface and either promote or hinder learning when opportunities arise. (Russ & Yiannis 2011,342-343.)

Leadership and management need to show a learning attitude by their own example. Leaders also need to continue updating their own leadership skills and other skills that are required for their role in the organization. Especially future studies are important for leaders to be absorbed in order to steer the organization in the right direction in the right direction and continue promoting innovation and learning. Often leadership and management continues to focus on the operational side of running businesses rather than learning new thinking and strategies. Many great businesses have failed or lost the competition because the leadership has not been able to follow or observe changes and disruptions in the markets and changes in

customer needs. (Martela & Jarenko 2017, 224.) The same techniques for learning that apply for individuals can also be utilized for leadership. External executive coaching programs can also be considered, as well as the possibilities for networking. Networking is important for leader's, within the industry and beyond. Continuously learning about the customer is also important for innovation and transformation

4.3 Individual learning

Organizations can offer learning opportunities, but it is up to the individual whether he or she embraces these opportunities. As established earlier, an organization can only learn through the individuals working for the organization immersing themselves in learning. (Shipton & DeFilippi 2011, 72.) Also, Senge (2006,7,134) stated, that an organization's ability to learn cannot be greater than the learning abilities of the individuals in the organization. He also argued that an organization's financial success is dependent on the employee's ability to personal development. One of Senge's five disciplines "personal mastery", relates to the individual's need for development in learning organizations. According to Senge (2006) "Personal mastery" is a process in which an individual is in a continuous learning mode. A person is aware of their shortcomings and at the same time is confident about themselves. A person who is at a high level of "Personal mastery" is a person who takes initiative and is committed to their work. The person takes their responsibilities seriously. Life is approached as a creative journey, the person is aware of what they want in life and is learning to see current realities accurately. (Senge 2006,131-133.) Personal mastery has similar sounding traits as an entrepreneurial mindset or intrapreneurship or the concept of lifelong learning. All these are important traits for individuals in a learning organization.

The focus in learning has long been on the cognitive aspects of learning, because of the emphasis on knowledge management and knowledge transfer theories. Recently, scholars have become interested in the emotional aspect of learning. Research shows that emotions are strongly linked to learning as emotions might make a person see matters differently. Researchers who study emotions have concluded that human emotions and cognition is intertwined and not separate. (Russ & Yiannis,2011,334-335.) Also, behavioral sciences have received popularity in business in recent years. According to behavioral sciences, human brains have two sets of thinking. Thaler & Sunstein explained (2020,28) The first way, is called intuitive system thinking (System 1) which refers to an individual's first instinct, the impulsive and rather emotional way of thinking. The fast thoughts, that come into mind as a response to some stimuli. The second way of thinking is the "reflective "system (System 2), which is slower and produces more rational thinking resulting in wiser decisions. In literature, these two different modes of thinking are often referred to as System 1 and System 2 thinking (Kahneman, Lovallo & Sibony 2013,22). Humans often make decisions based on System 1 thinking, we believe we are following our instinct, thinking that our instinct cannot be wrong. The fact that the power of emotions is nowadays considered with organizational learning is a positive trend. When humans understand the connection between emotions and rational thinking, that understanding can guide us in controlling our behavior and decisions.

Individuals in organizations have emotions, and the emotions are not separate from the context in which people are being managed. In other words, discovering people's emotions in an organization can reveal a lot about the organization as a system. (Hess 2014,11; Russ & Yiannis 2011,337.)

Psychologists have noted that a person's emotions both negative and positive, are strongly connected to learning. Emotions are also connected to a person's beliefs about how they manage learning situations. (Russ & Yiannis 2011,331.) If a person has negative memories of learning from the past perhaps from their childhood or of their years in educational institutions, the negative feelings will resurface again, when new learning opportunities present themselves. A person with negative memories about learning in the past will feel that they are out of their comfort zone. Learning for an adult is not as easy as it is for inexperienced and curious children, who do not have years of experience, emotions, and biases inhibiting learning. (Hess 2014, 13,14,33.) Page-Tickell (2014, 10,11) also mentions that, if there are past emotions of feeling incapable of reaching certain goals, often any organizational interventions for learning and improvement might be viewed with resistance and avoidance.

Continuous negative emotions can influence a person's motivation and stifle learning in an organization. Negativity is linked with anxiousness and fear and makes a person interpret all messages even neutral or positive ones, in the worst possible way. A fear, whether true or perceived, overtakes a person's thinking and the brains are not able to make rational decisions. This inhibits change and learning. In a positive environment, individuals are better able to accept new ideas, solve problems easier, are abler to remember neutral and positive memories, and can reduce their feelings of defensiveness. The human brain is malleable and it is possible to increase positive emotions through training. For example, instituting daily gratitude practices, such as reserving time to think about matters one is grateful for or keeping a diary of them increases positivity. (Hess 2014, 26.) These training interventions can also be used in organizations to combat negative emotions.

A person's perception of how much they are in control of their circumstances is also a factor that contributes to the personal motivation for learning. Some people are more proactive than others, believing that they can impact the outcome in matters, therefore they are more prone to act and use the development opportunities. Others are more passive maybe because of past negative experiences such as being made redundant. They might feel that engaging in development opportunities does not contribute to job security. (Page-Tickell 2014, 18.) The psychological contract is a term Rousseau (1989) spoke about, which means that an individual performs at a level that is satisfactory to their inner scale of justice. Through this scale, a person measures themselves in comparison to others and measures their input if it is at a satisfactory level to themselves. The level of effort put into learning and development is also justified on an individual level. (Page-Tickell 2014,17)

All professional people need to continue learning and updating their skills throughout their careers, to stay relevant. Many companies have a personal development plan for employees.

This personal development plan is usually discussed with the manager maybe once or twice a year. It is the responsibility of the individual to make sure, that they follow their personal development plan. However, greater value is acquired if the organization facilitates the learning and directs the learning toward what is beneficial for the company. Self-directed learning can be anything from reading and studying and reflecting on important topics, that add value to everyday work. To update their knowledge and skills employees can participate in formal courses of learning arranged by educational institutions, such as open universities. Companies arrange webinars, seminars, and conferences, where professionals can learn and network beyond the boundaries of their organization. Some events are free and even the power of LinkedIn or YouTube should not be underestimated, as they can provide serious and relevant learning for individuals. New insights that broaden understanding can also be found in union magazines or other trade-related publications or media outlets. (Page-Tickell 2014,165-166.)

Senge (2006,177) writes, that learning is always connected to action. There is no benefit for anyone if a person would generate academic knowledge but would not put it to use. It is important to put learning into practice and connect reflection to learning practices. Schön (1983) emphasized action and reflection after a learning situation has passed. All learning activities should be tied to reflection. Reflecting encourages System 2 (reflective thinking), which might lead to smarter decisions. When reflecting on the learning situation afterward, it promotes deep learning (the matter stays in our memory) and can also lead to change as one can reflect on what went wrong. Specific and up-building feedback is crucial for learning and development, as it promotes self-awareness and the transfer of new skills and understanding. Through constructive feedback, the individual can become aware of the areas where there are gaps, and needs for improvement. (Page Tickell 2014, 172-173.) A professional who is involved in learning actions, should practice reflection and seek feedback from the appropriate source to continue developing.

4.4 Collaborative learning

Organizational learning is a social phenomenon and requires that an individual in the organization feels a sense of belonging or commitment to the organization as established earlier. (Child & Rodriguez 2011, 309; Lipshitz et.al 2002,87.) People have different social identities, such as occupation, nationality, and ethnicity. An Individual can simultaneously associate themselves as belonging to several different groups at the same time. A person might feel a sense of belonging to different groups such as fellow workers with similar educational, occupational, or national identities, but if there is no belonging to an organization's identity there is easily resistance when and withdrawal, and lack of commitment to organizational change. People in an organization are more likely willing to share their understanding or skills with others with similar social identities. This poses challenges to managers trying to bring together people to contribute and share knowledge so that the organization can utilize the knowledge. (Child & Rodrigues 2011,309-311.) A learning organization is a place where learning happens at all levels by sharing collectively. The learning does not necessarily have to

happen through formal training, although learning is facilitated in the organization. (Far-rukhan & Waheed, 2015, 75.) Senge argues (2006,221), that;

“Collectively, we can be more insightful, more intelligent, than we can possibly be individually. The IQ of the team can, potentially, be much greater than the IQ of the individuals”

There are many examples from sports, science, and arts, that highlight the importance of teams. If a team is functioning well, the individuals within the team can collectively produce greater intelligence than the members on their own. If a team is not coherent a lot of energy and effort goes wasted (Senge 2006,9,18,19.) Senge (2006,217), argued that individual learning is not as important for organizations as teams learning together. When teams learn the learning is put into action and becomes a part of the organization’s culture. Team learning is possible when individual members of the teams have learned the art of discussion and communication. Roloff, Woolley & Edmondson (2011,249) stress, that when people are members of different teams, learning happens through “cross-fertilization”. Meaning one member of several teams acts as a messenger, bringing and producing new learning across teams. There is a growing interest in assigning people to become a member of several teams simultaneously to share more knowledge across boundaries. This kind of multi-membership can contribute to organizational learning. (Roloff et al.2011,251.)

Especially in organizations where people work remotely from different geographical locations, even from different countries, team learning can produce positive results and promote a united organizational culture. (Page-Tickell 2014,170.) The organizational culture matters because if the culture is not right learning does not flourish. Organizational culture includes all the layers of how things operate and are done in an organization. The standards and social values, that influence people’s behavior. The values, the beliefs, and the history people hold onto and what their perception is of all of it. (Isaksen & Tidd 2006,313.) The organizational culture that is needed for learning prioritizes learning and rewards learning progression. (Dibella 2011, 187.) When leadership understands the social connections in the organization that promotes learning and how people learn, they can steer the process toward what is suitable for the company strategy. (Dibella 2011,186.)

Senge points out that a shared vision is needed in a learning organization because it raises people’s ambitions and aspirations. A shared vision brings people together, it can help people to work together even though they might have had distrust, or misconceptions about each other previously. The shared vision becomes the driving force that helps people to be courageous and commit to the cause. (Senge 2006,193-195) Shared visions do not always originate from leaders, and they are not shared visions until everyone has accepted and connected with the vision to also be their vision. Sometimes visions come forth from individuals in the organizations and they are accepted as shared visions because people relate to them. (Senge 2006,199-200). All management wants committed people, but compliance cannot be forced, a manager can create conditions that promote compliance. When employees disagree, often the best way to get them onboard is pleading with them rather than trying to force people to

commit. (Senge 2006, 207). Trust is needed in teams for learning to happen. According to Parviainen (2006, 170,171), trust is a feeling of security that needs to be experienced and earned. The feeling of trust is usually mutual and cannot easily be explained (Parviainen 2006,171). Building trust might be challenging in virtual teams, as team members might never have met each other in person. All members contribute to the team culture because all members bring their diverse backgrounds and different perspectives to the team. However, the same principles of building trust in local teams also apply in virtual settings. Being honest, sharing information, admitting mistakes, giving and accepting up-building feedback, not spreading confidential matters, keeping agreements, sharing responsibility and decision-making, keeping agreements, and so on, will help any team to establish trust. Team dynamics will exist both in local and virtual teams and therefore, communication is needed to avoid misunderstandings. (Mattiske 2020,82,166-167.) Edmondson (1999,6-7) used the term “psychological safety” when speaking about similar trusting conditions in a team that promotes learning. Research evidence suggests that psychological safety is required for team learning. (Lipshitz et al. 2002, 87.) Each team member has to be able to use speak out without fear of being judged. This kind of psychologically safe environment eases any fears of making mistakes and therefore allows for a free exchange of thoughts as the team members are not afraid to be viewed as incompetent by others. (Roloff et al.2011,258-259).

