



Diverging and converging perspectives: Exploring the leadership of informal learning in knowledge work

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Purpose: This study examines how experiences of informal learning and its management diverge and converge across organizational levels in a knowledge-intensive organization. The study bridges a gap in comparative perspectives concerning informal learning leadership by examining managerial and employee points of view.

Study design/methodology/approach: The study employed a qualitative, cross-sectional case study design with 18 semi-structured interviews with managers and employees from within a multinational IT and consulting organization. Data analysis was conducted by an inductive thematic analysis, enabling the emergence of themes related to informal learning, learning modalities, leadership engagement and organizational support structures.

Findings: The findings indicate a consensus among managers and employees that informal learning is important, but there is significant disagreement regarding its visibility, support and linkage to career development. Managers tended to depict their role as enabling autonomy, while employees perceive a lack of structured support and recognition. Informal learning was found to be prevalent but extremely invisible in formal organizational processes.

Originality/value: This study deepens understanding of the leadership of informal learning by highlighting the concept of "symbolic autonomy", where support for learning is rhetorically there without substantive mechanisms. It provides a theoretical contribution by positioning the relational and systemic aspects of informal learning leadership in the front line and offering practical understanding of how informal learning can be embedded more effectively within organizational practice.

Introduction

In contemporary, knowledge-intensive work environments, continuous competence development is increasingly regarded as an integral part of daily professional activities rather than a separate or formalized process (Argote et al., 2021; Chen & Lin, 2023). In this regard, informal learning constitutes a fundamental part of employees' skill and competence acquisition, particularly in the contexts of rapidly evolving and often unpredictable business environments (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Billett, 2024).

Informal learning is inherently unstructured, embedded in practical experience and shaped by the learner's initiative. Previous research has already proven that the effectiveness of an informal learning process depends not only on the individual motivation and agency but also on the organizational and social environments behind it (Callanan et al., 2011; Degner et al., 2022). While autonomy, psychological safety and leadership support are frequently cited as critical enablers of informal learning, its presence still often remains invisible and taken for granted. This invisibility can stem from time constraints, limited organizational structures and processes, and unclear recognition of informal learning (Zia et al., 2021; Aurrekoetxea-Casaus & Díez, 2020).

This article seeks to move beyond general lists of enablers and constraints by empirically examining how informal learning is led, supported or neglected in the everyday reality of a knowledge work context, using a large, globally acting IT and consulting firm as a case organization. Despite an expanding body of literature on informal learning, relatively little has been written about how it is experienced and practiced across organizational levels. The existing literature suggests that misalignments between managerial strategies and employee experiences are common and can undermine informal learning practices altogether (Lejeune et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2019). These differences are often rooted in how each group perceives responsibility, support and recognition related to learning. Managers may describe their leadership in this regard as empowering and enabling autonomy, while employees may interpret this autonomy merely as symbolic or lacking structural support (Degner et al., 2022; Watkins & Marsick, 2023). This suggests that a shared understanding of informal learning is not always present, which can hinder the development of a strong learning culture throughout the organization. By examining the views of managers and employees in the case organization, this study aims to elaborate existing scientific understanding on the perspectives on informal learning across organizational levels between managers and employees (see Figure1). In our empirical study part, we focus on the following research questions (RQ):

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

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

The research approach is illustrated in Figure 1 using a modified Venn diagram to highlight overlapping and diverging perspectives of managers and employees. By comparing these views, the study uncovers how informal learning leadership is experienced across organizational levels and how it can be strengthened in practice.

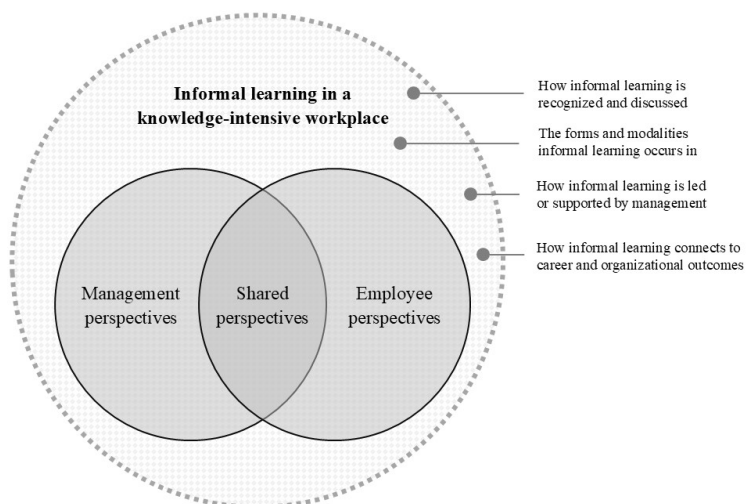


Figure 1: Research approach as a modified Venn -diagram.

