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Strategizing Learning for a Better Quality of Work Life:

Integrating Context and Learning Orientation

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Abstract

The paper explores how employees make sense of their quality of work life by considering the way they engage in learning. It extends the theory of learning orientation, as originally conceptualized by Baker and Sinkula (1999), by examining the importance of context which is determined by the quality of work life as both a perceived and experienced reality. This reality illuminates the concept of sensemaking where employees attach meanings to different aspects of their job as signifying quality or non-quality of work life. Based on data collected over a three-year period on an interactive online discussion forum among 137 working adults in America, it was found that a negative perception of work life would lead to a reactive and passive learning orientation while a positive perception, a proactive and forward-looking learning orientation. Quality of work life boundaries are conditioned by three cognitive categories: objective judgment, subjective interpretation, and evaluative sensemaking.

Keywords: Context, HRD, learning orientation, organizational learning, quality of work life, sensemaking

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In the study of organizational work and the perceived quality of life, Rice et al. (1985) discovered that human action and intentionality in performing an activity in a particular context are crucial for influencing the quality of an outcome. More specifically, they found that organizational work can influence the perceived and objective quality of work life through the way employees engage in work, respond to their environment, and determine outcomes resulting from specific activities. If both intent and action can increase or decrease an employee's quality of work life, it does suggest that a deeper understanding of cognitive (intent) and behavioral (action) participation in organizational work could change the way employees perceive and experience their work life. In other words, employees can learn to redefine the quality of their work life by first understanding the value of the work activities and their very existence in the complexity of organizational dynamics.

The purpose of this paper is to determine how employees make sense of their quality of work life by considering the importance of learning and their engagement in learning. We view the relationship between the need to learn and the actual learning process as characterized by learning orientation in a particular context. We further posit that the understanding of learning orientation can intensify the sensemaking process of job boundaries and its impact on the organization, the relationship of which helps determine the quality of work life in more specific terms. Taking this relationship further, our focus is to explore how employees increase their organizational learning capabilities by creating value for their organizations. Value creation refers to the knowledge gained and its distribution into work practice bringing tangible results including work efficiency and productivity, increased employee relations and customer service, and reduced errors (Baker & Sinkula, 1999). Such organizational learning capabilities through value creation are, in turn, facilitated by a

learning orientation that increases employees' opportunities for double-loop learning where routines and norms are challenged for the creation of a new organizational form (Argyris & Schön, 1996). The following questions guide the purpose of our inquiry:

1. *How do employees make sense of their quality of work life?*
2. *How do the meanings associated with the quality of work life influence employees' learning orientation?*

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the interrelations between the conditions that shape the quality of work life and employees' orientation to learning in improving their overall work life. In the next section, we review the literature that surrounds the two research questions.

Literature Review

We focus our literature review on quality of work life, learning orientation, context, and sensemaking. In examining these interrelations, concepts related to high-performance work systems and job enrichment become relevant.

Quality of Work Life

Quality of work life is a concept which suggests that employees, as a primary resource for organizational success, have the potential of making valuable contribution to the business prospects of an organization. Hence, they should be treated with respect and dignity given their trustworthiness and responsibility (Martel & Dupuis, 2006). The term quality is used to suggest that work and life are intertwined in such a way that elements such as the primary tasks employee do, physical environment, social context, and the administration system have an impact on life within and outside the job. This further suggests that if an employee is stressed out at work, the stress may be spilled over to his/her personal life affecting the way he/she views work and subsequently, life, upsetting work-life balance (Judge, Ilies, & Scott, 2006). As such, studies into the quality of work life (e.g. Che Rose et al., 2006; Connell, & Hannif, 2009; Crouter, 1984; Elizur & Shye, 1990) have investigated

the various approaches to increasing employees' commitment to their work and organizations by focusing on job-related wellbeing, reward systems, and performance management.

To a large extent, quality of work life is also concerned about employee participation in collaborative problem solving and decision making leading to mutual benefits between employees and the employer. More specific considerations of quality of work life enhancement include autonomous work groups, job enrichment, and high-performance opportunities which aim at increasing job satisfaction and productivity of employees, as reinforced by Gittel et al. (2008) in their study of nursing services. Accordingly, the emphasis will be on employees' cognitive and behavioral responses to organizational identification, job involvement, job effort, intention to quit, and personal alienation. In a study by Leavitt, Fong, and Greenwald (2011), they discovered that the role of implicit attitudes toward an employee's coworkers, supervisors, and organization is a determinant to his/her well-being. Of primary importance is to examine the type of needs that can and cannot be fulfilled at work according to an individual's perception of his/her involvement in the workplace (Sirgy et al., 2001).

We now discuss the influences of quality of work life on work performance achieved through work redesign and high-performance work systems as there is a close relationship between the notion of quality in the work life and job performance (Che Rose et al., 2006).

Work redesign. Research as early as the 70's recognized that the quality of work life is closely related to job redesign. In a study by Hackman and Oldham (1976), they discovered that the work that employees do should be a core part of an organization's strategic aim. As such, what makes them engaged at work is largely related to what they perceive as meaningful to what they do. It was also found that the degree of meaningfulness is closely aligned to job-design principles where autonomy and skill variety should be considered to

bring out the best in an employee. In turn, job redesign and enrichment (derived from meaningfulness) will lead to intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and increased performance.

High-performance work systems. The relevance between quality of work life and high-performance work systems is seen in the type of work practices in contributing to optimal organizational performance. Hence, high performance should first be considered at the individual level before examining the systemic effects that lead to cross-functional work practices (Glover & Butler, 2011). It is the understanding of individuals' ability based on their discretionary effort and quest for better performance that is of fundamental concern to evaluating high-performance work systems (Boxall & Macky, 2009). The relevance to quality of work life is seen in the dichotomy between the benefits given to employees such as competence development and increased rewards, and the potential costs incurred from a high degree of stress and work-life imbalance.