Communication is important for a learning organization and Senge (2006) points out that deeper communication which he calls “Dialogue” is needed for teams to be able to learn and become smarter. The “True dialogue” according to Senge (2006), happens when people in a team bring forth their thoughts and discuss matters freely without fear. True dialogue means that senior employees who are used to being influential, let go of their power and allow others to also take charge. Senge (2006,233) argues, that the greatest barrier that hinders our learning is our defensive mechanism, the hurt or defensive emotions that we portray when we are confronted with an issue that is close to us. The defenses humans put up prevent change and learning. A team can get beyond some of these defenses and become a learning team, by working on the negative emotions. Working on negative emotions requires the ability to understand that all humans are imperfect and put up these barriers. (Senge,2006, 233-238) Lipshitz et al. (2002, 85) identify the importance of giving and accepting feedback as a way to grow and learn in teams. Although uncomfortable at first, it is possible to get used to feedback and specifically demand it from peers. When a team member understands that everyone takes turns in receiving and accepting feedback, also those of a higher rank, feedback becomes an integral function of a learning team. (Lipshitz et.al 2002,83.) Senge (2006,225) referred to something similar when saying that thoughts should be expressed freely in teams, but assumptions should be held back. Team members should remember they are colleagues, not each other’s enemies. The thoughts that people express often stem from the collective cultures that have molded their thought patterns. Therefore, people might view ideas that spring out as their brilliant thoughts, but they are produced from collective discussions and team effort. (Senge 2006,225.) Parviainen (2006, 175) refers to dialogue when discussing professional knowledge sharing and building. The collective dialogue in professional teams is not

stiff, but a lively discussion that can produce new information, new practices, and innovation. According to Parviainen (2006,175-176) Teams, although diverse, should have something in common, to find common ground for discussions and problem-solving.

4.5 Tools for implementing learning

Coaching and mentoring are often used in organizations to implement learning. Coaching is an informal arrangement, where a person with more insight, has a coaching relationship with another employee who is less experienced. The purpose of coaching can be developmental, for example, to internally help a junior employee to work through difficulties that they encounter in their work. The difficulties can be related to personal qualities, competencies, or problem-solving. A line manager can be a coach and spend time with that person(coach), helping them for example, to acquire more assertiveness or persuasion skills when doing sales. The coaching can be also implemented at the executive level, which in practice means, a coach from outside of the company usually from a consulting firm, coaches a senior manager. The outsourced consultant or coach helps to improve performance by listening to the manager by providing feedback and support to work through challenging problems. (Page-Tickell 2014, 162,163.)

Mentoring is also an informal arrangement, but it is usually set up by the human resources in the company. The relationship is between two parties the mentor and the mentee. A mentor is a senior person who knows the organization or the industry that he can share with the mentee. The mentoring relationship is often for a longer period. This is a relationship with tacit knowledge that can be shared benefiting the mentee. The mentor also benefits from the relationship because the relationship helps to develop soft skills in the mentor, it can also provide the mentor with a more realistic picture of what is happening at other levels of the organization. The mentoring relationship is learner-centric and promotes learning through action and experience. It is important to give careful thought to whom the mentor is and the mentee because if the personalities do not for some reason work together the mentoring relationship might not work. Both parties need to be proactive and show trust and mutual respect. (Page-Tickell 2014, 162,163.)

Learning technologies have become very popular in organizations when instituting formal and informal learning. It is of great interest as knowledge management stresses the importance of retrieving, processing, and storing information and knowledge as data. The knowledge management field is closely linked to organizational learning, but since it is a large field of its own, we will not consider it in this thesis. (Easterby-Smith & Lyles 2011, 14.) Information technology is allowing companies to share knowledge and data that previously before the technological revolution were found only in people's minds.

Many businesses have adopted learning management systems(LMS) to implement formal learning within the company. Companies can have their employees take courses on these platforms in different subjects. Topics, such as customer service, leadership skills, or courses that teach how to use new technology can be chosen or other subjects that the organizations want

to emphasize. There is much variety in learning management systems and they come with a price. The benefits of LMS might outweigh the costs. A learning management system can help employees to absorb the company culture and values and embody the goals of the organization. If there is a need to unify company standards or practices a learning management system is a great way to implement such learning. As established earlier, it is up to employees if they want to learn. Many companies have used different technologies also to measure and evaluate organizational learning. It is important to find out whether the learning initiatives have been successful and worth the cost. Metrics are needed to decide whether to continue on the same course or discontinue a program if the results are not relevant to the organization. Also, the evaluation of individual learning, leadership and management learning, and coaching and mentoring programs are important although more complicated to measure. Surveys can be used, or one-to-one discussions, and team discussions on the perceived value. (Page-Tickell 2014,183-193.)

5 Research

It is important to research the employee perspective and experience when aspiring to develop a certain aspect of an organization. What kind of feelings, opinions, and experiences do the employees have toward a development initiative? What type of development would work in the organization and what initiatives can improve the current state? Understanding the employee point of view through employee-centered research improves competitiveness. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021,48-49.)

When research is done for businesses, the researcher tries to find a way to combine theory, experience, and the practices that are common in the field of work. (Vilkka 2021,15.) A researcher can use a combination of methodologies to find the most applicable outcome. Three types of design methods can be chosen when doing research: Quantitative, qualitative, and a mixture of both methods. Neither quantitative nor qualitative is superior to the other as both in different situations are applicable and have positive qualities and negative characteristics. Quantitative research methods often focus on numbers and produce statistics that represent a greater population or take. There is no limit to what can be measured in a quantitative survey. (Bui 2020,10-13.) Qualitative and quantitative research methods can support each other. They are not to be viewed as opposites. (Hirsjärvi, Remes, Sajavaara 2006,127.) Where quantitative research considers numbers, a qualitative survey tries to find meanings. A qualitative research method aims to explain a phenomenon, the way the people involved in the study experience it, and to gain an understanding of the target group.

In qualitative research, the sample group is often small so that time can be spent to analyze and categorize all the findings of the study. Qualitative research can also be done in many subjects and fields. (Bui 2020,14; Hirsjärvi et.al 2006,170.) A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is often used overlapping each other. A qualitative study can be done before the actual quantitative survey to get background information. Or a quantitative survey can have open-end questions, leaving more room for the participant to express their true

feelings or opinions. (Hirsjärvi et.al. 2006,127.) Research that combines the previously discussed two methods allows for more flexibility. Using both methods brings the added benefit of collecting and analyzing a wider array of data. It might require strenuous work and the scope is wider, but also the outcome might bring out more meaningful explanations and evidence. A mixed methods research can also be called “data triangulation”, meaning several different ways and methods are combined in the study, which produce more trustworthy outcomes when results are compared. (Bui 2020,15,190.) The researcher chooses the method for research based on his conviction, of which method will bring out the most meaningful results. To determine which study method is the most effective, it is important to consider which method would best answer the research question. (Bui 2020,17; Hirsjärvi et.al 2006,128.)

5.1 Research methods

A mixed quantitative and qualitative research design was chosen for this research project, to receive a broader understanding of the start-up company’s current situation and the employee’s opinions on different learning-related subjects. The sample group is the employees of the partnering start-up. The sampling can be viewed as purposive sampling as the participants have been chosen because they are start-up employees, have experience in a start-up environment, and can answer the research questions. (Buy 2020,146.) The purpose of the research is to be descriptive, describing the opinions and feelings of the employees of the start-up and the start-up environment. The term “descriptive” can also be used when an interesting phenomenon is found or when data is described so that it becomes easily comprehensible to the reader. (Buy 2020, 171; Hirsjärvi et al. 2006,128-130.)

The hectic environment of a start-up work was taken into consideration when choosing the research methods. To gather data that would answer the research questions, interviews were conducted with the start-up management, and a survey questionnaire was created and sent out to the company employees.

The first phase of the data gathering, involved a semi-structured interview, conducted with the start-up CXO (Chief Experience Officer). The interview questions were created after an initial review of the literature on start-ups, and the literature on learning in organizations. The interview can be viewed as semi-structured, as the questions were created beforehand, but during the interview, the discussion was going in many directions and not strictly keeping with the written scripts, which is common in open interviews. (Hirsjärvi 2006, 190.) The interview aimed to gain a better understanding of the start-up environment, the management perspective, and the employee situation in the company. An additional set of interview questions were sent out by email to the company CXO, to find further information on the strategies and structure of the company. A qualitative interview was important, as the start-up environment and the business itself were previously unknown to the researcher, and with the help of an interview, it is possible to get insights that cannot be gained elsewhere. An interview can clarify matters for the researcher, as additional questions can be asked to better understand the participant’s viewpoint. In an interview, the participants can provide nuances

through gestures and facial expressions, that the researcher would not otherwise be able to interpret. (Hirsjärvi et.al 2006,194.)

The second phase of the data gathering involved a quantitative survey for the start-up employees to understand their viewpoint on learning related subjects. A survey was chosen because every employee works remotely and a few from abroad. The days for employees are busy, so the best way to reach most of them was through a survey, which would not take too long to fill out. With the help of surveys, it is possible to gather information about the behavior of individuals, their actions, their values, and their beliefs. (Hirsjärvi et.al 2006,186.) Survey research is a structured and standardized way of collecting information, by using a form or conducting interviews. The results are analyzed by explaining, describing, and comparing different phenomena. (Hirsjärvi et al.2006, 125.) The questions for the survey were formulated in a way, that it would be easy for the employees to answer the survey in less than 15 minutes. Rea and Parker (2005,46) argue, that a survey should not be too extensive and difficult to fill out so that the respondents would avoid the task. A few open-ended questions were put in place to find the respondent's true feelings on the subject. When there are no suggested answers the respondent can express themselves in their own words. Through open-ended questions, also feelings related to motivation surface easier. (Hirsjärvi et.al 2006, 190.)

All the questions in the survey were based on the literature available about organizational learning. The questionnaire was produced on Microsoft Office 365, on the application called "Forms™". The survey was forwarded by email to all the employees in the company. The email and the front page of the Forms survey included an explanation to the employees, that the survey is conducted to find out the employees' perspective on future learning initiatives in the company.

The questionnaire included mainly structured Likert scale questions, mixed questions, and a few open-ended questions. Likert scale questions help the respondent express their opinions and they can choose how strongly they feel about a matter. In Likert questions, the question is posed and different options follow, usually 5-7 levels of options to express their favorable or unfavorable opinions. In this survey 5 levels were used usually number one meaning "I totally disagree", number 2 meaning "I somewhat disagree", 3 being "neutral", number 4 expressing "I somewhat agree" and number 5 meaning "I fully agree". The majority of the questions were Likert questions, as they are easy to answer and would not take too much time from the busy day of the employees. The mixed questions allowed the respondent to choose between multiple options, the last option usually being I don't know or I don't want to disclose my answer. The open-ended questions allow the respondents to express their true feelings. Through open-ended questions also feelings related to motivation surface easier (Hirsjärvi et.al 2006,187-190.) The themes for the groups of questions were created from the combination of the literature review and the researcher's decade of experience as an entrepreneur and the experience of working as a teacher in adult education for the past 6 years.

Hirsjärvi et al. (2006,191) argue, that structured surveys have been viewed as a creative piece and are dependent on the researcher's personal experiences and a variety of insights. A third meeting was held with the start-up CXO before sending out the survey so that he could express his opinions and suggest changes to the questions to better meet the company's needs.

5.2 Trustworthiness and limitations

All research has to be evaluated whether it is reliable and true. All research also has limitations. The limitations refer to weaknesses in the study. (Buy 2020, 111.) Trustworthiness is usually associated with the reliability and validity of the research. In research terms, reliability means that the research can be duplicated or conducted with the same sample group, and the results would remain the same. In other words, the research tool is accurate. Validity is often used in conjunction with quantitative studies and means, that the study conducted specifically measures the purposed subject matter. For example, if the research questions are not clear and understandable and the respondent understands them in a different way than intended, then the interpretation of the results would not be valid. (Hirsjärvi et.al.2009, 217.) Some qualitative researchers claim, that in qualitative research there is no attempt to validate the research results or prove their reliability. They stress that all descriptive research has its unique qualities and should not be compared in terms of reliability or validity. However, to assure trustworthiness it is recommended that a detailed description is given of how the research was conducted. By using several different types of research methods the validity can also be increased. (Hirsjärvi et.al 217,218.)

Validity was considered when the interview and survey questions were constructed and conducted. The company language of start-up X is English because it operates in addition to Finland, also in other countries. All people hired have to be able to read and speak in English. The questions for the interview and survey were formatted simply and understandably. This enabled participation, even though the respondents might not be native to the English language. In regards to the survey, if a respondent was uncertain about the language, the option "neutral" was available. The assumption is that all employees have understood the questions as intended, and the research is valid from this perspective.

