

Editorial: Exploring the impact of agility and learning in organisations

Welcome to Volume 14, Issue 2 of the *Journal of Work Applied Management*, a Special Issue dedicated to examining how work-based learning, action learning and organisational development methods are delivering against the unprecedented and urgent need for organisational agility, flexibility and ambidexterity. The diversity of ways in which these work-applied approaches are effectively curated are increasingly evident across different levels of organisational learning, development and adaptation in response to the “megatrends” of technological hyperconnectivity, urbanisation, geopolitical tensions and a global climate crisis, amidst a challenging phase of post-pandemic economic recovery affecting workforce readiness, supply chains and inflation (Deloitte, 2017; Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2021, 2022).

It is not surprising that the Special Issue features a range of work-applied approaches tackling contemporary challenges and across situations; its intention is to stimulate debate in relation to organisational agility, flexibility and ambidexterity in the context of work applied learning, action orientated learning, coaching, leadership and other applied learning methods across sectoral, cultural and multi-cultural settings to generate new dynamic capabilities. Here, these work-applied approaches are aligned to the practical commitment to change despite being from – in this issue at least – different traditions including consultancy, apprenticeship education for managers, enterprise development or psychoanalysis though it is interesting to see that these work-applied methodologies are not necessarily branching out for multiple methodological practices for organisational change, as articulated by Zuber-Skerritt and Abraham (2017), where action learning and work-based learning are combined to address change.

There is genuine diversity in the application of action learning in organisations including, for example, professional and personal development, change management, problem-solving, service and product improvement, innovation and even in attempting to tackle the wicked problems involved in achieving sustainability and social action. But there is also diversity in the form action learning takes around the world although many of its core principles remain constant, as the articles in this issue demonstrate. Action learning is adaptive and context sensitive, which may, in part, account for its longevity and its ambidexterity. These complex methodological interventions, characterised as work-applied learning, would seemingly provide complex solutions to complex challenges (Zuber-Skerritt and Abraham, 2017). *JWAM* would welcome practitioners and researchers to pursue these multifaceted approaches in future journal issues.



As you will soon discover, the Special Issue has attracted a multi-disciplinary range of cutting-edge international research drawn from public, private and community sector practice to demonstrate how individual, team, organisational, national and international inter-organisational level learning is connected through creative and flexible work-applied methods.

In the first article, [Zabiegalski and Marquardt \(2022\)](#) examine the intersection of action learning and ambidexterity and expose the balance that they believe is optimal in nurturing both exploitation (action) and exploitation (learning) to enable the central tenets of learning, curiosity, questioning and learning within ambidextrous learning organisations. [Zabiegalski and Marquardt \(2022\)](#) argue that action learning teams promote ambidexterity, particularly where the transformation of organisational cultures is evident, providing a thought-provoking framework for sustainable and synergistic organisational change.

Moving from action orientated learning to a broader review of the literature relating to different work-applied learning strategies, [Fergusson \(2022\)](#) examines a range of ersatz modes of workplace, work-integrated and work-based learning. Through an investigative review of studies drawn from eight scholarly categories of work and learning, [Fergusson \(2022\)](#) is able to identify four main types of learning together containing twelve modes of learning to inform a proto-theoretical model, with reflective practice at its heart. In doing so, the paper provides a critical reminder that whilst work-based learning can provide participants with multiple opportunities to learn, programmes, strategies and interventions require flexibility, cognisance of inclusivity and diversity policies to widen participation and ensure fair equality of access.

In the next article, [Brook and Abbott \(2022\)](#) deepen our understanding of inter-organisational action learning in drawing upon a self-managed action-learning initiative undertaken by social workers. [Brook and Abbott \(2022\)](#) identify the benefits of networking, individual and organisational learning juxtaposed with contemporary practical challenges presented by virtual learning sets. Hitherto, the role of the expert facilitator has been widely accepted as essential in traditional practice; however, the paper offers alternative perspectives, challenging our previous assumptions and provoking discussion in this regard. Their findings resonate with [Fergusson's \(2022\)](#) to remind us of the significant role that reflective practice plays in work-applied learning.