Quality of work life and learning. Job dissatisfaction can have an impact on employees' learning orientation because learning can help them to seek new opportunities on their overall quality of work life (Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2009). Furthermore, motivation to learn can also influence the quality of work life as employees engage in strategies and practices that provide social support for each other to achieve certain tasks. Social support is defined by the complementariness of attitudes, emotions, and actions from subordinates, supervisors, and top management. A study done by Facticeau, Dobbins, Russell, Ladd, and Kudisch (1995) indicated that social support in the work environment is a predictor of pre-training motivation and perceived learning transfer. In other words, employees, when supported at work, are more likely to feel motivated to seek out learning and training opportunities. This study, therefore, focuses on the influences of quality of work life on employees' learning orientation.

Learning Process and Learning-Oriented Behavior

According to Cook and Yanow (1993), there is a difference between the learning of individuals and learning in organizations. The former is a personal pursuit where the knowledge gained through learning could be demonstrated in individual ways. On the other hand, the latter requires the generation of knowledge that will have an impact on behavioral change at the organizational level (Huber, 1991). Such a change, when demonstrated collectively, will lead to organizational learning where individuals generate new insights that will create value for the long-term benefit of the organization (Farrell, 2000). According to Hurley and Hult (1998), in order for an organization to support learning as a value-creation process, it needs to provide an appropriate culture by developing structures, strategies, and processes that enhance learning behaviors which operate at different levels: individual, team, and organizational.

Individual learning. Individual learning takes place in the human minds (cognition) and the knowledge stored is often tacit in nature until the learner externalizes the learning into practical applications (Simon, 1991). Nonaka (1994) extended this idea by identifying the practical knowledge creation process as the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. This is when individuals depend on their procedural memory to either maintain or create new organizational routines (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994), reinforcing Argyris and Schön's (1978) reference to single-loop learning (questioning of assumptions for incorporation into norms) and double-loop learning (questioning of assumptions for creating new norms) as characteristic of organizational learning.

Group learning. Group learning occurs when group members generate, internalize, and reflect upon feedback based on specific actions (Edmondson, 1999). Schilling, Vidal, Ployhart, and Marangoni (2003) suggested that insight, intuition, and innovative ideas that reside at the individual level are insufficient to be externalized for the benefit of the

organization. It is how these ideas are shared and interpreted in group settings that a common set of meanings will develop. These meanings will subsequently determine the actions to be taken affecting organizational routines (Crosson, Lane, & White, 1999; Daft & Weick, 1984).

Organizational learning. Organizational learning occurs when individuals and groups come together to challenge underlying assumptions through collective knowledge creation and action (Argyris & Schön, 1996). In the process, two types of learning could possibly emerge; one is single-loop learning where lessons learned from an action are part of the shared cognition (identifiable frames of references) and consequently incorporated into existing norms and routines. The other is double-loop learning where errors form the basis for mental models to be reexamined and modified to guide decision making for the development of organizational rules and practices (Senge, 1990).

Learning orientation. Learning orientation, a concept first developed by Baker and Sinkula (1999), is a condition that integrates generative and double-loop learning based on a set of knowledge-questioning values. According to Chiva, Grandío, and Alegre (2010), these values are a result of generative learning when learners go beyond the state of logic to question assumptions and seek new mental connections by taking their existing knowledge to another level (transcending current thinking). The underlying process is one which requires organizations to unlearn obsolete knowledge and norms, and remove any perceptual errors related to new information and action (Hedberg, 1981). Baker and Sinkula (1999) further suggested that learning orientation is underpinned by values that are associated with an organization's learning capabilities leading to a commitment to learning, an open-mindedness to embrace learning, and a shared vision to learn collectively.

Much of the literature suggests that learning orientation is conceptualized at the organizational level (e.g. Baker & Sinkula, 1999; Nystrom & Starbuck 1984; Stern, Katz-Navon, & Naveh, 2008; Swart & Kinnie, 2010); however in relating to the quality of work

life, this paper will conceptualize learning orientation at the individual level. This could perhaps be better understood if we considered the operationalization of learning orientation from a situational perspective. Perception of the quality of work life is often based on the shifting conditions under which an experience in one's working life is determined by a specific context. According to Stern, Katz-Navon, and Naveh (2008), learning orientation is context-driven and situational learning orientation is the extent to which individuals perceive their contextual boundaries as increasing their competence to fulfill a task or do their job well. This is demonstrated in the way individuals seek new information, experiment new ways of doing, and actively engage in feedback.

Relating situational learning orientation to learning capability takes March's (1991) notion of knowledge utilization (exploitation) and renewal (exploration) to a micro level of analysis. The former refers to the maximization of current knowledge while the latter, creation of new knowledge. As Swart and Kinnie (2010) suggested, increasing one's learning capability based on situational contexts and individual values (learning orientation) through exploration requires continuous search, risk taking, flexibility, and innovation. On the other hand, exploitation or capitalization of existing knowledge requires choice, refinement, efficiency, and implementation. We further identify two types of learning orientation to explain how situational contexts can trigger the way individuals respond to opportunities for learning and their choice of actions.

Proactive learning orientation. Proactive learning orientation is a cognitive condition that motivates individuals to derive lessons from challenging status quo instead of being passive and adaptive to present situations. Such a condition propels individuals to adopt an active attitude and approach toward work. Individuals with a proactive learning orientation develop work procedures and professional competencies to improve their job performance and future work demands. Not only do they take initiatives in improving work processes, they

exercise control but maintain a certain level of flexibility in dealing with others (Sannentag, 2003). More importantly, they are responsive to learning opportunities.

Forward-looking learning orientation. Forward-looking learning orientation is a cognitive condition that allows individuals to internalize their values for making decisions on their future course of action. This also depends on their learning capability to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure that the action taken is effective. According to Gavetti and Levinthal (2000), cognition (the way people think) is a forward-looking form of intelligence which relates choice of actions to potential impact based on tangible outcomes. In another study, Wong and Kwong (2007) suggested that forward-looking thinking processes are linked to decision making which leads to prospective outcomes. The way individuals frame their references will have an effect on the efficacy of their action choices.

