



Learning and transfer in organisations: how it works and can be supported

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how learning and transfer in organisations function and how these processes can be supported. First, we trace the lines of change in learning and application. We describe three forms of learning – formal, informal, and self-regulated – and analyse their interplay, social embeddedness, and integration into individual learning paths. We also highlight how learning fosters innovation in organisations. Second, based on these considerations, we discuss the challenges addressed in the special issue “Learning and Transfer in Organisations: How it Works and Can Be Supported”, which includes nine articles. These articles employ diverse methodologies – quantitative, qualitative, network analysis, and reviews – to contribute valuable insights into advancing learning and transfer in organisations. Third, we conclude by proposing an agenda for future research, emphasising that different forms of learning should be examined together. In the field of learning transfer, research should not only consider formal training but also informal and self-regulated learning, and socially embedded individual learning must extend beyond personal transfer to drive organisational transformation in disruptive times. Furthermore, we highlight opportunities for integrating artificial intelligence in work-related learning, to foster sustainable learning practices. We link individual learning pathways to organisational transformation and encourage the expansion of existing evaluation approaches.

KEYWORDS

Learning transfer; organisational transformation; work-related learning; training; informal learning; self-regulated learning

Introduction

Organisations and employees must continuously learn to adapt to market changes, societal demands, and technological advancements (Beier et al., 2025; Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Kraiger & Ford, 2021). In today’s market climate, to foster their employability, employees need to enhance and expand their skills to master new tasks and adjust to modified work processes (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Decius, Decius, et al., 2024). Recent reports predict that, in the future, half of the global workforce will require upskilling or reskilling (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2023). Successful transformation not only depends on employee development but also on organisations’ ability to design effective learning processes at the individual, team, and organisational levels. In disruptive times, learning has become a critical competitive factor.

Work-related learning has shifted significantly over recent decades to align with evolving organisational needs (Noe et al., 2014). In the early stages of work-related learning, competence development primarily relied on alternating between two distinct phases of learning – qualification and application – especially in training contexts. This approach proved effective when organisations operated with stable processes and manageable information (Baitsch, 1998; Kauffeld, 2016; see Figure 1, first strand). In the 1990s, these previously distinct phases became increasingly intertwined. However, the efficiency of this integration declined as corporate processes became more transient and information overload emerged (see Figure 1, second strand). Consequently, continuing education was often perceived as being too slow and chronically delayed, and failing to address the concrete job demands effectively (Marsick & Watkins, 1990).

Furthermore, continuing formal education is considered particularly ineffective in terms of transfer. The transfer problem in

the context of learning (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2017) describes the tendency of training participants to fail to transfer the skills or behaviours they acquired during training to the workplace. Furthermore, due to the transfer problem and the declining reputation of formal learning, alternative learning methods – such as informal learning (e.g., through experimentation, feedback seeking, and reflection) and self-regulated learning (e.g., setting, monitoring, and regulating learning goals and learning activities) – attracted the attention of organisations and researchers (Decius, 2020). These forms of learning are significantly less prone to the transfer problem because they integrate learning and the application of what has been learned.

The interplay of work-related learning approaches: formal, informal, and self-regulated learning

In terms of work-related learning, we must distinguish between three learning approaches: formal, informal, and self-regulated learning (Decius, 2024; Decius, Knappstein, et al., 2024; Kortsch et al., 2024). Formal learning is highly structured regarding location, time, and support (e.g., training and education; Kyndt & Baert, 2013). This type of learning is typically facilitated by a trainer in a designated learning environment and provides controlled content delivery (Decius, 2024). Common formats include trainer-led classroom sessions, structured training programmes, workplace educational courses, and formal instruction (Jeong et al., 2018). Formal learning sessions are generally planned as discrete events, which are purposefully designed with specific processes to shape the learning experience (Kortsch et al., 2019). However, only 10 to 15% of what is learned in training can be transferred to the work context by training participants (Ford et al., 2018). Hence, in these times of

rapid transformation and increasing shortages in skilled labour, formal learning alone is proving insufficient and too cumbersome to meet evolving workplace demands (Schaper et al., 2023).

Informal learning involves learning which is directly integrated into the work process and is often used for problem-solving, involving learning activities such as the employee's own experimentation (i.e., trial and error), feedback seeking, and reflection (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Decius, 2024; Decius et al., 2019; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022; Tannenbaum et al., 2010). Processes that involve others in learning, such as providing feedback, are referred to as social-based informal learning. In contrast, processes that focus on exploration and reflection are referred to as self-based informal learning (Decius & Hein, 2024). Informal learning is a rather unstructured, self-directed process that deliberately or spontaneously occurs organically within everyday work activities (Jeong et al., 2018). According to a recent conceptualisation (Decius, Decius, et al., 2024), the informal learning cycle often begins with an internal stimulus, such as personal curiosity, or an external stimulus, such as a problem to be solved; these stimuli initiate informal learning activities via a learning intention or coping intention. Through implicit or explicit cognitive processing in the memory system, employees then build their knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs). Informal learning is largely shaped by organisational factors such as resources, demands, available social support and learning culture (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Decius et al., 2021; Decius, Schaper et al., 2023; Graßmann & Decius, 2023; Kyndt & Baert, 2013; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022; Welk et al., 2023).

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is an active, intentional process whereby learners set personal learning goals, monitor progress, and adapt strategies to achieve desired outcomes (Schunk & Greene, 2018; Sitzmann & Ely, 2011; Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). SRL involves the systematic regulation of cognitive, motivational, and emotional processes, which is driven by goal-setting and sustained through internal feedback loops (Cuyvers et al., 2021; Panadero, 2017). Unlike informal learning, which may arise as a byproduct of task completion, SRL is purposefully oriented towards continuous development (Decius, 2024). This type of learning has been extensively studied in formal education contexts, but its relevance in workplace settings is increasingly recognised (Endedijk & Cuyvers, 2022; Sitzmann & Ely, 2011). In professional environments, learning is often driven by task and performance demands and there are limited opportunities for structured self-reflection (Margaryan et al., 2013). However, SRL remains essential for adapting to dynamic work conditions (Hemmler & Ifenthaler, 2024), such as those found in clinical environments, where ongoing development and learning within the workflow are critical (Cuyvers et al., 2024). Recent studies also emphasise the importance of fostering SRL skills through targeted interventions, as these skills enable professionals to manage their own learning effectively (e.g., Cuyvers et al., 2021).