The next two articles draw upon exploratory case studies to direct our attention to the value of strategic planning in a medium-sized organisation to improve employee engagement and business performance demonstrated by [Gerard and Allcorn \(2022\)](#) in the fourth article, juxtaposed with dynamic and adaptive survival strategies in a micro-enterprise in response to an extreme event presented by [Murphy and Kelliher \(2022\)](#) in the fifth paper. [Gerard and Allcorn \(2022\)](#) invoke the lens of psychoanalytic insight to illuminate unconscious forces of power and authority in organisational cultures, revealing the potential for profound and sustainable change to influence the quality of work environments and employee morale. Conversely, [Murphy and Kelliher \(2022\)](#) explore the consequences of an SME's unplanned and adaptive strategic response to an extreme event and offer a range of agile recommendations, including a hybrid learning strategy intended to strengthen decision-making and progress during future periods of crisis. Together the two papers emphasise the critically important contribution that planned work-applied interventions, professional development and management learning can make to employee engagement and agility to inform business performance in all sizes and types of business across the globe.

[Quew-Jones and Rowe \(2022\)](#) provide a timely reminder of the critical work carried out by workplace mentors, amplifying the value of work-applied management learning through the collaborative support structures which underpin degree apprenticeships. The paper examines employers' perspectives of apprenticeship management, raising awareness of the complex challenges relating to human resource factors including the management of

expectations of work-based learning and work applied methodologies. [Quew-Jones and Rowe \(2022\)](#) expose the breadth of expectations placed upon employers and their workplace mentors, suggesting a radical re-think of levy-funded eligible activities to allow a broader range of apprentice support strategies for optimal outcomes.

[Schönbohm and Zhang \(2022\)](#) draw upon the strategic formulation and serious game literature to develop a virtual gamified recession workshop in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Adopting an action research methodology, the international pilot study reveals the power of such a tool in improving and structuring the strategic decision-making process, enhancing creativity and motivation and mitigating error and cognitive bias. The paper provokes further investigation into the application of both facilitated and automated serious games within strategic management processes to incorporate formulation, implementation and evaluation to improve overall decision-making through creative work-applied learning.

[Kyei-Frimpong et al. \(2022\)](#) examine the mediating role of knowledge sharing within the Ghanaian financial service sector and reveal its significant role in effective leadership behaviours, which enhance organisational performance. Their findings expose a myriad of practical implications for applied management learning and human behaviour, specifically the need for exceptional leadership behaviours to inculcate knowledge sharing behaviours to help build a productive workforce for effective organisational operation in volatile, uncertain, competitive and ambiguous business environments.

In the penultimate article, [Koster \(2022\)](#) further develops the theme of knowledge intensity in drawing our attention to the power of inter-organisational learning through a review of human resource collaborative practice across a range of Dutch organisations, operating in the world's fifth highest ranked knowledge economy. [Koster's \(2022\)](#) research reveals a growing agility and strengthened interdependence with other organisations in terms of knowledge sharing, in addition to pragmatic insights into combined modes of governance and methods of evaluation to encourage best practice.

In the final article [Lokhtina et al. \(2022\)](#) illustrate the power of international inter-organisational collaboration in their exploration of synchronous and asynchronous virtual communication in teaching, learning and research as a critical part of academia's global response to the pandemic. This virtual group of collaborative global scholars formed a nexus between action learning and extant literature to reveal potential constraints of affordance and parity, providing practical recommendations for sustainable and effective spaces of virtual collaboration and learning.

We hope that you enjoy this diverse and thought-provoking collection of papers in this Special Issue and find them useful in your practice. Please do get in touch if you would like to discuss your own ideas for publications within the journal. As always, thanks are due to all of these contributors for their valuable, original insights and rigorous methods of research and analysis. We would also like to especially thank our wonderful reviewers, without whom this publication would not be possible and whose wisdom and guidance is very much appreciated.

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