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## Insights into intention to learn of employees in a startup for enterprise development

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**Abstract:** The study focuses on learning within an enterprise at its startup stage. Learning has contributed to successful enterprise development. Thus, facilitating workplace learning becomes one of the primary responsibilities of startup owners. Based on a survey of 100 employees from one startup, three common organisation-related factors (i.e., age of employees, length of employment, and type of employment) have no impact on employees' intention to learn which consists of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behaviour control, in accordance with theory of planned behaviour. This case study

highlights that workplace learning for a startup can be planned and facilitated for all employees because the intention to learn is not influenced by the three organisation-related factors. For future research, motivation to learn is suggested to help extend employees' intention to learn for effective workplace learning in a startup.

**Keywords:** intention to learn; startup; workplace learning; enterprise development; theory of planned behaviour; TPB.

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## **1 Introduction**

Enterprise development is associated with a positive change, high performance, business success, and long-term competitiveness. Enterprise development is often viewed as a carefully – planned process designed to strengthen an organisation' structures and capability to achieve a set of its strategic objectives (Bae and Choi, 2021). Successful enterprise development represents the ability to adapt to both incremental and drastic changes in business operations and due to human resources, financial resources, and applications of technologies (Cooper and Park, 2008; Santoro, 2023; Sebuwufu and Timilsina, 2024). Essentially, enterprise development includes a broad spectrum of activities aimed at improving innovation and learning, productivity and quality, profitability, and competitiveness (Teece, 2010). Achieving adaptive performance, facilitating workplace learning, integrating advanced technologies, engaging with all key stakeholders, extending emotional intelligence to workforce, developing new product and service, and innovating business processes are some of notable activities of enterprise development (Moustaghfir et al., 2020; Sebuwufu and Timilsina, 2024).

Currently, there are many critical issues facing enterprise development, especially during the transition into Industry 4.0. Particularly, they include the effectiveness of workplace learning to overcome intense competition, ability to integrate advanced technologies into key business processes, ability to constantly innovate and come up new products and services, and ability to anticipate and adapt to business uncertainties (Moustaghfir et al., 2020; Ciccarelli et al., 2023). These issues determine business survival, especially for an enterprise at the start-up stage in its life cycle. Nowadays, learning in a workplace needs to go beyond training with the primary focus on completing tasks/work and adapting to technologies. Workplace learning for Industry 4.0 needs to recognise an employee's work performance which includes task achievement, behaviour, motivation, and learning (Koopmans et al., 2011; Bignotti and Roux, 2020). Thus, informal learning, which consists of constant feedback, coaching, mentoring, learning from mistakes, and sharing these mistakes, has been encouraged (Dierdorff and Surface, 2018; Wong et al., 2023).

Specifically, a startup's learning in business environment differs from an enterprise at the growth or mature stage in its life cycle (Fenwick, 2003; Himawat et al., 2023). For a startup, learning needs to be an integral part of work. Workplace learning in a start-up enterprise tends to rely on social interactions among employees, hands-on experiences, and mistakes (Bandura and Walters, 1977; Himawat et al., 2023; Kardell, 2024). The reason is that employees are expected to learn on the job while performing tasks, solving problems, and dealing with business-related crises. Thus, workplace learning has successfully helped a startup adapt and succeed in a highly competitive market (Hasani and O'Reilly, 2020; Melenchion et al., 2023; Santoro, 2023). As a result, learning ensures that employees continue to have knowledge and skills needed to perform their work effectively (Cooper and Park, 2008; Dierdorff and Surface, 2018). Not only does a startup

need to come up with new products and services continuously, but it also constantly deals with constant changes in the business environment.

Traditionally, a startup is confronted with persistent turnovers of personnel, need to control operating costs, understanding of current and emerging competition, compliance with regulatory requirements, and lack of market protection schemes from the public sector (Fenwick, 2003; Cressy, 2006; Himawat et al., 2023). This has resulted in a common practice of hiring new graduates from either vocational colleges or higher education institutes on a part-time and/or temporary basis (Sebuwufu and Timilsina, 2023; Melenchion et al., 2023). For business owner(s) or founder(s), maintaining cost-effective and agile operations with relatively young workers to ensure an enterprise' survival can be a challenge. This is due to unclear effects from an enterprise's factors on the intention to learn among these young workers (Hasani and O'Reilly, 2020; Melenchion et al., 2023; Santoro, 2023). These factors are an average age (which is expected to be low based on young workforce) and a status of employment (as startups often hire part-time employees) (Fenwick, 2003; Himawat et al., 2023; Thanh and Hiep, 2023). This intention to learn is essential for stabilising business situations, addressing customers' needs, and innovating work processes.