This article is structured to build a layered understanding of informal learning leadership: it begins with a review of relevant literature, followed by a presentation of the empirical study and concludes with a discussion on practical and theoretical implications.

Background

Workplace learning encompasses a variety of types of learning forms; formal, non-formal and informal. These differ by their structure, intentionality and context. Formal learning is usually organized in programs with set curricula, while non-formal learning is structured learning outside traditional settings, such as in workshops or in online training (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Informal learning, in contrast, is unsystematic, embedded in daily routines and often unplanned or incidental (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Schugurensky, 2000).

Informal learning is a vital component of continuous learning in modern workplaces (Owusu-Agyeman, 2024). Marsick and Watkins (2001) describe how it occurs “in the midst of action” and emphasize its experiential, tacit, and socially situated nature. Schugurensky (2000) distinguishes between self-directed, incidental and tacit learning referring to the varying degrees of intentionality involved. Informal learning can be achieved through problem-solving, peer interaction, mentoring or self-initiated inquiry (Callanan et al., 2011; Billett, 2024). Despite its importance, informal learning is easily neglected or undervalued within organizational settings (Degner et al., 2022). Literature calls for more organized approaches to managing informal learning, especially in knowledge-intensive, hybrid or digitalized settings where traditional boundaries between work and learning are fuzzy (Billett, 2021; Karhapää et al., 2024).

Leadership is at the heart of enabling or hindering informal learning at work (Watkins & Marsick, 2023; Ifenthaler et al., 2021). For instance, leader authenticity and humility behaviours have been found to create psychologically safe environments in which experiential learning is encouraged (Rigolizzo et al., 2022). Previous research has often focused on the role of leadership in facilitating informal learning, but there is little comparison with employees’ own experiences of it. This gap is significant because mismatches between managerial intentions and employee perceptions can invalidate learning initiatives (Lee et al., 2019). Leaders directly or indirectly shape learning conditions through goal setting, feedback and resource allocation or by influencing the organizational culture and its norms (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). Transformational leadership has been seen to effectively support informal learning through vision-building, empowerment and trust (Zia et al., 2022; Rigolizzo et al., 2022). Supportive leadership may enable employees to undertake self-directed learning, reflect on experiences and learn from others.

Tynjälä’s (2013) 3P model of workplace learning (presage-process-product) provides a useful framework for understanding the interplay between contextual factors (e.g., leadership), learning processes (e.g., reflection, participation) and learning outcomes; in this framework, leadership is a presage factor that shapes the conditions for learning, influencing how individuals engage in learning and what outcomes are achieved. From the management perspective, informal learning is typically handled strategically with the aim of positioning employee development towards organizational goals (Watkins & Marsick, 2023). This might involve implementing tools for competence monitoring, facilitating knowledge sharing, or encouraging self-leadership (Hutasuhut et al., 2020; Lejeune et al., 2023). Managers may view such mechanisms as empowering, while employees may view them as stressful or poorly adapted to real work settings. Employees, in contrast, can concentrate on autonomy, intrinsic motivation and learning opportunities embedded within everyday interactions (Zia et al., 2021; Bouma et al., 2023). Research shows that informal learning takes place most naturally when employees feel trusted, supported and able to take initiative (Degner et al., 2022). However, barriers in the form of lack of time, inadequate infrastructure or rigid management processes,

fragmented communication, or poor technological support could hinder this process (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019; Aurrekoetxea-Casaus & Díez, 2020).

To integrate above enablers and constraints associated to informal learning in the existing literature, organizations must recognize it as a shared responsibility, requiring both top-down leadership and bottom-up commitment. By examining where management and employee views concur or differ, this study aims to provide a more integrated understanding of how informal learning leadership can be developed in theory and in practice.

Research design

Study context

This study was carried out in a large multinational IT and consulting firm, referred to here as the “Case Organization”. Operating globally, the Case Organization employs a diverse workforce, including both managerial staff and knowledge workers, and serves a broad range of industries. Its flexible structure is intended to foster innovation and improvement, providing a relevant context to explore informal learning management. The Case Organization has a strong emphasis on employee development, integrating both formal training programs and informal learning opportunities. Leadership plays a crucial role in fostering a learning culture, particularly through the implementation of policies and practices aimed at promoting self-directed learning. By the company policy, managers are encouraged to act as facilitators of learning, supporting their teams in identifying and pursuing learning opportunities that align with both personal and organizational goals.

