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**Abstract**

Organizations, large and small, are faced with adversity when trying to remain competitive in their respective industries. With new information constantly infiltrating the marketplace, organizations need to become flexible and be able to adapt to stay relevant. Change is not always easy, though. The purpose of this qualitative meta-synthesis study identified requirements and barriers present within an organization when trying to create a continuous learning environment. Previous studies and articles of topics relating to this study were compiled and analyzed in order to find similarities and/or differences in what this ‘environment’ looks like within different organizations. Common themes were present between the majority of the articles, including working toward a common goal, collaboration, innovation and adaptation, and constant change or transformation.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Sihle Insurance Group has been in business since 1974. The organization specializes in providing commercial and personal property and casualty coverages for its customers, and it has grown to be one of the largest privately held insurance agencies in Florida. There are 11 offices located throughout the state. With an increasing amount of new businesses requiring insurance to operate, constant knowledge of changes in products, technology, carrier appetite, coverages, and pricing is required to stay a leader in the industry. “Learning is at the heart of competitiveness” (Gronhaug & Stone, 2012, p. 269). Insurance is a never-changing field and being knowledgeable in all aspects of the job is crucial. Staying on top of current trends and training gaps will allow the employees to be efficient in their roles. This represents a challenge to keep a geographically disperse workforce trained in an industry experiencing continuous change, especially when the workforce is facing a boom of retirees (Cole & McCullough, 2012). As a result of both growth and turnover, a changing workforce only exacerbates the problem for organizations such as Sihle Insurance Group.

Statement of the Problem

While the insurance industry has started to see the need for a constant learning environment, or continuing education (CE) to stay relevant, this is not the only industry that has done so. Continuous learning has historically been viewed as an important part of many varying industries. Such industries include healthcare, law, and business among others. These learning requirements allow professionals to stay current with latest developments, skills, and new technologies required for their fields as they are constantly changing and prevents the professionals from falling behind in their fields (South University, 2012). Each of the different industries use CE courses in varying ways. For example, Howard explains,
“…It is therefore, critically important that professionals [law enforcement et al.] stay current and in compliance with changes in law and regulations, as well as technological advancements; particularly forensic science, intelligence gathering and analysis, surveillance, financial crime detection, and investigation techniques. (South University, 2012)

In addition to law enforcement officers, paralegals are required to participate in continuing education courses each year. This allows these professionals to learn new skills while sharpening old skills, provide networking opportunities and enhancing the professionalism of each member (Cope & McCall, 2016).

As business professionals, continuous learning is seen as a tool for organizations to become effective and provide their employees with short-term and long-term benefits to lead to successful careers. These benefits include knowledge acquisition, self-awareness building, perspective change, skill development and behavior change – each of these leading to increased productivity and achievement of the goals of the organization (Maurer & Weiss, 2010, p. 2-3).

Being an educator requires its needs for a continuous learning environment, as well. In order to guarantee the success of graduates, educators are encouraged and sometimes required to undergo extensive training at the individual, employer, state and societal level (Matveieva, 2017). The need arises due to teachers needing to be able to respond quickly to challenges from students, transform traditional teaching methods to adapt to varying models in learning, master educational technologies, and contribute to the full development of the student and others (Matveieva, 2017).

With the constant pressure of a changing environment, whether it be in products, new technology, competition, or pressure from customers, it is important to ensure adaptation and
flexibility to stay relevant. This pressure happens to businesses of all sizes and requires them to upgrade employee knowledge and skills. Situations like these are troublesome for larger corporations with training departments, as well as those smaller businesses without these dedicated resources.

The concept of a learning organization has been around for a long time, but the term was first coined in 1990 and is defined as an organization where people continuously extend the capacity to create the results they really want, the new and prolific ways of thinking are encouraged, where collective aspiration is free and people learn continuously how to learn together (Senge, 1990). Many studies of learning organizations have similar results regarding the qualities of the organizations, including the organization being able to transform itself through learning, the idea that learning is shared across the organization, and learning organizations are successful as such when the leadership supports the idea (Kim & Watkins, 2018). The creation of a continuous learning environment is a solution to the problem facing Sihle Insurance Group as well as many other organizations of staying relevant on current trends, information, and technology.

