



## Antecedent Factors of Self-Directed Learning in the Workplace: A Case Study in a Private Organization in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

Self-directed learning (SDL) is becoming a prominent issue discussed in the workplace learning topic. Each of the employees needs to be aware that organizations need people who do not only believe the importance of learning but they must have initiative and capability to learn effectively. This study aims to examine the antecedent factor of the emergence of SDL in the workplace. This study using qualitative research design, particularly case study approach conducted in a prominent motorcycle-manufacturing company in Indonesia that intentionally set the organizational direction toward a learning organization. A total of thirty staff and managers were purposively selected and interviewed using a semi-structured approach. The Data gathered were analyzed using the content analysis technique. Findings indicate three factors as the antecedent to the emergence of SDL in the workplace, namely: personal factors, organizational factors, and family support. Discussion and recommendations based on research findings will be explained later.

*Keywords:* Self-Directed learning, Workplace learning, Organizational learning

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### BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Workplace learning has been agreed as part of organizational core competencies required to ensure organizational sustainability in this globalization era. Workplace

learning rooted in individual learning, Senge (1990) stated that workplace learning will not occur without individual learning. Each of the employees in the organization is a subsystem that needs to learn how to perform in their respective fields so that it contributes to the overall organizational performance. Employees need to be aware that organizations need people who do not only believe the importance of learning but they must have initiative and capability to learn effectively (Garger, 1999). Therefore, the self-directedness of learners is becoming a significant factor that should need to be

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focused by human resources practitioners and scholars. A common definition of this approach of learning is known as Self-Directed Learning (SDL) which is defined by Knowles (1975) as a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. Every employee needs to empower him/herself as a self-directed learner to meet the demands of the rapidly changing business environment (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 2006). Previous studies were very limited in identifying antecedent factors that drive the emergence of SDL in the workplace context (Chou, 2012; Junaidah Hashim, 2008; Li, Tancredi, Daniel, John, & Daniel, 2010; Merriam, 2010). A better understanding of these antecedent factors will contribute to the development of the body of knowledge and will provide beneficial knowledge for HR practitioner.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Houle (1961) is among the first to study the areas of SDL with his study about 'Adult Learning Projects' (Chien, 2004). Since his research on adult learning projects, SDL has become a central theme in the literature of adult learning subject (Abdelaziz, 2012; Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991; Garrison, 1997; Jarvis, 1992; Hiemstra, 2000; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007; Spear & Mocker, 1984; Tough, 1979). Houle (1961) identified that independent, SDL was an essential way for people to manage the daily events and problems they faced and maintaining competence in

their work-life. For more than four decades, SDL has evolved through a long research tradition and has turned into a well-developed concepts and practices and well-perceived both among educators and human resources practitioner (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Caffarella, 2000; Houle 1961; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005; Long, 2001; Merriam, 2004; Tough, 1967, 1979; Artis & Harris, 2007).

SDL is the most basic and natural learning where adults pursue learning throughout their lives (Candy, 1991; Chien, 2004; Guglielmino, 2008; Knowles, 1975). Self-learning is the only way for people to carry out daily activities and face their problems (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991; Houle, 1961). Knowles (1975) stated that all adult learners are self-directed learners with a range of degrees of a continuum. The continuum range from teacher or others directed learning at one end and SDL at the other (Knowles, 1975; O'Shea, 2003), depending on the readiness and the amount of control over the learning process. The self-directed learners are those who have self-concept as independent and active learners (Knowles, 1975), who demonstrate a greater awareness and motivation to take responsibility in making learning meaningful (Garrison, 1997), view problems as challenges, ready to change and enjoy learning (Taylor, 1995). However, learners may perform different levels of self-direction in different learning situations (Candy, 1991; Song & Hill, 2007). Learners will be more self-directed in an area in which they are familiar, or in areas where they have had similarities to previous experience (Candy, 1991). Therefore, the learner's readiness and ability to self-direct their learning is different (Chou, 2012).

In the workplace context, Long (2001) explained self direction in learning is likely to be influenced by several variables. Long (2001) described that self-direction in learning is likely to be influenced by anyone, or more, of several variables. As the consequence, it is possible that learners may not consistently manifest the same enthusiasm or level of interest in being self-directed in all learning situations. Therefore, the degree to which self-direction in learning exists is the result of interaction among the major variables. However, there is limited study that systematically traces the extent to which individual and external factors play a role as antecedent of the emergence of SDL (Nursyamilah & Roziana, 2014).