In the past, formal, informal, and self-regulated learning activities were often considered separately in research and practice, although they are interrelated throughout individual learning paths, which exist in the designated social and

organisational context (Decius & Decius, 2022; Decius et al., 2022; Poell, 2017; Richter et al., 2020). For example, an employee who learns in a self-regulated manner can recognise training needs and then engage in formal learning. Engagement in informal learning also increases the transfer of formal learning in onboarding processes (Blume et al., 2024; Runnalls 2024). Research further indicates that training participants learn informally from each other through social exchange, even outside of the formal training context (Choi & Jacobs, 2011), and reflecting on the training experience can stimulate informal learning processes in everyday working life (Richter et al., 2020).

Ideally, an employee is supported on their learning journey with individual learning goals and topics, for which they must build and maintain a motivation for change and learning. Different learning opportunities are related and describe an employee's individual learning path (Kauffeld & Paulsen, 2018; Poell, 2017). Research shows that participants in formal continuing education continue to learn independently if they are satisfied with their training (Richter et al., 2020). In addition, to achieve their learning, implementation, and career goals, employees must receive support throughout their individual learning path: clear learning goals must be set, meaningful learning units identified, learning transfer stimulated, and learning progress and the application of what has been learned reflected (Kauffeld & Paulsen, 2018). Future research should place greater emphasis on individual learning paths by integrating the three learning forms described above, to help develop a more comprehensive and contemporary understanding of learning (Decius et al., 2022).

Challenges in learning transfer

The transfer of what is learned into the everyday work context depends on participant-related factors (e.g., transfer motivation and volition), the training (e.g., transfer design, work-training congruence, training atmosphere), and the work environment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010; Ford et al., 2018). The totality of conditions, processes and structures that promote or hinder the transfer of acquired knowledge and skills from a learning environment into practical application can be described as a learning transfer system. When considering the learning transfer system, we must ensure that the acquired knowledge is not only understood but can also be effectively applied in everyday working life (Holton, 2005; Holton et al., 2000; Kauffeld, 2016). However, learning transfer research is often limited to the investigation of formal learning approaches.

Questionnaires such as the Learning Transfer System Inventory (which is one of the most frequently used measures and has been translated and validated in several languages) have been developed and validated to operationalise the factors that affect training transfer (Bates et al., 2007; Holton et al., 2000; Kauffeld et al., 2008). These factors can be utilised for the process-related evaluation of existing training programmes, as well as to diagnose the causes of known transfer problems, raise awareness among trainers and supervisors about transfer issues, and identify problems with training factors early on. For example, they may serve as an early warning system before

implementing extensive training programmes. Most importantly, these factors can aid in the development of measures aimed at enhancing transfer (e.g., Kauffeld, 2016). Factors within the work environment are primarily responsible for determining whether the transfer of training into everyday work is successful (Massenberg et al., 2017). Particularly relevant are support from colleagues and supervisors, opportunities to apply knowledge, availability of time resources, and feedback (e.g., Massenberg et al., 2015; Mehner et al., 2025; Richter & Kauffeld, 2020; Seiberling & Kauffeld, 2017). It has been argued that these situational and environmental stimuli affect key actors in the workplace, providing both constraints and opportunities that influence organizational transfer behaviour (Johns, 2006; Mehner & Kauffeld, 2023; Tafvelin et al., 2025).

While the transfer of formal learning is well described and researched, little is known about the transfer of informal and self-regulated workplace learning. Although meta-analyses have explored the factors associated with the two forms of learning (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Sitzmann & Ely, 2011), the identified variables are primarily understood as direct predictors and outcomes of the learning process; they do not focus on transfer in terms of its medium-term application in everyday work or its adaptation to new, similar tasks. Conceptual work by Blume et al. (2024) assumes that the transfer of informal learning is heavily influenced by organisational support, particularly the role of managers in providing direct assistance, guidance, and emotional support to employees as they navigate learning opportunities within their work environments. This emphasises the importance of creating a supportive climate that allows employees to apply the knowledge and skills gained through informal learning without fear of making more mistakes or experiencing rejection at the beginning of the transfer phase. Thus, a positive error management culture can be seen as both a predictor of informal learning (Decius et al., 2021; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022) and a facilitator of learning transfer. Regarding the transfer of SRL at work, research has mainly discussed the role of self-regulation in the transfer of

formal learning (Sitzmann & Ely, 2011). This lack of empirical evidence might stem in part from SRL being viewed as highly dynamic and closely interwoven with the work process, which calls for future research to employ real-time assessments to capture this complexity (Cuyvers et al., 2021).

The strategic role of integrating learning and transfer

Integrating learning and transfer into organisational strategies offers the significant advantage of directly embedding the learning process within the operational context, which can enhance its relevance and applicability. This approach aligns with the concept of competence (see Karwehl & Kauffeld, 2021; Kauffeld & Albrecht, 2021), which emphasises the successful resolution of novel and complex workplace tasks as a core capability (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Decius et al., 2022; Kauffeld, 2016). To address the growing demands of the modern workplace, integrating learning with real-work assignments has become a critical component of organisational life and can be used to drive organisational process innovation (Figure 1, third strand; Kauffeld & Berg, in press; Kauffeld & Paulsen, 2018). By embedding learning under conditions of direct application to workplace assignments, challenges such as implementation barriers and transfer problems typically encountered after formal training can be significantly reduced (Marsick & Volpe, 1999).