**Purpose of the Study**

As previously noted, many small organizations lack the resources to provide the frequent and regular training required to address the need for continually updating and upgrading employee knowledge and skills; and that the solution lies in creating a work environment that promotes and supports continuous learning. The purpose of this study was to answer the following question:
“What are the barriers and the requirements to a small business organization (one of less than 25 employees), competing in a rapidly changing industry, interested in creating and sustaining a continuous learning environment for its employees?”
Chapter II: Literature Review

The concept of a learning organization was originally popularized in 1990, and it promoted a continuous learning environment. It achieved this by encouraging people within organizations to change their way of thinking, collaborate, and increase their desire to achieve results together (Garvin, 1993). Since its conception, numerous studies have been conducted on what constitutes a learning organization, the characteristics of learning organizations, and the nature of how they are used. With access to additional [expendable] resources, many large business organizations have been able to support the concept of creating a learning organization. Unfortunately, without these resources, small business organizations face different obstacles when attempting this.

The Learning Organization

The basic idea of beginning to create a learning organization is to implement some type of change to promote the creation, acquisition, or transfer of knowledge. Many organizations face the idea that, “Without accompanying changes in the way that work gets done, only the potential for improvement exists” (Garvin, 1993). Without action, and a plan for improvement, a learning organization is essentially unable to be obtained. Varying organizations have seen success in implementing behavioral change, leadership change, and methodological change. This evidence supports the notion that while not all organizations are alike, they are able to create a learning organization.

Characteristics of a learning organization in theory. After the initial research had been released by Senge in 1990, many different researchers wanted to expand on what the true definition and characteristics of a learning organization are. Watkins and Marsick (1993) expanded on the initial concept of what a learning organization is and theorized it as an
organization that constantly learns and transforms itself, similarly to Senge (1990). Differentially, they invited the idea that a learning organization has embedded systems to gain and share learning, which would promote the collaborative aspect of the original conceptualization (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). They started to develop the Dimensions of the Learning Organization (DLOQ) model, which named seven actions which, in theory, are considered the essential building blocks for any organization to adapt to this type of culture, illustrated in Table 1.: 1. Create continuous learning opportunities, 2. Promote inquiry and dialogue, 3. Encourage collaboration and team learning, 4. Establish systems to capture and share learning, 5. Empower people toward a collective vision, 6. Connect the organization to its environment and 7. Providing strategic leadership for learning (Watson & Marsick, 1996). Several studies have examined these seven measures in different contexts and countries, including the United States, Colombia, China, Taiwan, and Korea (Pokharel & Choi, 2013, p.129).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Explained</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create continuous learning opportunities</td>
<td>Learning is integrated into work to encourage on-the-job learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote inquiry and dialogue</td>
<td>Opportunities are provided for continuing education and growth, encouraging expression of their views and the ability to listen to views of others; supporting questioning, feedback, and experimentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage collaboration and team learning</td>
<td>Use of groups encourages different modes of thinking; working together is viewed as a value of the organization’s culture and is rewarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish systems to capture and share learning</td>
<td>Access to high and low technologies is provided to employees to share learning and integrated into work; systems are maintained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower people toward a collective vision</td>
<td>People are involved in creating and implementing a common vision, and accountability to obtain this is used to motivate people to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect the organization to its environment</td>
<td>Organization is linked to the community, so people are helped to see the impact of their work on the entire enterprise; information gained from environment is used to adjust their work practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide strategic leadership for learning</td>
<td>Leaders model, champion, and support learning and uses strategic learning to attain business results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1.* Constructs integrated into the DLOQ. Adapted from Marsick and Watkins (2003).

Many definitions of learning organizations include some or all of these components, but also tend to focus on two factors: collaborative learning and management of knowledge outcomes.