Learning strategies. If learning orientation leads to potential actions, it would be necessary to understand the learning strategies adopted by individuals to determine their choice of actions. Nembhard and Tucker (2010) made a distinction between autonomous and deliberate learning, the former referring to individuals' responsibility of learning while the latter, choice of learning made by individuals based on specific circumstances. In their study in neonatal intensive care units, Nembhard and Tucker found out that deliberate learning takes the cumulative experience of healthcare professionals to another level. Adopting deliberate learning strategies allowed them to handle learning challenges as characterized by knowledge and contextual complexity. Such strategies, as reinforced by Bell and Kozlowski (2008), not only promote self-regulation and a proactive approach to problem solving but also develop more complex skills of analysis that enable adaptive transfer of knowledge and know-how in crucial times.

Contextual Stimuli

Quality of work life is largely influenced by an immediate context which Mowday and Sutton (1993: 198) defined as “stimuli and experience that surround and thus exist in the environment external to the individual.” There are positive and negative contexts that provide the stimuli as perceptual cues for employees to evaluate their quality of work life (Huber, 1991). Examples of positive contexts include flexible working hours, a strong job identity, opportunities for training and competence development, strong work ethics, reward and recognition as well as a collaborative climate. In contrast, examples of negative contexts include a lack of resources, micromanagement, entrapment derailing promotion, unrealistic job demands, and overtime work (Nykodym, Longenecker, & Ruud, 2008; Rice et al., 1985). Given the importance of context, we suggest that learning orientation provides the capacity for employees to “...create a sense of order and make arrangements with each other, both to achieve security and to meet material needs.” (Watson, 1995: 222) There are four distinct contextual stimuli that engage in employees’ cognition as perceptual cues to help them interpret their work life, and consequently develop learning strategies to enhance its overall quality. They are generative, supportive, facilitative, performative, and facilitative stimuli.

Generative stimuli. Generative stimuli are a type of learned stimuli that have undergone some form of transformation in the cognitive process. This process is also known as schema coordination where individuals relate different frames of references and map them onto a lived (familiar) and perceived (unfamiliar) experience. Characteristics of generative stimuli facilitate the calling out of the prior understanding of familiar cognitive enablers based on an activity, event or encounter and allow individuals to respond to such enablers by anticipating similar or better experiential outcomes (Lee, Lim, & Grabowski, 2008). Generative stimuli, therefore, promote a new dimension of learning and action taking as individuals become more proactive in developing new references for further experimentation.

Supportive stimuli. Supportive stimuli function through social cognition that operates in the way individuals process and exchange information based on various social networks. There are context-induced stimuli that either support or counteract the extent to which individuals perceive their connection with the external world (Bandura, 1989). For instance, a study by Lutz et al. (2003) investigated, through laboratory and treatment settings, the dichotomy of context-induced contrast and assimilation that led to individuals' support judgment. It was found that there is a correlation between social contexts and supportive stimuli where the former refers to the overall climate induced through social interaction while the latter is associated with specific support interventions. Taken together, both social climate and supportive interaction combine to produce supportive stimuli that have an influence on an individual's affective orientation.

Facilitative stimuli. Facilitative stimuli are driven by the performance orientation of new tasks in environments that may be less predictable than anticipated. Individuals rely on spontaneous yet predictable cognitive resources such as their intelligence and experience to handle certain challenging tasks to completion (Fiedler & Garcia, 1987). In doing so, they exploit their cognitive ability by going beyond the tried-and-tested experience to develop new schemas that could support the optimizing of task performance. Facilitative stimuli also guide individuals in exploiting the regularities of the task environment, the availability of information, and the dynamics of social interaction to satisfy new and less-defined tasks (Logan & Zbrodoff, 1979).

Performative stimuli. Performative stimuli guide daily behavior and task engagement of individuals based on norms and habits. They not only increase the intentionality of individuals to perform a particular task better but also transform the way individuals identify with themselves according to what they do. Such stimuli provide language and job characteristic cues that guide the performance of tasks from moment to moment driven by

feedback on the adequacy of ongoing performance. They also engage individuals in understanding the dynamics and emphasis of the task at hand (Cheyne et al., 2009).

In short, according to Johns (2001), context provides the opportunity for individuals to exist with the complexity and ambiguity through sensemaking and the projection of language. Hence, context can be regarded as having an influence on action, utterance or expression, determining the extent to which employees learn (DeRose, 1992).

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a process by which an individual goes into a retrospective rationalization of the ongoing circumstances of a certain phenomenon by extracting and developing perceptual cues. These cues help the sensemaker to identify the social context in clearer terms helping him/her respond to the ongoing circumstances in more or less specific ways (Weick, 1996). Sensemaking leads to a communication process that transforms perceptual cues into concrete words and these are further organized into salient categories that manifest themselves as written or spoken texts. The explicitness of words is often a representation of employees' quest for meaning in their organizational life helping them to develop subsequent actions (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). However, sensemaking is not an automatic cognitive response to events; it requires an individual's engagement with his/her direct experience to appropriately attach meanings to ongoing circumstances. Capturing the meaning of an experience does not necessarily lead to a further understanding of what is going on. It is through embracing the social and systemic circumstances such as task coordination, information dissemination and power distribution that sensemaking is heightened. Only then can an individual ask, "What is going on here?" and "What do I do next?" to allow talk and action to form an integrative mix that leads to an ongoing process of action taking (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

As part of sensemaking in the workplace, individuals perceive their lived experience as combining work and other personal issues such as family and professional development. Hence, their lived experience is largely determined by different meanings attached to compatibility and conflict, particularly how two or more work-life elements intersect to give rise to the notion of quality (Aryee, Srinivas, & Tan, 2005). There are three types of sensemaking that are related to the quality of work life: evaluative sensemaking, subjective interpretation, and objective judgment.

Evaluative sensemaking. Evaluative sensemaking is a process by which individuals attach meanings to workplace transitions, particularly to determine if change is indeed a defining quality of the work environment, hence improving individual and group relationships in organizational contexts. It is a process that guides individuals in understanding the potential contextual factors and their influence on the extent of change leading to workplace improvements. This involves their being aware of the cognitive factors that shape their perception toward the opportunities and constraints that help them fulfill their psychological contract with the organization (Chaudhry, Wayne, & Schalk, 2009). A psychological contract involves mutual beliefs, values, trust, and obligations between an employee and employer. It determines the dynamics for employees to be connected to their work and guides them in the execution of their tasks to produce effective results (Rousseau, 1996).