In times of disruptive change, when many work processes are being redesigned, it is not enough to simply provide employees with learning units and support them on their learning journey. A key strategic consideration is also aligning individual learning goals with organisational objectives. Learning that directly contributes to achieving broader corporate goals ensures that developmental activities result in tangible organisational benefits (Sitzmann & Ely, 2011). In times when disruptive technologies require new processes (Figure 1, fourth strand), work-integrated learning should be promoted in a way that supports the innovation and development of the organisation (Abel et al.,

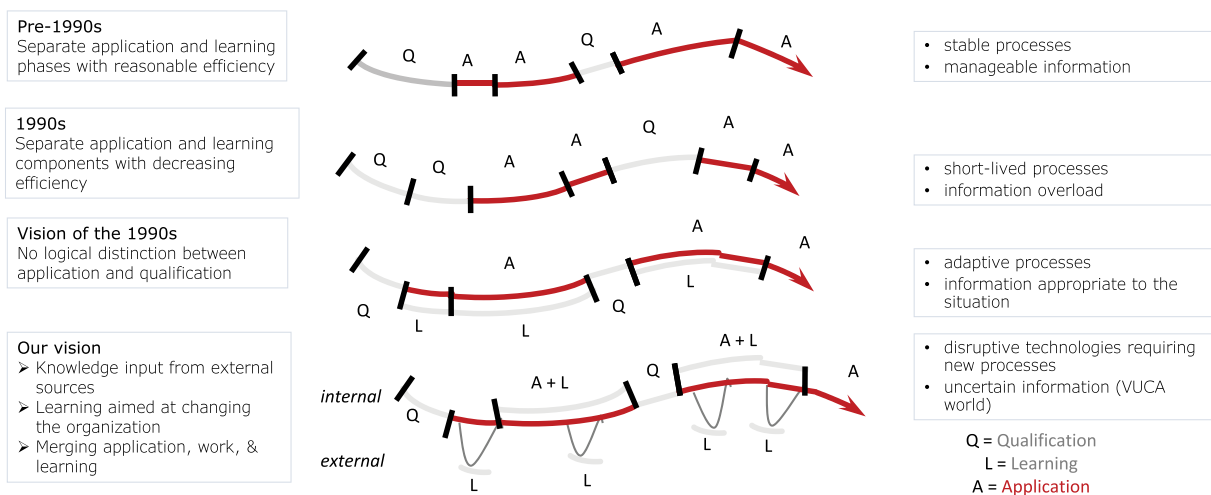


Figure 1. Qualification, application, and learning in the past and future. Note: The first three strands are based on Baitsch (1998), and the fourth strand is based on Kauffeld and Paulsen (2018) and Kauffeld and Berg (in press).

2016; Hilkenmeier et al., 2021). For this alignment to be effective in disruptive times, especially those where in-house expertise is no longer sufficient, via training and consulting formats, organisations must integrate external expertise, such as insights from universities or research institutions. This needs to be coupled with work-integrated learning formats in order to develop suitable solutions for the organisation, such as qualifications of change-makers and their accompanying projects as a transfer field for digitalisation, AI, cultural change, systems engineering, innovations in studies and teaching, and sustainability (Berg, Schulte, et al., 2023; Kauffeld & Berg, 2022, *in press*). The aim is to make a sustainable contribution to the development of the organisation through the learning of the individual.

Transfer projects offer an effective tool for bridging the gap between learning and its application in practice (Berg, Schulte, et al., 2023; Kauffeld & Berg, 2022). Such projects, which involve real organisational challenges such as digitising workflows or improving customer service processes, serve as a link between training programmes and their implementation. For maximum impact, these projects must be strategically aligned with the organisation's goals, adequately resourced, and accompanied by clear expectations regarding learning and implementation outcomes (Berg, Schulte, et al., 2023; Kauffeld & Berg, *in press*). Explicit agreements between management and programme participants regarding these expectations play a vital role in ensuring accountability and success.

Furthermore, fostering strong networking and social exchange behaviour within organisations can accelerate transformative efforts and facilitate the integration of learning outcomes into broader change processes (Stasewitsch, Barthauer, et al., 2022; Stasewitsch, Dokuka, et al., 2022). In this context, creating a conducive learning environment, which is characterised by accessible learning resources and collaborative support systems, is essential for sustaining development and enabling the long-term application of learned skills (Kortsch et al., 2024; Massenberget al., 2015, 2017). Overall, by strategically linking learning and transfer processes to organisational objectives, companies can drive innovation, enhance employee competence, and achieve sustainable growth (Berg, Bakaç, et al., 2023).

With this special issue, we aim to strongly advance scientific knowledge on different forms of organisational learning and transfer and their integration into the organisation. The articles in this special issue provide answers to questions about how gamification can optimise virtual training environments (Eger et al., 2025), the interplay between a leadership mindset and goal-oriented tools in enhancing training transfer (Güntner et al., 2025), the influence of social support and contextual alignment on knowledge sharing (Mehner et al., 2025; Sijbom et al., 2025; Tafvelin et al., 2025), and the challenges in fostering effective learning from soft skills and workplace socialisation agents (Frögéli & Backström Eriksson, 2025; Hamzah et al., 2025). Additionally, insights are provided on the role of expertise and specialisation in organisational knowledge networks (Köhler et al.,

2025), as well as the dynamic effects of goal-setting on motivation and transfer in diverse training contexts (De Jong et al., 2025).