All of these components together help identify what an organization is lacking, gives insight on how they can change for improvement, and create processes through which the process of learning new knowledge becomes meaningful.
The learning organization in practice. Many analysts are seeing that large, successful companies such as Amazon, Facebook, Uber, and even Airbnb use little to no financial and physical capital for their size, and there has been a shift toward using knowledge-based capital to succeed (Shin, Picken, & Dess, 2017). In a learning organization, each individual employee is encouraged to give feedback or input on issues or goals the organization is wanting to achieve. This is a progressive way of thinking, as many organizations are run by leaders and upper management, with decisions being made from the top down. Rapidly changing technologies and a constantly competitive environment requires the organizations to rely on the skills, knowledge, and experience of all of their employees, rather than just the upper management; this is done by creating a learning organization (Shin et al., 2017).

Continuous Learning

Continuous learning is becoming more of an important part of different industries business models daily. Historically, many organizations or individuals had the idea that continuous education and learning was only a requirement to uphold licensure or certification. Unfortunately, this puts a barrier on what the organization can achieve. The following sections will discuss the formal and informal approaches to continuous learning and the importance to continuous education in varying industries.

Formal approach: Professional development or ‘continuous education’. In the medical field, continuous learning is imperative. There are many different governing bodies involved within the healthcare field and they regularly provide updates on their laws, statutes, amendments, and operational requirements. These updates and knowledge can typically be accessed through completing a mandated CE course. In addition to these types of updates, medical professionals are subject to technological advances daily, whether it be with new or
improved medical equipment they may use, or new drugs they will be able to prescribe, or new methods to treat patients. Being knowledgeable about these updates is important so these professionals can keep their reputation, provide new opportunities for themselves by separating their qualifications from other professionals, and for professional development (Landers et al., 2005, p.861).

Within the insurance industry, useful tools have been identified in commercial lines insurance training and include agency resources such as insurance cheat sheets, user manuals, and links to websites that aid in providing information desired by the agent (Peck, 2018). But as the industry is changing constantly, continuing education (CE) courses are important to the producer’s success. CE courses allow employees to stay relevant on updated or new information within the field, but also helps maintain licensure or certification (Zingg, 2002). As previously stated, there have been multiple studies on the effectiveness of mandatory CE courses in other industries and they have shown positive results. Unfortunately, only a few studies have been completed directly with the insurance industry, but the need for CE has already been widely accepted. The National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC) now requires producers, insurance carriers and broker-dealers to participate in state CE courses, and has different resources that simplify the process (Quest CE, Inc.). With the NAIC organization having many resources available to these professionals to be able to gain their CE credits, it shows their firm belief in the importance of continuing education. While this is true, there are not a lot of previous studies which show the direct correlation between CE courses and their effect on the producer’s success. In Florida, for a general lines agent to remain active, it is required that they complete 24 hours of continuing education courses every 2 years; 5 of which
are state mandated to obtain an update on law and ethics. This reemphasizes the need for consistent agent awareness of changes within the industry as it is constantly changing. However, there can be a negative connotation when dealing with ‘mandated’ or required government training. A study completed at St. Ambrose University tested 987 insurance license holders and their perception on continuing education. It was revealed that despite the mandate to attend, most respondents reported that completing CE courses allows the agents to be better equipped to serve the needs of their current and potential customers, improve the quality of advice provided, increased the reputation of the insurance industry, and improved the conduct of the agents (O’Leary, Quinlan, & Richards, 2011, p. 101).

Continuing education courses in varying industries have shown positive improvements in the participating associates’ workplace productivity and ability to provide better services for their customers. Studies have also shown that having continuing education courses mandates have increase participation, and professionals feel they have positively benefited from the CE courses. Applying this concept to any industry on a large or even small scale is sure to show the same results.