Participants

Eighteen (18) participants (8 female and 10 male), including employees (7) and top-/mid-level managers (11) (see Table 1), were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. All participants received comprehensive information about the study prior to the interviews and informed consent was obtained from everyone. Managerial interviewees (ID1-11) were suggested by the Case Organization’s HR professionals to ensure coverage across leadership levels and to ensure that the interviewees shared a common understanding of informal learning and approaches to leading it. Employee participants (ID12–18) were recruited independently by the researcher via an open call and all of them were based in Finland. The interviewees are listed in Table 1 in the order in which the interviews were conducted.

Table 1: Demographic information of the interviewees.

Interview ID	Role	Gender	Country	Interview duration (minutes)
1	Vice President	Male	Finland	42
2	Vice President	Male	Finland	30
3	Vice President	Female	United Kingdom	55
4	Manager	Female	Finland	39
5	Vice President	Female	Finland	53
6	Vice President	Male	Finland	34
7	Vice President	Female	Finland	75
8	Specialist	Male	Netherlands	40
9	Manager	Male	Finland	72
10	Vice President	Female	Netherlands	52
11	Manager	Male	Finland	60

12	Consultant	Female	Finland	35
13	Consultant	Male	Finland	40
14	Consultant	Male	Finland	32
15	Consultant	Male	Finland	60
16	Consultant	Female	Finland	40
17	Consultant	Male	Finland	43
18	Consultant	Female	Finland	60

Data collection and analysis

Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews (see Appendix A) were framed on the following thematic areas: 1) Management of informal learning, 2) Development of informal learning practices, 3) Individual responsibility in leadership practices and 4) Summary and evaluation through presage, process and product stages. Areas 1-3 were developed based on practical considerations and research group's prior knowledge of the research context, while area 4 was explicitly guided by Tynjälä's (2013) 3P model of workplace learning. A funnelling technique was used across all themes, with broad open questions at the beginning, i.e., "How is learning currently managed in your organization?", followed by more specific questions such as "What methods and tools do you use to manage informal learning in your role?". Question phrasing was adjusted slightly based on the interviewee's work status. For example, managers were asked, "What methods and tools do you use to manage informal learning in your role?", while employees were asked, "How is your learning currently managed in your organization?". Interviews were conducted in English (3) or Finnish (15), based on the interviewee's preference.

Anonymized verbatim transcripts of the interviews were used for analysis. When quoting interviewees, the number refers to the interview ID as listed in Table 1. All interview transcripts were imported into NVivo for analysis. A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2008) was employed to investigate how informal learning is understood and managed. The analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data. In essence, codes were grouped into themes that reflected converging and diverging views between managers and employees. Role-based comparative analysis was enabled by matrix questions, and selected quotes were used to illustrate each theme. Decisions and thoughts in coding were documented in memos with transparency and rigor.

Results

Drawing on the comparative thematic analysis, the findings reveal alignment and disconnection across organizational levels. As a result of the inductive analysis, four themes (see Table 2) were identified reflecting how informal learning is perceived and practiced (RQ1) and supported and connected to organizational practices and processes (RQ2).

Table 2: Themes, codes and illustrative quotes.

Theme	Thematic code	Illustrative quote
Perceptions of informal learning at work	Management perspective on visibility	"It just happens. It's not planned - it's part of getting the work done." (ID6)
	Employee perspective on visibility	"We're learning all the time, but it doesn't count if it doesn't show up in a report." (ID13)
Learning modalities	Peer learning and project-based learning	"I learn a lot just by talking with colleagues and clients." (ID13)

	Mentoring and reflection	“Teaching others has probably taught me more than any training.” (ID14)
	Self-directed learning	“Sometimes I just search for a solution and learn along the way.” (ID17)
Leading informal learning	Role of supervisors and leadership	“We guide things strategically, but people lead their own learning.” (ID2)
	Lack of follow-up and monitoring	“Even if I learn something new every week, it doesn’t show up anywhere.” (ID14)
Organizational impact	Organizational learning value	“Learning keeps the business moving. But it’s reactive.” (ID5)
	Impact on career development	“Even though I’ve learned a lot, promotions don’t seem to follow.” (ID15)

To summarize the themes discussed in Table 2 and as a response to RQ1, the interviews showed that while both managers and employees recognize the central role of informal learning in daily work and competence development, their perspectives diverge sharply regarding how it is supported, led and aligned with strategic and career outcomes. Managers tend to believe that informal learning is implicitly embedded and supported by autonomy, development processes and leadership culture. In contrast, employees see informal learning as being motivated largely by self-management and invisible to the organization, with little proactive support or recognition. As a response to RQ2, the two groups concurred that leadership ambiguity, time pressure, business agendas and the lack of formalized structures are barriers to learning. Most significantly, leadership roles were seen as facilitative rather than directive and informal learning was decoupled from formal careers or evaluation mechanisms. While convergence was observed in valuing informal learning, divergence was seen in operationalization, visibility and shared responsibility. The above four themes are discussed more profoundly below.