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted in one of the biggest motorcycle manufacturing company in Indonesia. In this organization improvement and innovation have always become the central issues and a way of life among employees. It is rooted in the Philosophy of the organization to always produce the best for the country and the customers. Participants who involved in this study in-

clude all administrative staff and managers. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure those who were selected meet the specific criteria, that are those administrative staff and above (managers) with working experience in the current position minimum one year, and recognized by their supervisor as employees who have high learning initiatives and independent-learner. Nineteen staff and eleven managers were interviewed using a semi-structured instrument to get their views and experience. Data collected were analyzed using the content analysis technique where transcribed data was classified and reduced into manageable bits of data. Then constant comparative analysis leads to developing tentative categorization, coding according to research objectives and research questions. Findings were finalized after the inter-coder process conducted and been reconciled.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study provided empirical data regarding antecedent factors of SDL in the workplace. These factors divided into three categories consisting of personal factors, organizational factors, and family support as an-

**Table 1: Personal Factors**

Factors	Sub Factors	Number of Participants
<b>Personal Factors</b>	• Motivation	7
	• Sense of Responsibility	3
	• Self-Efficacy	12
	• Flexibility	9
	• Knowledge Sharing	4
	• Values towards Knowledge	6
	• Learning Skills	3
<b>Organizational Factors</b>	• Organizational Culture	7
	• Shared Vision	3
	• Learning Facilities and Time allocation for Learning	9
	• Leader as Agent of Learning	6
	• Job Design	4
<b>Family Support</b>	• Family Support	4

tecedent factor of SDL in the workplace (see Table 1).

### Personal Factors

*Motivation.* People are triggered to learn when they know they will receive some kind of rewards intrinsically or extrinsically after they accomplish their goals (Kim & Park, 2011). Intrinsic Motivation and extrinsic motivation were identified as forces that drive employees to learn. Employees were self-directed to do work-related learning to satisfy intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivation. SDL is driven by something that provides satisfaction that comes from within, such as curiosity like Participant 28 mentioned: “ *I feel fun gaining new information or knowledge.*” Interest and love of learning also function as intrinsic motivation that drives employees to do SDL, like P17 mentioned: “*For sure, once we love whatever we will enjoy to do it even though we have to face many obstacles and challenges.*” As Thomson (2000) mentioned that work will be intrinsically motivated if the employees have understood the purpose of the task and take it into their personal. SDL is also driven by an external reward such as enhancing career development, like what P1 mentioned: “*based on my experience I noticed that employees with better education have a better career opportunity in the workplace, therefore I must continually learn.*”

*Sense of Responsibility.* Employees mentioned that they initiated to learn due to the sense of responsibility to ensure the work will be done to achieve the goals set. As P27 mentioned: “*Feeling of responsibility.... If we are given the job, we shouldn't be unreceptive, we should take it*

*and be responsible to get the job done at all cost, that is it.*” (P27). Moreover, P11 mentioned: “*I took it to myself....this responsibility is not for my supervisor but me.*” This is relevant to Hiemstra (1991) which he stated that self-directed learners assume ownership of the tasks assigned and take it as personal responsibilities for completing it not merely because they were given the task by their supervisors. The self-directed learners demonstrate a greater awareness and motivation to take responsibility in making learning meaningful and they can monitor the whole learning process thus making them more effective learners (Garrison, 1997; Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 2002; Knowles, 1975).

*Self-Efficacy.* Self-directed learners are learners who are ready to take initiative and control of their learning, they are not waiting to be directed by others such as supervisor or trainer (Raidal & Volet, 2009). Many of the participants in this study had a clear understanding of their learning needs. They also exhibited confidence and they were able to locate where the learning resources were and when they would need them in the future. They have a strong “I can do” mentality. They took difficult tasks as challenges, not obstacles to be avoided because they believed if they learn they will be able to perform whatever needed. They attributed failure as insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills which motivate them to heighten their efforts in learning. Many scholars identified self-efficacy as an important component of SDL pursuits (Brookfield, 1986; Candy, 1991; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Taylor, 1995). As Fisher and King (2010) asserted that the learners who have high