To gain more insights into the intention to learn in a startup, individual's behaviours are typically influenced by their intentions such as learning and working, based on theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991; Madden et al., 1992). These intentions are affected by three attributes (i.e., attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control). Attitude is the mindset embedded internally within an individual. Attitude reflects a personal perception and belief toward a particular situation, subject, person, or event. On the other hand, an individual's intention (and behaviour) also depends on how much control an individual feels he or she has over actions and decisions. Simply put, perceived behavioural control is about individuals' capability and responsibility to influence and manage their own performance. Moreover, subjective norms signify social pressures and perceived expectations of others. Often an individual's intention (and behaviour) can be swayed by how much these expectations are valued (Anghelache, 20213; Abubakar et al., 2024). It is believed that the more favourable the three attributes are, the more likely the intention and action are to occur.

Finally, learning in a typical startup needs to consider relevant enterprise-related factors such as employees' age, length of employment, and type of employment (Wegge et al., 2008; Kunze et al., 2013; De Meulenaere et al., 2016). An employee's age affects maturity, social interactions, and behaviour. The duration of employment is often viewed as a possible factor that influences task performance and creativity (Goswami, 2021; Harlianto and Rudi, 2023). Also, it is generally expected that the employment category (i.e., full-time, or part-time) should contribute to the differences in attitude and commitment in a workplace (Kalleberg, 2000; Hirsch, 2005). Usually, a startup attempts to hire sizeable part-time employees to help meet customers' demands which can vary from time to time while maintaining a minimum level of full-time staffs.

## **2 Problem description**

Effective workplace learning helps workers at startups complete their tasks and/or prepare them for the future (Fenwick, 2003; Himawat et al., 2023). Nevertheless, facilitating this learning in a typical startup can be a challenge due to various reasons

such as ineffective training and inability to continuously recruit qualified workforce (Hasani and O'Reilly, 2020; Bae and Choi, 2021; Samarasinghe et al., 2024). It is important to point out that, for more established firms, training can be systematically formalised and financially organised for newly- recruited employees. Formalised training is not usually practical due to:

- Nature of work (i.e., no standardised work and clear organisational structure as an enterprise needs to constantly adapt to business environment and customers' needs as well as requirements),
- Unclear problems due to rapidly – changing customer expectations and requirements (i.e., difficulty to identify suitable external experts)
- Size of start-ups (i.e., too small to organise training sessions)
- Financial restriction (i.e., too costly to organise training sessions regularly).

As a result, understanding how their employees view learning in a workplace and what influences this viewpoint is essential for facilitating workplace learning. In other words, the insights into how employees view learning and whether their intention to learn is influenced by these organisational-related factors (e.g., whether a part-time employee has a different attitude from a full-time employee on learning or whether a newly – hired employee views learning differently from a more-experienced employee) are needed to help business owners facilitate workplace learning (Fenwick, 2003; Bignotti and Roux, 2020).

The research is considered as a case study. In this study, facilitating workplace learning (e.g., developing user-generated contents to help deal with problems, encouraging more constructive feedback and informal learning in a workplace, etc.) has been a challenge for the startup's executives. A lack of insights into staffs' intention to learn affects how the owners or founders of this startup deal with workplace learning.

### **3 Research question**

Given the critical roles of employees for start-ups' enterprise development, do common factors such as age, length of employment, and types of employment (i.e., full-time, or part-time) affect employees' learning, especially their intention to learn?

### **4 Research objective**

The objective is to determine whether there is a significant influence from the three organisation-related factors (mentioned above) on employees' intention to learn. In this study, the intention to learn consists of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control.

## 5 Method

This case study research can be regarded as both exploratory. Exploratory research helps investigate a problem which is not clearly defined (Rendle et al., 2019). An exploratory case study is needed to gain a better understanding of a specific circumstance or phenomenon – whether, for a startup, employees’ intention to learn is influenced by the following three organisation-specific factors (i.e., age, length of employment, and types of employment).

The case company can be described as follows. This startup began its operation and provided education-related services in 2022. Presently (as of 2024), it has around 120 employees who need to constantly engage and analyse the readiness of students, to improve their digital – technology skills. Its main services include preparation and advisory in digital technology for students through training and tutoring. In addition, advisory services for both students and their parents about how to prepare and utilise digital technology – design, coding, programming, etc. are also part of the case company. Learning has been critical for this enterprise since its inception due to competition and changing expectations and demands from customers.