Contributions of the special issue to learning and transfer research

The studies included in this special issue (see Table 1) all approach the question of how learning and transfer in organisations work and can be supported in a variety of ways, reflecting both heterogeneity and shared themes in the organisational context. They examine different learning approaches, using a wide range of methodological approaches. Regarding the three types of learning discussed above (formal, informal, and SRL), most of the studies included in this special issue focus on training as a formal learning approach (De Jong et al., 2025; Eger et al., 2025; Güntner et al., 2025; Hamzah et al., 2025; Mehner et al., 2025; Tafvelin et al., 2025). However, they consider different training approaches – for instance, gamification in virtual training (Eger et al., 2025), soft skills training (Hamzah et al., 2025), and leadership training (Güntner et al., 2025; Tafvelin et al., 2025) – or explore the influence of different training types directly (De Jong et al., 2025). Other studies focused on knowledge sharing and the role of various agents in this process (Frögéli & Backström Eriksson, 2025; Köhler et al., 2025; Mehner et al., 2025; Sijbom et al., 2025). While Frögéli and Backström Eriksson (2025) address the challenges faced by socialisation agents supporting newcomers, Köhler et al. (2025) examine professionals, analysing their expertise and specialisation within social networks. Mehner et al. (2025) explore the role of social support in training transfer and knowledge sharing, while Sijbom et al. (2025) explore the daily fluctuations of knowledge sharing and knowledge-sharing expectations, capturing short-term behavioural variations. Güntner et al. (2025) examine a micro-learning approach designed to enhance leaders' SRL, ultimately integrating this learning approach with training transfer.

The methodologies employed in the included studies are diverse, encompassing experimental designs (De Jong et al., 2025; Eger et al., 2025; Güntner et al., 2025), time-lagged surveys (e.g., Tafvelin et al., 2025), mixed-methods approaches (Mehner et al., 2025), social network analysis (Köhler et al., 2025), diary studies (Sijbom et al., 2025), and literature reviews (Frögéli & Backström Eriksson, 2025; Hamzah et al., 2025). It is difficult to appropriately assess transfer with cross-sectional designs, especially in the transfer of learning realm. Transfer of learning refers to the extent to which individuals apply their new knowledge and skills to their work; hence, it needs time to develop after the learning event. Following this reasoning, the included studies assessed training transfer with time lags of one to several weeks. De Jong et al. (2025), Güntner et al. (2025), and Eger et al. (2025) utilised an experimental setting. While De Jong et al. (2025) examined the influence of a goal-setting intervention compared to a control group, Güntner et al. (2025) compared the impact of a micro-dose learning intervention with a waiting control group, and Eger et al. (2025) manipulated different levels of gamification to promote training outcomes. The included studies also used social network analysis (Köhler et al., 2025; Mehner et al., 2025), diary studies (Sijbom et al., 2025), or a mixed-methods approach to get a better understanding of knowledge sharing in

Table 1. Overview of studies included in this special issue.

No.	Authors	Title	Learning approach/topic	Method	Core results
1	Güntner et al.	The combined effect of a goal-oriented leadership app and leaders' mindset in optimising training transfer	A goal-oriented micro-learning approach designed to stimulate leaders' self-regulated learning within leadership training, serving as a transfer intervention to improve training transfer.	Experimental design with leaders ($N = 253$) and their subordinates ($N = 717$), compared to a control group without intervention.	Partial support for the effectiveness of the transfer intervention, depending on the measures used to assess training transfer. Beneficial effect of the intervention from the leaders' perspective regarding leadership skills and greater transfer success compared with the waiting control group. Higher leadership self-efficacy and motivation lead to improved training transfer. No significant difference when evaluated from the subordinates' perspective regarding leader-member exchange quality or leadership skills.
2	De Jong et al.	Chasing the goal(s): How a goal-setting intervention influences transfer motivation, its antecedents and transfer of training for different training types	Goal-setting intervention to foster training transfer.	Participants were randomly assigned to a goal-setting or control group ($N = 615$ in total). Both groups completed a questionnaire directly after training and indicated transfer after six weeks.	Beneficial effects of goal-setting for subjective norm and perceived freedom of action; mixed effects for transfer motivation. Effects of goal-setting differed for different training types (maximum effects of goal-setting for hard-skill training; no effects for in-person training). No differences for personal antecedents, transfer intention or transfer of training.
3	Mehner et al.	How to maximise the impact of workplace training: A mixed-method analysis of social support, training transfer and knowledge sharing	Social support, training transfer and knowledge sharing.	<i>Mixed-methods analysis:</i> Study 1: Survey of employees after workplace training in the past two years ($N = 541$); Study 2: Qualitative interviews and recording of knowledge networks before and after training ($N = 51$).	Training transfer and knowledge sharing were related to individual organisational results, mediated by motivation and volition. Both peer and supervisor support were found to be antecedents for training transfer and knowledge sharing. The majority of training participants increased their knowledge networks after training.
4	Eger et al.	The power of play: Gamification in virtual workplace training	Gamification in virtual workplace learning.	Between-subjects design with manipulation of different intensity levels of gamification used in virtual training ($N = 355$ employees in total).	Gamification intensity negatively affected perceived autonomy and both affective and performance-related training outcomes. Perceived autonomy had a positive impact only on affective but not on performance-related training outcomes.
5	Hamzah et al.	Making soft skills "stick": A systematic scoping review and integrated training transfer framework grounded in behavioural science	Transfer problem in soft skills training.	Scoping review ($K = 91$ studies).	To derive a framework grounded in behavioural science, 69 factors were synthesised into the COMPASS model (capability, opportunity, and motivation of professionals' application of soft skills). Each factor was assessed for its efficacy in promoting soft skills training transfer.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