self-efficacy are more successful in carrying out SDL compared to learners with low self-efficacy. Indeed, Appelbaum and Hare (1996) asserted that self-efficacy helps improve the level of SDL. Even when they were given a task in which they had no background at all, but they believed that they were able to do so. They were confident in their ability to learn and adapt to overcome any problem encountered as shared by P22: *"In my dictionary, there is no such word "cannot" before trying, so it must be 'I can' first. The most important thing is trying first if there are obstacles in the middle of the way, then we can find ways for it. The most important thing is the belief that we can do it"*. (P22)

*Flexibility.* SDL is the most basic and natural learning where adults pursue learning throughout their lives (Candy, 1991; Chien, 2004; Guglielmino, 2008; Knowles, 1975). Knowles (1975) stated that all adult learners are self-directed learners with a range of degrees of a continuum. The continuum ranges from "others directed" learning at one end and "self-directed" learning at the other (Knowles, 1975; O'Shea, 2003), depending on the readiness and the amount of control over the learning process. This study found that every challenging circumstance perceived as a trigger and motivator for self-directed learners to learn. They took it as challenges, not obstacles. This is relevant with what Knowles (1975) has written in his book that the initiative to learn derives from the adaptation of changes; the initiative to learn is the means to survival such as learning to close the gaps in competencies required, ineffective way of working and to keep up with technology development. This study found evidence that the initiative to learn

derives from the flexibility or adaptability towards change; the initiative to learn is the means to survival as shared by P16: *"I am the one who easily adapts, is flexible and when I face with a trouble, I cope it without panicking, once my supervisor told me "When you're under pressure don't be disheartened but keep still bending". I hold it as my principle, so if I am under pressure, I don't easily break down, but keep trying to be flexible."* (P16). And P26: *"We will be motivated to learn things when we are in a pressured situation. We learn quickly if we're under pressure, so learning is survival."* (P20)

*Knowledge Sharing.* This study found that SDL practices usually emerge on individuals who love to be a teacher, who love to disseminate their knowledge or simply called as a knowledge sharer. To teach or disseminate knowledge, of course, he/she needs to put him/herself remains resourceful. By teaching and sharing the knowledge they believe their knowledge will be multiplied driven by the emergence of questions or discussions that occurred. willingness to share knowledge becomes the antecedent to initiate learning more and more, as mentioned by P18: *"When I share my knowledge I feel satisfied. Then, what is the impact on me? Automatically I need to learn more because I have to be ready to answer questions, such as why like this, why not this. Then I need to learn more. See, my knowledge increases."* (P18)

*Values toward Knowledge.* Some of the participants highlighted the importance of values as principles or standards of behavior that are used as a reference for a person to determine what is important in life. Some participants mentioned that their values

which believe that knowledge is more valuable than material things have influenced them in guiding their everyday lives, especially in their work life. The participants' believe that the values of knowledge of whatever they learn will be far more worthwhile than material things. Knowledge will remain forever for themselves and it will multiply or at least it will bring something positive for themselves. Senses of feeling honored by doing something believed as important and use it as guidance in carrying out the practice of life. Based on this study, the self-directed learners showed their pro-activeness in observing and approaching their surroundings and questioning and maintaining the values that can inspire them towards self-development, as P5 mentioned: *"I believe the values of knowing that whatever we learn will be far more worthwhile than material things ....The knowledge that we learn for example by attending courses or seminars or any knowledge will be carried through with us and will multiply. Regardless of whether it has a direct effect or not, at least it will bring good thing to my thinking and mind."* (P5)

**Learning Skills.** This study found the importance of having good learning skills as a basis for doing effective learning in the workplace. Candy (1991) mentioned that for a self-directed learner to be effective; he/she must use critical thinking to question rules, norms, and accept claims within his or her field of study. Some other scholars also emphasized the importance of cognitive skills as a key role of the emergence of WRSDL in terms of deciding learning goals, selecting learning strategies and materials, and implementing evaluation

(Cranton, 1996; Pilling-Cormick, 1997; Taylor, 1995; Cho & Kwon, 2005). Adult education scholars agree that self-directed learners get benefit from having core learning skills such as reading, comprehension, arithmetic, critical thinking and problem solving (Artis & Harris, 2007; Garrison, 1997). This capability will assist the learner to critically identify and modify weak or unconfirmed ideas, which helps to strengthen the individual's knowledge base (Artis & Harris, 2007).