Subjective interpretation. Subjective interpretation is driven by externally-situated information but the information can be objectified through behavior. The subjectivity of meaning making and the objectivity of behavioral response often allow individuals to discover their own intentions in committing to an action (Weick, 1996). When individuals depend on or recreate their existing knowledge to make sense of their work environment, tasks, and activities, they essentially engage in the subjective interpretation of what is going

on around them. Such an interpretation is often intensified by formal and informal interactions that occur in the workplace where individuals explore problematic issues through the sharing of assumptions and experiences which in turn lead to inter-subjective meanings. These meanings provide the richness for individuals to frame and re-frame their mental models to allow collective sensemaking to occur when a coherent cognitive structure patterned by more controlled frames of references is developed. This structural coherence further defines boundaries of intervention leading to intelligible actions (Schön, 1983).

Objective judgment. Objective judgment is the way in which individuals organize and frame the meaning of their perception based on existing guidelines that help to determine an opinion or argument. Fiol (1994) first introduced the notion of judgmental content of communication based on her differentiation of broadly or flexibly-framed argument and narrowly or rigidly-framed argument. The former suggests that there is a certain degree of uncertainty attached to the meaning of a perception while the latter implies a more certain way of perception of an incident and its consequences. Objective judgment, therefore, operates at varying degrees of certainty depending on how the content or meaning of the communication is framed.

Gaps in the Literature

This study seeks to extend the theory of learning orientation, an area that has not been extensively researched following Baker and Sinkula's (1999) conceptualization. More importantly, research on the linkage between quality of work life and learning orientation has been minimal as much of the work on the quality of work life revolves around career development (Che Rose, Beh, & Idris, 2006), human resource management practices (Connell & Hannif, 2009), leadership (Greenberg & Glaser, 2008), organizational change (Nykodym, Longenecker, & Ruud, 2008), quality of life (Elizur & Shye, 1990), and employee motivation (Sirgy et al., 2001).

One of the main contributions of this study is expanding the concept of learning orientation by understanding context, that is, how contextual stimuli promote learning-oriented behavior. Context is determined by the quality of work life as both a perceived and experienced reality, extending the concept of sensemaking through which individuals attach meanings to perceptual cues. Another contribution of the study is to unravel the different levels of learning that operate within the domain of learning orientation which has been conceptualized at the organizational level (Baker & Sinkula, 1999). Analyzing learning orientation from the perspective of organizational learning which operates at the individual, group, and organizational level allows us to have a better understanding of the different levels at which learning orientation operates. Extending Baker and Sinkula's concept of learning orientation, we situate conceptualization in the context of quality of work life by examining how individuals make sense of their work life through social exchange. Combining learning orientation and quality of work life will increase organizational learning as organizations can build a culture of psychological safety to promote trust, openness, and commitment to learning. We next describe our empirical exploration to address the gaps in the literature.

Methodology

Context and Data Sources

The data on which our analysis was based were taken from the online forum discussion of one of the authors' MBA students that spanned six semesters between the spring of 2007 and fall of 2009. To ensure that no ethical issues were involved, an Institutional Review Board application was made for the course and students were at the start informed of the purposes of the forum including knowledge sharing, online learning, and research. This is a state university located near a metropolitan area of the southwest of the United States. About 99% of the students were working full time while pursuing their MBA and were aspiring to pursue a management career, The demand of school work and a full-

time working schedule made them a viable sample, which represents working professionals, to contribute to our study on their learning orientation and perception of the quality of their work life. The discussion was part of the course requirements but they were not judged by their opinions presented in their answers; rather, they were encouraged to participate actively to share and discuss their honest perceptions about various issues about their own quality of work life that either confronted or supported them. The students were presented with two open-ended questions:

- *What are the factors that will negatively affect your attitude toward work?*
- *What are the factors that will positively affect your ability at work?*

The open-endedness provided an unlimited platform for them to think totally from their perspectives without any predetermined notions about the subject. The main objective was to allow them to reflect and thread on issues based on their perceived quality of work life including personal and organizational issues that would have an impact on their learning abilities and performance. While following the threads, we were identifying the recurring factors that led to their perceived quality of work life and how these had affected the way they learned at work. From the spontaneous discussion where respondents built on each other's views, we could identify that informal learning had occurred as they provided insights into the deeper issues that were embedded in their work life, and the way they coped with and responded to ambiguous work situations. We further determined issues pertaining to their perception, learning, experience, thinking patterns, and performance regarding their work life.

Research Design

The reflective narratives of these respondents formed the core of the qualitative data that satisfied our purpose of inquiry, one that was exploratory in nature. In contrast to a positivistic paradigm, an exploratory approach emphasizes truth as a cooperative construction

between subjects and their prevailing context (Eisenhardt, 1989). As a parallel, quality of work life is, in part, a function of the context rather than an objective reality. Within this perspective, the meaning of the data collected will be largely underpinned by the values and reality of the subjects (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In exploring a variety of learning processes based on their online interactions, it is appropriate to argue that “perception is the most important reality” (Perry, Reige, & Brown, 1999: 6) when the respondents were able to internalize their perceptions to reflect their interpretation of reality.

The online forum was designed to allow the subjects to respond freely to the posted questions through a process of elaboration and clarification of work-life issues. The virtual space was left open for the entire semester of about six months to allow them to engage in ongoing ‘conversations’ with other subjects. Many of them went beyond single entries as they ‘jumped in’ almost spontaneously on issues that were important to them leading to multiple entries. Some raised questions seeking specific responses while others shared their experiences to enrich their learning. Most of the entries were multidirectional as ideas were constructed and shaped along the way. Some responded with brief statements to make a point while others provided more description. The discourse took different forms and this made the data come alive as we were able to determine if learning occurred during the virtual interaction. For instance, as subjects shared about life events such as having a family, buying a house or car, and switching career, they helped each other to construct their own experiences about career choices and job involvements. In so doing, they were making sense of what might mean as their quality of work life as they reflected on what they could have done or not done to make their working life better. They also realized that they were developing some potential learning strategies through the process of sensemaking to help themselves by building a better quality of work life.