The interview transcription was given to the CXO to proofread before publishing, so that it portrays his true feelings and opinions as brought out in the interview. Going back to the source and asking for confirmation adds to the trustworthiness of the qualitative portion of this research. The survey was structured so the study can be repeated to the same sample group, and answers can be expected to be similar to the ones received in this survey, so the measurement instrument can be viewed as reliable. Some limitations however detract from the reliability of the research. The survey received only 15 participants out of 30 eligible employees. The response rate constitutes 50% of the company employees. The small sample size can be viewed as a limitation of this research. The research is supposed to be a mixed methods research and because of the low percentage rate of respondents, it poses a limitation

from the quantitative aspect. A low response rate is a common problem in survey research. (Buy 2020, 111.) In this start-up case, the low final response rate is also related to the turnover in the company.

Other limitations in this research are related to the hectic start-up environment and the researcher's inexperience in research methods. The survey method chosen applied to the environment, but at the same time the limitations were evident. A structured survey was chosen because interviews are time-consuming for the participants. The negative side of structured survey questions is, that they limit the respondents, as they are not able to express their opinions in their own words. This might raise the question of how trustworthy the results are, and if the results are portraying the true opinions of the respondents or did the respondents quickly answered to get rid of the task.

The great number of neutrals can be viewed as a limitation. A month was given for the employees to fill out the survey. A majority of the answers came back in the last few weeks and days. It confirms what was previously discussed, that start-up employees are busy with work. The high amount of neutrals can also indicate indifference, which would be a negative outcome. The participants spent an average of 21 minutes on the survey. The fastest respondent only took 5 minutes to fill out the survey and the longest time spent on the survey was 133 minutes. Which most likely means, that the respondent was interrupted and continued the questionnaire at a later time. Most participants took less than 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire, which is the suggestion when conducting surveys. (Hirsjärvi et.al 2006,192.)

When discussing trustworthiness, this group of participants can solely be expected to possess the true understanding to answer the research questions in the case of this company. (Rea & Parker 2005,25.) In research terminology a sample group symbolically represents the opinions of a wider audience, that can be expected to portray similar answers. For example, in this survey, the respondents can be the sample that represents all employees of start-ups. Findings about behavior, attitudes, preferences, etc. can be gathered from a small sample group and the findings are generalized to apply to a greater population (Rea& Parker 2005,29). However, the participants in this survey provided answers that are only applicable to their situation in the company they work for. All business environments are different, so all the findings from this research cannot be fully transferred to another environment, although some general findings can be applicable for developmental purposes.

5.3 Ethics

There are challenges to the ethical aspect of conducting research online as material online leaves a traceable digital footprint and can harm the respondent's reputation. When qualitative research is conducted in person, the researcher can interpret and understand many different non-verbal messages and nuances which is not possible asynchronously online. (Kristiansen 2022). The survey was conducted anonymously, with the help of the Forms application. No names or personal details were asked, that would reveal who the respondents are. By having the link to the Forms-questionnaire, the respondents were able to give answers, that were

returned and seen only by the researcher. To guarantee the respondent's privacy, the research answers and data will not be shared with anyone. The start-up leadership and management do not have access to the data collected. The employees can confidently answer the survey questions as the answers are kept confidential and cannot be traced back to any individual. An official agreement was signed with the partner start-up company, and all survey participants participated without compulsion. Before publishing the thesis, final permission was obtained by email from the CXO, so that he was able to check that his views and opinions from the interview were portrayed accurately.

6 The interview findings

The interview with the company CXO, (chief experience officer) was conducted in person, on Teams, and through questions introduced in several emails. It was important to receive information about the start-up environment and to sense and feel the culture in the company so that any questions posed to the employees would be applicable. The CXO in these interviews represented the opinion and perspective of the leadership and management of this start-up.

The interviews produced material such as interview scripts, emails and handwritten notes. These were transcribed by reading the material over and over again and comparing to thoughts that had appeared in the literature on start-ups and organizational learning. Main points and key words were brought out that corresponded with the themes of the research questions, such as leadership, the start-up environment, company culture, learning, and entrepreneurial qualities. Similarities were grouped together and analyzed so as to find answers to and new meanings. The interview coding was done after the survey coding, which allowed to find connections between the results. In mixed methods research, the data is often evaluated separately. (Buy 2020,188-190.)

The answers and explanations given by the CXO were generally aligned with the literature on start-ups. When considering the leadership aspect, it was found that the company mission and vision have been communicated to the employees, which highlights communication. Management feels that it is important to take care of the employees and to have good teamwork. Good teamwork results in employees being happy being part of the start-up journey according to the CXO.

“We want people to enjoy being here and share the mission and values of the start-up community “

When asked about what leadership style is emphasized in the company the following answer was given:

“Lead by example, a loved leader is always better than a feared one. Inspiring people to do their best.”

The opinion of the CXO was, the company has a low hierarchy and leadership wants to listen to the employees.

“Flat, but there is a hierarchy...but also democracy. People are being listened to and are allowed to evolve and grow”

The previous was further confirmed, when the CXO revealed, that he himself, started in customer service. It shows that s can offer great professional growth opportunities for individuals that are willing to work hard.

Entrepreneurial qualities and company culture was highlighted in the answers. The CXO brought out the opinion that employee personalities differ. Some people are better able to keep up with the demanding and hectic work, while others might find it too stressful. The CXO expressed the opinion, that certain positions were more challenging:

“Customer service is a business that can be rough, there is turnover. It is a dumpster. Requires a sort of personality that can handle the cases without taking it personally, the personality is the key to be able to make it or not.”

Hoffman (2021, 25-27.) stated, that when start-ups hire they need to hire fully motivated and enthusiastic employees. The same thoughts are emphasized in the following words:

“Nobody “just” works here, it would not work. People need to understand the company culture and act accordingly. “

These thought shed light on the demands and expectations that lie on the shoulders of start-up employees. When discussing the main goals and focus of the business, the start-up culture was emphasized in the following statements:

“To be able to grow we need to be modern”

The word “growth” was used on several occasions by the CXO. He told that the business operations in the beginning stages were the elementary “working out of a garage” type of setting, before becoming better established and growing. Focus on growth and financial targets was also evident, in the following words:

“A business is a business, it needs to generate money, what we do is profitable not sacrificing”

The discussion continued by also pointing out that in line with the company goals the start-up remembers to:

“...care about our customers want to serve the customer and solve their problems.”

The fast growth in the start-up has affected employees, as operations have scaled up there has been a need to hire more people. In 2019 an additional 10 people were hired, the years

following some 3 people yearly, which means a lot of new dynamics in a small business. The company outsources some functions and uses contractors and consultants where possible. This points to an environment that is constantly under change, although the CXO mentioned;

“At some point, it will slow down”

This confirms the findings in the literature on start-ups, that they are unstable and uncertain and require a certain mentality from the leadership and employees alike. At the same, they are fast and exciting places to grow professionally. (Goetz 2015). Other issues were brought out:

“Lack of actual physical contact creates its own challenges... There might be times when people feel like outsiders and are not connected. “

A challenge that was brought out was the fact that most people are working remotely and working very independently, it can create a sense of insecurity for an employee and can generate a lack of commitment. (Hill 2016,40; Lipshitz et al. 2002, 87.) A second challenge that appeared from the interview is the turnover experienced in the company. A reason for the turnover was expressed to be:

“Growing very fast makes it hectic. We cannot offer stability or routines like big companies.”

According to the CXO, as the company is growing and the days of the employees are hectic, it regularly creates situations where employees have to take care of responsibilities beyond the title or role they were hired for.

The start-up does not have any formal ways of learning, there is an intranet and:

“...a code of conduct that everyone is supposed to follow. Mainly about the respect among fellows and customers and partners, contractors, and so on. Making (X) a good place to work a happy place to work”

When discussing different ways of learning, the CXO stated that the employees do not have much time to answer surveys, also when asked if they have any mentoring in place, the answer was:

“Mentor problem is time.”

The interviews brought out valuable findings about the start-up environment. The communication with the CXO showed that he was very busy, but showed a very dedicated and loyal attitude toward the business.

Strong expectations towards the employees was sensed in some of the opinions. The statement that highlighted the environment of a start-up not just being a place to work, was a

significant indicator that the employees are truly expected to have the mindset of an entrepreneur to be successful. Start-up challenges that appeared in the interview answers, were related to the working environment being mostly remote. As most employees in the company are working remotely, there is a challenge to make people feel a sense of belonging to a team or a greater cause. Because the partnering start-up is growing fast, the days are busy for the employees. Often they have to take care of responsibilities beyond the title or role they were hired for. Turnover was also stated to be a challenge, as a start-up company often cannot offer the same kind of stability and routines as bigger organizations. (CXO,2022.) This might create a sense of insecurity for an employee and can generate a lack of commitment. However, the start-up can be an exciting place to work and grow in, and it can also offer great professional growth opportunities. A hardworking employee can be hired into a customer service role and after some time be promoted to be a manager. These findings confirm that the hectic start-up environment in itself naturally offers informal learning opportunities.

7 The survey analysis

The survey analysis was performed by carefully examining the survey results, and finding connections to the existing pre-structured themes in the survey: Leadership, the work environment, learning at work and entrepreneurial qualities. The intention was to find similarities and patterns in the answers, that support the existing literature review and to find the opinions of the majority of the respondents towards different learning-related topics. With the help of the electronic tool "Forms" the data is visualized into tables and figures, with numerical statistics. These tables make the data more visual and comprehensible, by comparing between the percentage of answers that were positive, neutral, and negative towards each topic. The purpose of the study was to descriptive to describe the opinions of the employees and to find out if the company culture was conducive to learning. Therefore, no mathematical calculations or estimations about the variables were conducted. Rather the data was grouped and organized in Excel, according to the themes and descriptions, and comparisons were done between the percentages of favorable and unfavorable opinions towards the topics. By comparing these percentages and considering the answers to the open-ended questions, meanings were found. (Hirsjärvi et.al. 2006, 247.) The researcher's own experience, the literature review, and the interviews with the CXO all served to build an understanding of the overall issues involved.

The first question in the survey asked the employees about their age. The majority of the participants were between 26-45 years old. Most surveys have portions, that ask background questions to identify the age group or the educational background of the group. (Hirsjärvi et.al 2006,186.)

7.1 Background questions

The first question in the survey asked about the age of the participants.

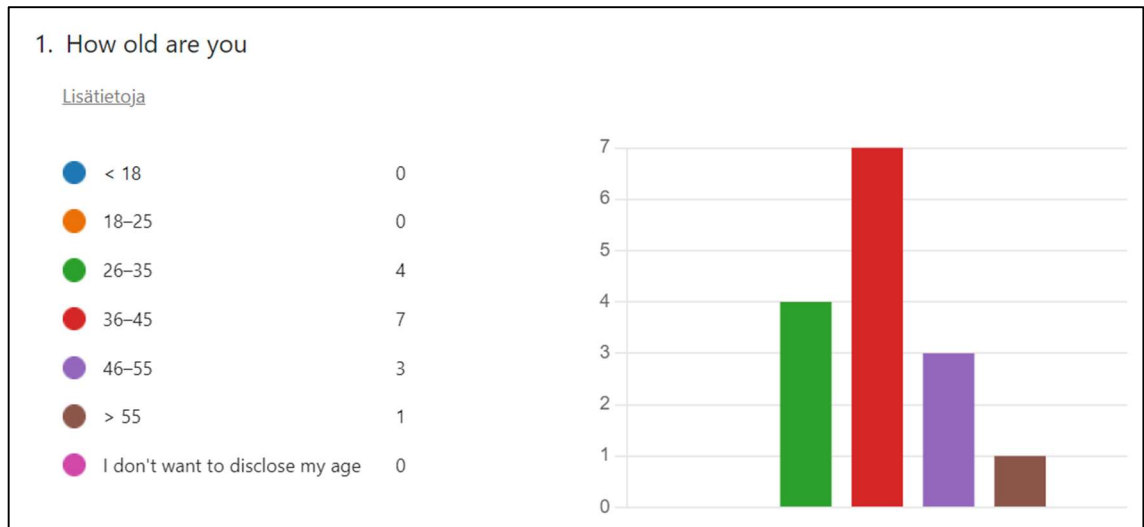


TABLE 1: Age groups of the respondents

A total of 7 people of the 15 respondents stated, that they are in 36-45-year age group, 4 of the respondents were in the 26-35-year age group, and only one person stated they are above 55 years old.