No.	Authors	Title	Learning approach/topic	Method	Core results
6	Tafvelin et al.	More is not always merrier: Does leader – team perceptual distance on context influence leadership training transfer?	Degree of alignment of leaders and team members on formalisation and employee orientation as contextual factors for leadership training transfer.	Survey of leaders ($N = 37$) and their subordinates ($N = 373$) at baseline and follow-up (six months later) – leaders participated in leadership training.	Agreement between leaders and their teams on formalisation and employee orientation was associated with improvements in transformational leadership to a certain extent. At high levels of formalisation, agreement negatively affected leaders' development of transformational leadership, and at high levels of employee orientation, the positive effect of agreement diminished. Leaders who rated formalisation and employee orientation higher than their teams showed less improvement in transformational leadership, as perceived by their followers.
7	Frögéli & Backström Eriksson	Obstacles experienced by socialisation agents as they support new professionals' learning and adjustment: A systematic review of qualitative evidence	Obstacles in supporting new professionals' learning and adjustment.	Systematic literature review of qualitative studies ($K = 20$ studies, $N = 446$ participants).	The support provided by socialisation agents such as co-workers and supervisors for the learning of new professionals was constrained due to the lack of formal recognition for this effort. A model of key obstacles is presented, focusing on socialisation agents' capabilities (e.g., lack of teaching and communication skills), opportunities (e.g., lack of time and guidance), and motivation (e.g., perceived costs and lack of incentives).
8	Köhler et al.	Expertise and specialisation in organisations: A social network analysis	Knowledge-sharing processes, focusing on advice – requests depending on skills, expertise, and specialisation.	Social network analysis ($N = 344$).	Indication of a halo effect, as proficiency in one skill set was related to an increase in advice requests across other skill sets. There were similarities in skills, tenure, and leadership responsibilities between those seeking advice and those providing it.
9	Sijbom et al.	Daily knowledge sharing at work: The role of daily knowledge sharing expectations, learning goal orientation and task interdependence	Fluctuations of knowledge sharing and knowledge-sharing expectations over time.	Two 10-day diary studies among employees (Study 1: $N = 557$ daily surveys from 101 respondents; Study 2: $N = 401$ daily surveys from 88 respondents).	Daily knowledge-sharing expectations were related to more daily knowledge sharing and were strongest for expectations from co-workers. Varying moderating effects of learning goal orientation on that relationship, with no moderating effect for perceived task performance.

Studies are ordered according to their thematic focus: First, studies that consider multiple learning approaches are listed, followed by studies on training transfer, and finally studies on knowledge sharing.

organisations. It is worth noting the approach used in two studies to examine the perspective of both leaders and their subordinates in leadership training (Güntner et al., 2025; Tafvelin et al., 2025), as both groups were viewed as the target of the learning intervention. Two studies used a literature review to synthesise existing research on their respective topics, finding patterns in the challenges regarding new professionals' learning and adjustment (Frögéli & Backström Eriksson, 2025) and transfer in soft skills training (Hamzah et al., 2025). The methodological diversity of the included studies represents a valuable contribution to the literature, as it enables the generation of robust and nuanced insights into the learning and

transfer processes in organisations, and underlines the shared goals of advancing organisational learning and transfer processes. We now elaborate on the overarching contributions of these included studies for learning and transfer in organisations.

Transfer design as a link between different learning approaches

The studies in this special issue provide valuable insights into the role of transfer design as a mechanism for linking formal, informal, and self-regulated learning approaches. In some

studies, formal learning and SRL are combined in the sense of transfer design (Learning Transfer System Inventory; Kauffeld, 2016; Kauffeld et al., 2008). These studies are consistent with Bell et al. (2017) call to continue investigating transfer interventions. De Jong et al. (2025) shift their focus to how interventions can be used to influence the factors that affect and promote the transfer of training. They studied goal-setting interventions in which trainees set goals about what they wanted to achieve through applying training content, showing which antecedents are raised through goal setting and which are not. Güntner et al. (2025) used an app-based transfer intervention to strengthen the transfer of training after a leadership intervention. By engaging in SRL after training (Sitzmann & Ely, 2011), leaders reported enhanced learning transfer. However, the subordinates of leaders who used the app did not perceive significantly greater leadership skills in their leaders.

Taken together the studies in this special issue show that the effects of goal-setting are limited. The results remain mixed. What could be the reason for this? The measures mentioned focus on the individual. For example, goal-setting interventions can help learners regulate their transfer behaviour by directing their attention and action, mobilising their effort over time, and motivating them to develop relevant goal-attainment strategies (Sitzmann & Ely, 2011). Thus, they are encouraged to engage in self-regulatory activity. The focus of the transfer remains with the individual. The work environment, the behaviour of colleagues, the organisational processes, and the work equipment remain unchanged and can act as central transfer barriers. Hence, taking the context into account may be key to making transfer interventions more effective. Nevertheless, the studies show how different forms of learning can be integrated. At the same time, they point out that the learning transfer system itself must be taken into account and it is not up to the individual learner whether the transfer is successful.

Context in the learning transfer system

In research on the learning transfer system, the working environment has proven to be particularly important in facilitating transfer. Openness and support from colleagues as well as superiors have been identified as being particularly relevant (Blume et al., 2010; Massenberg et al., 2017; Richter & Kauffeld, 2020). Theoretical models attribute a mediating role to transfer motivation between various influencing factors and the transfer of learning (see Gegenfurtner et al., 2009; Kontoghiorghes, 2004), which has been empirically confirmed for many factors, especially in the working environment (e.g., Grohmann et al., 2014; Massenberg & Kauffeld, 2015; Massenberg et al., 2015). In work teams that take part in training together, a shared transfer motivation develops at the team level (Massenberg et al., 2015). Based on the Rubicon model (see Achtziger & Gollwitzer, 2018), transfer volition has been identified as a second mediator (e.g., Seiberling & Kauffeld, 2017). In this special issue, Mehner et al. (2025) show that both peer and supervisor support, and knowledge sharing via motivation and volition, affect training transfer. Therefore, they achieved the expansion of Seiberling and Kauffeld's (2017) training transfer model to include motivation to share, volition to share, and knowledge sharing as distinct factors. Furthermore, Mehner et al. demonstrate a significant

and positive impact of both training transfer and knowledge sharing on individual organisational outcomes; by exploring knowledge sharing, they broadened the view of individual learning and brought the impact of training for the organisation into focus.