Data Analysis

We coded the data using categorical cues, identifying the research questions as broad categories and the other key themes as root categories. For instance, we started with keyword search such as “training”, “learning”, “education”, “context”, “motivation”, “advancement”, “culture”, “environment”, and so on to help us grasp an overall sense of the data. We then relied on the online guiding questions and followed the chain of discussions very closely to look for connections and coherence of ideas from single and clusters of contributors who had expanded on or diverted away from earlier pools of ideas. We embarked on a highly systematic and rigorous process of pattern matching till recurring themes began to emerge. Such recurrence signaled to us that there was data saturation where interpretations between both of us (researchers) were more or less along the same lines (Guthrie & Matthews, 2003). In our coding process, we were sensitive to the examples provided and the various supporting ideas. We managed to disintegrate the messy data into meaningful units as we used tables to help us classify our units of analysis and determine preliminary thematic patterns (Sekaran, 2000). When individual themes and patterns were finally interpreted, we adopted an integrative perspective in reducing the data to obtain a clear set of collective responses. In the process, we depended heavily on the research questions to guide us in the analytic procedure to achieve pattern-matching (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The data were analyzed through a manual approach as we consistently tried to match the key themes with the extant literature to help us identify conceptual similarities and deviations. This process enabled us to achieve theory elaboration as we engaged in thematic integration and expansion of concepts (Eisenhardt, 1989) in the areas of quality of work life, learning orientation, and sensemaking. In order to ensure that the data were consistently treated, we used a constant comparative method when performing content analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method sought to maintain consistency where data were assessed on their stability, that is, the level of interpretation by another party would not have deviated too

drastically from the first analysis. In other words, if the data were to be analyzed from scratch, the results would fall within similar thematic patterns (Krippendorff, 1980).

Findings

A total of 137 MBA subjects responded to the online forum on the quality of work life. Of these, 84 are male (61%) and 53 are female (39%). The average ratio for gender distribution is 15 (male):10 (female), indicating that all male subjects ($n=84$) of the total population ($n=140$) and 95% of the total female subjects ($n=56$) participated in the online discussion. A total of 62,529 words constitute the overall text that formed the core of our analysis and interpretation. We will discuss the findings in relation to the research questions.

Sensemaking the Quality of Work Life

By the following the thread of discussion closely, we discovered that many of the respondents made sense of the quality of their work life through interaction with their immediate context as represented by both tangible and intangible organizational elements. The pattern-matching of data in the content analysis helped us to classify the recurring themes based on examples and ideas as associated with quality of work life context into four broad categories which we term contextual stimuli. These are external triggers that enable individuals to form frames of references that associate their experience with the quality of work life. According to some researchers (e.g. Axtell & Parker, 2003; Boxall & Macky, 2009; Greenberg & Glaser, 2008), control and empowerment over work and its intrinsic value in making an impact on organizational performance signifies one's control over life as well. The idea is that when work gives meaning to an employee, it helps him/her to increase engagement in life both in and outside work (Harrington & Ladge, 2009).

We discovered that these contextual stimuli, as illustrated in Figure 1, are facilitated by internal and external motivating factors. Internal motivators are those that involve the intrinsic cognitive participation of employees in wanting to do something to either capitalize

on their strengths or minimize their current deficiencies. Cognitive participation refers to the mental readiness to engage in a current or forthcoming experience giving rise to the level of intent influencing subsequent action (Rice et al., 1985).

PROACTIVE LEARNING ORIENTATION	Performative Stimuli <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competence • Work outputs and outcomes • Work enrichment 	Supportive Stimuli <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment • Collaboration • Communities of practice
FORWARD- LOOKING LEARNING ORIENTATION	Generative Stimuli <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control • Empowerment • Communication • Prospects/of new challenges 	Facilitative Stimuli <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Resources • Rewards • Workload
	INTERNAL MOTIVATOR	EXTERNAL MOTIVATOR

Figure 1. Contextual Stimuli

Linking these motivators to quality of work life, it can be seen that employees are concerned about their current (lived) and projected (perceived) work-life experience. Identifying the gap between the two types of experience has allowed them to draw on different contextual stimuli helping them move toward a better of quality of work life. As an example, *generative stimuli* project flexibility and autonomy in managing work processes and human relationships, as illustrated in the following quote:

I think if I were given more responsibility, within reason of course, and included in more meetings and decision making sessions my attitude towards my work would, particularly to work as a team would be better. As of now I am mostly just given assignments without really knowing what they are for, what they resulted from, or even who they benefit. I think if I were given more challenging assignments or even given the opportunity to volunteer for assignments in team meetings that I would have a better attitude about my work.

On the other hand, employees are also concerned about their job outcomes and seek opportunities to improve on the quality and sustainability of their performance by drawing on *performative stimuli*, as expressed by a respondent:

Almost all companies have a diverse set of employees with diverse backgrounds, and diversity can help a firm achieve superior performance as it learns from the collective past of its employees. An employer cannot disregard a suggestion from the lowest level simply because the idea did not originate at the management level or it risks losing its key assets. I have had the best attitude at companies that allowed me to use my creativity to solve problems, and I have gone above and beyond to gain skills that not only help me but help the company.

The other two external motivators are concerned with the overall environment and resources available to help employees seek change. The first is *facilitative stimuli* that project the necessary tools and incentives to take employees to new levels of competence and contribution, as articulated by a respondent:

My job has an unlimited amount of training that it offers its employees. The government invests a large amount of time in training employees. Therefore, this is really great to have just in case I change to another position. (Smoother transitions from job to job.)

On the other hand, *supportive stimuli* project conditions and opportunities that promote team learning and collaborative inquiry, as suggested in the following quote:

Employers that allow employees to have fun on the job, and encourage fun team-building events and a little bit of craziness will produce a great positive attitude within me. I believe that as much time as we all spend working, 1/3 of our life, we should be able to have fun doing it. I feel that having a diverse employee base results in a much more dynamic environment, where ideas are able to flow freely, and open discussion and debate can thrive. I believe that those environments produce a better product or service.

In the next section, we discuss the relationship between the quality of work life and learning orientation.