The second question “What is your educational background” produced the following answers; there were 6 individuals with vocational education as their highest degree, 2 bachelor’s degrees, 1 master’s degree and 2 with a primary school background, three of the respondents had chosen “other” as the answer. The educational background is asked, as the answers can shed light on what kind of social groups the respondents identify with. The educational background is meaningful, when contemplating what kind of material should be presented when planning learning. The topics has to be understandable to all, and something that the audience finds interesting. The majority of the respondents had a second degree education. A few people had a bachelor’s degree or higher and a few people chose other as an option.

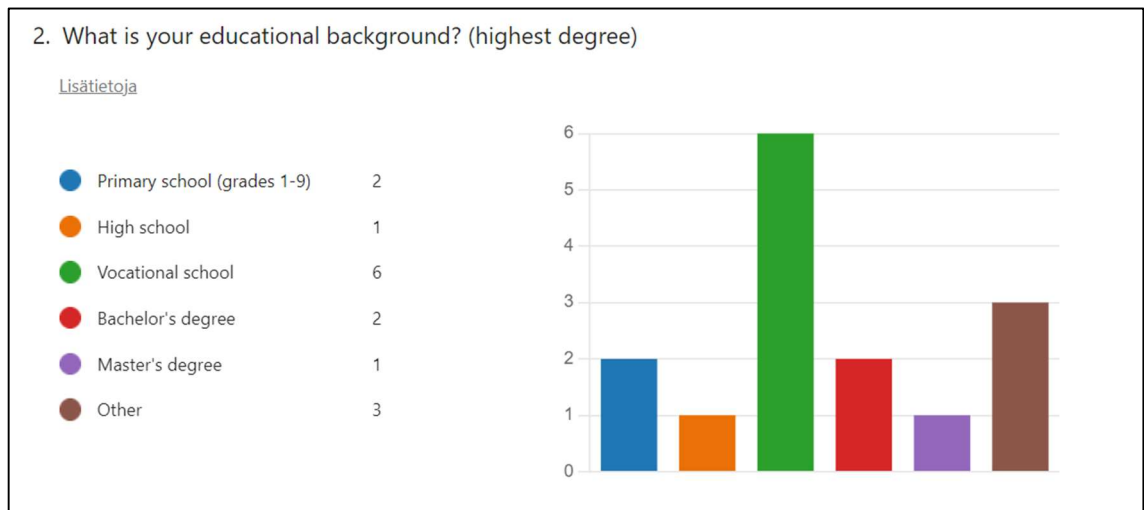


TABLE 2: Education of the respondents

Question number 3, asked how the respondent feel they learn best. This question was introduced so that the employees learning styles can be taken into consideration when planning learning initiatives. Although most people learn using a combination of these methods, one method is usually stronger than others. The answers show that the majority of the respondents felt that they learn by doing, (kinesthetic learners). These findings should be taken into account, when planning best practices for learning in this organization. Rather than implementing formal learning in the form of self-study and plenty of reading and writing material, experiential and action based learning would serve the needs of the majority of these respondents.

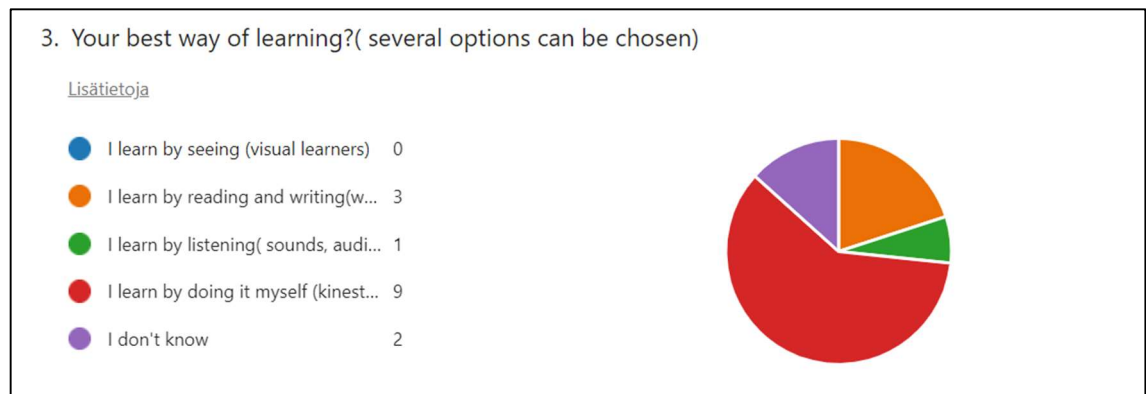


TABLE 3: Learning styles

Question number 4 asked the employees if their memories and feelings about the school years were positive or negative. The majority of the respondents had positive or neutral memories of school. This question was asked because the literature on learning indicates that the memories and feelings associated with previous experiences in education, has an impact on a person's willingness to learn new things. As stated earlier, negative emotions associated with experiences in education might hinder learning because those emotions surface again. (Hess 2014,33.) Therefore, the answers to this question shows that, the majority of the employees in this start-up business should not have previous negative emotions towards leaning hindering their future willingness to learn. Only a minority associated negative memories with school, indicating that new learning objectives might not fully be met without resistance.

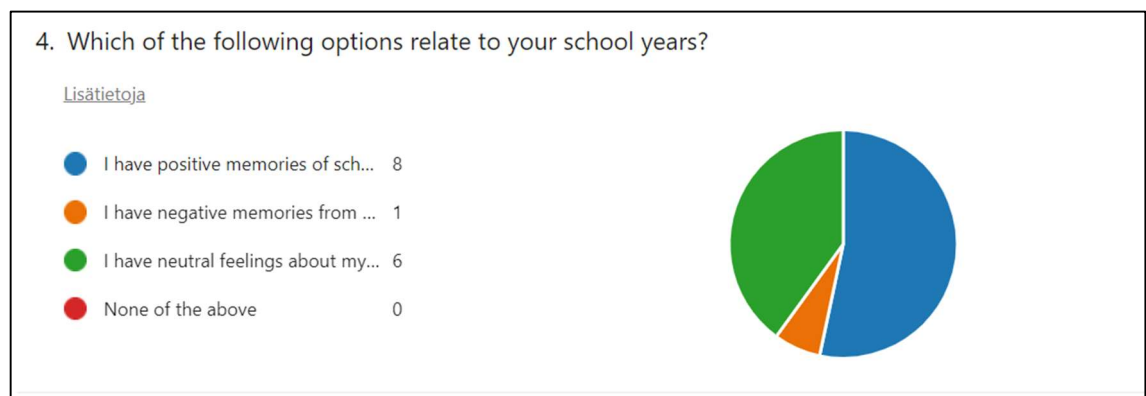


TABLE 4: Feelings about past education

7.2 The work environment

The survey continued on the topic of “the work environment”. This section was put in place to measure the work culture in the organization, whether it is conducive for learning. This section had 11 different Likert item questions relating to the work environment. As previously discussed, the way an employee experiences their surroundings has a direct influence on their commitment for learning in an organization. It is important to feel psychologically safe and have a trusting and supportive environment so as not to hinder learning. (Liddle 2021,17-118; Lipshitz et al. 2002, 87; Parviainen 2006, 170,171.) The results show that the majority of the respondents (47% somewhat agreed and 26,7% fully agreed) feel that the work atmosphere is good and people trust each other. The results also showed that people are motivated and committed to their work (60% somewhat agreed, 26,7% fully agreed), and they also feel that coworkers are giving their best to the job, which further confirms a trusting spirit and entrepreneurial qualities. The majority agreed that they receive commendation from fellow managers, coworkers and customers. This is still a subject to further contemplate, as quite many respondents felt neutral in these areas. The majority felt that when problems arise they communicate together, but a significant 27% percent of respondents felt that problems are not solved together. This is an area to develop in the organization shared leadership, sharing responsibility, shared vision and a shared knowledge all contribute towards learning in an organization. (Kotter 2012, 174; Roloff et al.2011,249,251; Senge 2006,193-195.)

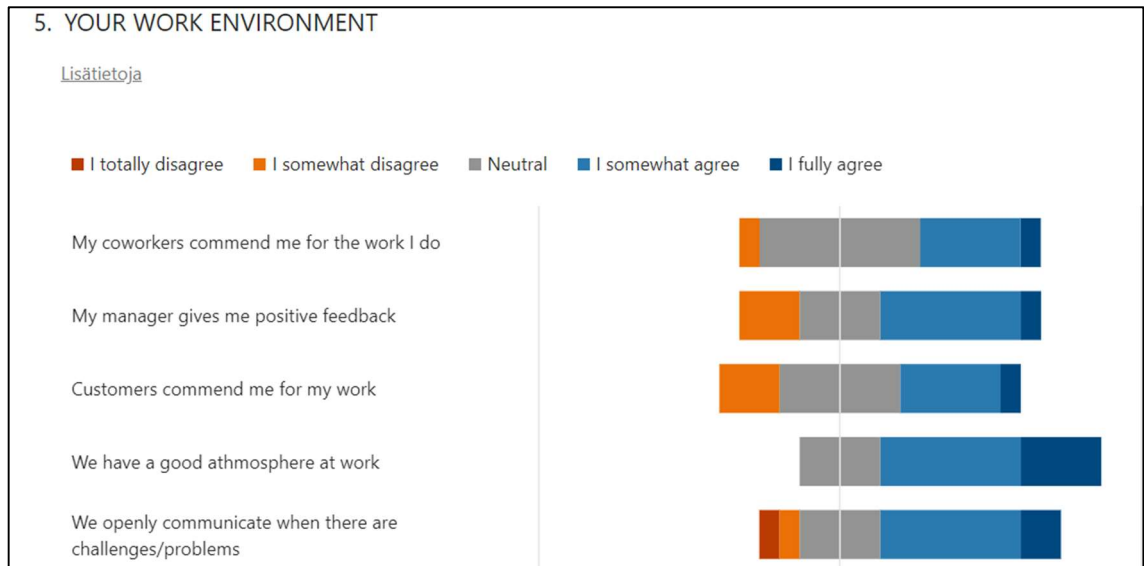


TABLE 5: The work environment

Most start-ups do not have a human resources(HR) department in the beginning phases. The statement related to talking negatively of others, had the majority of the answers agreeing that such behavior is avoided (I somewhat agree 47%, I fully agree 27%), but a few felt that back talk does happen. This also being a subject to discuss in the organization. A few respondents felt that the company is not investing in them. As previously discussed, this can refer to the uncertainty that is often experienced in start-up companies, as the focus is on profits and growing to get successful and there is not yet a focus on employees and their growth.

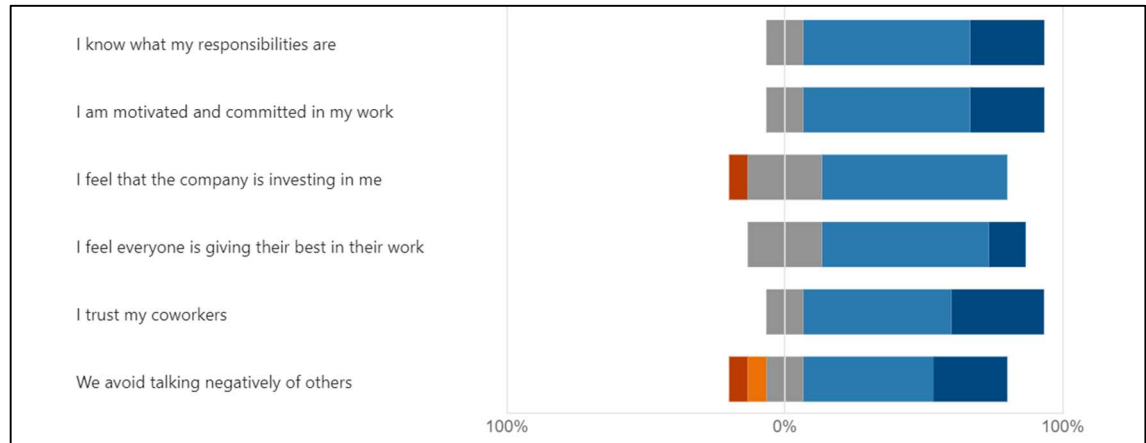


TABLE 6: Work environment continues

In general, the results in this section of the survey show that the majority of the employees of this start-up company feel that their working environment is a place where they feel safe and appreciated. The employee perspective on the work environment being generally positive makes it smoother for management, when learning initiatives are facilitated. Only a few respondents felt or somewhat agreed that the management, coworkers and customers do not give commendation, problems are not communicated and solved together, the company is not investing in them and some negative backtalk happens. Although the opinion of a few, these are blockages that need to be addressed when aspiring to become a learning organizations. It is advisable to listen to the perspective of all employees and consider what steps can be taken so that these shortcomings in the working environment can be adjusted.