Perceptions of informal learning at work

Informal learning was mentioned by both managers and employees as a universal part of their daily work. Substantial differences emerged regarding its visibility, perceived support and strategic integration within the organization. From the managers’ perspective, informal learning was considered a natural and valuable aspect of daily work. Managers tended to describe it as tacitly embedded in the organizational culture, and facilitated through developmental conversations, exposure to challenging projects and collaborative settings. This comes well out from an interview quotation by a manager (ID 6): *“I believe informal learning is embedded in everything we do. It’s part of how people develop; by doing, reflecting, and adjusting along the way.”* Despite this positive conceptualization, the support for informal learning was considered largely implicit and conceptual. Managers assumed that the conditions for learning were in place, but rarely specified mechanisms for recognizing or guiding it. Correspondingly, informal learning was widely taken for granted as being self-evident and everywhere yet rarely surfaced in formal discussions or organizational practices.

Employees emphasized the practical necessity of informal learning in coping with complexity and keeping up to date with skills. They discussed it as an everyday reality, yet one that was still undervalued, hidden and not linked to formal processes such as performance management or career development, as one employee (ID13) expressed it: *“We learn all the time. It’s the only way to keep up with changes. But it’s like it doesn’t count unless it’s on your CV or in a training report.”* Another recurring theme throughout the employee interviews was the strong sense of individual responsibility. Informal learning was experienced as something one needed to initiate and continue one’s own. While some managers believed that they encouraged autonomy, employees felt that learning depended on one’s own initiative with minimal structural or dialogical support, as exemplified in an interview quotation by employee (ID16):

“I decide what I need to learn, when and how. My manager might support me if I ask, but usually it's up to me.”

Across interviewees, there was a consensus that informal learning is essential and pervasive, and it happens through interaction, reflection and hands-on experience. Managers saw their role as enablers, but employees often perceived that support as passive or even absent. Both groups acknowledged the relevance of informal learning for competence development, yet employees reported a lack of strategic alignment, formal visibility, and shared ownership. The idea of learning as a shared responsibility, one of the study's central theoretical propositions, was inadequately instantiated in practice. This gap highlights the need for better alignment between implicit managerial intentions and explicit, actionable support structures. Without such integration, informal learning is underutilized despite its central role in adaptability and expertise development.

Learning modalities

Interviews showed a rich range of informal learning types, illustrating how knowledge work enables, and sometimes requires, continuous, non-formal competence development. Managers and employees both reported more than one form of learning, but their descriptions highlighted differences in emphasis, structure and perceived ownership. Employees described a broad spectrum of informal learning types, including peer interaction, project-based learning, mentoring, reflection and self-directed knowledge seeking. Peer learning and unplanned collegial talk were the most natural and frequent mechanisms. Daily talks with colleagues and clients were considered highly effective but described as unstructured and inconsistently supported, as one employee (ID13) stated: *“We learn a lot just by talking, with colleagues, with clients. It's these daily exchanges that help you understand things better.”*

Learning-by-doing was universally regarded as the most powerful form of informal learning. Client work, new tools or new project areas were described as drivers of on-the-job competence development. This type of learning was deeply embedded in everyday problem-solving and adaptation, as comes out from a quotation of an employee (ID15) interview: *“Most of my learning happens in real-time, by solving problems for clients, trying new tools or working with unfamiliar domains.”*

Reflection and independent investigation were also prevalent. Employees frequently described learning through independent reflection of what worked or didn't work, without formal triggers or feedback loops, as one interviewee (ID13) noted: *“Reflecting on what worked and what didn't, that's how I improve. No one asks me to do it, but I've learned to make it a habit.”* Both receiving and providing mentoring were valued but done in an informal way. Some of the participants mentioned that mentoring often depended on an initiative and learning was equally gained through supporting others. One participant (ID14) commented this in a following way: *“Teaching others has probably taught me more than any formal training ever did.”*

In addition, non-interpersonal sources such as internal knowledge platforms, online articles and even YouTube were referred to as everyday tools for independent learning. In this regard, one employee (ID17) added: *“Sometimes you just search for a solution and learn as you go. That's how I picked up some of the AI policy stuff, it wasn't in any official training.”*

Managers identified many of the same learning types, particularly project work and peer collaboration. However, they described these learning processes more in terms of organizational initiatives or structures, such as mentoring programs, development discussions or forums for knowledge sharing. They also emphasized the expectation that employees take personal responsibility for engaging in these opportunities. In that regard, one manager (ID3) said: *“We've set up structures for mentoring and reflection, but ultimately, it's up to the employees to take the initiative.”*

