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# The Owner-Manager's Role as a Facilitator of Informal Learning in Small Businesses

Few studies have examined the owner-manager as facilitator of learning in small businesses. Furthermore, these studies are typically not framed by distinctive characteristics of small businesses. These limitations of the literature stimulated us to ask: *How do the situational opportunities and constraints that emanate from the distinctive characteristics of small businesses affect the small business owner-manager's role as a facilitator of learning?* To address this question, we first conducted a narrative review of existing research on the owner-manager as facilitator of learning in small businesses (10-49 employees). Four themes emerged from our analysis of research findings, including a theme that owner-managers are seldom directly involved in facilitating employees' learning. Next, we conducted an integrative review of literatures that discuss (a) indirect approaches managers can adopt to facilitate learning; and (b) small business characteristics. We focussed on four high-impact indirect approaches owner-managers can use and examined how employment of each approach might be enabled or constrained by distinctive characteristics of small businesses. The integrative review generated ten research propositions. We also synthesised a conceptual framework that illustrates the main variables to be studied and presumed relationships among them. Based on our analysis of literature, implications for policy and practice are proposed.

Keywords: owner-manager, facilitator of learning, workplace learning, informal learning, small business

## Introduction

Learning in the workplace is a major focus for human resource development (Bierema and Eraut 2004; Jeong et al. 2018). In a highly competitive business environment characterised by rapid and continuous change, both the quality and quantity of workplace learning are key factors in the economic viability and competitive advantage of organisations (Noe, Clarke and Klein 2014). From an employee perspective, learning at and through work is important to maintain their employability, because of factors such as job insecurity and the proliferation of contingent employment (Rubery et al. 2018).

Additionally, participation in continuous learning and development makes important contributions to the development of employees' positive work attitudes such as job satisfaction and engagement (Cerasoli et al. 2018) and to employee well-being (Watson et al. 2018).

In developed and developing countries, small businesses constitute a substantial component of the workplace-learning context, because they are major providers of employment (Storey 2018). Given the substantial stock of skills and knowledge in small businesses, how skills and knowledge are acquired, maintained and transformed through informal learning processes in these organisations are matters of significant interest to researchers, policy makers and small business owners. Accordingly, Human Resource Development (HRD) in small businesses should be an important area of scholarship, but HRD researchers have instead focused on large organisations and formal HRD practices (Nolan and Garavan 2016a, 2016b; Short and Gray 2018). Consequently, as Tam and Gray (2016, 672) noted, "much of what is known empirically about HRD comes from the studies of large organisations." Thus, the current HRD knowledge base is deficient, because small and large businesses are fundamentally different (Storey et al. 2010) and HRD in small businesses is characterised by informality (Nolan and Garavan 2016a, 2016b; Short and Gray 2018). Furthermore, although Nolan and Garavan's (2016a) systematic review of the sparse literature on HRD in SMEs highlighted the key role of owner-managers and their centrality in research on HRD in SMEs, little is known about how small business settings enable and constrain the owner-manager's role as facilitator of employee learning.

Small businesses have a strong preference for and are heavily reliant upon informal learning processes, as opposed to employee participation in formal training (Bishop 2017a; Author 1, Author 3 and Author 2 2017). Therefore, as Kitching has argued, the

role of the small business employer regarding employee skill and knowledge acquisition is better conceptualised as “enabler of employee learning rather than provider of training” (2008, 103). The importance of learning in highly competitive and rapidly changing environments, and compelling evidence that small businesses prefer and are more reliant upon informal learning processes, suggests owner-managers can play a key role as facilitators of employee learning (Nolan and Garavan 2016a).

While there is a substantial body of literature on managerial roles (Sandhu and Kulik 2018), there is a relatively small but growing body of literature that examines the manager’s (or leader’s) role as facilitator of employees’ learning (e.g., Döös, Johansson and Wilhelmson 2015; Ellström 2012; Hughes 2004; Author 2 2017). This literature suggests that managers can have a significant impact on informal learning in the workplace through developmental interventions such as coaching (Beattie et al. 2014) and through creating conditions in the work environment that are conducive to learning (Ellinger 2005). Within this stream of literature, there are few studies that have examined the owner-manager’s role as a facilitator of employee learning in small businesses. Given the numerical and economic significance of small businesses, more empirical studies are needed to develop understanding of the small business owner-manager’s role as a facilitator of informal learning and to provide practical guidance to owner-managers who wish to enhance employee learning.

However, it is important that such studies be framed within the context of the distinctive characteristics of small businesses (Author 1, Author 3 and Author 2 2017). Large and small businesses are fundamentally different (d’Amboise and Muldowney 1988; Welsh and White 1981) and distinctive characteristics of small businesses are likely to have significant effects on enactment of managerial roles (Florén and Tell 2004), including the learning facilitation role. Distinctive characteristics of small businesses

produce situational opportunities and constraints that enable or constrain managerial role enactment. With the aims of: (1) generating propositions and a conceptual framework to guide future research on the owner-manager's role as a facilitator of informal learning; and (2) providing practical guidance on facilitation of informal learning in small businesses, this paper addresses the question:

How do the situational opportunities and constraints that emanate from the distinctive characteristics of small businesses affect the small business owner-manager's role as a facilitator of informal workplace learning?

To accomplish the twin aims, the rest of this paper is organised as follows. The next section describes the key concepts of the article to provide conceptual clarity. Thereafter, we critically review existing literature on managers as facilitators of employee learning in smaller enterprises. We then go on to analyse how distinctive characteristics of small businesses, that constitute situational opportunities and constraints, are likely to affect the owner-manager's role as a facilitator of informal learning. Drawing on our review of literature and analysis of the effects of distinctive characteristics of small businesses on the owner-manager's learning facilitation role, we then propose: (1) a set of propositions; (2) a research conceptual framework; and (3) practical and policy implications for facilitating informal learning in small businesses. Finally, we outline limitations of the review and then conclude the article with a synthesis of key ideas in the paper.

### Key concepts

Consistent with good practice guidelines for writing literature reviews (Torraco 2016), the following sub-sections provide explanations of the key concepts of the topic.

### *Small business*

Any definition of ‘small business’ must capture fundamental differences between small and large businesses (Curran and Blackburn 2001; Welsh and White 1981). However, developing a theoretically meaningful definition of organisation size has been problematic (Josefy et al. 2015) and there is no widely accepted definition of ‘small business’ (Curran and Blackburn 2001). In qualitative terms, a small business can be defined as a business that is independently owned and managed by the same individual(s) and which is not dominant in its field of operation (Bolton 1971; d’Amboise and Muldowney 1988). However, because it is difficult to operationalise qualitative definitions, researchers often use quantitative criteria (e.g., staff headcount, annual turnover). This may lead to ‘size reductionism’ (Curran and Blackburn 2001; Storey 1994), which is a tendency to explain almost every aspect of the phenomenon being studied by reference to the selected size criterion. Burrows and Curran (1989, 530) write, “size, whether measured in terms of number of employees, turnover, market share or whatever, is not a sufficiently robust criterion to allow ‘small firms’ to be isolated and analysed as being an economic and social specificity”. Similarly, Nolan and Garavan (2016a) argue that size is just one several internal and external contingencies that shape businesses. Author 1, Author 3 and Author 2 (2017) have proposed that research on informal learning in small businesses should focus on distinctive characteristics of small businesses that are potentially relevant to informal learning processes. This approach would also assist in bringing coherence to research on informal learning in small businesses and facilitate comparisons over time and between countries.

In this paper, we use the European Union (EU) staff headcount definition of the small business (i.e. 10-49 employees) (European Commission 2015). In the EU definition, micro enterprises are businesses that employ fewer than 10 persons, while medium-sized enterprises are businesses that employ 50-250 staff. We did not include

micro businesses in our review because these businesses are unlikely to have a recognisable management structure and thus may not demonstrate the phenomenon of interest to researchers. Medium-sized businesses were excluded because characteristics of medium-sized businesses tend to be closer to large businesses than small businesses, and medium-sized businesses are managed in a relatively more formalised, professionalised and structured manner compared to small businesses (Lai et al. 2016).