**Informal approach: The continuous learning environment.** Organizations employ people with varying ages, backgrounds, goals, and methods of learning, leading to challenges when trying to provide them the tools they need to excel and develop. One way to get around this is for the organization to create a continuous learning environment. A continuous learning environment is one that allows constant learning, that is fluid and ongoing, and uses a variety of methods for individuals to gain information and to reinforce concepts and skills (Beland et al., 2012). It has been said that there are nine factors to influence the continuous learning
environment: openness, opportunities to learn, co-worker support, high performance expectations, supervisor support, tolerates mistakes, situational constraints, assigns to avoid errors, and big picture awareness (Eddy et al., 2005). Identifying these factors shows the correlation between a continuous learning environment and creating a learning organization, by reinforcing the idea that a learning organization can lead to success by collaboration, working toward a common goal, and creating opportunities to learn from others.
Chapter III: Methodology

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the requirements and barriers present when creating a continuous learning environment and/or a learning organization. In an attempt to identify these characteristics, previous studies and articles were compiled, reviewed, analyzed, and compared through the use of a qualitative meta-synthesis (QMS). This chapter further explains the method in which the research was researched, selected, analyzed, and compared, as well as the limitations to the study.

Research Design

In order to determine the characteristics of a continuous learning environment or learning organization, the requirements to create one, and the barriers present when transitioning from a traditional environment to a learning environment, previous studies were compiled. Qualitative meta-synthesis (QMS) was the method used to read, analyze, and these studies. In order to properly conduct a QMS, studies must have a common theme in order to establish the validity of the comparison. Also, emphasis is placed on interpretation of findings from a collection of research studies with a common interest (Nurse Researcher, 2008, p. 60). The results of the compiled research were used to make recommendations for small businesses (one with 25 employees or less) to implement a learning organization. The results were also used to identify gaps and make recommendations for further research.

Population

In order to gain enough information to perform a QMS, a filtered web search with key words and phrases was used. These key words and phrases included ‘continuous education’, ‘continuous learning environment’, ‘learning organization’, and ‘organizational learning’. To
explore if there were commonalities between such studies, a population size between 30 and 40 articles were reviewed.

**Instrumentation**

The data needed included key phrases relating to the purpose of this study as previously mentioned. The sources of the data were obtained through the University of Wisconsin – Stout’s online library resources using a web search with these key phrases. The sources included articles, peer-reviewed articles, journal entries, and external websites.

**Validity and Reliability**

The method of obtaining the information needed for this study, qualitative meta-synthesis, is well-respected and frequently used. While it is up to the investigator to decide what sources of data to use for their analysis, this study included similar previously completed studies and peer-reviewed articles. The information within these articles have already been fact checked and reviewed and allowed the investigator of this study to make inferences and recommendations based on this information.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study include lack of empirical studies and previous research on the topic of learning organizations and continuous learning environments.
Chapter IV: Results

This paper explores the topic of a continuous learning environment and the barriers and requirements present while attempting to create one, specifically within a small business organization (one with less than 25 employees). Chapter IV will discuss what has been found to deter businesses of any size from creating a continuous learning environment or learning organization, the effects of culture on organizational learning, important steps for organizations to take to begin to implement this type of environment and how current organizations can transition from a traditional organization to a learning organization.

Before we are able to look at barriers or requirements to create a continuous learning environment or learning organization, it is important to know the meaning of the concept. Learning organization models have been studied since initially recognizing the term in 1990, but different authors have varying definitions of what a learning organization is really setting out to do. Table 2 illustrates the most commonly used definitions of the concept of a learning organization.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Definition of the learning organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senge</td>
<td>Organizations where people constantly develop their ability to create results they actually want to obtain; where new ways of thinking can grow; where collective aspiration exists and where people continuously grow together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedlar</td>
<td>An organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and that continuously changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schon</td>
<td>In other words, we must become experts in learning. We must not only manage to transform our institutions to adapt to situations and changing needs; we must equally invent and create institutions that constitute “learning systems”, in other words, systems that are able to cause their own continuous transformation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watson &amp; Marsick</td>
<td>Learning organizations are characterized by the commitment of employees in a collaborative process of change for which all and each are responsible, aiming at sharing values or principles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamali Khoury &amp; Shayoun (2006)</td>
<td>[...] A type of organization that encourages continuous renewal of the organization through the introduction and integration of a set of fundamental processes that favor a positive propensity to learn, adapt, and change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2. The meanings of the concept of learning organization. (Source: Toxopens, H., 2007, p. 10)*