Tafvelin et al. (2025) consider the context and focus on employee orientation in the organisation, which refers to the balancing of interest between employee objectives (e.g., employee well-being), organisational objectives (e.g., productivity), and formalisation in the organisation. Moreover, it is interesting to note that these authors propose that contextual factors may also display curvilinear relationships with the transfer of leadership training such that high levels of certain contextual factors may be too much of a good thing and actually have detrimental effects.

In their literature reviews, Frögéli and Backström Eriksson (2025) and Hamzah et al. (2025) utilise and expand behavioural models to gain a better understanding of how to design workplace training and learning programmes that reduce obstacles for and increase the likelihood of successful transfer. Both present models that focus their attention on the capabilities, opportunities, and motivations of learners, as well as their support agents. They deliver a different perspective on the promoting and inhibiting factors that explain subsequent behaviour change.

Social networks for the transfer of work-related learning

To facilitate learning transfer within an organisation and drive organisational change, it is essential that acquired knowledge and skills are effectively shared among employees (Kauffeld & Berg, 2022; Mehner & Kauffeld, 2023). When an employee shares their knowledge with a colleague, the recipient experiences this as a transfer activity or an informal peer-focused learning process (Decius, Knappstein, et al., 2023; Kortsch et al., 2019). The dissemination of knowledge through sharing plays a crucial role in organisational success, contributing to improved outcomes such as process optimisation, enhanced problem-solving capabilities, and the development of new knowledge structures (Ferrer-Serrano et al., 2022; Mehner & Kauffeld, 2023).

In recent years, the discourse on both formal and informal learning has increasingly recognised the potential of the social context (Decius, 2024; Stasewitsch, Dokuka, et al., 2022). Informal learning from others has often been conceptualised as either a self-initiated activity or based on the individual's general attitudes towards learning (see Kortsch & Kauffeld, 2019). However, this perspective treats informal learning from others as an individual characteristic, which is somewhat limiting, given that the construct is inherently relational (Mehner et al., 2025). Examining social structures and their implications and antecedents via network analysis is arguably a more suitable method for investigating the social nature of the informal learning process. Mehner et al. (2025) highlight the importance of knowledge networks, and the role of social support within these networks, for facilitating training transfer and knowledge sharing. Their research provides evidence of how employee competency development contributes to organisational success through these mechanisms. Knowledge networks enable

individuals to exchange and acquire expertise across various domains and topics, promoting faster and more efficient learning, problem-solving, and innovation (Donati et al., 2016; Phelps et al., 2012; Stasewitsch, Barthauer, et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Wen & Wang, 2022). Mehner et al. (2025) found that more than half of their participants experienced changes in their knowledge networks and that individuals actively sought knowledge exchange with more experienced colleagues, considering such interaction to be a valuable complement to formal training. The knowledge sharing primarily occurred between colleagues with close working relationships who were expected to benefit from the newly acquired knowledge. In turn, perceived useful of shared feedback also fosters team awareness (Hagemann & Decius, 2024), which may strengthen these social relationships.

Several studies included in this special issue focus on the role of the social network in learning and training, especially in relation to knowledge sharing (see Köhler et al., 2025; Mehner et al., 2025; Sijbom et al., 2025). Sijbom et al. (2025) examined the relationship of knowledge-sharing expectations from co-workers and supervisors with knowledge-sharing behaviour, finding that the relationship was stronger for expectations from co-workers. This highlights that different social actors may have different influences on the learning process and we need a better understanding of how to integrate them during the learning process. Frögéli and Backström Eriksson (2025) also examined co-workers and supervisors and their role as socialisation agents in helping newcomers learn and adjust. They discuss the obstacles involved, offering insights on improving the process through effective management and recognising socialisation agents' efforts. Köhler et al. (2025) examined advice-seeking behaviours, identifying a halo effect where proficiency in one skill set increases the likelihood of also being sought for advice in other areas, particularly when the advice seekers and givers share similarities in terms of skills, tenure, and leadership responsibilities. These findings not only underscore the importance of social networks for workplace learning but also raise questions about the varying impact of different actors within learners' social networks and how such networks should be managed within organisations.

Evaluation of training effectiveness

The best-known and most widespread results-based evaluation concept in practice is Kirkpatrick's four-level model (1967; J. D. Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). This model comprises four levels: reaction, learning, behaviour and results. The studies included in this special issue mostly consider the behavioural level in addition to increased knowledge and changes in attitude. The behavioural level refers to transfer success and includes changes in work behaviour. It corresponds to the implementation and generalisation of what has been learned in the workplace and indicates the extent to which transfer from the learning environment to the work environment has been successful. Observations were typically the method of choice for obtaining information about changes in behaviour (for example, see Kauffeld, 2006). Transfer surveys or interviews with participants, their superiors, or their colleagues were also used. In addition, the studies refer to positive transfer, which

assumes that training participants succeed in applying the learned content (knowledge, behaviour, etc.) in their everyday work, which differs (to a greater or lesser extent) from the learning situation. The greater the difference in content between the learning environment and the everyday situation where the desired behaviour is to be applied (i.e., the more dissimilar the two situations are), the more challenging the task is for the employee. The distance of the transfer increases with the dissimilarity of the situations. Most of the studies in this special issue refer generally to employees applying their learning at work. Positive, vertical transfer can be seen in various studies in this special issue. De Jong et al. (2025) measured the general transfer of training after six weeks. Mehner et al. (2025) used the Questionnaire for Professional Training Evaluation (Q4TE; Grohmann & Kauffeld, 2013) and thus refer to D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1967, 2016) four levels of training evaluation as a framework. Eger et al. (2025) used a retention test four weeks after their participants completed an online experiment, measuring the number of correct answers as a performance-related training outcome; this primarily represented the knowledge level as a transfer measure. Tafvelin et al. (2025) assessed training outcomes via leaders' development of transformational leadership both from the leaders' and their subordinates' perspectives, measuring behavioural aspects of training transfer. While self-report descriptions were generally used (such as in De Jong et al., 2025), Güntner et al. (2025) combined self and external descriptions of leadership behaviour after leadership training. While not all the interventions were successful in terms of transfer (for example, see Güntner et al., 2025, for external descriptions of leadership), there was no evidence of negative transfer, where participants struggled to cope with tasks they previously handled without difficulty. The effects of the changed behaviour on the team and the organisation were not considered in the studies.