### *Situated learning*

Situated learning theory underpins this paper, because it is widely used as a theoretical lens in studies on workplace learning (e.g., Billett 1994; Fuller and Unwin, 2011). It is a particularly appropriate theoretical lens for developing an understanding of learning processes in small businesses, because small businesses tend to provide just wholly work-based learning experiences, which means that employees learn mainly through participation in everyday situated work practices and interactions with more experienced co-workers (Billett et al. 2015). Situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991) provides a situated and relational explanation of the process of learning and it was developed as an alternative conceptualisation of the process of learning to cognitive perspectives on learning (Cairns 2011; Contu and Willmott 2003). A key difference between the two perspectives on learning relates to the unit of analysis. In cognitive theories, the individual learner is the unit of analysis (Cobb and Bowers 1999). Knowledge acquisition, maintenance and transformation take place through cognitive processes ‘in the mind’ of the individual (Billett 1996). Learning as a cognitive process involves the transmission of comparatively abstract, codified bodies of knowledge, often within the context of formal education or training (Contu and Willmott 2003). Sfard (1998) coined the phrase ‘learning as acquisition’ to encapsulate this conceptualisation of learning. In situated learning theory, the social collective is the unit of analysis (Cobb and

Bowers 1999). The situated approach conceptualises learning as a phenomenon that takes place within a social framework of participation in everyday, goal-directed work activities (Billett 1996). Learning occurs naturally, as people participate in activities such as tackling novel and challenging assignments, interacting with colleagues and clients, and completing projects as part of a team (Eraut 2004). Sfard (1998) used the phrase ‘learning as participation’ to sum up this conceptualisation of learning.

### *Workplace learning*

To examine learning processes in workplaces, some workplace learning theorists (e.g., Eraut 2004; Marsick and Watkins 1990) find it useful to differentiate between formal (i.e. structured) and informal (i.e. unstructured) learning. Formal learning is structured in that it is typically organised through courses offered by an education or training provider. A designated teacher or trainer delivers the courses that have specified learning outcomes. Successful achievement of learning outcomes often results in the award of a qualification or credit. Informal learning, on the other hand, is typically characterised as non-didactic; based on learning from experience; highly socially collaborative; embedded in an organisational context and meaningful activity; initiated by the learner’s interest or choice; and enhanced by pro-activity, critical reflection and creativity (e.g., Callanan, Cervantes and Loomis 2011; Kyndt and Baert 2013; Watkins and Marsick 1992).

In this paper, *learning* is taken to mean permanent or semi-permanent changes in how individuals think and act (Billett 2004), while *workplace learning* refers to the learner’s participation in situated work activities that offer rich learning experiences (Billett and Choy 2013). Learning through participation in practice can take many forms, including learning through social interaction with more knowledgeable or skilled colleagues or managers, and learning through reflection and experimentation while participating in novel and challenging work activities (Nikolova et al. 2014). Poell (2014,



20) described workplace learning as “a natural and largely autonomous process derived from the characteristics of the work process and its inherent social interactions; often implicit and sometimes even hard to differentiate from doing the daily work”.

Workplaces learning environments have been conceptualised as ranging from ‘expansive’ to ‘restrictive’ (Fuller et al. 2007). Expansive rather than restrictive environments foster learning at work, because in expansive environments employees experience diverse forms of participation (Fuller et al. 2007). Furthermore, expansive learning environments are more likely to foster learning that has been variously referred to as double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1978), exploration (March 1991) and generative learning (Senge 1990). Restrictive learning environments, on the other hand, are more likely to yield learning that has been termed single-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1978), exploitation (March 1991) and adaptive learning (Senge 1990). Expansive and restrictive environments therefore also differ in the magnitude of creative change involved in learning processes (Olsen 2016). For example, Yukl (2009, 51) writes, “Exploration involves finding innovative new products, services, processes or technology. Exploitation involves learning how to make incremental improvements in existing products, services, or processes.” However, exploration-exploitation should be viewed as a continuum of behaviours, as opposed to a choice between discrete options (Lavie, Stettner and Tushman 2010). Effectively balancing exploration and exploitation is essential for the survival and competitive advantage of organisations (March 1991), but balancing these contradictory activities and seeking to create organisational ‘ambidexterity’ poses significant managerial challenges (O'Reilly and Tushman 2004).

#### *Facilitation of informal workplace learning*

Literature that discusses the manager’s (or leader’s) role as a facilitator of learning tends to assign a broad meaning to the term ‘facilitation’. For example, Amy (2008, 220) writes

“facilitating refers to making a process less difficult for others while supporting their progress”. Several studies have sought to identify what managers or leaders actually do to facilitate learning. For example, Ellinger, Watkins and Bostrom (1999) identified nine behaviour sets that define the role of facilitator of learning in learning organisations, which included providing feedback to employees and building a learning environment. Beattie (2006) studied behaviours used by voluntary sector senior and first-line managers when facilitating employee learning and proposed a hierarchy of nine facilitative behaviours ranging from the base level of ‘caring’ through to the highest level of ‘challenging’. Amy (2008) investigated how leaders facilitate individual and organisational learning in a telecommunications company which was considered to be a learning organisation and uncovered three clusters of ‘leader learning behaviours’ involved in facilitating individual learning (e.g., delegating, teaching, empowering) and three ineffective behaviours (e.g., being authoritarian and defensive). However, even some ‘ineffective behaviours’ (e.g. being authoritarian) may well trigger employee learning in some situations (Author 2 2017). For example, managers might use threats of punishment to influence poor performers to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to improve their work performance. From a contingent view of leadership, Vera and Crossan (2004) argued that learning in organisations may sometimes prosper under transformational leadership behaviours, and at other times benefit more from transactional leadership behaviours.

These multiple micro behaviours identified in prior studies reflect a mix of direct and indirect approaches to facilitating workplace learning. Thus, there appears to be broad consensus that managers can facilitate workplace learning in essentially two ways: through developmental interventions (e.g., Beattie et al. 2014) and through creating conditions in work environments that are favourable to learning (e.g., Ellinger 2005).

Consistent with this view, Döös, Johansson and Wilhelmson (2015) made a distinction between two types of pedagogic interventions: direct and indirect. *Direct pedagogic interventions* (e.g., providing developmental feedback) use communication as the means to influence people's ways of thinking and acting. Alternatively, *indirect pedagogic interventions* (e.g., job redesign) seeks to influence people's ways of thinking and acting via changed work environment conditions for learning.

In this paper, we examine how distinctive characteristics of small businesses might enable or constrain the owner-managers' pedagogic interventions and focus on indirect interventions aimed at facilitating workplace learning. However, it is important to note that direct and indirect interventions are difficult to distinguish in reality. For example, when an owner-manager coaches an employee (direct intervention), s/he is simultaneously modelling a commitment to learning, which helps build a learning culture (indirect intervention).

#### Review of prior studies

A systematic narrative review of prior studies is needed because the owner-manager's role as facilitator of learning in small businesses is a new, emerging topic (Short and Gray 2018) and the small body of existing literature lacks coherence and a shared understanding of how the topic should be examined in a context-sensitive manner (Nolan and Garavan 2016a, 2016b). Additionally, studies which include an examination of the owner-manager's role as facilitator of learning often encompass micro, small and medium-sized businesses. This approach overlooks the distinctive contextual characteristics of these different firm sizes and how they might influence learning practices. These limitations of the literature indicate research gaps and have negative implications for both empirical endeavours and theory advancement. Furthermore,

despite the importance of the topic, a review and critique of the existing literature has not yet been done, which also indicates that there is a gap in the literature.