Quality of Work Life and Learning Orientation

In terms of the way employees perceive learning, there are two perspectives that encourage them to shift their mental models when approaching change as driven different contextual stimuli. For instance, findings suggest that employees who view work as an immediate outcome of their skills and knowledge application tend to take a short-term but continuous approach to learning, identified as *proactive learning orientation*. This suggests

that employees are required to identify current learning needs and resources to improve on their performance and take them to the next level, as reflected in this quote:

I am also new to this job and the industry, but I am not completely sure that there is a lot of room for growth or improvement here. I am still learning but I feel that if I were trusted with work of added depth and involved in more group sessions that I would learn more and more quickly.

On the other hand, contexts that trigger generative and facilitative stimuli as associated to work processes tend to offer employees a much longer-term learning approach, identified as *forward-looking learning orientation*. In this approach, employees seek change at incremental levels to free themselves from the entrapments of routines and norms. It enables employees to look beyond current obstacles to gather new insights into work flows and processes that help increase their knowledge, competence, and abilities further. This approach provides them a direction to achieve bigger tasks with more challenging prospects, as exemplified in the following quote:

Many possibilities for the future – My company is involved in many different products. They like to move people around and cross train them. Much of the upper management is close to retirement and they are starting to groom personnel for executive positions.

Extending from Sirgy et al.'s (2001) view on the different levels of needs affecting the quality of work life, findings show that there are different types of tension that provide employees with different mental frames to pursue learning as part of their work life. The first type is the tension between *present needs and future demands*, and employees often adopt an inward-looking learning orientation (as opposed to forward-looking) with a tendency to continue with familiar routines, an example of which can be seen in the following quote:

Quality of life factors that negatively affect my attitudes at work include management's lack of understanding, lack of advanced training, and mandated lunch/extracurricular activities that are not work related... no point seeking change.

The second type is the tension between *empowerment and control* and the approach to learning orientation is forward looking with a tendency to seek change, as reinforced by a respondent:

Another factor that negatively affects my attitude at work is a lack of control over my work environment...All these negative factors are the reason why I am getting my MBA to move onto work that will better suit my skill set.

The third type is the tension between *internal fulfillment and external rewards* where the learning orientation is tentative and reactive (as opposed to proactive) in nature and largely dependent on opportunities, as reflected by a respondent:

As an employee...there is no flexi-time offered, no employee break room, no special employee programs, and no encouragement for education and training. These quality (of) work life factors have caused a major impact to the level of morale show by everyone.

All three examples illustrate that the perception of tension between employees' lived and perceived experience can help facilitate their orientation toward learning. If learning is characterized by a spontaneous response to intra and interpersonal dynamics based on work activities, then employees' perception of their quality of work life will shape their cognitive and behavioral readiness to embrace learning as an inescapable way of life (Senge, 1990). In the next section, we reinforce our findings through the development of a conceptual model.

Toward a Model of Quality of Work Life and Learning Orientation

Figure 2 illustrates that quality of work life contexts can modify the way employees engage in their perceived and lived experience in the workplace. This happens when individual mental models interact to produce multiple frames of references that can be translated into concrete actions. Extending this view, we suggest that human actions are the byproducts of helping employees make better sense of their environment as they get involved in activities that lead to certain outcomes. These outcomes can maintain, increase or decrease their quality of work life in one way or another. In the process, employees engage in learning-oriented behaviors through the development of learning strategies that will help them

improve existing work conditions. Occurrences of learning become more complex as individuals transcend double-loop learning achieved through multiple feedback cycles to the group level through dynamic social exchange. This leads to collective sensemaking as individuals operate within different learning orientations in connection to the various contextual stimuli, leading ultimately to organizational learning. In demonstrating our conceptualization further, the following propositions have been developed:

- *P1: Quality of work life contexts form the basis on which meanings of lived and perceived experience are constructed in such a way that existing contextual stimuli will lead to the development of immediate frames of references for subsequent actions.*
- *P2a: When the lived and perceived experience of work-life contexts are influenced by positive frames of references, individuals will adopt a learning orientation that is proactive and forward-looking.*
- *P2b: When the lived and perceived experience of work-life contexts are influenced by negative frames of references, individuals will adopt a learning orientation that is reactive and passive.*

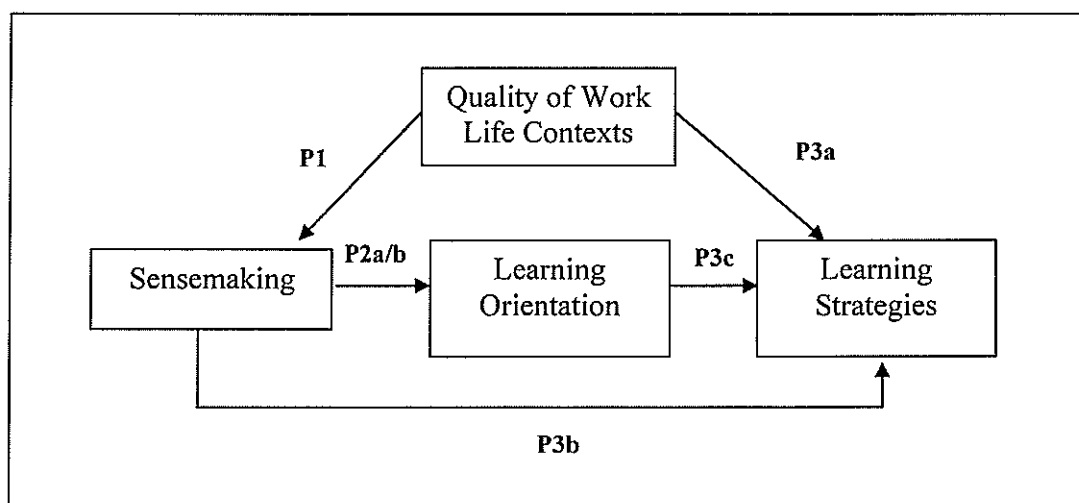


Figure 2. A model of Quality of Work Life and Learning Orientation

Findings also reveal that the interrelation of quality of work life contexts, lived and perceived experience as well as learning orientation motivate employees to engage in learning strategies in different ways. On closer analysis, we discovered that individuals perceive learning strategy as a means of managing “your job responsibilities and therefore can decide how hard you want to challenge yourself”, as reinforced by a respondent. To some, learning is a strategy to “help me maintain a positive, optimistic and enthusiastic attitude [toward] that employer’s value [if] I have learned the things that are important to me”, commented another respondent. To others, learning is a strategy to achieve “creative control” over job complexity and ambiguity. We further realized that individuals employ a variety of learning strategies according to three key cognitive categories: objective judgment, subjective interpretation, and evaluative sensemaking. Cognitive categories are characterized by the manner in which individuals select their conceptual schema and structure to inform them of a plausible intervention approach through human action (Edmondson, 1999). Table 1 illustrates the influences and dimensions of learning strategies in greater detail. These categories are represented by three dimensions of learning strategies, as encapsulated in the following propositions:

- *P3a: Quality of work life contexts lead to the stimulus-response dimension of learning strategies in such a way that learning is dependent on the objective judgment of circumstances derived from leadership and organizational climate.*
- *P3b: The lived and perceived experience of individuals lead to the psychological safety dimension of learning strategies in such a way that learning is dependent on the subjective interpretation of circumstances based on the internalization of external events.*

- *P3c: Learning orientation leads to the cognitive participation dimension of learning strategies in such a way that learning is dependent on the evaluative sensemaking of contexts conditioned by specific stimuli.*

Table 1
Importance of Learning Strategies

Cognitive Categories	Learning Strategy Dimensions	Characteristics of Learning Strategies	Representative Quotes
Objective judgment based on quality of work life contexts	Stimulus and response as characterized by management support, collaborative climate, and reward and recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internalization of viewpoints for wider external utilization • Reflection on personal and organizational values • Capitalization on feedback to build a point of view 	"I find my work challenging. I learn something new each day and I feel like I am making a difference with the people I work with. I appreciate some acknowledgement, and my bosses also try to recognize employees for positive achievements. "
Subjective interpretation based on perceived and lived experience	Psychological safety as characterized by openness, trust, and an awareness of self and others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of social dynamics • Verbalization of tried-and-tested concepts • Expression of personal views • Embarking on some risk taking 	"I am still learning but I feel if I were trusted with work of added depth and involved in more group sessions that I would learn more and more quickly...I appreciate well thought out approaches to training, communicating, and implementing ideas especially in the workplace."
Evaluative sensemaking based on learning orientation	Cognitive participation as characterized by a mental readiness to engage in and challenge existing contextual stimuli.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on reflective listening • Verbalization of assumptions • Proposition of new ideas • Engagement in active feedback loops • Stretching of thinking boundaries • Exploration of possibilities • Integration of diverse views 	"My definition of job responsibilities means not so much power or sway I have, but rather whether or not what I do at work has meaning over all. Also, I like to be busy. When I first started at the company I currently work for I was working in Operations. It is fun and exciting in Ops...during slow times working in Ops is BORING!!! Now I am working in accounting and there is always something to do. Also, because of my cross training I am still able to help out in Ops when things get busy."

Discussion

Implications for HRD Research

Making sense of the quality of work life has enabled employees to engage in double-loop learning through a process of inquiry and elaboration as they reflect on and internalize feedback during the social exchange. The different interpretations of quality of work life have given rise to a situational learning orientation that allows employees to learn from each other's mistakes, helping them develop potential action plans in actual contexts. A key theoretical contribution is that double-loop learning which occurs at the individual level (Argyris & Schön, 1978) does lead to a certain type of learning orientation where employees analyze underlying assumptions and engage in deliberate learning, a cognitive strategy adopted to change the rate at which learning occurs (Nembhard & Tucker, 2010). This observation further contributes to HRD research as it is a holistic approach to learning (Watkins, 2000) aimed at fostering behavioral change for the improvement of work performance (Swanson, 1995) and ultimately the quality of work life (Megginson, Joy-Matthews, & Banfield, 1993).

Extending Baker and Sinkula's (1999) conceptualization of learning orientation, we argue that it is the sensemaking of external events that enables the learning process to operate at different levels. The materialization of meanings associated with the quality of work life is a step toward communicating organizational events into existence as employees combine interpretation of their social context and action to produce a sequence of organizational outcomes (Weick, 1996). Sensemaking usually makes its entrance during times of chaos when employees begin noticing and framing their raw experience into identifiable concepts that can be articulated in specific terms. When these concepts are further categorized, the general sense of the experience begins to stabilize (Chia, 2000). Weick and Roberts (1993), in trying to explain how individual actions could lead to a higher-order pattern of social interactions, introduced the notion of collective mind which, according to Cook and Brown (1999), explains how individual cognitive capabilities (ability to absorb new ideas and

recreate old ideas) merge with the cognitive properties (ability to select, categorize, and discard ideas) of groups through the social organization of meanings within a context that leads to organizational learning, a key aspect of HRD (Ruona & Gibson, 2004). This process is facilitated by a set of values (learning orientation) that determine the degree to which an organization realizes its theories-in-use which govern actual behavior and contain assumptions about self, others, and the environment (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

Organizational learning can potentially lead to high-performance work systems as it promotes complementary work practices that induce productivity gains (Appelbaum et al., 2000; MacDuffie, 1995). Complementariness, as advanced by the work of Godard (2004), is realized through substantive participatory decision making, training, and policy development. According to Glover and Butler (2011), involvement in collaborative practices requires a work climate that supports discretionary effort that leads to the long-term performance of the organization. Combining learning orientation and quality of work life motivates employees to seek opportunities that enlarge their job responsibility leading to a proactive engagement of their overall task (Axrell & Parker, 2003; Swanson, 1995). This discovery was confirmed by Champion et al.'s (2005) study which extended the individual dimension of job enrichment to team-structure designs, illuminating social facilitation, task significance, and feedback as increasing self-efficacy and contributing to professional development and the overall quality of work life.

Implications for HRD Practice

Findings suggest that different contextual stimuli can either promote or truncate employees' pursuit of learning based on several dominant negative and positive factors that influence their perception of the quality of work life and their learning orientation. These stimuli provide implications for HRD practice as HRD professionals play a crucial role in functioning as facilitators and mediators for providing cross-functional and

cross-cultural training, and other aspects of human development such as group dynamics, interpersonal relations and systems thinking (Stewart, 1991). Table 2 provides a more thematic analysis of the influences of quality of work life contexts on learning orientation with implications for HRD practice.