In addition to this list, the definition listed in the Business Dictionary states,

“Organization that acquires knowledge and innovates fast enough to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing environment. Learning organizations (1) create a culture that encourages and supports continuous employee learning, critical thinking, and risk taking with new ideas, (2) allow mistakes, and value employee contributions, (3) learn from experience and experiment, and (4) disseminate the new knowledge throughout the organization for incorporation into day-to-day activities.” (BusinessDictionary.com, 2019)
Amongst these definitions, we can begin to see some common themes: continuous learning, constant change or transformation, collaboration, working toward a common goal or vision, use of all its members, and innovation. Some models may have additional requirements found to mold their concept of a learning organization, while others may have less. These models are also commonly accepted as not all organizations are treated the same, and do not require the same needs. Those studies may have proven a learning organization be created with more or less requirements.

**Learning Organization versus Organizational Learning**

The terms ‘organizational learning’ and ‘learning organization’ have historically been treated as equal, but after many studies have been completed, we now know that these two terms have distinct definitions.

Organizational learning can simply be put as a set of learning processes or a change in beliefs or behaviors, while a learning organization can be described as an organization with the capacity to consistently transform itself through learning (Guta, 2012, p.342). Organizational learning can take place within a learning organization. A previous study shows that participants consider having a strong set of processes and learning systems within the organization leads to opportunities for personal and system-wide learning (Siddique, 2016, p.147). Another study mentions that organizational learning and the learning organization ‘can and should co-exist’ (Gorelick, 2005, p.388).

**Collaboration**

Another common theme present in the definitions of a learning organization is that of collaboration or working with each other to achieve a common goal. While we are able to learn as individuals, personal knowledge can only go so far. Sharing knowledge and ideas within an
organization allows each of the employees to learn on another level. “Knowledge sharing is an important aspect of knowledge management that contributes to enhancing organizational learning to face competition” (Abu-Shanab, Haddad, & Knight, 2014, p.38) A continuous learning environment is effective when knowledge sharing is promoted, and the employees feel confident enough to share and provide feedback without rejection or punishment. Collaboration and knowledge sharing also helps those with generational differences also gain valuable insight to each other’s way of thinking. For example, a 2017 study has shown that some Generation Xers have shown reservation in commenting on issues that Generation Yers do not (Kaminska & Borzillo, 2017, p. 97). Each of these cohorts can learn from each other as their ways of thinking or behavior are not the same. Rather than staying within their cohort and sharing the same ideas, they are able to diversify their ways of thinking and learning due to the collaboration that is promoted. They are also able to learn from each other in the technical sense, as Yers are more in tune with learning through the use of social media networks, while Xers are used to learning using more traditional methods (Kaminska & Borzillo, 2017, p. 98). This is an important component because many organizations are implementing the use of social media infrastructure within their systems (Eijkman, 2011, p.165).

Change

Focusing in on the common themes, we can elaborate on how a traditional organization can make moves to transition to become a learning organization and create a continuous learning environment. In a world that thrives on competition, it is not surprising to hear about organizational change. Change is inevitable, but the process of change is not always as smooth as one would hope. Historically, many employees of organizations view change as a punishment as a result of mistakes or incorrect actions. Within a learning organization, change is viewed as
an opportunity to learn or adapt to shifts in the external environment sustain and fulfill their mission (Bunea, Dinu, & Popescu, 2016). Embracing the change and acknowledging its importance is also imperative for the organization to grow and remain competitive with other organizations within the same industry or field. “Without accompanying change in the way that work gets done, only the potential for improvement exists” (Giesecke & McNeil, 2004, p.55).

Creating a continuous learning environment supports and encourages constant changes and learning, as organizations are beginning to realize the pace of innovation and influx of information needed to stay relevant.