Above contrast illustrates a key tension: while managers reported the existence of enablers, employees questioned their accessibility, usability or relevance to actual work practices. Peer learning, for instance, was seen by managers as culturally embedded, but employees hoped for more structured or facilitated support. Both groups claimed the crucial role of project work; employees viewed reflection and self-directed learning as essential in this regard, while managers rarely mentioned them as such. Mentoring was widely supported by managers but often experienced by employees as informal and self-led. Across both groups, informal learning was described as largely self-driven. The extent of organizational support varied, though. Employees expressed a desire for clearer structures to navigate and prioritize learning opportunities, especially in environments where time was scarce and learning was not formally acknowledged. An employee (ID12) put it this way: *“We have a mentoring program, yes. But no one tells you how to use it. You’re on your own.”* Another employee (ID16) argued the realms of project business in this regard: *It’s hard to justify time for learning if it’s not billable. So, it’s something you squeeze in, not something that’s planned.”*

This analysis highlights that while the same types of informal learning are taking place at all levels of the organization, their perceived legitimacy, support and integration differ significantly. Employees emphasized autonomy and tacit reflection; managers emphasized structures and expected initiative. Bridging these perspectives requires leadership practices that are not only enabling in principle, but also embedded in routines, supported with time and tools and responsive to the realities of knowledge work.

Leading informal learning

The interviews revealed an underlying tension between the formal leadership intention to support learning and the everyday experience where employees navigate through informal learning largely independently. Although managers and employees both recognized the importance of leadership in enabling learning, they strongly perceived differently how leadership was actually practiced. From a management perspective, leading informal learning was largely understood as creating good conditions rather than engaging in hands-on guidance. Leaders preferred to describe themselves as “facilitators” or “catalysts,” promoting autonomy through strategic planning, capability frameworks, and development discussions, as one manager (ID2) concluded: *“We guide people through strategic planning and capability needs, but it’s also important that they lead their own learning.”*

This view of support remained largely conceptual. Managers spoke of learning as something that occurred through regular check-ins, but employees rarely felt these conversations were meaningful or continuous. The majority described the manager’s role as passive and reactive, where support only existed if specifically requested. One employee (ID15) described that this way: *“My manager is supportive if I bring something up, but they don’t initiate the conversation.”* In this regard, another employee (ID17) elaborated how: *“It’s not that they block learning. They just don’t lead it. It’s not really on their radar.”* This mismatch was further reflected in the gap between rhetorical and practical support. Managers described facilitation of autonomy as a support for learning. Employees, however, noted that autonomy without structure or actual participation felt more like delegation without purpose. One employee (ID13) argued that: *“We are expected to be self-directed. But being left alone is not the same as being supported.”* This was a pattern of a larger phenomenon that emerged in the results, wherein autonomy was assigned to the structures and actual investment required to make it effective, a symbolic autonomy that places a huge amount of learning challenge resolution in the hands of employees themselves. While leaders were generally willing to support learning, few had the tools, routines or time to make this support tangible or consistent.

The challenge of consistency was also reflected in differences between organizational levels and individuals. Several middle managers painted a picture of a disconnect between top-level

ambitions and ground-level realities: top level leadership spoke of capability development, but the middle level often seemed to lack the capacity or expertise to implement this vision in practice, as comes out from a quotation of an interview of a manager (ID4): *“There’s a strong push from the top on capability building. But the middle layer is where things often fall through.”* In this regard, employees also indicated that learning support was largely dependent on the individual manager’s attitude or priorities. Some felt encouraged and guided, while others described indifferences or competing demands that were higher on their priority list than development discussions, as one employee (ID12) brought out: *“It really depends on who your manager is. Some care, some don’t. There’s no consistent practice.”*

So, despite a shared belief in the importance of informal learning, the managerial role was inconsistently enacted and responsibility was frequently shifted onto the individual employee. A second notable finding was the absence of systematic monitoring or recognition of informal learning. While development discussions periodically raised learning topics, neither group described clear processes for linking informal learning to performance metrics, career development or feedback cycles as shown in the interviewee quotations by a manager (ID6): *“We don’t really measure informal learning, it’s more of a feeling than a data point.”* and an employee (ID14): *“Even if I learn something new every week, it doesn’t show up anywhere unless I decide to mention it.”*

Most of the managers were aware of the lack of formal tools for tracking informal learning and employees confirmed that its outcomes were mostly hidden unless they were self-documented. Autonomy was therefore widely expected from employees, but without shared systems, accountability structures or standard practices, informal learning remained irregular and individual. This points to a critical leadership paradox: autonomy is encouraged and leaders try to foster learning culture, but the lack of active managerial engagement, follow-up and formal processes prevents this support from being driven into practice. Hence leadership must move away from general support toward systematic, dialogical, and accountable practices embedded within the daily flow of work to be able to best harness the potential of informal learning.