In conducting the review we followed guidelines for conducting literature reviews recommend by Callahan (2010, 2014) and Torraco (2005, 2016). The inclusion criteria were: (a) empirical studies, (b) published in peer-reviewed journals, (c) during 1998-2018, (d) reporting research located in small businesses (10-49 employees) that include (e) a focus on informal learning and (f) a focus on the owner-manager's role in facilitating learning. Keywords used for literature searching were: "small business," "small firm," "small enterprise," "SME," "informal learning," "workplace learning," "learning environment," "conditions for learning," "learning-oriented leadership," "learning-oriented management," "the manager/leader/supervisor as facilitator of learning," "leading learning," "developmental leadership," "transformational leadership," and combinations of these keywords. Six online databases were employed for the search: Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, Emerald, ERIC, Scopus, and Google Scholar. In addition, we searched thirteen journals that have a history of publishing papers on small business, HRD and informal learning for 'serendipitous findings' (Callahan 2014, 273).

Only 17 articles met the inclusion criteria and each article was carefully reviewed through the lens of the owner-manager's (or leader's) effects on employee learning. The articles were first analysed independently by the authors. The analysis included an examination of the study purpose, research methodology, theoretical perspectives, and definitional issues (e.g., how key concepts such as 'learning' were defined in the study). Key aspects of the articles are summarised in Appendix 1. Thereafter, the individual analyses were discussed jointly to identify streams of related ideas in the literature (Torraco 2016). Four broad themes emerged from analysis of the study findings (see

Table 1) and these themes are outlined in the sub-sections below. After outlining the four themes, we identify methodological and theoretical limitations of the prior studies.

*Insert Table 1 here*

#### *Owner-manager's learning orientation and view on learning*

The owner-manager's personal learning orientation and view on the importance of workplace learning are emphasised in findings of several studies (e.g., Ahlgren and Engel 2011; Bishop 2017a; Macpherson et al. 2003; Panagiotakopoulos 2011). Personal learning orientation has been defined as "a concern for, and dedication to, developing one's competence" (Gong, Huang and Farh 2009, 765) and "ability, personality, and interests related to learning and development activities in the workplace" (Choi and Jacobs 2011, 242). Owner-managers who espouse a learning-orientation engage in practices that support workplace learning, such encouraging employees to challenge the status quo without fear of retaliation or retribution (Lans, Verhees and Verstegen 2016). In a study of owners of small businesses, McPherson and Wang (2014) found that the owners provided all employees with access to workplace learning opportunities and deemed such access as essential for the development of their businesses. These owners described their desire for learning as a 'cultural norm' that regulated the behaviour of employees. In another study located in Dutch businesses, the social competence of owner-managers (e.g., their ability to exploit social networks) was found to be crucial for fostering employee learning (Lans, Verhees and Verstegen 2016). However, several studies that we reviewed found that owner-managers were perceived as providing limited support for learning. In a study of small manufacturing businesses, Author 1 (2006a) found that the employees perceived few opportunities for learning at work because, in their view, workplace supervisors did not consider employee learning an important and integral part of the job. Similarly, based on interviews with employees, Ahlgren and Engel

(2011) reported that employees perceived that their employers had a limited view on learning and did not appreciate the contributions employee learning could make to business success.

*Employees' learning orientations and perceptions of their workplaces*

A theme that emerged from our analysis of findings concerns employees' personal learning orientations, and their views on their workplaces as learning environments and the importance of learning at work. In a study of 27 small manufacturing and service firms, Author 1 and Perry (2008) found that several factors accounted for differences among the learning orientations of employees. Attitudes towards learning, motivation to learn and work ethics were some key factors that affected employees' willingness to engage in workplace learning activities. Similarly, in a study of how apprentices learn at work, several factors were found to be important in affecting their quantity and quality of learning, including employees' attitudes toward learning (Kotey, Saini and While 2011). Drawing on data from 464 employees in 31 small businesses, Author 1 (2006a) concluded that employees' learning-orientations were related to how employees perceived their workplaces as learning environments (e.g., supervisor support for learning, extent of task variety, opportunities to use skills). Findings of this study suggest that conditions in the work environment (i.e., expansive versus restrictive environments) influence how employees view the importance of learning at work. Similarly, it has been argued elsewhere that employees' views on the importance of learning and their decisions to engage in workplace learning activities can be understood as an interplay between the work environment and the agency of the individual (Bishop 2017a). Furthermore, findings of a study which examined how different demographic groups within organisations perceive their workplaces as learning environments suggest that employees' views vary according to their age, tenure and level of formal education

(Author 1 2007). Similarly, Author 1, Peter and Peter (2011) showed that novices and experienced specialists differed significantly in their perceptions of their workplaces as learning environments and their managers' support for learning.

#### *Owner-manager's approaches to facilitating learning*

A common finding across several studies was that owner-managers were seldom directly involved in facilitating the learning of their staff through developmental interventions such as coaching, mentoring or providing on-the-job training (Bishop 2017b; Author 1 2006a; Macpehrson et al. 2003). Nevertheless, several studies find that owner-managers did play an important role in facilitating employee learning through a range of indirect approaches. For example, Author 1 (2006a) reported that owner-managers supported learning in several ways, such as through sharing their personal learning experiences with employees, providing incentives for employees to learn, and encouraging employees' continuous improvement efforts. Other approaches to facilitating learning that were reported in a study by Kotey, Saini and While (2011) included clarifying employees' roles and observing and correcting employees as they performed their tasks. In Bishop's (2017a) study, the manager participants recounted making deliberate attempts to address employee learning needs within the constraints of the firm's tight production schedules. Furthermore, there are also examples of more indirect, but still effective, contributions of managers to their employees' learning. For instance, Author 1 (2006c) found that the owner-managers provided access to a range of work activities, supported apprentice learning, and sponsored programmes that facilitate newcomer organisational socialisation. In a business studied by Macpehrson et al (2003), an additional layer of managers was added to free up time for senior managers to pay more attention to learning in the organisation. In a study of family firms by Cunningham, Seaman and McGuire (2016), participative leadership behaviours, in comparison to supportive/instructive

behaviours, were found to better encourage knowledge contributions from non-family employees relating to development of the business.

#### *Small businesses as learning environments*

From our analysis of the literature a theme emerged that relates to the small business as a learning environment and in particular the central role of owner-managers in shaping the learning environment. Several studies conclude that owner-managers have a powerful impact on the learning environment (Bishop 2017b; Author 1 2006a, 2006b; Kelliher and Henderson 2006; McPehrson and Wang 2014). Factors in the external business environment that create pressure to learn (e.g., technology advancements, customer expectations, competitive pressures) as well as factors in the internal work environment (e.g., job characteristics, resource paucity) are key factors that shape the small business learning environment (Author 1 and Perry 2008). Some factors are unique to a small business learning environment. For example, powerful business partners' commercial requirements often enforce change and the requisite learning upon small businesses, while time and resource constraints constitute barriers to learning in small businesses (Kelliher and Henderson 2006). In some studies, the owner-manager is viewed as the most influential factor among the several factors that shape the small business learning environment. For example, based on their findings, Lans, Verhees and Verstegen (2016) argued that the owner-manager's level of social competence (e.g., ability to exploit social networks) is a key factor in facilitating workplace learning. Similarly, Marketti and Kozar (2007) use case study findings to argue that entrepreneurs and managers can build a rich learning environment through adopting a range of supportive behaviours, which they collectively characterise as 'relational leadership'.



*Limitations of existing studies*

Our review revealed methodological weaknesses that negatively affects the quality of research on owner-managers as facilitators of informal learning in small businesses. Most studies are cross-sectional and employed the interview and case study methods, while quantitative and mixed-methods studies are less common. In most studies sample sizes are small in terms of numbers of participating firms and individual respondents. Furthermore, in some studies that were considered for inclusion in our literature review the findings encompassed micro, small and medium-sized firms, without due consideration for how learning processes might be affected by these different firm sizes. However, in our literature review we included just those studies in which the findings were clearly linked to the firm size. Moreover, in some studies the methods section was vague. Consequently, it was often difficult to distinguish the different types of primary data (e.g. observation data, interview data, artefacts) that were used to generate findings, and to understand the data analytic procedures that had been employed. These methodological patterns point to a need for more careful attention to methodological issues and stronger research designs, including longitudinal studies and research context-specific approaches (Nolan and Garavan 2016).