A research agenda for work-related learning and transfer in a disruptive World of Working

Although they interact, formal, informal, and self-regulated learning are still too often considered separately in research and practice. Investigating them in isolation risks oversimplifying the complexity of work-related learning and neglecting the combined effects of different types of learning on learning outcomes and learning transfer. Although our special issue contributes to integrating these work-related learning approaches, questions for future research remain (see Table 2).

Conceptually, formal learning provides structured knowledge acquisition, which can serve as a foundation for informal and SRL to enhance the application and adaptability of learning in real-world contexts (Noe et al., 2014). Empirically, studies such as that by Sijbom et al. (2025) demonstrate how daily work-based support fosters integrated learning and knowledge exchange processes. Similarly, Mehner et al. (2025) show that social support mechanisms enable knowledge transfer across formal and informal contexts, highlighting the critical role of organisational networks in sustaining learning outcomes. Future research should not only look at the predictors of the various work-related learning forms together, but also examine

Table 2. Future research agenda on work-related learning and transfer in organisations.

Topic	Potential research questions
Integration of formal, informal, and self-regulated learning	(1) How can different learning approaches be integrated for learning in organisations? (2) How do different learning approaches interact with each other to explain learning outcomes? (3) What is the unique contribution of different learning approaches to learning outcomes?
Transfer of informal and self-regulated learning	(1) What factors influence the transfer of learning and learning outcomes (e.g., knowledge, skills)? (2) How can organisations facilitate the transfer of informal and self-regulated learning? (3) How can organisations create environments that encourage the application of informal learning in everyday tasks?
New learning technologies such as (generative) artificial intelligence (AI)	(1) How does digitalisation change work-related learning (e.g., frequency, duration, or selection of learning approaches) and learning transfer? (2) When and why can generative AI be used to support learning transfer at different stages of the learning process? (3) How can generative AI support and create adaptive learning paths based on individual progress and needs?
Role of social learning networks	(1) How can social networks support work-related learning and learning transfer in the organisation? (2) What factors influence people's learning networks and their impact on change in the organisation? (3) How can organisations effectively cultivate and manage learning networks to foster learning and knowledge sharing?
Connection between individual learning, and organisational learning and change	(1) How is individual learning connected to organisational learning, so that organisations can initiate and implement change? (2) How does learning drive the integration of new topics into organisational processes, and how can organisations manage their introduction? (3) How can organisations align learning initiatives with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals?
New evaluation models	(1) How can evaluation models make visible the direct, indirect, and long-term effects on employees, their team/network, the organisation, and society? (2) How can the contribution of different forms of learning to evaluation results be taken into account? (3) How can reflective formats integrated into learning be used in a complementary evaluation alongside outcome- and process-related evaluation?

the mediating processes and outcomes (see Decius, Decius, et al., 2024).

Learning transfer research has so far focused on the individual transfer of knowledge acquired in formal contexts (Ford et al., 2018). Formal further training has also been considered when investigating the learning transfer system (e.g., Bates et al., 2007; Kauffeld et al., 2008). Although the transfer hurdle is significantly lower in the case of informal and self-regulated learning, organisations must also create the conditions for these forms of learning to occur, so that learning content can be sustainably integrated into everyday work (Blume et al., 2024; Decius, Decius, et al., 2024). This requires fostering a supportive organisational culture that values knowledge sharing and provides opportunities for informal exchange, as this is critical for reinforcing learning in practice (Kortsch & Kauffeld, 2019). Moreover, the integration of SRL strategies, such as goal-setting and reflective practices, into daily workflows enhances the durability and relevance of learning outcomes across all learning modalities (Sijbom et al., 2025; Sitzmann & Ely, 2011). Concepts are also needed that combine the different forms of learning, generate insights into the optimal design of individual learning paths, and focus on the development of the organisation in disruptive times. In addition, further research with longitudinal designs is needed to examine the underlying causal mechanisms between conducive conditions, learning activities, and transfer success.

New technologies, particularly (generative) artificial intelligence (AI), offer a wide range of possibilities for supporting work-related learning and knowledge transfer. For example, generative AI can provide personalised learning content in real-time that is tailored to the individual needs and respective contexts of learners (Decius, 2024; Kauffeld & Paulsen, 2018). Adaptive algorithms make it possible to optimise learning

processes and overcome barriers to knowledge transfer; for example, by automatically generating specific application scenarios or industry-specific case studies. Furthermore, AI enables the simulation of complex work situations, which can promote practical experience and strengthen metacognitive skills. At the same time, technological progress also places new demands on organisations; for example, with regard to the integration of technologies into existing learning and work structures and the promotion of employees' digital skills (Holmes & Littlejohn, 2024). To fully exploit the potential of generative AI, therefore, a systematic approach is needed that combines technological possibilities with didactic principles and organisational strategies.

AI differs fundamentally from earlier technologies in one respect: to some extent, it has its own agency and shares it in collaboration with humans (Murray et al., 2021; Parker & Grote, 2022). Future research should therefore address the extent to which work-related learning might change when AI becomes both a learning tool – and thus, in the sense of actor – network theory (Gutiérrez, 2023), a generic actant – and an independent actor, and what this means for the human – AI learning process. These interactions could be examined using social network analysis in the work-related learning context, building on previous results with this method (see Köhler et al., 2025; Mehner et al., 2025).

