

Professionals' experiences of work and learning in complex adaptive organisations

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PhD

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Globalisation and innovations in technology have increased complexity in work and workplaces, placing demands on professionals to learn and adapt as part of an increasingly uncertain and unstable workforce. A greater degree of theoretical complexity is required to fully understand the ways professionals and organisations are adapting their learning practices to suit emerging contexts of change and uncertainty. Situated within the field of work and learning, this study adopts a complex adaptive systems approach as the basis to investigate professionals' experiences of work and learning using a newly developed framework.

An adapted phenomenographic approach and a specifically developed framework, the *complex adaptive organisations conceptual framework*, were used to analyse the data from semi-structured interviews with fourteen professionals, from a variety of organisations and industry sectors within Australia. The data analysis produced four categories of description. The first category described professionals' experiences of learning as being primarily through work. The second category described how organisational complexity shapes the conditions of work, influenced by varying degrees of emergence, adaptation, complex social networks, and agency. The second category highlighted that work in complex adaptive organisations is best described as fluid work. The third category described how the greater the degree of work fluidity, the greater the need for professionals to learn through work. This study provided empirical evidence that fluid work and learning are interrelated in complex adaptive organisations. The fourth category highlighted how organisations have been slow to adapt to the influence of organisational complexity in continuing to emphasise structured learning.

This study makes two original and significant contributions to knowledge in the field of work and learning. First, it uses the *complex adaptive organisations conceptual framework* to examine how organisational complexity influences professionals' experiences of work and learning. Second, this empirical study indicates that work and learning are interrelated in complex adaptive organisations and should be investigated concurrently. The adapted phenomenographic methodology was key to enabling work and learning to be analysed as a composite. The findings of this study suggest that the focus for understanding learning and development systems and practices in complex adaptive organisations needs to shift away from structures and individual learning, towards approaches that consider the interplay of organisational complexity, fluidity of work, and experiences of learning primarily through work.

Publications from this research

Lizier, A.L. (2017) Investigating work and learning through complex adaptive organisations, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 29(7/8), 554-565

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