Change is also implemented in organizations as a way to improve on organizational performance. Organizations cannot sustain if all moving parts, as well as the entire entity are not improving. Focusing on organizational performance is an important avenue for change to occur. Although there is a lack of empirical studies on creating a learning organization as a tool to enhance workplace performance, realistic explanations can create a strong argument that this statement would be true; the studies that are present can contribute as well.

Levels of Learning

Many studies have been done and show that learning is done in three groups within an organization, also known as three pillars, to support learning organizations: the individual, the group, and the organization. Employees of all levels need to be involved in continuous learning in order for the transition from a traditional organization to a learning organization to be successful and maintainable (Weldy & Gillis, 2010, p.459). As an individual, one must have a strong motivation and enthusiasm for learning, allowing for active participation within the lessons and for learning to take place (Pokharel & Choi, 2013). Also, learning is self-propelled a lot of the time, as the individual does not want to wait to be told what to learn (Ghaffari et al.,
At the group level, collaboration and sharing of ideas is critical, and the group setting encourages a “continuous process of intellectual socialization” (Pokharel & Choi, 2013). Learning organizations must be able to create an environment that fosters learning within the individual and the team levels, as neither can perform in an environment that prevents it. The organizational level uses the results of group and individual learning to incorporate the shared understandings into the organization. The knowledge shared becomes part of the institution and organizations use this new knowledge to reflect and change (Pokharel & Choi, 2013).

Cultural Impact

The effects of outside factors such as competition within the marketplace, new information and new technologies are as relevant as the effects of inside factors, such as company culture when creating a learning organization. All of these factors together drive learning within organizations. When creating an organization, one is inclined to put forth a mission or vision, a set of core values, and systems to drive success toward these. This creates the company culture, and employees are typically hired with the idea that they will work to uphold these values and work toward the mission.

The creation of a learning organization encourages this, but it also modifies it in a way. “In a nutshell, a vision always should be tangible and desirable, so that the employees of the Organization will improve constantly and learn on the way by achievement of objectives to the vision” (Luhn, 2016). The need for organizations to change from being rigid systems to fluid systems in crucial in creating a learning organization. This affects the culture within an organization as they are able to modify or develop their core values, mission, or vision to continue innovating and improving. Obtaining constant input from different individuals leads to
diversity within the workplace including diversity of ideas and cultural diversity. This, in turn, leads to a stronger workplace.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the concept of the learning organization has been studied in many countries. Globally, the impact of culture on creating this type of environment has shown some differentiation. As traditions and cultures are different in different parts of the world, it is safe to assume that behaviors and processes within organizations are different. The benefit of implementing a continuous learning environment, or learning organization, is while processes may be different, with the basic concepts and requirements mapped out by Senge (1990) and Watson and Marsick (1993; 2003), any organization of any kind has the tools to create this type of environment. For example, a study was conducted within Jordanian schools to determine if some of the basic principles of a learning organization were present within these environments. It was determined that different school systems had varying availability of these basic principles, and that with further support and resources, these types of environments can be fostered (Hawamdeh & Jaradat, 2012).

Barriers

There are many types of barriers that may affect identifying needs for change, innovation, and progress within organizations. These barriers may include management not realizing the need for change, hierarchal structure, not desiring feedback from employees, employee resistance, lack of knowledge about the changes occurring, access to improved technology and lack of funding or resources for the changes to be able to be implemented. Any single or combination of these factors, as well as the addition of any other barriers, weighs strongly on the prevention of creating a continuous learning environment.
**Effect of leadership.** Many times, organizations are run with a hierarchal structure, with upper management and key stakeholders making decisions for the entire organization. As stated by Shin,

“Most successful organizations are so caught up in their day-to-day activities that they rarely, if ever, pause to reflect and to think objectively about themselves or their businesses. They fail to ask probing questions that might lead them to question their basic assumptions, refresh their strategies, or reengineer their work processes.” (Shin, 2017, p. 47)

This statement leads to the formation of probing questions, itself, as to why this process of self-reflection within organizations is not done more regularly. Watson and Marsick saw that leaders emerged as gatekeepers of change, and they first required transformation in order to model a transformative environment (Watkins et al., 2013).