Much of the work-related learning research to date has focused on either organisational or individual outcomes (see Beier et al., 2025; Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022). However, little is known about the interplay between individual and organisational learning. While work-related learning should be designed to empower learners and enable them to learn content that they categorically want to learn (Decius et al., 2022), strategic organisational goals must remain central to

workplace learning and self-regulated initiatives to ensure that learning efforts are cohesive and contribute meaningfully to broader organisational development. Future research could investigate how the integration of formal, informal, and self-regulated learning approaches collectively supports organisational transformation and development. The overarching aim is to foster sustainable organisational change.

Notwithstanding these arguments, the sustainability of learning outcomes – whether in terms of environmental initiatives or other organisational improvements – depends not only on individual efforts but also on broader social dynamics. Social processes, such as those observed in social networks, play a pivotal role in the success of learning and transfer in organisations. Networking and social exchange are critical mechanisms for accelerating and supporting learning and the transfer of knowledge (Mehner et al., 2025), and social networks accelerate the diffusion of ideas and innovations (Stasewitsch, Barthauer, et al., 2022). Small-world networks promote the efficient exchange of knowledge and can facilitate innovation (Stasewitsch, Barthauer, et al., 2022). The knowledge gained is primarily passed on to close contacts with whom an individual works (Stasewitsch, Dokuka, et al., 2022). Hence, future research should investigate how social processes, such as leveraging social networks, fostering peer collaboration, and addressing resistance, can be systematically integrated into organisational learning and transfer strategies. Specifically, studies could explore how different types of social networks contribute to the sustainability and effectiveness of training programmes, as well as how peer collaboration can be designed to maximise learning outcomes (Mehner et al., 2025; Stasewitsch, Dokuka, et al., 2022). Most of the studies in this special issue examined how individuals perceive that support is available (i.e., perceived support) or how employees accepted the personal support they received from others at work (i.e., received support) (for reviews, see Bavik et al., 2020; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Jolly et al., 2021). A dualistic perspective, which is also referred to as the paradox of social support (see Ehrhardt & Ragins, 2019), points to the importance of perceptions of congruence between the support received and support provided (Berg et al., 2024; Patterer et al., 2023). It is also important to understand and map social support as an interaction process in the learning and transfer context (Berg, Bakaç, et al., 2023).

Furthermore, implementing newly acquired knowledge often necessitates changes, not only for training participants but also for their colleagues. Therefore, future research should examine methods for proactively managing resistance to change in the context of training transfer and how these methods influence both individual and systemic organisational change (e.g., Güntner et al., 2019). Moreover, it is essential to consider that organisations frequently face paradoxical tensions in work-related learning – such as balancing stability with change or exploration with exploitation – which can shape the extent to which training outcomes are successfully integrated into everyday work practices (Paulsen et al., 2024). By addressing these issues, future studies can provide deeper insight into aligning learning initiatives with long-term organisational goals.

Regarding evaluating learning outcomes, the question arises about whether we need to evaluate differently. Many evaluations use D. L. Kirkpatrick's (1967, 2016) four-level framework model, which considers the satisfaction levels, learning, behaviour, and organisational outcomes (e.g., Questionnaire for Professional Training Evaluation; Grohmann & Kauffeld, 2013). In addition to assessing direct outcomes at the target group level (e.g., awareness, skills, or behaviour), changes made in the target group's life situation as a result of the new work skills acquired can also be considered (Berg, Schulte, et al., 2023). This would help to bridge the gap between learning and transfer research and career research. Sustainable careers can be promoted that are characterised by productivity, satisfaction and health (see De Vos et al., 2020). Evaluating the transfer of knowledge to the team and the network goes beyond evaluating the individual learner. The team and network are not only seen as catalysts of learning transfer but also result-related evaluation criteria.

At the impact level, organisational and societal level effects can be described, which are triggered by further training in the long term. Companies that strategically train and qualify their employees can contribute to industrial, ecological, and digital transformation. This can have a positive impact on the economy as a whole and help to prevent a shortage of skilled workers. These aspects contribute to the implementation of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly the goals for high-quality education, equal opportunities, and a focus on health and well-being. In addition, learning and transfer can address the ecological dimension of sustainability in organisations. Learning processes can focus on ecological objectives, such as promoting green knowledge sharing, which can significantly contribute to resource conservation and environmental stewardship (Katz et al., 2022; Renwick et al., 2013; Ritter et al., 2024). Fostering e.g., employee green behaviour can positively impact organisational reputation and operational efficiency, supporting the broader goals of corporate social responsibility and sustainable development (Ones & Dilchert, 2012). In terms of evaluation, it is important to ask how these levels – individual, team/network, organisation, society – can be operationalised and how their interdependence can be taken into account in evaluation levels and models.

In addition to the temporal sustainability and result levels to be considered through evaluation, it is important to explore how the different forms of learning – formal, work-related informal, and self-regulated – can be evaluated and how we can identify what contribution the respective forms of learning make to the results. When considering the learning transfer system, the question arises as to whether the same person-, design- and context-related factors are relevant for different forms of learning. In addition, it is important to identify how skills development research can benefit from reflective formats integrated into learning alongside traditional outcome- and process-based evaluations, and how these can be used for evaluation (see also Kauffeld & Paulsen, 2018).

Concluding note

This special issue underscores the vital role of integrating formal, informal, and self-regulated learning in fostering individual and organisational adaptability. The featured studies highlight that effective learning transfer requires not only well-designed training interventions but also robust organisational support, strategic alignment of learning goals, and the active use of social networks. By addressing the barriers to skill application and leveraging emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, organisations can create dynamic learning environments that meet the demands of disruptive change. Future research should continue to explore how these learning modalities can collectively drive sustainable organisational development, balance individual empowerment with strategic objectives, and foster innovation through collaborative knowledge-sharing frameworks. The insights provided in this special issue lay the foundation for a more holistic and effective approach to learning and transfer, equipping organisations to thrive in the rapidly evolving world of work.

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