Employees of this startup are required to organise workshops, summer camps, and competitions (e.g., robotics competition). They are also expected to develop and update the training and tutoring contents for students. The age of the company’s workforce is relatively young. There are more part-time staffs. The duration of employment is also short.

The survey is developed, based on the TPB, to help gain better understanding on the intention to learn by a startup’s employees. The survey’s details stem from the discussion with two business owners and two senior supervisors who oversee business planning and expansion. The scope of the three attributes (i.e., attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control) is explained so that a set of suitable questions that correspond to an enterprise’ circumstance is identified.

Also, three organisation- related factors are also included- age, length of work at the enterprise, and employment status. See Appendix A for the survey. The analysis of the survey’s results includes many statistical approaches and software. The overall focus is whether the three organisation- related factors influence each of the three attributes of the intention to learn. Thus, there are altogether 9 hypotheses.

- H1 Age of employees influences their attitude at work.
- H2 Length of employment influences employees’ attitude at work.
- H3 Type of employment influences employees’ attitude at work.
- H4 Age of employees influences individuals’ viewpoint on subjective norm.
- H5 Length of employment influences individuals’ viewpoint on subjective norm.
- H6 Type of employment influences individuals’ viewpoint on subjective norm.
- H7 Age of employees influences individuals’ viewpoint on perceived behaviour control.
- H8 Length of employment influences individuals’ viewpoint on perceived behaviour control.

H9: Type of employment influences individuals' viewpoint on perceived behaviour control.

## 6 Results

Altogether, 104 employees participated in the survey from January until February 2024. After analysing the responses initially, 100 surveys can be subsequently used for further examination – as some did not complete required data. See Table 1 for the participants' details that are classified into the three organisation-related factors.

**Table 1** Sample distribution analysis

| <i>Factors</i>                                           | <i>Category</i>        | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>%</i> |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|----------|
| <i>Organisation-related factor: age of employees</i>     |                        |                  |          |
|                                                          | 25 years old or less   | 71               | 71.0     |
|                                                          | More than 25 years old | 29               | 29.0     |
| Total                                                    |                        | 100              | 100%     |
| <i>Organisation-related factor: length of employment</i> |                        |                  |          |
|                                                          | Less than 6 months     | 47               | 47.0     |
|                                                          | More than 6 months     | 53               | 53.0     |
| Total                                                    |                        | 100              | 100%     |
| <i>Organisation-related factor: type of employment</i>   |                        |                  |          |
|                                                          | Full- time status      | 19               | 19.0     |
|                                                          | Part time status       | 81               | 81.0     |
| Total                                                    |                        | 100              | 100%     |

The next step is to analyse the reliability of the responses to the survey questions. This step is completed by applying the Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha helps assess the reliability of a survey. When a survey is reliable for further examination and analysis, it should have a great deal of covariance among the survey's questions or items relative to the variance. For the guideline, the value which is greater than 0.7 is reliable (e.g., 0.7–0.79 indicating reliable, 0.80–0.90 indicating highly reliable, and greater than 0.9 indicating very highly reliable) (Supparerkchaisakul, 2014). The result of the Cronbach's alpha is 0.834. See Table 2. This value implies higher reliability and internal consistency within the survey. Thus, a further analysis can be conducted.

**Table 2** Cronbach's alpha

| <i>Cronbach's alpha</i> | <i>Cronbach's alpha based on standardised items</i> | <i>N of items</i> |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 0.834                   | 0.845                                               | 10                |

The next step is to apply the structural equation model for testing the nine hypotheses. The independent variables are the three organisation-related factors. The dependent variables are the three attributes to the intention to learn. The results from the structural equation model are as follows. See Table 3.