Organizational impact

The final theme explores how informal learning contributes to organizational capability and individual career development. Both managers and employees saw its importance but described its impacts, support mechanisms and strategic linkage differently. Employees universally described informal learning as the foundation to their expertise. Whether through client projects, peer-to-peer work or problem-solving in new domains, learning was presented as continuous, self-driven and embedded in daily work, as one employee (ID16) shared: *“Informal learning is what helps me stay sharp, new projects, new clients, new tools. It’s how I grow.”*

For the majority, the emphasis was not getting promoted but on performing the job better as comes out well in the following employee (ID13) quotation: *“It’s not about climbing the ladder. It’s about being better at what I do.”* Managers largely viewed this way, emphasizing the importance of informal learning in productivity, agility and innovation, but they couldn't explain how it was being measured or scaled across the organization. Although its influence was visible in client outcomes and delivery performance, it was hardly linked to formal evaluation or talent processes. One manager (ID7) noted this in the following way: *“We see the effects of learning in client feedback, team agility and delivery quality. But we don’t always know how to trace it back to specific learning.”*

While informal learning had contributed to competence building, its link with career development was considered weak. Employees noted that even though they had progressed professionally, their learning was not taken into consideration or valued within formal advancement discussions, as one employee (ID15) pointed out: *“I’ve grown a lot*

professionally, but I don't know if anyone tracks or acknowledges that. Promotions don't seem to follow learning." Managers for their part admitted that career development remained project- or network-led, with learning playing an indirect and often invisible role, as quoted by one manager (ID2): *"Career paths are still very much project-driven or network-driven. Learning supports that, but it's rarely the deciding factor."* This is an indication of a lack of structured pathways through which informal learning could be recognized or rewarded in career development processes.

Each group did identify meaningful, though indirect, organizational benefits arising from informal learning. These included enhanced customer satisfaction, faster responsiveness and improved innovation. However, the learning culture was described as reactive and emergent rather than intentional or systematically constructed, as one manager (ID5) commented: *"Learning keeps the business moving. We respond faster, we adapt better. But it's all very reactive."* Employees supported this, stating that learning was localized and undocumented. An employee (ID14) reflected: *"We learn a lot, but it stays in people's heads or in projects. There's no structure to capture it."* The lack of institutional mechanisms to share, scale or formalize such learnings limited the organization to maximize its learning potential.

Several recurring organizational barriers were identified by managers and employees alike. These included a lack of time and resources for learning, the dominance of billability and delivery metrics over developmental priorities and the absence of systems for tracking or rewarding informal learning. Further, the cultural emphasis on personal responsibility tended to leave learning efforts fragmented and unsupported, as indicated in the following interview quotations by a manager (ID3): *"Right now, learning is valued in principle, but we don't really have the tools or routines to make it count in practice."*, and an employee (ID17): *"If we had clearer links between learning and advancement or at least more visibility, people would be more motivated to invest in it."*

While both groups agreed that informal learning was essential for individual and organizational development, both also agreed that it occurred largely invisible in formal processes. Its outcomes were seldom measured, its connection to career growth was unclear and its organizational value never fully realized because it went unrealized strategically. These findings suggest that without robust recognition systems, frequent follow-up and more transparent alignment between informal learning and formal advancement, the organization risks leaving critical learning potential untapped. Bridging this gap offers a strategic opportunity for leadership and HR in knowledge-intensive settings, one where learning is not only encouraged but systematically integrated into how capability, performance and progression are understood and supported.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

This study sought to examine how employee and manager understandings of informal learning diverge and converge within a knowledge-intensive organizational setting. Our comparative analysis of the manager and employee interviews highlighted significant alignment in recognizing the value of informal learning, as well as notable disconnections in how it is supported, put into practice and connected with organizational and career outcomes. Our findings complement prior studies (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Billett, 2024) highlighting the centrality of informal learning towards flexibility at both organizational and personal levels.

In response to RQ1, both managers and employees deemed informal learning important, particularly in the face of rapid changes in the business environment. This aligns with the findings of Lejeune et al. (2023) of a gap between embeddedness and strategic anchoring: learning is indeed happening, but the organization lacks systematic ways to recognize, support

or align it with broader organizational goals. Moreover, this “learning is indeed happening” supports earlier theoretical insights suggesting that informal learning is experiential, socially situated and often invisible in nature (Marsick & Watkins, 2001), as well as incidental and tacit (Schugurensky, 2000). In this regard, our findings extend previous knowledge (Lejeune et al., 2023) by suggesting that while managers would articulate their support as enabling autonomy, employees often experience this autonomy as a lack of visible support or structured encouragement, confirming previous concerns about symbolic leadership.