The review also identified theoretical shortcomings. Most studies did not make clear distinctions between different types of learning (e.g., exploration or exploitation, March 1991), nor did they consider the differing conditions necessary to support each type of learning. Furthermore, the concept 'learning' was often inadequately defined and the differences between informal and formal learning (Kyndt and Baert 2013; Watkins and Marsick 1992) were often difficult to distinguish in the empirical material. Similarly, the concepts 'management' and 'leadership' were rarely defined and various perspectives of leadership (e.g., transformational versus transactional) seldom acknowledged. Finally,

none of the articles exhibited critical perspectives on focal concepts such as leadership, management, workplace learning, and employee learning.

Overall, the findings of the preceding review of literature are largely consistent with findings of a recent review that examined the broader literature on HRD in SMEs (Nolan and Garavan 2016a). This review found that “the limited evidence is fragmented, disjointed, and methodologically deficient” (Nolan and Garavan 2016b 407). More specifically, our review of literature on owner-managers as facilitators of learning in small businesses, along with previous reviews of literature on HRD in smaller enterprises (Author 1, Author 3 and Author 2 2017; Nolan and Garavan 2016a), has highlighted that the distinctive characteristics of smaller enterprises are insufficiently accounted for in existing research. These limitations of the existing literature point to a significant research gap that can be partly addressed through an integrative review of literatures. Such a review could contribute to new thinking about the topic and take research on owner-managers as facilitators of learning in small businesses in a new direction.

#### Enabling and constraining characteristics

Our analysis of findings of research on the small business owner-manager’s role as facilitator of learning suggests that there are three key inter-related determinants of the quantity and quality of informal workplace learning. These are (1) context; (2) owner-manager behaviour; and (3) employee behaviour. In this paper, we focus on internal contextual factors (i.e. small business specificity), owner-manager behaviour and indirect approaches to facilitating employee learning. Accordingly, below we outline four high-impact indirect ways for owner-managers to foster informal learning and examine how the deployment of each indirect approach might be enabled or constrained by distinctive characteristics of small businesses. This is done through integrating primarily literatures that examine (a) indirect ways for managers (or leaders) to foster workplace learning and

(b) small business characteristics. Drawing on mainly these two literature streams, we develop propositions that should be investigated in future research.

#### *Create a shared vision*

A widely shared vision of an organisation's future state, which unifies and energises employees, is a key enabler of workplace learning (e.g., Senge 1990; Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier 1997; Tannenbaum 1997). A shared vision is a crucial requirement for proactive employee learning, because it provides direction for their learning (Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier 1997). Employees can choose learning experiences that are aligned with the organisation's strategic vision, thus enhancing the likelihood of personal and organisational success (Tannenbaum 1997). According to Calantonea, Cavusgila and Zhao (2002, 517.): "A clear direction for learning is likely to form an organisational strength or even a core competence". By contrast, lack of a shared vision creates an ambiguous environment in which it is difficult to know what to learn, even if employees are motivated to learn (Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier 1997). Without a widely shared understanding of the strategic vision and a commitment to what the organisation is seeking to accomplish, the employees' motivation to learn is likely to be weak (Senge 1990).

Some distinctive characteristics of small businesses create conditions that enable owner-managers to develop a widely shared organisational vision and build commitment toward the vision. For example, the relatively small number of employees when compared to large businesses makes it easier to involve employees in the process of shaping the organisation's vision. Employee involvement in the process of developing a strategic vision increases the likelihood that it will be accepted and valued by organisational members (Strauss 2006). Furthermore, in regard to communicating the vision, in small businesses managers and employees work in close proximity which facilitates using

informal, face-to-face communication (Forth, Bewley and Bryson 2006). Face-to-face communication allows for timely feedback from receiver to sender, therefore misunderstandings about the organisation's strategic vision are less likely to occur. Furthermore, face-to-face communication is more persuasive than other less direct forms of communication for a variety of reasons (Sassenberg, Boos and Rabung 2005; Wilson 2003). For example, in face-to-face communication verbal communication is accompanied by nonverbal communication which provides a 'dual punch' and people are generally more easily persuaded under conditions of high social presence than low social presence (Falk and Scholz 2018). In contrast, in large businesses senior managers are more reliant on less information rich channels, such as computer-mediated communication for articulating their strategic vision and the message receivers then typically experience a relatively higher degree of psychological distance from the persuader.

Drawing on the foregoing arguments, we propose the following:

Proposition 1: The small number of employees and close contact between owner-managers and employees enables creation of a shared vision to guide employees' situated learning.

#### *Build a learning culture*

Several workplace learning researchers assert that managers can facilitate the learning of their staff by building and maintaining a 'learning culture' within the organisation (e.g., Ellinger 2005; Warhurst 2012). A learning culture refers to the values, norms and expectations associated with workplace learning (Schneider et al. 2017). Organisational culture has had many definitions, but in this paper organisational culture is taken to mean "a system of shared values defining what is important, and norms, defining appropriate

attitudes and behaviors” (O’Reilly and Chatman 1996, 166). The organisational culture in small businesses will be largely determined by the values and actions of the owner-manager (O’Reilly et al. 2014). In accordance with social learning theory (Bandura 1986), the owner-manager’s recurring patterns of behaviour will be a highly significant source of information for employees regarding the desired values and norms in the organisation (O’Reilly et al. 2014; O’Reilly and Chatman 1996).

Two distinctive characteristics of small businesses create conditions that enable owner-managers with a strong commitment to learning to build and maintain a learning culture. First, the owner-manager’s centrality, authority and status, and frequent and close contact with employees (Tsai et al. 2007) provides the owner-manager with opportunities to have a powerful impact on the organisational culture through their modelling influences. Through processes of observational learning on the part of employees (Wood and Bandura 1989), the owner-manager’s pattern of behaviour (e.g., treating mistakes as learning opportunities, encouraging employees to experiment in their work) is likely to be a powerful force in shaping the organisational culture and thus employees’ ways of thinking and behaving regarding workplace learning. Second, the simple organisational structures in small businesses should enable owner-managers with a strong commitment to learning to build and maintain a homogenous organisational culture in which there are widely shared values, expectations and behavioural norms relating to workplace learning. Unlike many large organisations, small businesses are not characterised by hierarchical levels, departments and occupational groups (Josefy et al. 2015) that produce cultural variety and fragmentation through the establishment of sub-cultures (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008).

However, the managerial informality that characterises small businesses (Marlow, Taylor and Thompson 2010; Storey et al. 2010) may be a factor that constrains the owner-

manager's ability to reinforce desired ways of thinking and behaving. Although some small businesses do use formalised HRM practices (Sheehan 2014; Lai, Saridakis and Johnstone 2017), the small business sector overall is characterised by informality in HRM (Marlow, Taylor and Thompson 2010). A system of formal HRM practices which supports the desired organisational culture (i.e. a learning culture) creates a situation in which employees share a common interpretation of the behaviours that are expected and rewarded (Bowen and Ostroff 2004). For example, recruitment, selection, induction, appraisal and reward practices can all be leveraged to transmit the desired values, norms and expectations to employees. However, while formalised HRM practices may well contribute to building and maintaining a learning culture, formal HRM systems may have negative effects. For example, managerial informality has often been used to explain why small business employees typically report higher levels of satisfaction with their managers (e.g., Forth et al. 2006), job satisfaction (e.g., Idson 1990) and self-reported job quality (e.g., Storey et al. 2010) when compared to employees in larger businesses. Thus, owner-managers who value learning may prefer to rely on primarily their modelling influences, rather than formal HR systems to foster a learning culture.

In accordance with the foregoing arguments, we propose the following:

Proposition 2: The owner-manager's centrality, authority and status, and frequent and close contact with employees, enables the owner-manager to have a significant impact on the organisational culture through modelling influences.