Globally, leadership can affect the way in which things are done within the organization by not wanting to share knowledge or learn from others. For example, an American auto maker and a Japanese auto maker were completing a similar assembly process, but the process in Japan was done with much more precision and reliability at a lower cost. After further investigation, it was discovered that instead of having three different lead designers create three different bolts for one engine, the Japanese designers shared knowledge and made one universal bolt that could be used (Gronhaug & Stone, 2012, p.267).

**Employee resistance.** Employees who have been with an organization for any amount of time get set in their ways and any mention of change can cause stress from disruption. Unfortunately, a lot of the time, change is implemented in order to make the processes easier. Trying to implement a continuous learning environment is not met without resistance, though. In order to support a learning environment, employees must feel safe to admit flaws in their
processing and report mistakes, allowing them to learn from them (Eisenberg, 2000, p.201).

Historically, change as a result of mistakes has been seen as a punishment, so many employees have not been on board with reporting errors. Applying penalties for mistakes leads to fear within the employees’ minds, inhibiting learning (Guta, 2012).

Employees may also be resistant to change if they do not understand fully what change is happening. When the change is technological, it may take some employees longer to catch on to the concepts and procedures than others. Additionally, it has been proven that people are more successful with change when it is done in increments, rather than changing everything at once. This may pose a barrier within trying to create a continuous learning environment if any or many of the seven criteria of learning organizations are not already present within the organization.

In addition, the consciousness of the employees while at work plays a role in their capacity to learn. A study states, “Organizational learning depends on the degree of alertness of individuals and on the aggregate wakefulness or collective consciousness as a whole” (Heaton, 2017, p.405). This, in turn, affects how the concept of a learning organization is received; more consciousness development allows for greater capacity for seeing systems, collaborating amongst differing views, and envisioning what the future looks like to the organization (Heaton, 2017, p.405).

Lastly, employees may be resistant to working together with one another, assuming they have to suspend their personal views and assumptions of how things are done. This notion plays a pivotal role in the creation of the nature of the environment in which collaboration takes place. Employees need to feel that they are able to share their knowledge and can learn from others, transitioning from a defensive environment of change to an inclusive one (Halmaghi, 2018, p. 99; Giesecke & McNeill, 2004, p.58). As stated differently in many examples, and most
famously by Aristotle, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” While individual learning is important for personal development, learning at the team level is important for the organization’s overall development.

**Lack of resources.** Not having access to important resources is a pivotal barrier for smaller organizations to be able to create a learning organization or continuous learning environment. Larger organizations may have additional funds, manpower, and access to technology that would allow them to complete this transition more easily. With learning, knowledge sharing, and training, time and money are important resources to consider. Focusing on this aspect of the business model may cause smaller businesses to neglect other important daily operations, which would be counterproductive to the organization overall.

**Transitioning from Traditional to Learning Organization**

The largest step for a traditional organization to take in order to transition to a learning organization is to create a climate that encourages learning, experimenting, innovation, and risk taking (Gieseke & McNeil, 2004, p.54-55). Focusing on learning as a means to enact positive change within an organization, rather than a punishment to mistakes, encourages employees to participate. When employees are invested in the organization’s improvement, they have the opportunity to obtain personal development as well (Gieseke & McNeil, 2004, p.54). When employees are encouraged to take risks and try new things, an environment that supports creativity is created.

As previously stated, collaboration between employees working and learning within the team environment is essential to the creation of a learning organization or continuous learning environment. Being able to share ideas and problem solve as a group allows for new problems to
be met faster with faster results and resolution. This, in turn, can lead to increased performance and customer service, two important aspects of many organizations’ business models.