To consolidate this contribution, symbolic autonomy in our study refers to a condition in which employees are formally granted autonomy over their learning, yet lack the structural, relational, or cultural support needed to enact it meaningfully. Drawing on theories of organizational power (Lukes, 2005), this concept illustrates how leadership discourses of empowerment can obscure the absence of concrete support. From an organizational culture perspective, it reflects a disconnection between espoused values and enacted practices (Schein, 2010), whereby learning is promoted rhetorically but not institutionally reinforced. As such, symbolic autonomy offers a critical lens through which to understand how well-intentioned leadership may inadvertently render informal learning invisible.

Second, the study advances understanding of the leadership role in informal learning. Although transformational and enabling leadership styles were nominally endorsed (like in Watkins & Marsick, 2023), leadership engagement was often rhetorical rather than practical, with learning support articulated at a strategic level but not enacted through consistent systems. This reflects previous theoretical perspectives on leadership as a presage factor in the learning process (Tynjälä, 2013), influencing the conditions under which learning can occur. This is also supported by Lejeune et al. (2023), who assert that symbolic support, which means support in principle without follow-up mechanisms, can hide the need for real developmental leadership. As earlier research (Ifenthaler et al., 2021) has shown, effective leadership for informal learning requires more than facilitating autonomy, it requires structures, active engagement and consistent follow-up.

RQ1 is further illuminated by the mismatch between informal learning and formal recognition systems mirrors previous studies (Lee et al., 2019) but also offers new insight into how the mismatch takes place in knowledge work. Our findings further support claims (Billett, 2021; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2019) that informal learning is rarely evaluated or recognized in formal systems, despite its critical role in competence building. By not having processes for recognizing, evaluating or connecting informal learning to career development, organizations can underleverage critical competence-building processes.

In relation to RQ2, our findings emphasize the need for leadership practices and organizational systems that make informal learning more visible, supported and connected to strategic goals. By analyzing management and employee views comparatively, our study addresses an urgent need for more holistic research and indicates that informal learning leadership must be understood as organizational shared responsibility instead of a personal one. This aligns with findings by Kaunda and Yangailo (2023), who demonstrate that top leadership commitment can fully mediate the relationship between employee motivation and performance, highlighting the crucial role of committed leadership in making learning visible and effective. As the boundaries between work and learning become more fluid and as collaboration increasingly occurs across time zones and platforms, it is likely that the visibility, leadership and recognition of informal learning will require new approaches. Recent research also suggests that shared learning practices and adaptive organizational culture play a key role in shaping both opportunities and risks in digital transformation (Jakab et al., 2023). Understanding how these conditions mediate both managerial support and employee agency would provide valuable insight for developing more adaptive, inclusive and strategically aligned learning cultures in knowledge-intensive settings.

Practical implications

Our study offers several practical suggestions for organizations that seek to enhance informal learning leadership. Suggestions compiled in Table 3 are derived from the analysis of the findings and address the question of how to bridge the identified weak links, considering the differing perspectives on managing informal learning.

Table 3: The key focus areas identified in this study, corresponding key actions for organizations, and supporting research literature for strengthening informal learning leadership in organizations.

#	Focus area	Key actions	Supporting literature
1	Balancing autonomy with structure	Organizations need to incorporate mechanisms like frequent reflective discussions, feedback loops and recognition practices to surface and legitimize learning.	Lejeune et al. (2023); Watkins & Marsick (2023)
2	Developing leadership capabilities	Leadership development should go beyond strategic visioning to include concrete coaching capabilities and dialogical leadership practices	Watkins & Marsick (2023)
3	Connecting informal learning to formal systems	Align informal learning with formal systems such as performance reviews, internal mobility processes or competency models.	Billett (2024); Rodriguez-Gomez et al. (2019)
4	Removing structural barriers	Address structural barriers such as time constraints, lack of peer learning infrastructure and limited knowledge-sharing routines.	AlSaied & Alkhoraif (2024)

In brief, strengthening informal learning leadership requires more than rhetorical endorsement; intentional integration of learning into everyday practices, leadership behavior and HR systems. Alignment of individual agency and organizational structures improves not only learning effectiveness but also supports long-term adaptability and resilience (Zgrzywa-Ziemak et al., 2025).