Proposition 3: Simple organisational structures enable owner-managers to build and maintain a homogenous organisational culture with widely shared values, expectations and behavioural norms relating to workplace learning.

Proposition 4: The prevalence of informal HRM practices in small businesses constrains the owner-manager's ability to create a learning culture, because formal HRM practices can serve to direct employees' attention towards issues such as learning that are important from the owner-manager's perspective.

*Facilitate knowledge acquisition, sharing and application*

Over the past several decades, scholars have argued that an organisation's stock of knowledge is a key factor in determining the economic viability and competitive advantage of the organisation (e.g., Grant 1997; 2013; Shin, Picken and Dess 2017). Accordingly, the management of knowledge has become an important matter for organisations in all sectors of the economy, including the small business sector (Durst and Edvardsson 2012; Hutchinson and Quintas 2008). Knowledge management is defined in several different ways including: "the processes and structures provided in SMEs to support different knowledge processes, such as transfer, storage and creation" (Durst and Edvardsson 2012, 879 – 880). There is little consensus on the various types of knowledge management processes (Wee and Chua 2013). In this paper we focus on three key distinct but interdependent knowledge processes, namely knowledge acquisition, sharing and application. This typology of knowledge processes corresponds closely to March's (1991) distinction between exploration (e.g. search, experimentation) and exploitation (e.g. implementation, execution) in organisational learning. Regarding the 'structures' to support knowledge processes, this refers to mainly information technology (IT) systems that are used for knowledge processes, such as knowledge storage and sharing. Such IT systems are often high cost, designed primarily for large organisations, and thus less suited to the internal knowledge processes of small businesses (Hutchinson and Quintas 2008).

Several distinctive characteristics of small businesses enable and constrain the owner-manager's role as a facilitator of informal learning through promoting knowledge acquisition, sharing and application. Knowledge acquisition includes the acquisition of knowledge from external sources and the generation of knowledge internally through exploratory processes such as creativity and experimentation that yield new insights (March 1991; Serban and Luan 2002). Acquiring knowledge beyond the boundary of the organisation can pose significant challenges for small businesses. Most small businesses lack the internal resources to systematically scan the environment for new knowledge and owner-managers typically rely on knowledge and advice that can be provided by proximal sources such as family, friends in non-competing firms, suppliers, clients and some professionals (e.g. accountants) (Hutchinson and Quintas 2008; Shaw 2006). Furthermore, resource constraints mean that small business employees are less likely than their counterparts in large businesses to get access to leading-edge knowledge through participation in firm-sponsored external training and development (Kotey and Folker 2007).

Concerning generating knowledge internally through exploratory processes, the characteristics of 'smallness' and resource paucity constitute constraints for small businesses. For example, effectively balancing exploration and exploitation activities may require organisational separation into units each with fundamentally distinctive learning environments and each dedicated to either exploration or exploitation activities (Lavie, Stettner and Tushman 2010; Tushman and O'Reilly 1996). Separation into two organisational entities, an 'exploitative business' and an 'explorative business', may not be practicable for an organisation with less than 50 employees. However, effectively balancing exploration and exploitation activities is feasible if organisational ambidexterity is instead conceptualised as parallel learning processes embedded in



human activity (Author 2, Author 3 and Nilsson 2012). The resource paucity characteristic imposes a further constraint on small business managers as facilitators of learning, because limited resource availability compels managers to favour one type of activity over the other (Lavie, Stettner and Tushman 2010).

Once knowledge has been acquired, it should be stored to reduce any forms of knowledge loss due to employees leaving the organisation (e.g., turnover, retirement) and shared among organisational members who need it (Serban and Luan 2002). The storage of knowledge poses a significant challenge for small businesses because they typically lack the resources to purchase and utilise the IT systems that serve as a repository for knowledge (Hutchinson and Quintas 2008). Instead, most knowledge is kept in the minds of the owner-manager and a few key employees, rather than in technology-based systems (Yew Wong and Aspinwall 2004). However, several small business characteristics are likely to give small businesses a significant advantage in relation to knowledge sharing through interpersonal connections. These characteristics include flat, simple organisational structures, lack of functional silos, spatial and social proximity of employees, and personal and frequent employer–employee interaction (Author 1, Author 3 and Author 2 2017; Yew Wong and Aspinwall 2004).

Finally, usage or application of knowledge has to follow, as it is the only way to create value within the organisation through incorporating knowledge into the organisation's products, services, processes or practices with the aim of increasing organisational effectiveness (Durst and Edvardsson 2012; Serban and Luan 2002). The knowledge application stage of knowledge management corresponds to the active experimentation or 'learning through applying' stage of Kolb's (1984) four-stage learning cycle. Yew Wong and Aspinwall (2004) assert that several small business characteristics facilitate knowledge application. For example, the 'smallness' characteristic means there

are just a few employees and they know that the success of the business will directly affect them. Employees will also be motivated to apply knowledge because they can more readily see the results of their knowledge application efforts. This is because feedback loops in small businesses are shorter than in large businesses. Small businesses typically serve a small customer base, tend to have frequent and close contact with customers, and staff may know customers personally (Ghobadian and Gallear 1997; Yew Wong and Aspinwall 2004). These close links with customers can assist small businesses to get timely feedback on their improvement efforts.

Proposition 5: Personnel and financial resource constraints impose limits on the owner-manager's ability to acquire knowledge from external sources through activities such as environmental scanning and participation in external training.

Proposition 6: Constraints on managerial attention causes owner-managers to neglect the facilitation of either exploration or exploitation learning activities.

Proposition 7: Characteristics such as flat, simple organisational structures, lack of functional silos, spatial and social proximity of employees, and personal and frequent employer–employee interaction simplifies the owner-managers task of facilitating knowledge sharing.

Proposition 8: Personnel and financial resource constraints impose limits on the owner-manager's ability to use computer-based systems for purposes of knowledge capture and reuse.

Proposition 9: Relatively shorter feedback loops in small businesses simplifies the owner-manager's task of facilitating knowledge application.

*Foster learning by encouraging risk taking and experimentation*

Empirical and conceptual literature on facilitating workplace learning is replete with references to the importance of managers and leaders encouraging risk taking and experimentation. For example, Ellinger's qualitative case study of contextual factors that influence informal learning identified "managers and leaders who encourage risk taking" as a positive organisational factor (2005, 401). Yukl asserts that leaders can facilitate learning by encouraging employees to "experiment with new approaches to assess their utility" (2009, 51). Similarly, Vera and Crossan exhort leaders to promote learning opportunities by encouraging experimentation and motivating individuals to "take 'intelligent' risks" (2004, 228). The advice to managers and leaders that they should foster risk taking is usually accompanied by the suggestion that they should also tolerate mistakes and encourage employees to view mistakes as a learning opportunity (Beattie 2006; Shin, Picken and Dess, 2017). Risk taking and experimentation are closely linked to innovation, which is particularly important for small businesses that have the opportunity and intention for growth (Mazzei, Flynn and Haynie 2016). For example, Amabile and Pratt (2016, 169) identify "support for reasoned risk-taking and exploration" as a key element of the work environment for creativity and innovation. Regarding experimentation, Thomke (2001) contend that experimenting with many diverse ideas is a basic learning mechanism that is crucial to innovation.

The context for risk taking, experimentation and innovation is important and there has been much debate about the innovation advantages and disadvantages of large and small businesses (e.g., Rogers 2004; Vossen 1998). The consensus appears to be that large businesses have resource and capability advantages, such as access to external finance to fund innovation and skilled personnel to conduct research and development, while small businesses have 'behavioural' advantages (Bommer and Jalajas 2004; Nieto and Santamaria 2010). This is because small businesses generally benefit from internal

conditions relating to organisation and management that facilitate behavioural patterns, such as risk taking and experimentation, which support learning and innovation (Freel 2000). The internal conditions which are frequently mentioned in the literature include: simple, flat management structures; quick decision making; internal flexibility; ability to react quickly to the changing business environment; lack of a silo mentality; informal internal communication; lack of bureaucracy; and an entrepreneurial spirit (e.g., Bommer and Jalajas 2004; Freeman and Engel 2007; Vossen 1998). In sum, there are several distinctive internal characteristics of small businesses that enable the owner-manager to fulfil his or her role as a facilitator of workplace learning through encouraging employee behaviours characterised by risk taking and experimentation. Both risk taking and experimentation present opportunities for learning and contribute to the multistage process of innovation (Scott and Bruce 1994).