**Table 3** Illustration of ANOVA results

| <i>H</i> | <i>Construct<br/>(organisation-<br/>related Factor)</i> | <i>Intention to<br/>learn<br/>(Attribute)</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Minimum</i> | <i>Maximum</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>P-<br/>values</i> | <i>Decision</i> |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------|----------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------------|
| H1       | Age of employees                                        | ATT                                           | 100      | 2.50           | 5.00           | 3.965       | 0.664     | 0.506                | Negative        |
| H2       | Age of employees                                        | SN                                            | 100      | 2.25           | 5.00           | 4.113       | 0.539     | 0.481                | Negative        |
| H3       | Age of employees                                        | PBC                                           | 100      | 3.00           | 5.00           | 4.388       | 0.519     | 0.996                | Negative        |
| H4       | Length of employment                                    | ATT                                           | 100      | 2.50           | 5.00           | 3.965       | 0.664     | 0.732                | Negative        |
| H5       | Length of employment                                    | SN                                            | 100      | 2.25           | 5.00           | 4.113       | 0.539     | 0.989                | Negative        |
| H6       | Length of employment                                    | PBC                                           | 100      | 3.00           | 5.00           | 4.388       | 0.519     | 0.120                | Negative        |
| H7       | Type of employment                                      | ATT                                           | 100      | 2.50           | 5.00           | 3.965       | 0.664     | 0.750                | Negative        |
| H8       | Type of employment                                      | SN                                            | 100      | 2.25           | 5.00           | 4.113       | 0.539     | 0.449                | Negative        |
| H9       | Type of employment                                      | PBC                                           | 100      | 3.00           | 5.00           | 4.388       | 0.519     | 0.850                | Negative        |

Note: ATT: attitude; SN: subjective norm; PBC: perceived behavioural control.

The findings from the case study, based on 100 employees, apparently show that the three common organisation-related factors have no influence on each of the three attributes of the intention to learn. Specifically, the age of employees has no impact on the attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control (see H1, H4, and H7). Also, the length of employment (see H2, H5, and H8) and the type of employment (see H3, H6, and H9) have no effect on the employees' attitude at work as well as their viewpoint on both subjective norm and perceived behaviour control at work.

## 7 Discussion

The findings from the case study help provide more clarity into an individual's intention to learn (i.e., whether this intention is impacted by employees' age, length of work in an enterprise, and work status). Before the survey, the startup's owners are uncertain about how to facilitate learning in their enterprise such as focusing on informal learning (instead of relying on organising a formal training for employees), integrating constructive feedback among employees in a workplace (instead of relying on performance appraisal by business owners), and encouraging user-generated contents for experience sharing (instead of relying on external training contents) for workplace learning.

Some of the key takeaways from the findings can be as follows. The prevalent belief among two owners and two senior supervisors in the case company is that a younger employee may not be interested in learning since they have just graduated from a university, or a vocational college is not supported by the findings. This belief is based on

the premise that new employees should have sufficient knowledge and skills to complete their tasks and work. Another important takeaway, based on the widespread viewpoint from two owners and two senior supervisors, relates to the type of employment. Part-time employees should not care about learning due to their temporary status. Also, thirdly, employees who have recently been hired (i.e., length of employment) may not be interested in learning due to their heavy workload. Generally, a startup generally requires employees to work on several projects at the same time with rigid deadlines (Melenchion et al., 2023; Santoro, 2023). Since there is no clear functional boundary for a startup, everyone is expected to work with different colleagues regularly.

To gain more insights into each of the three attributes of an individual's intention to learn, a review session with business owners is organised. It becomes clear that the structure is considered flat (i.e., no clear structure and chain of command) for this case company. The flat enterprise can possibly lead to more willingness to learn and more appreciation of learning and its benefits (regardless of the age of employees, and the length and status of employment) (Kalleberg, 2000; Himawat et al., 2023). Thus, this circumstance helps explain that there is no impact on employees' attitude from all three organisation-related factors.

In addition, because of intense teamwork in many projects to meet the deadlines, employment status should not affect each of the three attributes of the intention to learn (Sabina et al., 2009). Furthermore, due to active involvement by and engagement with business owners regularly, the length of employment does not have a significant impact on each of the three attributes of the intention to learn. This overall finding reflects the importance of constant communication of ideas, feedback, and opinions which subsequently increase the level of confidence among employees on completing their work on time (Coddling et al., 2005; Chiu and Chen, 2024).

## **8 Implications**

For a broader implication on a startup, workplace learning is often referred to as a process to improve employees' skills, knowledge, and competencies through various informal activities (Johnson et al., 2018; Himawat et al., 2023). It has become part of a startup's competitive advantage. This process involves coaching, mentoring, feedback, sharing, collaboration, and social interactions. Thus, workplace learning not only benefits employees individually, but also a startup which is faced with uncertainty in the business environment and competition (Cressy, 2006). In fact, a startup relies on continuous learning in a workplace to handle problems (with clients, suppliers, and own internal work), to innovate (with new product or service development), and to improve (key business processes) (Bae and Choi, 2021; Himawat et al., 2023). Therefore, the findings into an individual's intention to learn are essential for survival and enterprise development since most start-ups discontinue their operations after the first a few years (Cooper and Park, 2008).