Limitations and directions for future research

The study was conducted in a single organization setting with empirical data collected from a globally operating company operating in the IT and consulting sector. Though this setting provides an extremely rich context for deepening understanding on informal learning and knowledge work dynamics inside the Case Organizations, it limits the generalizability of the findings to other industries or cultures. Most interviewees were from Finland and all employee participants were Finnish, which may further limit how well the findings apply to other countries. In addition, differences in how participants were recruited may have led to some selection bias. Employees were recruited through an open call, while managers were recommended by the organization's HR department. This could have created a group of managers who were especially interested in learning, which might have affected the findings. The interviews and the analysis were to a major part conducted by a single researcher, which may introduce subjective bias and limit interpretive diversity. The study also employed a cross-sectional design and therefore merely captured perceptions at one moment in time. Future research should extend this comparative approach across a broader range of organizations and industries to further test and refine our analysis and explore how informal learning occurs and is supported in inter-organizational settings. Second, future research should use longitudinal methods to produce more in-depth insights into the dynamics of informal learning support. Third, more detailed scrutiny of middle management as a potential mediating or constraining factor in the translation of leadership intentions into employee experience would offer a productive way forward for theory development and practice.

Conclusions

Unlike earlier studies that looked at leadership and employee experiences separately, our study compares the two and shows how differences between them can reduce support for informal learning in everyday work. Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of informal learning leadership by focusing on the relational and systemic aspects of support. It expands previous conceptualizations of leadership's role from being merely about enabling autonomy to active scaffolding of informal learning processes. Doing so, it challenges assumptions embedded in much of the leadership literature that autonomy alone suffices to foster self-directed learning. This study highlights a risk of "symbolic autonomy", as Lejeune et al. (2023) describe: a situation where nominal autonomy is granted without sufficient structural support, leading employees to shoulder disproportionate responsibility for their own learning. This finding extends and enriches theories of workplace learning that emphasize the interplay between agency and environment.

The study also emphasizes the importance of contextualized analysis. Informal learning does not occur in isolation; it is shaped by organizational cultures, leadership practices and systemic affordances and constraints. The findings call for further research into how context-specific factors mediate the impact of leadership style on informal learning.

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Appendix A. Research themes and questions

Theme of the question	Number #	Questions for management position	Questions for employees
Background info of the interviewee	1	In what role and tasks do you work?	In what kinds of expert and/or knowledge work roles do you operate?
	2	What are your responsibilities in managing informal learning? And how do you see informal learning, the importance of it?	What are your areas of responsibility in your work?
Description of managing informal learning within the organization	3	How is learning currently managed in your organization? What is the part of informal learning in it? (overview)	How do you perceive informal learning happening in your work?
	4	What methods and tools do you use to manage informal learning in your role?	How is your learning currently managed in your organization? (General description) Who is responsible for it?
	5	Is the development of informal learning monitored in your organization?	How is the management of informal learning reflected in this?
	6	(If yes to the previous question) > How is the development of informal learning monitored in your organization?	How is your learning and development monitored? By what methods and how often? How does informal learning connect to this?
	7	What data is used to manage and monitor (informal) learning?	What kind of data is collected from you/do you need to report regarding your skills and development?
Description of the development of informal learning management within the organization	8	How does leadership assess employees' learning needs and the support for them? Who is responsible for the assessment?	How do you assess your own learning needs and the support for them? What is the role of leadership in this?
	9	How are potential changing needs addressed from a leadership perspective?	How often do you evaluate or discuss your competence needs (e.g., with your immediate supervisor)?
	10	Is the evaluation and development of leadership a routine part of the organization, particularly from the perspective of managing informal learning? How often is competence management evaluated, and by what methods?	-
	11	What types of competence/learning development projects are currently underway in the organization?	-
Individual responsibility as part of leadership practices	12	What role does self-leadership play in the organization when considering informal learning? (overview)	What role does self-leadership play in informal learning within your organization? (Open-ended description)
	13	How does this responsibility compare to other leadership responsibilities? (open reflection)	How does this responsibility compare to other leadership responsibilities? (Open-ended reflection)
Summary and Evaluation: Presage	14	How well are employees' prior skills and experience taken into account in supporting informal learning in your organization?	How well does your organization support the utilization of your prior knowledge in informal learning situations?

Summary and Evaluation: Process	15	How does your organization ensure that informal learning takes place during workdays? Are specific methods used for this?	How would you assess the opportunities your organization provides for informal learning in your daily work?
	16	-	What means does your organization use to support your informal learning alongside your work tasks?
Summary and Evaluation: Product	17	How do you assess the impact of informal learning on employees' productivity and development in your organization?	How has informal learning helped you improve your work and job performance over the past year?
	18	In what ways has informal learning impacted the achievement of your organization's goals over the past year?	How has informal learning contributed to your career development and professional competence in your organization over the past year?