7.3 Employee perception on management

This portion of the survey intended to find out the employee feelings and attitudes on leadership and management. As established earlier, the management serves as a role model in a learning organization and therefore play a significant part in creating the ideal environment and opportunities for learning and development in organizations. (Hess 2014,175.) The majority of the respondent answers indicated that the leadership has been successful in creating an environment that is conducive for learning. The leadership communicates company goals and strategy. The respondents felt that targets and deadlines are communicated by leadership. The leadership is future centric as they have communicated the company future needs relating to skills. Leadership is also ready to coach or mentor. Leadership listens to the employees, as 67% somewhat agreed and 13% fully agreed. and the core question in this section “leadership sees mistakes as learning opportunities” brought 47% of I somewhat agree and 27% I fully agree, which is very crucial from a learning organization perspective. (Russ & Yianis 2011, 344-345.) The results show, that the leadership has also been successful in creating a flat organization with a low hierarchy. Of the respondents 33% somewhat agreed and 33% felt they fully agree, that there is a low hierarchy. This is affirmative, when considering the learning organization objectives. (Farrukh & Waheed 2015, 77).

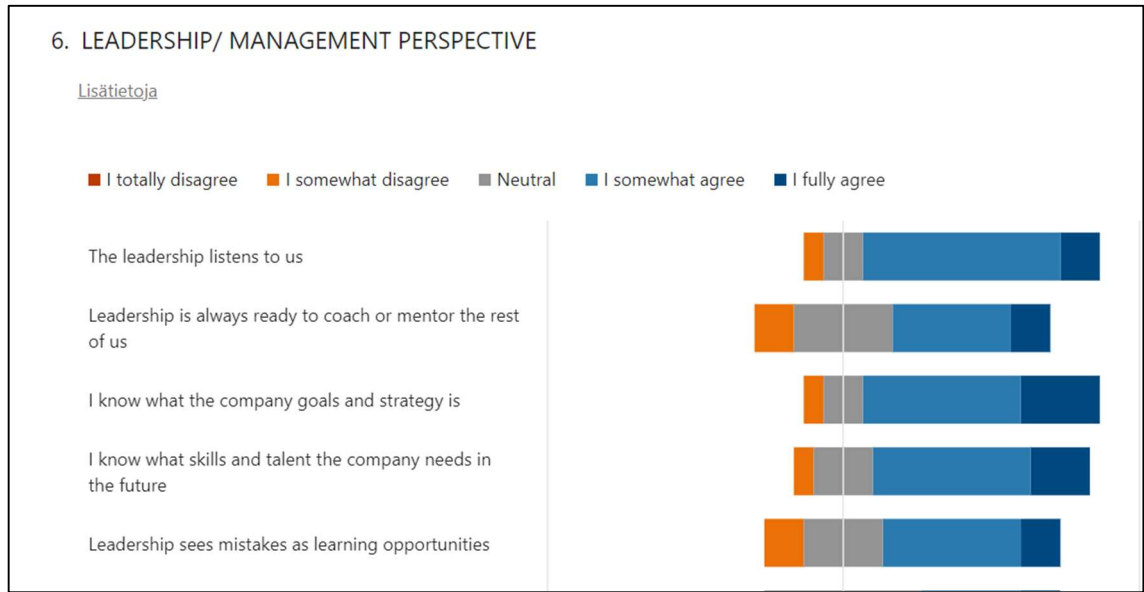


TABLE 7: Opinions on the leadership perspective

The rewarding systems-question brought 53% neutrals and 33% somewhat agree and only 13 % felt they in favor for a rewarding management system. The performance management system topic divided the opinions of people. The majority 47% felt neutral about performance management systems. Equally as many respondents felt a need for having a performance management system (27%), as were those who did not feel a need for it. A rewarding system can be motivating for employees as rewards are achieved by performance. The high amount of neutrals could indicate that the respondents do not necessarily know what these systems mean in practice. It can also indicate, that because people are mostly working independently being remote or in hybrid settings, they do not necessarily want any additional oversight. Performance management systems can be viewed as a pursuit for control and an attempt to micromanage. (Hayes,2011,90.)

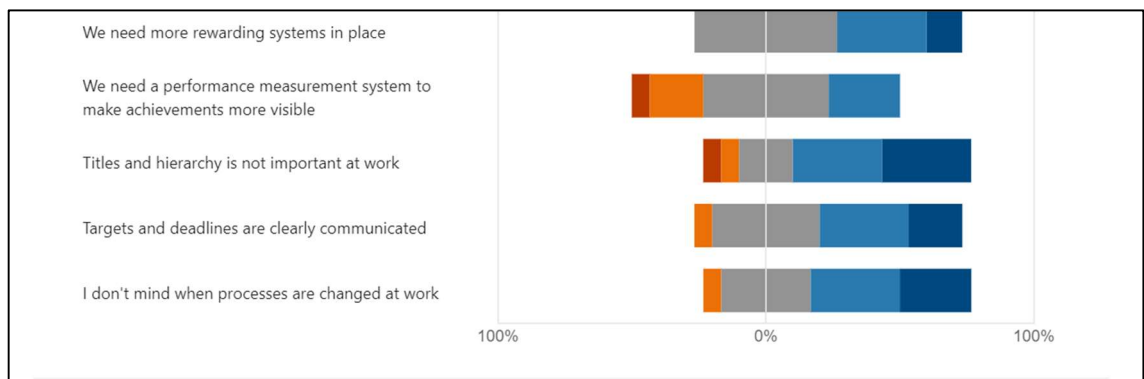


TABLE 8: Leadership perspective continues

A performance management system might be experienced as an intrusion on privacy and micromanagement. Research shows, that some rewarding and performance systems do indeed promote employee efficiency and performance. When done right they can also be a valuable asset in a learning organization as data can be analyzed together and the data gives new information and shows the areas that need improvement. Rewarding systems and performance

management systems are usually linked to each other. They do however, require a certain level of trust within the organization. (Page-Tickell 2014,183-193.)

7.4 Learning at work

The section about learning at work, is the core of the survey, as it answers the question whether the start-up employees are overwhelmed with their current workload or are they open to new learning. The results indicate that the majority of the respondents in this start-up are not too overwhelmed with their work so as to resist new learning initiatives. In fact, they are 100% happy to learn. They have time for learning, and the majority are not overwhelmed with work, they most often meet their deadlines and know how to organize their work so as not to get stressed. The majority of the respondents also feel that they take care of tasks that are beyond their title (53% somewhat agree and 13% fully agree) and often help others to finish their work (47% somewhat agree and 13% fully agree). The reason for these answers can be, that either there is not enough people in a start-up to take care of all the responsibilities, or people are not taking care of their own workload, or people are just very helpful because the teams are small. As a conclusion, the answers to these two statements confirm, what was previously mentioned by the CXO, that in a start-up environment, people have to take care of duties beyond their title. This reflects entrepreneurial qualities and the ability to learn.

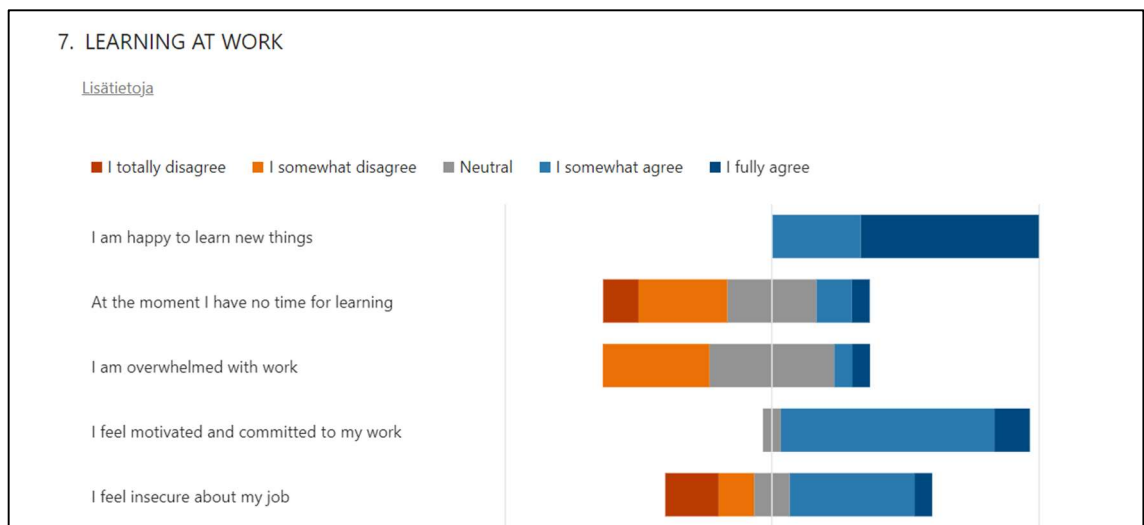


TABLE 9: Learning at work

Although the employees are willing to learn and have the motivation to learn, this portion of the survey also indicated some factors that are of concern. A few issues divided people. The majority (53%) felt that they are not stressed because of work, and 33% felt they are somewhat stressed because of work. Also, the topic of feeling that too much is expected of the employees generated quite divisive opinions, as the opinions of those who felt too much is expected of them were 20% I somewhat agree and 7% I fully agree. Those who felt that too much is not expected of them were 13% fully agreed and 27% somewhat agreed.

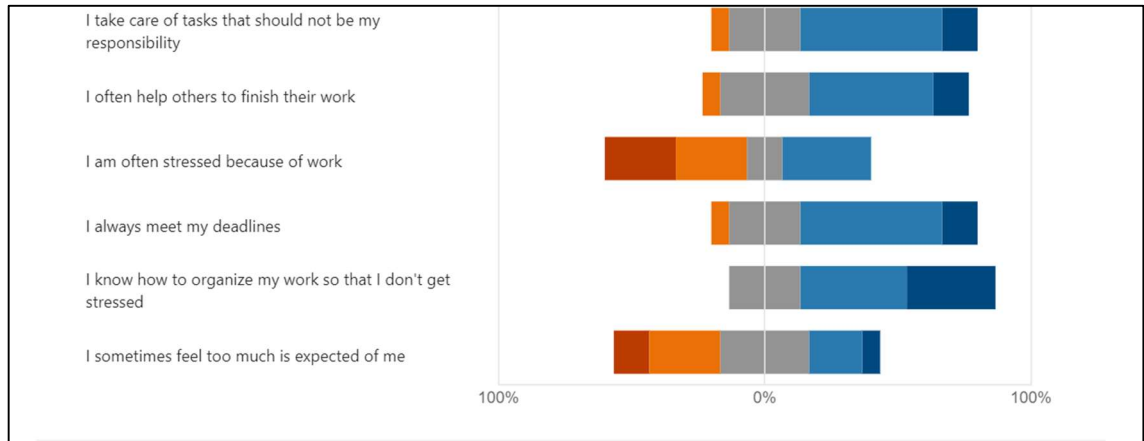


TABLE 10: Learning at work continues

A major concern in this section is the opinions on job security. More than half of the respondents felt insecure about their job (47% somewhat agreed and 7% fully agreed). It is alarming from a learning organization perspective because feeling secure is an important basic need for employees. These expressions about job insecurity must be related to the fact that the number of employees in the start-up company has decreased significantly since the start of the research (04/2022). Like established earlier, a start-up company is a hectic environment and there is turnover because employees might not be able to handle the pressures set upon them. There can also be turnover in companies because at times people are made redundant for different reasons, such as changes in the markets or production. When this research was undertaken in the spring of 2022 the start-up company CXO mentioned there are approximately 30 people employed in the company. Surveys were sent out in the autumn of 2022 with an expected response rate of close to 30 people. However only 15 employees participated in the survey and the explanation the CXO gave was that the number of company employees had decreased.