Proposition 10: Internal conditions relating to organisation and management simplifies the owner-manager's task of facilitating employee behavioural patterns, such as risk taking and experimentation, which support learning and innovation.

The foregoing potentially testable theoretical propositions are all consonant with the notion of 'learning as participation' (Sfard 1998) and a situated perspective on employee learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). Six of the ten propositions suggest that owner-managers should leverage enabling characteristics of small businesses to create conditions in the work environment that encourage employees to learn: (1) independently through participating in opportunities that develop their practice (e.g., experimentation); and (2) through processes of social interaction (e.g., knowledge sharing). The other four propositions identify distinctive characteristics of small businesses (e.g., resource paucity) that impose constraints upon the owner-manager's ability to facilitate learning that is situated in everyday work practices.

## Conceptual framework

This section presents a heuristic conceptual framework (Figure 1). The framework is based on the analysis of findings of research on the role of the small business owner-manager as a facilitator of learning and includes three inter-related factors: context, owner-manager behaviour and employee behaviour. Furthermore, the interaction between context, owner-managers and employees is understood from a situated learning perspective, inferring that the actors learn mainly through engagement in everyday situated work practices and interaction with co-workers (Billett et al. 2015). From a situated learning perspective this also implies that both individual and organisational outcomes can be understood as emanating from participation in practice and the social interactions among owner-managers and employees, situated in the context of small business.

The framework comprises a schematic model of key factors to consider in future research on owner-managers as facilitators of employee learning in small businesses. The key actors are the owner-manager and employees. The model shows the two types of interventions (i.e. direct and indirect) by which an owner-manager can influence employees' learning (Döös, Johansson and Wilhelmson 2015). Direct interventions involve behaviours and activities, such as providing developmental feedback, training and coaching, that owner-managers can use to influence employees' ways of thinking and acting (Ellinger, Watkins and Bostrom 1999; Author 2 2017). Direct interventions are not addressed in this paper. The indirect interventions are the four high-impact ways to enable workplace learning: create a shared vision; build a learning culture; facilitate knowledge acquisition, sharing and application; and facilitate learning by encouraging risk-taking and experimentation. Owner-manager interventions may lead to outcomes for individuals and/or organisations. Interactions between owner-manager and employees are situated

within varying contextual factors that are characteristic of the small business sector and that create differing conditions for leadership and learning.

Arrows show that both key actors (i.e., owner-managers and employees) are co-constructors of the interaction and thus each actor may influence the other. Similarly, arrows between the four indirect interventions indicate they should not be seen in isolation from each other. Rather, attempts by the owner-manager to indirectly facilitate the learning of employees will most likely involve all four interventions, but to varying degrees. Moreover, there are arrows connecting the indirect and the direct interventions to show that in practice they may be affecting each other.

*Insert Figure 1 here*

Our review of research revealed that we are still in early stages of investigating the owner-manager's role as a facilitator of employee learning in small businesses. At least three lines of inquiry would contribute to advancing knowledge on this important topic. First, propositions that we developed through an integrative review of literatures should be examined in the field, initially through gathering qualitative evidence. To examine these propositions, systematic, longitudinal case study research involving interviews, document analysis, shadowing, and participation in work activities, would be well suited for capturing social learning practices (Handley et al. 2007; Short and Gray 2018). This constitutes a 'bottom-up' approach that is appropriate when adopting the 'learning as participation' paradigm, as opposed to 'top-down' that concentrates on views of senior managers (Felstead and Unwin 2017). A second worthwhile line of inquiry would involve development of a measurement scale that can be used to assess the owner-manager's performance of each high-impact indirect intervention. With such a scale, owner-manager

performance can be self-rated and/or rated by employees. The third line of inquiry is to examine associations between owner-manager enactment of the learning facilitation role and outcomes for the organisation and individual employees. There are few studies that link informal learning to outcomes for the organisation or employees (Author 1, Author 3 and Author 2 2017). The Job Demands-Resources (J D-R) theory (Bakker 2017; Schaufeli 2017) can be used as a conceptual basis for such a link. J D-R theory proposes that abundant job resources (e.g., access to learning opportunities) triggers a motivational process, and via work engagement, leads to positive outcomes, such as organisational commitment, intention to stay, extra-role behaviour, employee safety, and superior work performance (Schaufeli 2017, 121).

#### Implications for practice and policy

To begin with, it is important to note that the quality and quantity of workplace learning is not solely determined by behaviours and activities of owner-managers. Employees' willingness and capacity to learn and an array of enabling and constraining situational factors are also key determinants (Cerasoli et al. 2018). Nonetheless, owner-managers do have a pivotal role in facilitating workplace learning, because they carry much of the responsibility for HRD in small businesses. To effectively enact the role as a facilitator of workplace learning through indirect interventions, owner-managers must be familiar with the four high-impact interventions. They must also understand how factors that are specific to small businesses (i.e. small business specificity) can enable or constrain their role performance. Furthermore, they may need practical advice and guidance on behaviours and activities necessary for effective implementation of each type of intervention.

The outcomes of this integrative review also have clear implications for HRD practitioners who might seek to bring HRD offerings to small business owner-managers

with a view to building their capabilities to facilitate employees' learning through indirect interventions. These HRD practitioners must ensure that the enabling and constraining characteristics of the relevant small business are sufficiently understood and accounted for in their interventions, which might include coaching, mentoring or training. Owner-managers must be given practical guidance on how they can leverage the enabling characteristics and mitigate the constraining characteristics of their small businesses. The HRD practitioners must also be able to identify and address the specific behavioural skill requirements that are associated with the owner-manager's effective implementation of each of the four high-impact indirect ways of fostering employees' learning.

There have been several calls for small business policy initiatives that acknowledge the importance of informal, situated learning within the small business sector and that assist in fostering learning supportive cultures in small businesses (e.g., Bishop 2015; Kitching 2008). These calls seem justified in view of the numerical and economic significance of small businesses and central importance of workplaces as sites for employee learning in the small business sector (Short and Gray 2018). Thus, there may be a role for small business policy to play in developing the owner-manager's capacity and willingness to facilitate employees' informal workplace learning. For example, the skills of facilitating workplace learning could be built into government-sponsored small business development and assistance programs.

### Limitations

The present review has some limitations. First, only four indirect interventions were included in the analysis. Second, we focus on internal organisational factors specific to small businesses and do not address external environmental factors specific to small businesses (e.g., small business policy aimed at developing management capability). Third, while we recognise the heterogeneity of small businesses (Short and Gray 2018),



our review did not consider factors that determine differences among small businesses, such as the industry sector.

## Conclusion

Despite the numerical and economic significance of small businesses in national economies (Storey 2018) and the profound impact of employee learning on organisational success (Noe, Clarke and Klein 2014), there is a surprising lack of research on HRD in small businesses (Short and Gray 2018). More specifically, there is scant research that has examined how distinctive characteristics of small businesses affect the owner-manager's role as a facilitator of situated learning. To address this limitation of the literature we conducted a systematic narrative review of prior studies that examined the owner-manager as facilitator of learning in small businesses (10-49 employees). As a response to Nolan and Garavan's (2016a, 16) call for "a more effective integration of both the HRD and SME literatures", we conducted an integrative review of the literatures on (1) indirect ways for managers (or leaders) to foster informal workplace learning and (2) small business characteristics. Our reviews make several contributions to advancing research on facilitation of learning in small businesses.