Many startups need to constantly adapt to new business environments, responding to customers' requirements, establishing a business presence, and developing/ improving a product or service (Bae and Choi, 2021; Sebuwufu and Timilsina, 2023). As a result, startups need employees who are willing to learn for the improvement of their business models and processes (Cressy, 2006; Teece, 2010). Learning from customer interactions, from mistakes, from competition as well as sharing this knowledge openly and

continuously are part of workplace learning (Hasani and O'Reilly, 2020). This notion is important because business owners cannot afford to hire an external expert or specialist to help improve business operations and model. Finally, the study highlights that workplace learning for a startup can be planned and facilitated for all employees because the intention to learn is not influenced by age of employees, and length and type of employment.

## **9 Future research**

The findings point to the possibility that different stages in an organisation's life cycle likely require a specific design and approach for workplace learning. For instance, while startups need learning to ensure skill development among employees, mature organisations probably need to balance formal training and informal learning in a workplace. Therefore, bringing more value to startups' customers requires effective workplace learning (Fenwick, 2003; Virick et al., 2015). Workplace learning for startups should further focus on motivation to learn- what motivates and how motivation is maintained and sustained. Motivation reflects a carefully- planned condition that triggers a change in behaviour toward an enterprise's objectives and goals (Rhodes and Courneya, 2003). Thus, it is important to have insights and knowledge into both intention and motivation to learn (Cressy, 2006). In addition, it is possible that, as an enterprise moves to the next stages in its life cycle (especially growth/expansion and maturity), the influence of organisation-related factors may be different. As a result, examining the impacts from the three organisation-related factors on learning throughout an organisation's life cycle represents the next step.

## **10 Conclusions**

The study focuses on facilitating workplace learning in a startup (as a case study). Due to the nature of a startup, relying on training and hiring external experts or specialists to deal with business challenges and competition are not practical. Thus, workplace learning is viewed as a competitive advantage which helps ensure business survival and growth for startups. However, facilitating workplace learning is a challenge since employees tend to be young and are often employed on a part-time basis. Their employment period is also relatively short. Despite this challenge, based on the survey of 100 employees, these three common organisation-related factors (i.e., age of employees, length of employment, and type of employment) have no influence on the intention to learn which consists of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behaviour control. This finding is essential for a startup's preparation of workplace learning. A discussion with business owners reveals that flat organisational structure, nature of work in which everyone is involved with projects, and active engagement with employees play a role in this insignificant influence. For future research, motivation to learn is suggested to help extend intention to learn for employees in a startup.

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## Appendix A

### *Illustration of the survey*

#### *Organisational factors*

| <i>Factor 1: Age</i>                            |                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 25 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> More than 25 years old |
| <i>Factor 2: Length of employment</i>           |                                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 6 months     | <input type="checkbox"/> More than 6 months     |
| <i>Factor 3: Employment status</i>              |                                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time status       | <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time status       |

### **Intention to Learn (with three attributes)**

| Item                       | Description                                                                               | Level of agreement  |          |              |       |                  |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------|--------------|-------|------------------|
|                            |                                                                                           | Completely disagree | Disagree | Indifference | Agree | Completely agree |
| Attribute: subjective norm |                                                                                           |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q1.                        | Success at our organisation today depends on continuous learning of everyone in workplace |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q2                         | Observing how others work and learn affects own behaviour and efforts at work             |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q3                         | Most people in the organisation appreciate the work that I have done                      |                     |          |              |       |                  |

**Intention to Learn (with three attributes) (continued)**

| Item                                   | Description                                                                                                            | Level of agreement  |          |              |       |                  |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------|--------------|-------|------------------|
|                                        |                                                                                                                        | Completely disagree | Disagree | Indifference | Agree | Completely agree |
| Attribute: subjective norm             |                                                                                                                        |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q4                                     | I am aware how policies, directions, and plans of an organisation affect my behaviour and efforts at work              |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Attribute: attitude                    |                                                                                                                        |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q5                                     | Success in working today is not determined by my education degree or background                                        |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q6                                     | I can openly express my opinions on important issues at work                                                           |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Attribute: perceived behaviour control |                                                                                                                        |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q7                                     | I always have an opportunity to exchange and give suggestions to my colleagues – supervisors, peers, and subordinates  |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q8                                     | My colleagues – supervisors, peers, and subordinates are willing to help me when I need assistance to complete my work |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q9                                     | My ability to control what I have learned and experiences at work will contribute to my future carer                   |                     |          |              |       |                  |
| Q10                                    | I believe that I can manage tasks or assignments which will contribute to my future career                             |                     |          |              |       |                  |