Feeling of uncertainty about a job can create fear in employees. In fact, fear is attributed to be one of the factors that hinders learning. If an employee is fearing that they might lose their job it can generate a lack of commitment to the company and any learning initiatives in the company. (Hess 2014, 17,18; Parviainen 2006,141.) Uncertainty and unstable circumstances, can be expected in the world we live in and it is reflected into business environments. The CXO stated earlier, that “a smaller company or a startup, does not have the same kind of benefits and security to offer like bigger corporations”. It is crucial from a learning organization perspective that leadership explores ways in which to make employees feel safe and valued (Parviainen 2006,136-137).

7.5 Employee perspective on possible learning initiatives

This section peers into the employee views and feelings on what kind of learning opportunities they would appreciate.

The respondents were quite divided when asked about the preferred setting to work in. Equally as many respondents felt that they like to work independently and equally as many felt they like working in all the suggested settings, independently, in teams and with a pair.

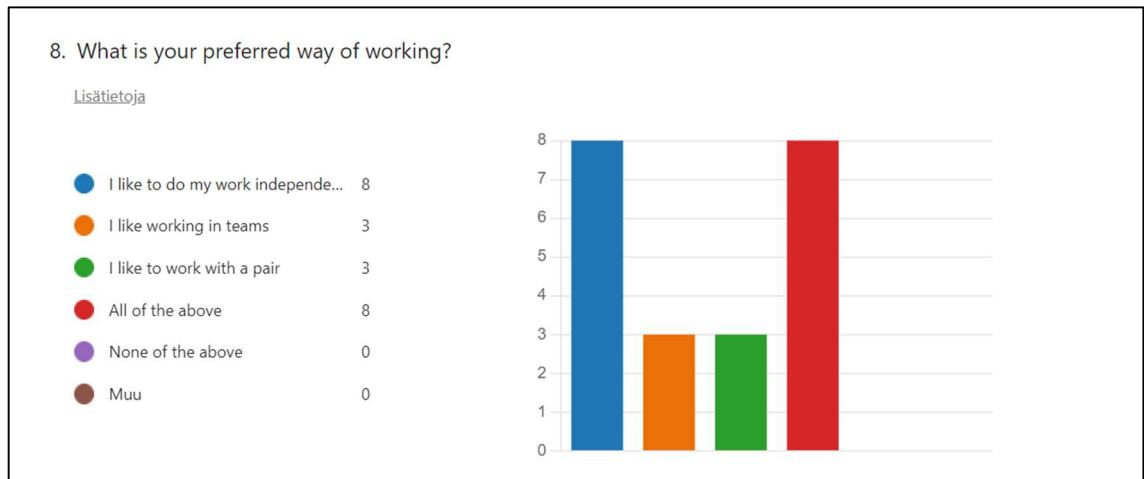


TABLE 11: The preferred way of working

The section that considered learning topics of interest to the respondents, also had Likert scale questions relating to different topics. The questions in this section were asked to find out, what kind of topics the employees would be interested in to learn further about, when implementing learning in the organization. All the different subjects generated favorable opinions close to each other. The most interest was expressed in soft skills which generated 47% of some importance answers and 27% of extremely important answers. Leadership skills also 47% of some importance and 20% feeling it is extremely important. Third was business and finance with 33% of some importance and 27% of extremely important opinions.

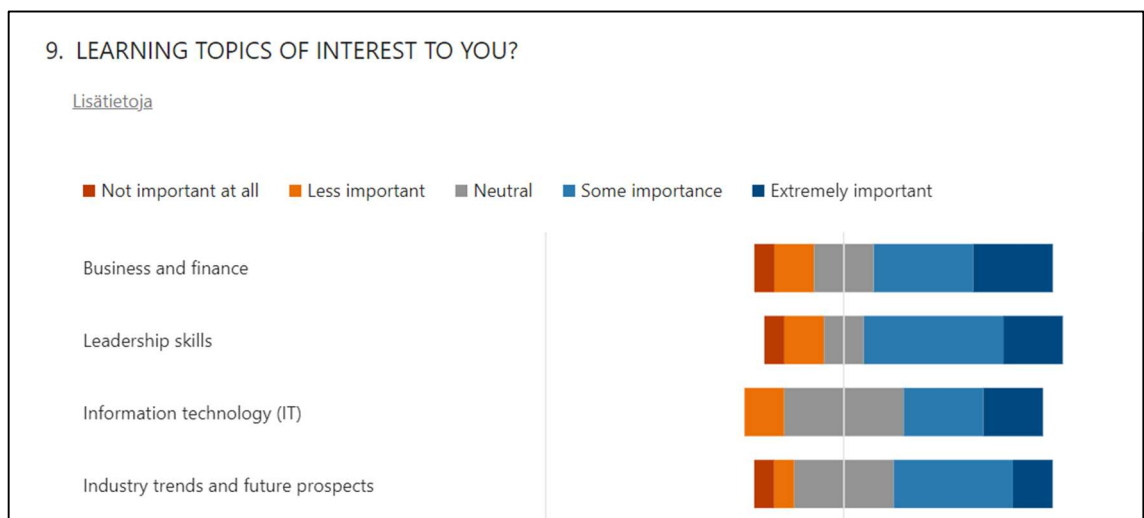


TABLE 12: Opinions on different learning topics

Many of the respondents felt neutral about information technology skills and change management. The lack of interest for or against IT related subjects might be, because people are

working remotely and are all the time using information technology in their work. It could be that people do not see the need for further IT development. The reason why there were so many neutrals on the topic of change management might indicate, that the term is not familiar to all people working in the company. Change management is often not taught as a topic in leadership studies in universities. On all these different learning topic options, there were some unfavorable opinions. However, these unfavorable answers constituted a small minority, which confirms that the majority of the employees have a willingness to learn and are open minded towards learning even in a hectic start-up environment.

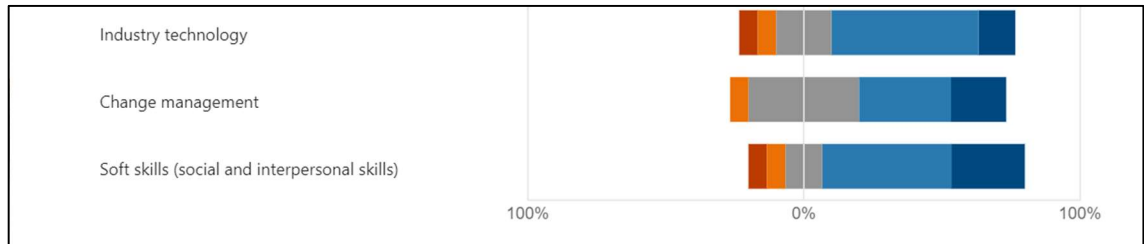


TABLE 13: Opinions on learning topics continue

Question number ten was an open question to finish of the last topic. The question presented was: Other subjects or skills or learning that you feel are important? Only two of the respondents had answered this question. One answer was rather general stating:

“Everything that comes along”

This answer indicates the willingness to learn anything related to whatever subject that is presented by management.

The other answer stated the following;

“Communication and behavior”

This answer refers to the need of soft skills being an essential topic when considering learning initiatives.

Question 11 was also a multiple choice question: How often do you learn new things at work?

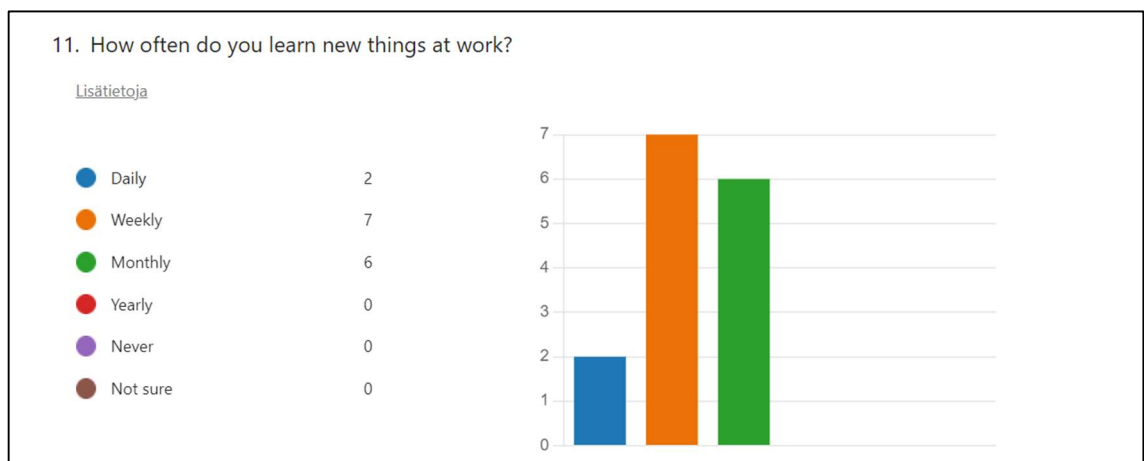


TABLE 14: Opinions, on how often employees learn new things at work

Question 11 brought forth an interesting finding. The results highlight that the employees, working in this start-up environment are regularly learning at work. People are learning although there are no formal learning initiatives in place. The answers show that the employees are learning new things monthly, weekly some even daily. This indicates that a start-up as an environment although hectic is a place where learning can thrive.

The following part of this survey was designed to find out the employee opinion on the learning environments of preference. Generally, the respondents were favorable towards all the suggested topics. However, there were plenty of neutral opinions. Going back to the actual survey results and forms it was visible that the neutral answers were mainly produced by the same respondents. Some even chose the neutral opinion on all the subjects. This could indicate that the respondents were busy and did not have the time or energy to concentrate on the survey at the ending stages. Or it can mean, that by choosing the neutral opinions they expressed their openness to any options.

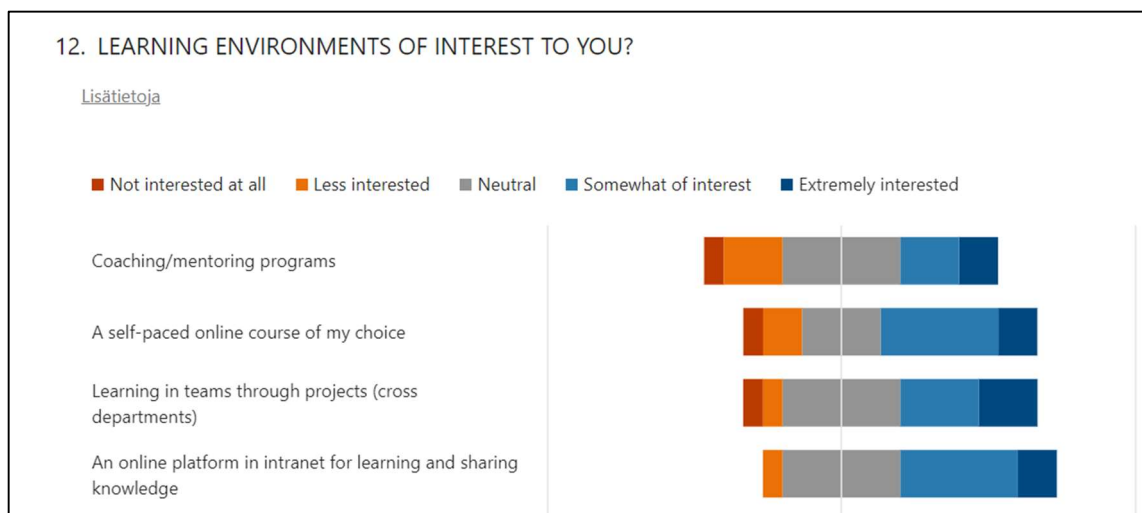


TABLE 15: Opinions on learning environments

The most interest was shown in new technology to implement learning (53% of somewhat interest and 13% extremely interested). Learning in teams (40%) and an open university course (47%) generated the most neutrals. The least interest was shown in coaching and mentoring. The reason why the answers did not show any major interest in coaching and mentoring are in line with the interview findings. The CXO had commented, that time is an issue, when considering mentoring as a way for sharing and learning. Speculating on the reason why there were so many neutrals on the “learning in teams” option, could be that the people have jobs within the company, that do not require team work. Some positions for example a sales person’s position or a mechanic’s work, often contain very independent tasks, and therefore it might be hard to imagine how team work or learning would be implemented in practice.