First, our narrative review of prior studies on the owner-manager as a facilitator of situated learning calls attention to the paucity of extant research, identifies themes and associated implicit overarching research questions in the current body of research, and casts light on the methodological and theoretical limitations of these studies. These limitations should be addressed in future research. Second, our integrative review generated 10 theoretical propositions that should be explored in future research. These propositions relate to high-impact indirect approaches that owner-managers can employ to facilitate employees' learning and they reflect a situated perspective on learning. Finally, we synthesised a research conceptual framework that illustrates the main

variables to be examined in research on owner-managers as facilitators of employee learning in small businesses. The heuristic conceptual framework was informed by situated learning theory and the insights that emerged from our integrative review and it should help to focus and bound future research in this neglected domain of scholarship. We hope that these contributions will assist to stimulate and guide future research to advance our understanding of HRD in SMEs.

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## Appendix 1: Studies that include owner-managers' influence on learning in small businesses

Authors / Year	Authors' country	Journal	Purpose of the study	Methodology and methods	Key findings
Ahlgren and Engel (2011)	UK, USA	Journal of Workplace Learning (JWL)	Examine the role of SMEs in promoting and/or hindering educational opportunities to adult employees in the UK.	Case studies of six small firms and six medium firms. Document analysis and interviews with owner-managers, managers, HR, and employees.	Employers were seen as important for driving employee training and development. However, the employers focused narrowly on job-specific, in-house training and many of the employees felt restricted by employers' limited view of workforce development. There were, however, some initiatives taken by managers to create opportunities for informal learning.
Bishop (2017a)	UK	Research in Post-Compulsory Education	Examine if a greater degree of informality in small firms entails a corresponding tendency towards a more restrictive learning environment and whether apprentices' learning benefits from lower degree of formality.	Interviews with 13 managers, supervisors/mentors and apprentices in three firms. One large firm, one small firm and one micro firm.	The small firms displayed restrictive features for apprentice development, e.g. resource constraints, lack of formal management practices, and minimal support for off-the-job reflection. There were also expansive features, e.g. encouragement to try new tasks and new machinery. Managers expressed the desire to create as expansive a learning environment as possible, even in the absence of a structured training system. The owner / manager's attitude and agency were key factors in shaping apprentices' learning.
Bishop (2017b)	UK	Education + Training (E+T)	Investigate the ways organisational context and individual agency interact to shape workplace learning of graduate trainee accountants, and to examine the role of firm size in conditioning this interaction.	Interviews with 20 trainees and managers/partners (owners) in two large and three small accountancy firms in England.	In the absence of training functions and structures within the firms, workplace learning affordances were shaped by line managers through impromptu and unstructured periods of on-the-job guidance. The managers did not try to build learning affordances into their work allocation decisions. Attempts were made to take trainees' development needs into account when allocating tasks, but such considerations were secondary to the concern of completing the jobs to specification and schedule.
Author 1 (2006a)	New Zealand	Employee Relations	Explain actions managers could take to improve support for staff learning and increase staff satisfaction with workplace learning.	Survey data from 464 employees and managers in 31 small firms.	The learning potential was enhanced by wide task variety and constrained by limited employee scope for action. Managers failed to create important facilitating conditions, such as providing incentives to learn. Supervisors were providing low levels of learning support and were not fostering staff learning. Employee perceptions of work environment characteristics and workplace supervisor behaviours influenced their satisfaction with workplace learning.

Author 1 (2006b)	New Zealand	Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	Describe findings from an exploratory qualitative study of owner-managers, managers, and employees in small manufacturing firms.	Interviews with 17 owner-managers, managers, and employees in 10 small firms.	Managers promoted learning by: providing access to a range of activities; promoting communication; facilitating access to guidance from workplace models; and designating learning facilitators. Informal employee practices used by managers had unintended positive side effects on informal learning.
Author 1 (2006c)	New Zealand	Research and Practice in Human Resource Management	Contribute to an understanding of the effects of managers on employees' learning in small manufacturing firms.	Mixed-methods. Interviews with 17 owner-managers, managers, and employees in ten firms. Survey data from 464 respondents in 31 firms.	Managers were an important part of the employee's learning network, but workmates were more useful sources of learning. The supervisor's direct involvement in employee learning processes seemed constrained and managers might have been failing to create facilitating conditions in the work environments. However, some managers made effective indirect contributions to employee learning by providing access to a range of work activities, supporting apprentice learning, and sponsoring organisational newcomer socialisation programmes.
Author 1 (2007)	New Zealand	JWL	Contribute to an understanding of how diverse groups of employees perceive their workplaces as learning environments, and to cast light on the learning processes of these employee groups.	Survey data from 464 employees and managers in 31 small firms.	Employee learning was concentrated in the early years of employment. Employees with longer tenures and older employees assessed conditions in the work environments and the workplace supervisors' proximate support for learning less favourably than the respective comparison groups did. Managers in the study did not seem to be fostering continuous learning.
Author 1 and Perry (2008)	New Zealand, New Zealand	E+T	Identify key factors influencing employee learning from the perspective of owners/managers.	Interviews with 27 owners/managers of small firms.	The owner-managers' views of factors influencing employee learning were categorized into four themes: factors in the external business environment (e.g. regulations, technological advances); factors in the work environment (e.g. employee practices, resource paucity); the job's learning potential (e.g. high vs low task variety); the employees' learning-orientations (e.g. motivation, work ethic). The findings could raise owners'/managers' awareness of the multiple factors influencing employee learning.
Author 1, Peter and Peter (2011)	Australia, New Zealand, New Zealand	Journal of Management & Organization	Examine the potentially differing learning processes of novices and experienced specialists.	Survey data from 218 novices and experienced specialists in 31 small firms.	Novices and experienced specialists differed in their perceptions of their workplaces as learning environments. Novices viewed both learning opportunities and organisational support for learning more favourably than experienced specialists did. Managers in the firms did not foster the learning of all staff. When managers enacted their employee development role they devoted most of their attention and resources toward novices.

Cunningham, Seaman and McGuire (2016)	UK, UK, UK	Journal of Family Business Strategy	Investigate the nature of knowledge sharing in small family firms and explore the role of the influence of family in knowledge resource development.	Mixed-methods. Interviews with 26 family and non-family members in the firms. Survey data from 110 owner-managers.	Leadership style was a critical factor in determining how small family firms engage with knowledge sharing activity. The findings showed two styles, supportive/instructional and participative. In supportive-based firms, there was informal encouragement of nonfamily knowledge contribution; however, boundaries were set on the extent of information nonfamily members had access to, and the types of decisions they could contribute to. Participative-based approaches utilised the informality of the environment to garner idea-generating discussion from across the organisation.
Kelliher and Henderson (2006)	Ireland, UK	Journal of European Industrial Training	Offer insight into the factors affecting individual and organisational learning in a small business. Identify learning relationships that are unique to the small business environment.	Longitudinal case study of a small firm. Interviews with, and observations of, owner and 11 employees.	Internally, organisational change and learning was instigated top down from owner to individual. However, the boundaries between learning taking place at the owner/individual interface were less defined and the resultant learning process proceeded in a collective manner. Learning time was curtailed by external environmental influences and internal resource constraints.
Kotey, Saini and While (2011)	Australia, Australia, Australia	International Journal of Training Research	Investigate employee learning strategies in community pharmacies and the factors that explain differences in the strategies employed.	Interviews with owners, managers, or senior employees of 12 pharmacies.	Learning on-the-job was revealed as the most prevalent source of employee learning. Employees learned while performing their duties and sometimes the owner-pharmacists and/or senior employees enhanced the learning by explaining employees' roles to them, and by observing and correcting them as they performed their duties.
Lans, Verhees and Versteegen (2016)	Netherlands, Netherlands, Netherlands,	Human Resource Development Quarterly	Explore the importance of owner-managers' social competence in the innovative small-firm agri-food sector in the Netherlands.	Mixed-methods. Interviews with 13 owner-managers and survey with 556 respondents.	Social competence of owner-managers was an important driver of small firms' HRD: enabling the development and actual use of social networks and relationships, and therefore making a significant contribution to small firms' learning and performance. Two domains of social competence emerged from the cases: welcoming questioning, criticism, and reflection from others; and being able to continuously assess a wide diversity of stakeholders.
Macpherson, Jones, Zhang and Wilson (2003)	UK, UK, UK, UK	JWL	Examine the process of managerial learning in a relatively remote rural small-sized firm.	Longitudinal case study. Seven interviews with the Commercial & Market Director and the Technical Director over 18 months.	An internal audit showed that the managers were spending too much time on running the company, which limited the time for innovation and development. An additional layer of managers was added to enable the top managers to focus on learning in the organization. The owner-manager's attitude, personality and values are key to learning approaches in the firm.