Table 2
Quality of Work Life and Learning Orientation for HRD Practice

Quality of Work Life Context	Learning Orientation	Representative Quotes	Questions for HRD Professionals
(--) Status quo <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No encouragement for professional development Competence kept at a fundamental level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn within the confines of familiar boundaries such as routines and norms. Reject new knowledge as this may disrupt preconditioned expectations of job performance. 	“The lack of opportunity for personal development doesn’t give a sense of achievement, growth, and improvement in one’s career.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What can we do to take employees out of their comfort zones? How can we increase their competence?
(--) Constraints <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of time and resources Out of balance in terms of workload 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce readiness to approach new tasks and processes for fear of failing. Restrict individuals’ propensity to explore learning strategies due to a lack of support and resources. 	“A negative factor is the lack of management understanding about how well we perform on our job depends on the space given to us to improve our skills. Lack of budget and resources, and increasing job demands derail our interest to improve ourselves.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What can be done to streamline work processes to allow employees to improve themselves through self-directed learning and training?
(--) Control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management control over processes and decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce trust between superiors and subordinates due to fear of mistakes and punishments. Limit opportunities to learn and explore new experiences due to rigid guidelines. 	“Micromanagement from bosses is a critical negative factor for me... it restricts our freedom to work freely always having to seek approval or justifying for our mistakes. No much opportunity to try new things at all!”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can managers empower employees with greater problem solving and decision making as a way of encouraging them to take risk?
(+) Task significance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enrichment of work Empowerment and work significance Focus on performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase openness to learn and seek greater job connectedness. Encourage improvement of learning strategies to create greater job impact. 	“If I were given more responsibility, with reason of course, and included in more meetings and decision making sessions my attitude towards work would, particularly to work as a team would be better.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How we can help employees to create value in their work? How can we link learning to job performance?
(+) Talent development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prospects of new challenges Industry-academic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Induce confidence in embracing new knowledge and testing it out. Promote trust in 	“Right now intrinsic motivation and having the ability to learn and excel in what I do is more motivating for me than pure extrinsic rewards. I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What can we do to help employees realize their full potential? How can we

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> collaboration • Experiential opportunities 	<p>management for opportunities to learn and develop new skills.</p>	<p>love to learn and would like an employer who minimizes over time so employees can pursue advanced and continuing education.”</p>	<p>encourage them to contribute at a higher level?”</p>
<p>(+) Collaborative inquiry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-training and cross-functional collaboration • Communities of practice • Strategic communication process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inculcate a team-based learning environment to facilitate greater dialogue and reflection. • Increase participation in knowledge sharing for potential productive outcomes. 	<p>“Work environment should be team based as it allows for members to have a social structure to learn from and to get motivated. Each member should take full responsibility of the task in hand, and have maximum ability to use their creativity in their assignment.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration? • Is there a way to develop peer learning teams or communities of practice?
<p>(+) Recognition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reward and recognition through professional development • A learning culture and environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage a new level of learning engagement through a change in mindset about the need to learn at work. • Enforce an intrinsic appreciation of learning as an inescapable way of life. 	<p>“Having recognition and the possibility to travel is very important to me. Learning and communicating with new people and new cultures gives me the chance to grow as a person as well as excel in my work skills.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How should learning behavior be recognized within the company? • How do we motivate people to learn and improve their professional development?

Factors such as status quo, constraints, and control all have an effect on employees’ cognitive participation in reflective action taking. The fundamental lack of reflective space due to tension arisen from mutual dependence and an over-expectant sense of management control has caused employees to adopt a reactive and passive learning orientation. This often restricts employees’ propensity to explore learning strategies due to a lack of support and resources. As such, employees begin to reject new knowledge as this may disrupt their expectations of job performance and lead them to experience a disconnection with their employer due to a lack of trust.

Findings further suggest that task significance and recognition are positive factors that can promote a more proactive and forward-looking learning orientation as employees are more open to learning new things and seeking greater job connectedness. The tension between responsibility and recognition can be minimized by encouraging learning as a continuous pursuit to high performance. Further, collaborative inquiry and talent

development have been identified as the other two positive factors influencing an increased learning orientation. A blame-free environment can facilitate greater dialogue and reflection enhancing knowledge sharing and experimentation.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Studies

This study has illustrated that there are two sides to the coin of quality of work life and they are influenced by positive and negative contextual stimuli. Employees may choose to engage in learning based on their perception and interpretation of the meanings that surround a particular context. As employees are involved in greater sensemaking of the context they are in, they begin to employ learning strategies that help them to redefine the quality of their work life. Learning orientation is the catalyst by which meaningful sensemaking operates, combining objective judgment and subjective interpretation of the environment. This study helps HRD professionals to understand that the complexity of quality of work life contexts can intensify employees' perceptual representation of experiential reality in both positive and negative ways. As organizational dynamics increase, employees' connection to their job, the organization, and their coworkers becomes more transitory (Nykodym, Longenecker, & Ruud, 2008). This is when the psychological mechanism of stimulus and response guides employees in increasing or decreasing their cognitive participation (sensemaking and action planning) in contexts that may bring more or less value to their work life influencing, ultimately, organizational learning (Cohen, Chang, & Ledford, 2006).

Although the online forum provided the respondents with a reflective and learning space to construct new meanings about their quality of work life, the absence of a more dynamic conversational space reduced the opportunity for us to understand their perceptions better. If a more active approach were taken, we could have explored more specific issues and conceptual relationships in greater depth. We propose that in-depth interviewing be used

through a longitudinal approach to capture the cognitive and behavioral patterns of employees as they shape their experience to redefine the quality of their work life. To advance this study, the influences of contextual stimuli on employees' learning orientation leading to HRD outcomes could be explored more carefully. If learning is indeed a process by which employees make sense of their quality of work life, it would be useful to determine the strategies that they employ to shape the boundaries of their quality of work life in more specific ways. More importantly, future HRD research could examine the process of higher-order learning that operates in an individual's learning orientation. In short, learning and context are inseparable as they provide the stimulus for making learning meaningful.

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