From the data collected either from HR management or participants of this study, it is found that the employees who work in this company have been rigorously selected to ensure that each worker hired are those who have good learning skills such as reading comprehension, arithmetic, and problem-solving, analytical thinking and system thinking. It is explained by P11 as: *"This is how I learn, First I have to understand the whole system....not only the technical part but I need to catch up quickly every single subsystem and the relation into each other ... So I need to study the SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) first... differentiate this with others... identify the difference between one and another..... All of the projects in this company will come to us and we need to analyze it..."*(P11)

### **Organizational Factors**

There are several organizational factors as the antecedent to the emergence of SDL in the workplace. They are organizational culture, shared vision, learning facilities and time allocation for learning, leader as an agent of learning and job design.

*Organizational Culture.* According to Bates and Khasawneh (2005), organizational culture is learned by individuals and groups concurrently when they work, interact, solve problems and face challenges. These daily working activities shape the values and beliefs of organizational members and influence their values towards learning to achieve organizational goals (Bates & Khasawneh, 2005). Thus the organizational culture influences their propensity to learn, which if continuous learning has become a culture, then employees will feel left behind if they do not learn. This research was conducted in an organization that management put serious effort in encouraging workplace learning by providing learning opportunities, facilities and ensuring availability of experts for consultation other than making available various kind of rewards related to learning. Management encouraged exploration, research, experimentation, learning from errors and ensuring a conducive learning environment by promoting smooth communication, dialogue and discussion so that employees feel encouraged and fully supported by their surrounding to continuously learning in their respective fields or even just gaining general knowledge for self-development as mentioned by P19: *“maybe it becomes a culture for this organization...for example when I first came here I felt so grateful because people around me, especially my supervisor was very generous in sharing their knowledge. Start from the day I reported for duty I had received a lot of new knowledge, therefore when a newcomers is joining in I will also do the same to them..... this is the culture here, the working culture has been well established.”*

*Shared Vision.* Clear vision, mission, and operational plans that cascade into clear expectations towards each's outcome allow employees to stay on track and align their effort with the organizational vision and mission (Kops, 1997). Clear shared a vision is required so that employees can plan, strategize, monitor and evaluate their performance toward achieving the objective. Ensuring that the company's mission and objectives have been translated into individual objective and bought-in by each of the employees is significant because when employees take these objectives personally they will be intrinsically motivated to do work-related learning in order to achieve their objective, as P22 mentioned: *“Usually at the beginning of the year, management explains the organizational direction and goals it is top-down. we try to understand what was expected, try to see the whole picture, and then we have to find ways to achieve the target set, we plan and take action, so that we can achieve the target, well this is a kind of learning.”*

*Learning Facilities and Time allocation for Learning.* Participants perceived that the organization has provided sufficient learning resources. The availability of expertise where senior workers are encouraged to share their knowledge with fellow workers was perceived as very encouraging. This is relevant to Spear and Mocker's (1984) in their study that implicates the availability of learning materials and resources strongly influences the self-directedness of the employees to carry out their learning. Kops (1997) asserted that the availability of resources enhances SDL and the lack of certain resources diminishes it. Statement from P22

shows the importance of learning resources: *"if we think that we need certain training, then management provides it for us. Indeed, the facilities for our development are provided here. Besides, another training that is internally provided by the training department is also provided here. Many knowledge-sharing forum conducted here, either internal or cross departments....for example, other departments invite us in their knowledge sharing forum regarding certain new information, so we will come"*.