Marcketti and Kozar (2007)	USA, USA	The Learning Organization	Further the understanding of the relational leadership framework as used by a successful small business owner.	Case study based on formal and informal interviews with owner-manager.	The profit potential of an organization as well as employee retention and development can be improved with leadership that embraces relational leadership. By assisting the employees in the coordination of strategies to deal with complaints and personal issues, the owner teaches two of the pillars of knowledge management strategy: learning from mistakes and learning how to communicate.
McPherson and Wang (2014)	USA, USA	JWL	Investigate the embedded process that enables or constrains low-income low-qualified employees' access to workplace learning in small firms.	Case studies of three small firms. Interviews and examination of organisational artefacts.	The business owners' value systems and organisational needs ensured that the subordinates were given equal access to workplace learning despite incongruent value systems. Business necessity stemming from the small size was a driver for providing equal access to workplace learning.
Panagiotakopoulos (2011)	Greece	The Learning Organization	Explore small firm owners' perceptions of the impact of employee training on small firm competitiveness.	Interviews with 43 owner-managers in 34 small and 9 micro manufacturing firms.	All small firm owners considered employee training critical for small firm success. They indicated that workplace-based training can: reduce employee errors in the production process; help small firms to meet skill shortage needs; facilitate the introduction of technology; and enhance employability. Most owners considered formal training a waste of time because it was too theoretical, expensive and not tailored to their specific needs.

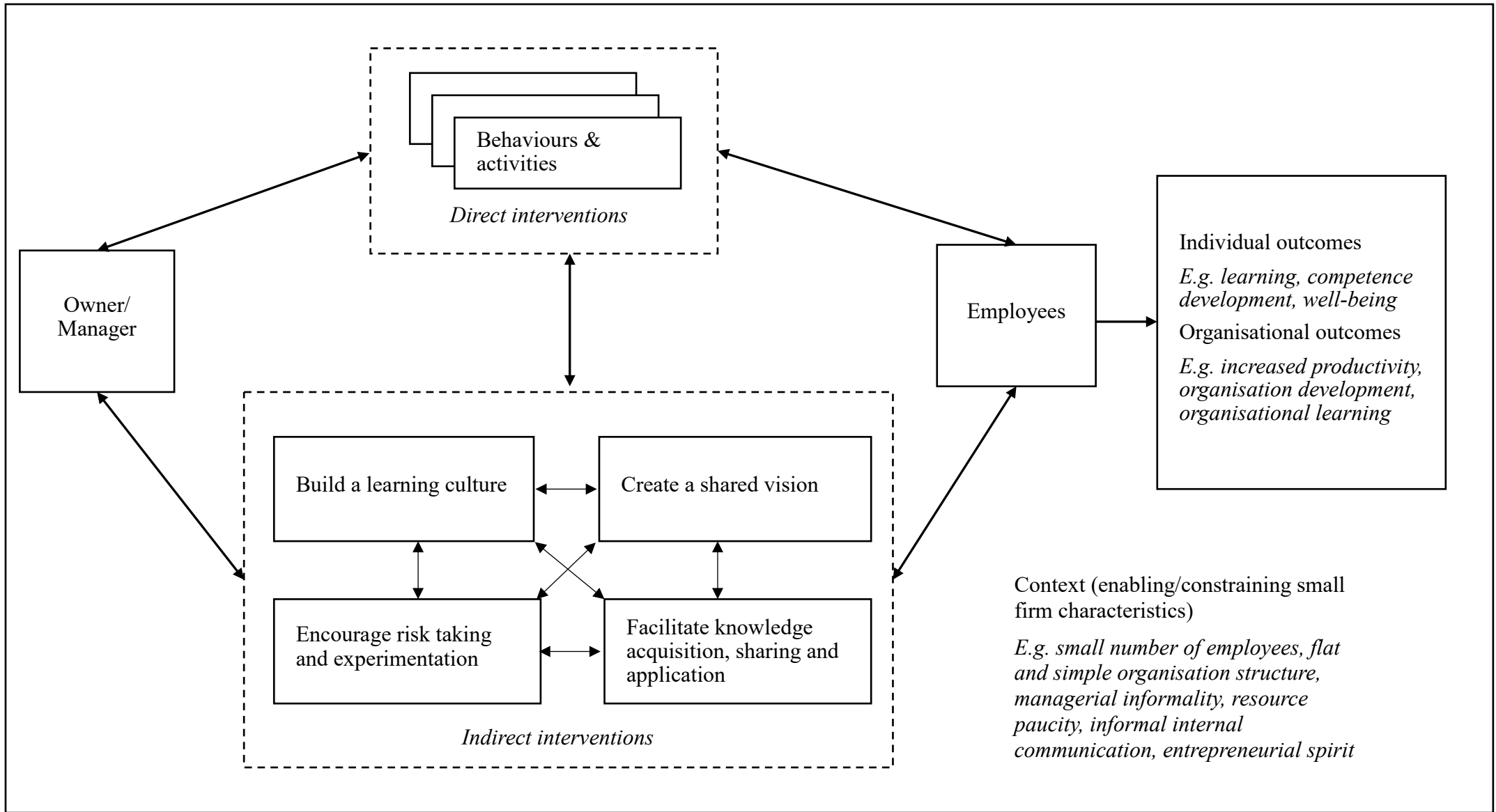


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Table 1: Summary of themes in the literature

Theme	Implicit overarching research question	Brief description of the theme	Articles
<i>Owner-manager's learning orientation and view on learning</i>	How does the owner-manager's predispositions influence the facilitation of employee learning?	Owner-managers who espouse a learning-orientation adopt practices that support workplace learning. Owner-managers who do not view learning as important create restrictive learning environments.	Ahlgren and Engel (2011); Bishop (2017a); Author 1 (2006a); Lans et al. (2016); Macpherson et al. (2003); McPherson and Wang (2014); Panagiotakopoulos (2011).
<i>Employees' learning orientations and perceptions of their workplaces</i>	How do employees' personal characteristics affect their orientation toward learning and perceptions of their workplaces as learning environments?	Several personal characteristics account for differences among the learning orientations of employees. Employees in the same firm will not perceive work environment conditions and the owner-manager's support for learning similarly.	Bishop (2017a); Author 1 (2006a, 2007); Author 1, Peter and Peter (2011); Author 1 and Perry (2008); Kotey et al. (2011).
<i>Owner-manager's approaches to facilitating learning</i>	How do owner-managers of small businesses facilitate the learning of their employees?	Owner-managers seldom become directly involved in facilitating the learning of their staff through developmental interventions. Owner-managers are more likely to use indirect approaches to facilitate employees' learning.	Bishop's (2017a, 2017b); Author 1 (2006a, 2006c); Cunningham et al. (2016); Kotey et al. (2011); Macpehrson et al. (2003).
<i>Small businesses as learning environments</i>	How do internal organisational factors and external environmental factors that are specific to small businesses affect employee learning?	Some internal and external factors that are specific to small businesses affect the workplace learning environment. The owner-manager as a central figure has a powerful impact on the workplace learning environment.	Bishop (2017b); Author 1 (2006a, 2006b); Author 1 and Perry (2008); Kelliher and Henderson (2006); Lans et al. (2016), Marketti and Kozar (2007); McPeherson and Wang (2014).