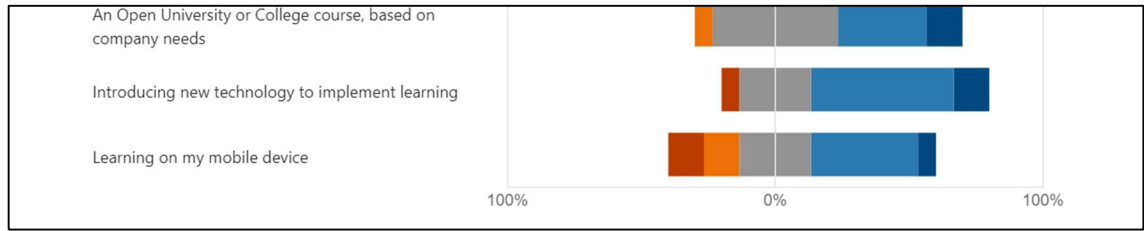


TABLE 16: Opinions on learning environments continue

We can conclude from this section that considers learning environments that the partnering start-up employees are willing to learn and do not have strong opinions favoring one environment over another. Different methods can be tried and more research can be done, to specify what is the best learning environment, that meets employee and company needs.

7.6 Entrepreneurial mindset

The next section, Question 13, “The business environment” considers the entrepreneurial skills of the employees. These skills are important for startup leaders and startup employees likewise. (Hoffman 2021,25.) These questions were introduced, so that when planning learning, the management and leadership could see what further needs there are for learning entrepreneurial skills. Also this section had a Likert items where the respondent could disagree or agree to the statements. This section concerning the entrepreneurial skills (the business environment”) gave the strongest favorable opinions out of all the themes discussed, and the least neutrals compared to the other survey topics.

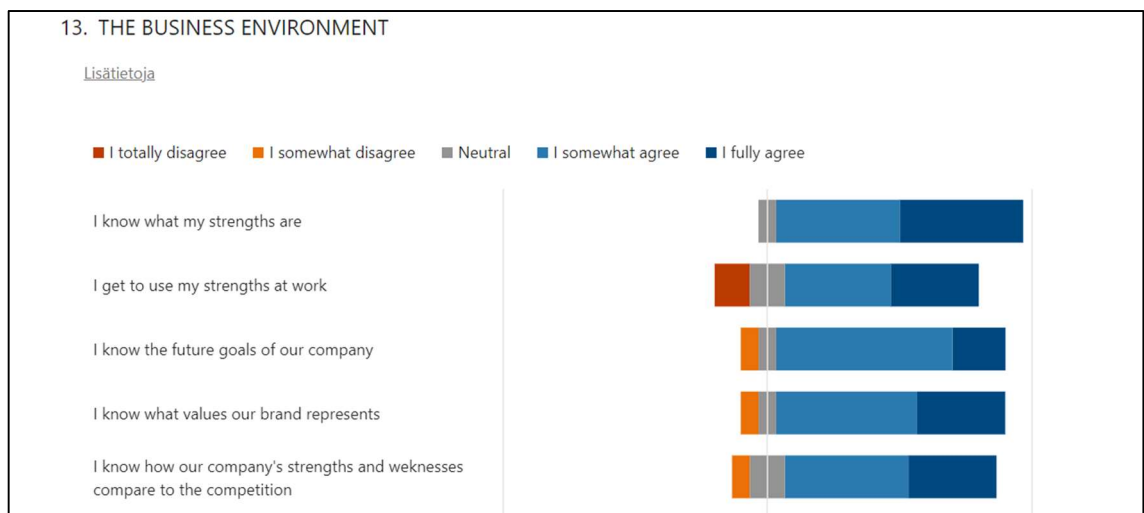


TABLE 17: Entrepreneurial skills of the employees

This finding gives convincing evidence that the employees fulfill the requirements for having entrepreneurial skills and mindsets. The employees know their strengths, they are able to use their strengths in their work, they know the company goals, values, the brand, the competition. They even know the strengths and the weaknesses compared to the competition, they know the customer segment and all these different aspects and business insights that in education are a part of entrepreneurial studies. Only a few people felt that they do not get to use their strengths at work. Organizational happiness depends on placing the right people in

the right positions utilizing every individual’s strengths and abilities. It can be achieved by data collection, to see what attributes each individual have and matching the with fitting roles where they feel they are able to give a meaningful contribution. (Hess 2014,161.)

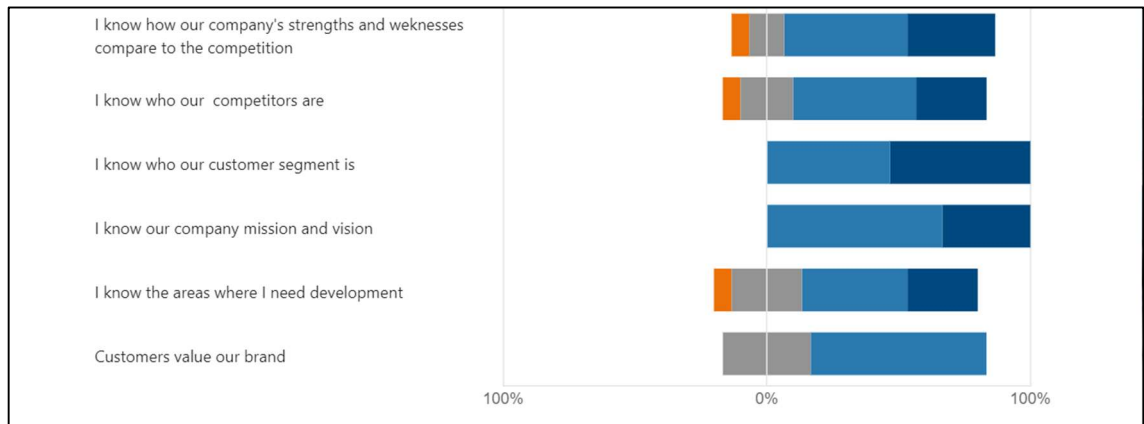


TABLE 18: Entrepreneurial skills of the employees continue

Question 14, was an open ended question for the respondents, where they could express their opinions freely on the topic: “What areas do you feel your organization needs to improve in, to stay competitive and meet future challenges?”

Question 14 produced different kinds of answers, (see TABLE 2). A few answers showed concern for the product, the respondents felt that the quality of the company’s products should be further developed and updated so that they meet today’s standards.

“Matching brand with quality and reliability”

A few respondents mentioned, that sales should be improved to the right segments.

Another answer suggested, that there could be at least two segments, the respondent stated:

“younger peoples”... “lets say 50/50”

The 50/50 referring to 50% being the existing segment and 50% being a new segment of younger people. Other recommendations called for better internal communication and fixing internal processes. Another perspective emphasized the need for the right focus and consistency when hiring employees. The respondent felt, that when hiring people, it takes a lot of effort and time to teach a new employee all the needed understanding needed for the position. According to the respondent, the customer segment appreciates consistency in the workforce. The respondent suggested, management should not easily let new employees go. The suggestion was to keep people employed longer in the house, to create stability and customer satisfaction. These answers show that there is still work to do in order to improve communication internally both from leadership to the employees and vice versa. These findings indicate that more transparent communication might be needed from management so as to have an aligned understanding about company operations. It is important from a learning perspective to have people experience positive emotions at work. If even a small group of employees have feelings of distrust towards management decisions, the negativity can spread.

(Hess 2014,26.) It is important to communicate and listen to the employees. Studies show that organizations that listen to their employees and are open to their insights generate feelings of psychological safety, which leads to higher employee engagement and innovation. (Hess 2014,53-54.) The fact that the open ended questions were mostly not answered confirms also what the CXO had foretold, that the start-up employees do not have much time to spend on answering surveys.



TABLE 19: “Buzz” words from the open-ended question

Question 15, Skills I feel that I need to improve in? This section was designed to give further insights to leadership and management about soft skills that the employees would want to develop or become stronger in. This section contained a lot of neutral answers. It could indicate that the respondents became tired by this point as the survey is nearing its end. However, this is the section where the respondents showed the most resistance by their unfavorable opinions on the suggested topics.

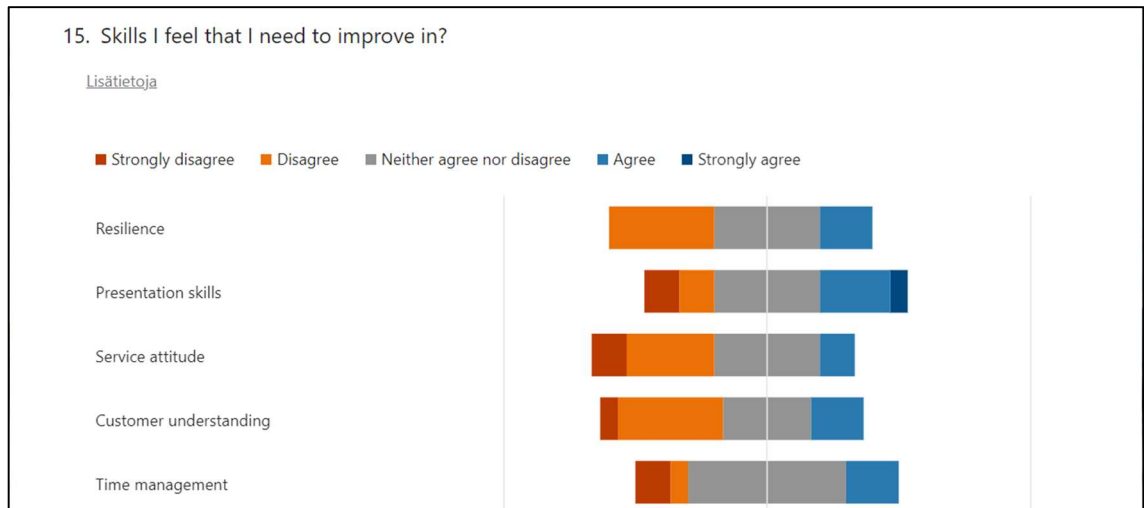


TABLE 20: Opinions on skills to improve on

We can draw the conclusion that these subjects are already too familiar to the respondents as they have been shown to demonstrate entrepreneurial mindsets. The majority of the respondents chose leadership skills (47% agreed and 7% fully agreed) and motivation (52% agreed) as the topics they want to improve in. It is interesting that motivation was chosen as a personal they already twice in this survey had strongly indicated that they are motivated. It might be

related to the previous question of job insecurity. The earlier results indicated feelings of job insecurity. It is likely that because of the feelings of job insecurity, there naturally exists a recognition and understanding that keeping up the motivation will be challenging. Time management and innovation received high neutral opinions. The high amount of neutrals in these areas might indicate that people recognize the need to improvement in those areas, but put on their defenses which is typical to humans, like established earlier in this thesis. (Hess 2014 17, 87.)

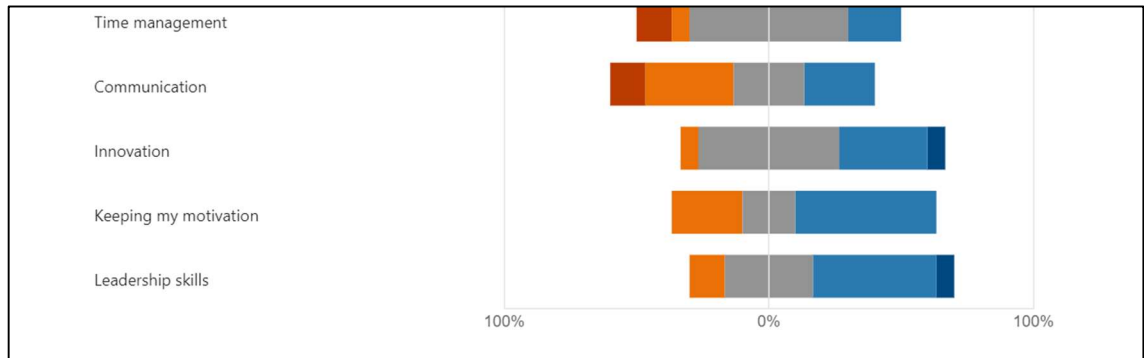


TABLE 21: Opinions on skills to improve on continue

The final question 16:” Other suggestions related to learning in your organization”, was an open-ended question, with the purpose of letting the respondents give any additional suggestions on the topic. Question 16 only generated one response, where the person expressed that they feel they are allowed to learn anything when needed, but that person felt they are the only person with that privilege in the company.