*Leader as Agent of Learning.* Vaill (1996) long time ago asserted that SDL is a critical skill for leaders. According to him, leaders must able to handle complex and subtle learning to determine the best course of action for their organization, therefore leader has to learn continuously and the learning must be SDL (Vaill, 1996). Leaders must become a model of SDL behavior, they need to inspire and motivate others in learning (Vaill, 1996). This study reaffirms that leaders do and become a role model of SDL. Leaders encourage employees' learning by showing positive examples such as reading new books every month, modeling knowledge sharing as a habit, encouraging employees to try new things, and build a strong interpersonal relationship so that employees feel free to interact and ask questions without fear or prejudice. Leaders need to inspire and motivate others in learning (Vaill, 1999). Moreover, leaders themselves need to have critical skills to encourage SDL among subordinates, as mentioned by P27: *"I learned from my superior. I learned from what he did, not only from what he said.....for example, the way he treated people, the way he made decisions or solve problems which are the things that I learned from him, instead of*

*only from the way he gave instruction"*. (P27)

*Job Design or Nature of Job.* Job design or nature of the job that requires rapid adaptation, deep analysis, and critical thinking require employees to do a lot of higher-order thinking. In this kind of work, the flexibility of action and creativity for solving problems, trigger the need for learning. Freedom on how the employees learn and work has become vital in generating new ideas, innovations and continuous improvement. This nature of work has driven them to carry out SDL, to ensure that they can keep up with up-to-date knowledge. This is relevant with what Skiff (2009) mentioned that SDL particularly happens when learning must be done fast in response to the unexpected changes. Therefore, the organizational environment plays a role in affecting SDL in the workplace (Raemdonck, Leeden, Valcke, Segers, & Thijssen, 2012). This is also reaffirmed by P22: *"In fact, the nature of work in my department is unique where every day the information can change due to the fast rapid technological development. For example new regulations from labor minister that set a new threshold value of certain chemistry or physics materials. In this situation, we have to update our knowledge by reading the new regulation thoroughly or attend a training or seminar. The implementation of this new regulation will be discussed in detail in the training center, such as how to measure and count it, so almost every day we learn something new"*.

Participant 28 also emphasized that job design or nature of job as antecedent to the emergence of SDL in the workplace; *"The*

*type of job that require deep-analysis based on valid and reliable data, and at the same handling few projects where each project has different fields..... so I believe these jobs force people to learn. This is the type of work where people are required to be always ready to learn new things, especially in handling projects. For example, we can be the PIC in Project A, but a member in Project B. These two are different, like it or not we have to learn...." (P28)*

### **Family Support**

Finding from this study also implicated that family support is a significant factor in motivating employees to take the initiative to always do self-improvement. Some of the participants came from a family background whose parents are educators. This is relevant to study done by Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), Brookfield (1993), Cho and Kwon (2005) and Candy (1991) that family background as the antecedent to the emergence of SDL. Since childhood, they have been instilled by their parents on the importance of learning and trained them to have learning skill and further it becomes a habit. So, learning is just a natural way forward for them, as mentioned by P26: *"Firstly it comes from the family circle; yes I've been taught by my family, by my father and my mother. It happened that both my parents were teachers and they taught me to become curious and truthful, always pushing for maximum effort; I have to be able to manage my time and many other things. I have lots of experience that had been taught by my parents to become autonomous."*

P17 shows how family background helps their children to build learning habits and

*skills: "Since my childhood, my father taught me to cultivate my curiosity and willingness to learn. My father is very diligent to dismantle electronic goods such as tape, radios, and usually, he invited me to see the way he dismantled the things and re-fix it back. It triggered my curiosity and willingness to learn. Learning does not merely through formal learning, we can learn from little things in our surroundings. From this little thing, we can think of what could be made in the future". (P17)*

### **CONCLUSION**

This study provides a deeper understanding regarding antecedent factors of SDL in the workplace. Every individual has the potential to be self-directed in his or her learning. This study highlights the importance of recognizing employee's characteristics to help employees have initiatives to learn in workplace. It is very fortunate if the organization has workers who are good in motivation, sense of responsibility, self-efficacy, flexibility, and have high learning skills. But if not, management needs to facilitate employees do self-development so that they are more self-directed in their learning in the workplace. Findings of this study identified some organizational factors as antecedent to the emergence of SDL in the workplace; they are organizational culture, shared vision, learning resources, leaders as agent of learning and job design.

Management needs to pay close attention to these factors to improve the self-directedness of their employees and further organizational learning will be cultivated. The third factor is family background, which this study found that family support

role as antecedent towards the emergence of SDL in the workplace. This finding provides insight to HR practitioners to pay more attention to the family background as one of the criteria in the selection of new employees if their organization puts serious effort into cultivating workplace learning.

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