Lastly, a pivotal step for traditional organizations to transition to learning organizations pertains to the role of the leader or leadership team. As mentioned above, leadership impacts learning in multiple ways, and can sometimes become a barrier for employees. Organizations with hierarchal structures or those who make decisions from the top down are encouraged to adopt a more collaborative view of leadership. Many great ideas formulated from the minds of employees get overlooked due to the presence of this hierarchal structure. A learning organization is one that encourages employees to offer ideas and feedback, express concerns, and collaborative decision-making (Shin et al., 2017, p.49). In order for leaders to be effective in implementing an environment aligned with that of a learning organization, they must be able to do three things: listen effectively, be accessible and show desire for information and feedback, and provide opportunities for information exchange (Shin et al., 2017, p.49). It is important for leaders to take a step back and allow the employees of the organization to thrive in the learning environment, as it fosters creativity, idea sharing, problem-solving and brainstorming.
Chapter V: Discussion

Throughout the duration of our lives, we are participants in many different organizations: schools, clubs, professional organizations. Whether we realize it or not, these organizations are constantly transforming, and they are doing it in order to stay up-to-date, relevant, and to sustain themselves within their respective industries. Creating a continuous learning environment within organizations would only serve to help them and the members of those organizations. But how important is this? How can it be done? What are the barriers that these organizations face when trying to create a continuous learning environment for their members or employees? These were the questions posed and the basis for this study. Chapter V will discuss the study as a whole, from how the research was completed, conclusions and recommendations based on the research, and recommendations for future research to be completed.

Statement of the Problem

The creation of a continuous learning environment is crucial for many different industries as it allows participants to stay informed on current trends and technology, products, information, and laws and statutes. These innovations lead to the creation of a competitive environment within the industries, allowing for professional separation due to the offerings of that organization. For organizations to stay relevant and competitive, these innovations and knowledge has to be within reach. As previously stated, continuing education courses have already been recognized as requirements for many different industries, including medical and healthcare, law enforcement, education, insurance, and even business. But knowing this, how do organizations, especially small businesses (with less than 25 employees), create this type of environment?
Conclusions and Implications

Based on the research that this study found and analyzed, learning organizations have been underrecognized for decades. Even since the coining of the term ‘learning organization’ in 1990, very few, diverse studies have been done to analyze the true nature of such organizations and the barriers that are present when trying to create one. The purpose of this study was to answer the question:

“What are the barriers and the requirements to a small business organization (one of less than 25 employees), competing in a rapidly changing industry, interested in creating and sustaining a continuous learning environment for its employees?”

The barriers identified in each of the studies were: employee resistance and lack of knowledge sharing and collaboration, hierarchal structure/leadership, and lack of resources or access to technology. Employee resistance accounts for the largest barrier, as they are the driving force of the organization. If they do not have the want or motivation to complete a task, it makes for difficulty for the organization to obtain this goal. This plays a part with knowledge sharing and collaboration, as many employees within small businesses do not feel the need to share their ideas and want to focus on completing their own work. Hierarchal structure/leadership is the second largest barrier to creating a continuous learning environment in a small business, as many individuals in upper management feel obligated to make all of the decisions. Many times, they are also not self-aware of the needs of the organization, but focused on their needs as an employee, leading to missed opportunities for improvement. Lastly, the third major barrier is the lack of and access to resources critical for implementing this type of environment. Unlike large corporations and organizations, small businesses do not have as much disposable funding and need to be more conscious about what they use their time and money on.
Not being able to purchase new technology in an increasingly technological world poses a huge threat to creating a continuous learning environment. Also, not being able to spend money on training opportunities, as well as brainstorming exercises and research and development of ways to improve the organization creates a large barrier to the creation of a continuous learning environment.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The deviation between requirements found to create a learning organization raises the question, “What are the bare requirements an organization need to create a learning organization?” This would lay the groundwork for organizations to be able to grow upon without stretching their resources too far. Noting the common barriers that were discovered throughout the previous studies, further research can be done to determine how to avoid such barriers throughout the process of creating a continuous learning environment. Lastly, this study would recommend research to explore the best time to create a learning organization or continuous learning environment. There was a strong sense of impact on the culture within an organization throughout the process, so it may be worth it to explore the timeline of whether this could be more easily implemented within a new business, within a struggling business, or within a thriving business with established roots.
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