The final answer is short and concise, but it confirms that the start-up employees are busy, the company goals are stressing financial growth, and previously there has not been any formal learning pursuits.

8 Conclusion and suggestions for development

8.1 Conclusion

A mixed method research was conducted by several qualitative interviews with the company CXO, and an electronic survey was conducted of the company employees. The interviews conducted indicated, that the start-up environment in itself fosters a culture that promotes learning. (Kansikas 2007,66-67.) The interviews highlighted that a start-up expects entrepreneurial qualities of the employees to support various business functions. In the start-up, work is delegated, and various task rotations exist that promote learning, as individuals have to take care of tasks beyond their title and scope of work. (Kotter 2012, 174-175.) Learning is happening as diligent individuals can grow and take on more responsibility, which serves as a fast track to professional career opportunities.

The survey results produced similar findings. The start-up environment is conducive to learning. A culture that promotes learning has already been established by having a flat hierarchy, which shows potential for becoming a learning organization (Farrukh & Waheed 2015, 77). The

majority of the respondents felt that leadership views mistakes as learning opportunities, which strongly suggests, that this start-up organization is already learning and is very capable of becoming a learning organization. (Virtainlahti 2009,230.) The findings show that leadership has the skills and ability to lead learning objectives. The leadership has already created an atmosphere of trust and dialogue with the employees. (Hess 2014,55.) The employees in the organization are generally satisfied with the working environment, as the majority of the people felt that they have a good atmosphere at work. There exists open communication and trust between coworkers. The employees in the partnering start-up, are not too overwhelmed with work to resist learning, but rather the respondents feel happy to learn. The employees who responded to this survey are motivated and committed to their work which is a positive outcome. Even though these employees do a lot of work beyond their scope, the majority meet their deadlines, and yet, they are not too stressed because of work. Possibly, because the work is independent, and the majority felt that they can organize their work, and they meet their deadlines, which indicates mutual trust between employees and management. The entrepreneurial mindset or “intrapreneurial” qualities of the employees were confirmed on several occasions in the survey results. It can be concluded that either management has been able to communicate business insights to the employees or that the people have been chosen to work for the start-up because of possessing entrepreneurial mindsets and skills. (Hoffman 2021,25-27.)

The survey answers showed, that start-up employees are regularly confronting situations at work that enables learning. This confirms that learning is happening all the time in a start-up environment. The majority of the respondents are open to different methods and subjects of learning, they like working independently and they are open to working with a pair and working in teams. The respondents did not feel a strong interest in self-improvement in the suggested areas. A substantial percentage rather resisted the suggested topics. This finding is interesting, as it contradicts all the other results, that showed that the employees are interested in learning and willing to learn. The contradicting opinions might have appeared because the respondents felt that they already know the suggested subjects very well, and therefore the topics are not of interest to them. The feelings could also reflect underlying emotions which Hess, (2014 17, 87) argued, that humans tend to defend their ego by clinging to what they already know, which limits learning and possibilities for change. The respondents expressed the most favorable opinions towards improving their leadership abilities, innovation, and keeping their motivation.

The survey had a few unstructured open-ended questions that allowed the respondents to openly express their feelings. Only a handful of employees answered these open-ended questions, which supports the hectic nature of the start-up environment. Some of the respondents suggested improvements in business processes and strategy, others expressed that internal processes, communication, and the stability in employee acquisition and retention should be improved. The answers confirm that people in the company are very aware of the business environment, and they possess business insights and creative solutions that when utilized, can

give value to the organization. It is up to the management and leadership to listen and see if the suggestions can be applied in some areas of the business. (Hess 2014,53-54.)

The survey results were generally affirmative when considering possibilities for formal learning in the organization. A few issues divided opinions and can be viewed as issues leadership needs to confront, as they cause concern from a learning perspective. Some respondents disagreed and felt negative about the topics considered. There were a lot of neutral answers as well, which might indicate indifferent attitudes. A minority were stressed because of work, a few respondents felt that they are not valued and some even felt they do not get to use their strengths in the organization. A few opinions indicated, that communication needs to be improved. However, the greatest concern came from the issue of job security. A substantial amount of respondents felt insecure about their job. These are issues that leadership and management should address, to avoid negative emotions from spreading, and to make sure that everyone feels they are valued employees. Due to the unstable markets and resulting changes in business environments especially in start-ups, it is natural to have feelings of job insecurity. (Hill 2016,40.) Leadership does well to consider ways in which to reassure the employees so that these feelings do not hinder learning. The findings showed that there is still room for development in the areas of communication and collaborative problem-solving. When formal learning is instituted, it is advisable to plan, how to bring people together to a greater degree, solve problems together, and, learn through cooperation

The social aspect of learning has been a common uniting factor in the literature that has been reviewed while conducting this research. The social interaction between networks creates the structures for learning. (Child & Rodriguez 2011, 309; Lipshitz et.al 2002,87; Shipton & Defilippi 2011, 73.) People learn in different ways and so do organizations. Dibella (2011,187) argues, that organizations do not necessarily need a formal approach to learning because all organizations learn. Organizations have different styles of learning. However, just like people have different styles in which they learn. An organization's learning style means all the learning practices an organization has in place. (Dibella 2011, 187.)

The general conclusions, that can be drawn from this research highlight these factors. Although previously there have not been any formal learning initiatives in place the start-up employees are willing to learn and they are already learning regularly. Also, the survey results confirmed, that start-up employees have to take care of tasks beyond their title and often help others to finish their work. This can be called work rotation in other organizations, but it happens naturally in this start-up environment. A personal realization from this survey is that the hectic and uncontrollable environment of start-ups is naturally producing learning in the employees. Also, the detail that appeared in the qualitative interview showed that a start-up can offer individual employees great professional career paths and growth opportunities. The hectic and changing environment of a start-up could be viewed as a "learning opportunity" that also traditional businesses can consider imitating to some degree when planning organizational learning.

The original intention of the research project was to have all 30 employees answer the survey, but only 15 employees (50%) participated. The small sample size is a limitation from a quantitative perspective as it makes the results of the quantitative research only tentative. A low response rate is a common problem in survey research. (Buy 2020, 111.) In this start-up case, the low final response rate is also related to the turnover in the company. When only 15 respondents had filled out the questionnaire, an inquiry was made to the company management to possibly gain more participants. The message received from the manager indicated that employees had been laid off, and therefore 15 responses were all that was possible at that point. In conclusion, these findings are only tentative and do not represent a wider population of start-up employees. To discover if the findings can be applied to a general population of start-up employees further research is needed on a wider sample group of several other start-ups.

8.2 Discussion and suggestions on future learning initiatives

According to the survey results most people preferred working independently and preferred introducing new technology to implement learning. Because of the individualistic nature of the employee's work, the suggestion is to implement various team learning methods in the organization. Team learning is the most productive way of learning. (Senge 2006,221.) Working in teams is less formal than an "Open university"-course and might better meet the business needs of a start-up. Team learning would also meet the needs of the employees who learn in kinesthetic ways, learning by doing. In a hectic environment like a start-up, where the purpose and existence of the company are based on continuous financial gains and continuous growth, there might not be enough time to be put aside for self-paced courses online or in open universities. Also, financial resources might not be generously available. (Bosch et.al 2013,2.) Our world is filled with free options, TED talks, online social platforms, and networks, that can be used to start formal learning initiatives. It is easier to start taking steps towards being a learning organization by using social and collective learning means. Learning can take place in teams utilizing current challenges or problems for learning together. As highlighted earlier, learning in teams, across departments, can provide valuable business insights and innovation and increase the collective intelligence of the teams and generate organizational learning. (Senge 2006,9,18,19.)

When there are projects to be worked on, these could be integrated into a learning process, so that teams are formed that work on certain subjects or areas for a longer period. These teams should occasionally come together and share findings, meanings, and things they have learned. Even if it is not possible to be together physically in the same location, teamwork can be implemented online. It would be advisable to form virtual learning teams. The corona pandemic showed, that various methods can be used and accomplishments can be achieved online in virtual teams. (Mattiske 2020,85,166.)

A second suggestion would be to implement learning management systems (LMS). Many companies have taken into use management systems, that help them to get valuable feedback in to learn and grow. (Page-Tickell 2014,183-186.) Data can be collected in various forms

externally from customers and other stakeholders to improve performance. Internal feedback can also be collected, to find out the employee satisfaction and management performance regularly. As established earlier, trust between members of the organization and honest dialogue is required to accept the feedback, learn and make changes. (Kotter 2012, 170-171.) Everyone on every level in the organization needs to learn leadership skills. (Kotter 2012, 176-177). The start-up has an intranet that can be expanded and possibly used as a learning platform. The system could guide the self-paced learning, that the respondents of this survey expressed interest in. The learning platform should include learning topics that would benefit the organization's strategy and help people in the organization to continue growing in their roles.

Different electronic online tools can also be used to continue acquiring information for the purpose of research. Using online tools allow for quick access to data in great quantities. Online ethnography is a qualitative research method, where researchers can synchronously or asynchronously observe and join online settings or communities to study people. The aim of online ethnography is to study the people their interests, interactions, and the culture that is being portrayed online. The researcher can also be involved by having synchronous conversations in these communities. (Cordoba-Pachon & Loureiro-Koechlin 2015,190-191.) When formal learning has been implemented for example through virtual teams or sharing in other online settings such as on the intranet, online ethnography could be used to further investigate how learning is constructed. By using an online ethnography approach, also leadership and management can acquire valuable information on how people operate in the work environment. (Cordoba-Pachon & Loureiro-Koechlin 2015,192.)

This thesis specifically considered the opinions and perspectives of the employees in the chosen start-up organization towards the development of formal learning in the future. The results of this research are tentative, although they shed some light on the unique start-up environments. As outlined earlier, the literature on organizational learning is varied and numerous in scope. (Easterby-Smith & Lyles 2011,1-2; Corley et.al 2011,361.) Yet, there exists very little information on start-up organizations aspiring to be learning organizations. (Baltrunaite, Sekliuckiene 2020, 84.) Research can be expanded to a wider population of start-up employees, possibly in several countries. In addition, further research can be conducted on how formal learning and informal learning takes place in start-up environments. The research would add to the existing literature and increase the understanding of how learning can be facilitated in these hectic business environments.

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Figure 1: Adapted from “The Four Quadrant Framework”, by Shipton & Defilippi (2011,69) . 14

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Appendix 1: Interview questions for CXO

First round of interview questions

1. Please, provide general background information on the company?
2. Company culture and values?
3. Does the company have a mission and vision?
4. What is the leadership style in the company?
5. How many employees does the company have?
6. What kind of organizational structure is there? (What positions are there?)
7. How is the company making effort at the moment to attract and retain talent?
8. How does the company take care of the employee wellbeing?

Second round of interview questions

1. What is the main focus in the business strategy? Profits, expansion or something else?
2. What are the core capabilities employees are expected to have to support business strategy?
3. Are there main competencies needed for the future strategy of the business?
4. How are leadership capabilities being built at the moment?
5. Do you have a chart of organizational skills? In other words what skills are required for a certain position?

Appendix 2: Introduction letter and survey



A survey about Learning in your organization

Hi,

My name is Maria Buchanan, I am a student at Laurea university of applied sciences and currently doing my Master's thesis on the subject of organizational learning.

The survey is done for the company you are working for, and it is highly recommended that you share your thoughts and opinions. Your answers are greatly appreciated and helpful in the development of future learning needs in your organization. This survey takes less than 15 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your participation!

* Pakollinen