

Contexts of organizational learning in developing countries: the role of training programmes in Egyptian public banks

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Contexts of organisational learning in developing countries: the role of training programmes in Egyptian public banks

Abstract

Purpose: Little research into organisational learning in the public sector in developing countries' is known. In this paper, we investigated the context of organizational learning in the public banks in Egypt.

Methodology: An ethnographic field research was employed by spending a month inside each of two public banks in Egypt. The ethnographic experience was operationalised by using direct observations of learning processes, procedures and practices, semi-structured interviews with learning specialists, and focus group discussions with bankers. We used thematic analysis to determine the main themes in the previous data collection methods of ethnographic approach.

Findings: The findings confirmed a lack of clear focus for the organizational learning practices employed by the banks, which highlights issues of seriousness in undertaking and/or tackling organizational learning, and increased doubts in relation to the added value of the different forms of formal trainings bankers participate in. To enhance the culture and maintain effective functioning of formal organizational learning, we suggest considering the following three categories of barriers: purpose related barriers, implementation and evaluation barriers.

Originality: Despite the generalisability caveats associated with the organisations studied, we believe that this paper contributes to the existing theory of organisational learning as it provides insights and understanding on the purpose, frame, conduct and results of organisational learning in the public sector. More specifically, our study is unique and is different from previous relevant studies as it relies on ethnographical approach in exploring how organisational learning practices are perceived in public banks in developing countries.

Keywords: Organizational learning, training, public employees, public banks, Egypt.

Paper type: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the concept of organizational learning has become critical for the survival and continuity of organisations (Molodchik and Jardon, 2015). Garvin et al. (2008) assert that multinational companies, private banks and branches of Western business schools operating in developing countries have paid considerable attention to organizational learning and knowledge management. Change and Lee (2007); Jamali et al. (2009) and Jain and Moreno (2015) have examined the adoption of organizational learning in Taiwan, Lebanon and India. Molodchik and Jardon (2015) highlight that both public and private companies that care about agility, innovation, empowerment and resilience, consider organizational learning a paramount developmental and survival factor. Wahda (2017) demonstrates that the challenge of today's organization is not only in acquiring knowledge but

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3 also in keeping and continuously updating that knowledge through continuous organizational learning.
4 Malik et al. (2011) mention that organizational learning should be embedded as part of organizational
5 culture and that securing an effective learning culture positively impacts not only employee
6 performance but also the organizational loyalty of golden employees. Wahda (2017) highlights that
7 organizational culture entails an organization's capability to create, acquire, retain, use, update,
8 disseminate and/or export knowledge at all organizational levels. Edmonstone (2018) highlights that
9 organizational learning is the capacity of a specific organization to create or acquire, retain and apply
10 knowledge, and is shaped by both external factors (e.g. environmental condition and stakeholder
11 engagement) and internal factors (e.g. organizational culture and organizational hierarchy). Chiva et al.
12 (2007) and Oh (2019) confirm that regardless of its process, scope and orientation, organizational
13 learning has been widely seen as an organization's capability to effectively respond to its surrounding
14 local and global environment in an attempt to guarantee a relevant level of adaptability, changeability
15 and consistency.
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17 In relation to the external and internal factors affecting organisational learning and although the "work
18 on learning in the public sector has tended to follow the lead of research in the private sector" (Jarvie
19 and Stewart, 2018, p.15), it is important to acknowledge public and private sector differences. Betts
20 and Holden (2003) consider organisational learning practice within the public sector as relatively under
21 researched. More than fourteen years later, Jarvie and Stewart (2018) argue that research into learning
22 in public sector remains patchy in extent and relatively small in number, which asserts the importance
23 of context in shaping learning and encourage research to pay attention to the way learning issues are
24 "framed" in such organizations.
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26 From their side, McCarthy and Puffer (2013) elaborate that the transition from a state-owned economy
27 to a market-driven one with its subsequent new managerial practices, development opportunities and
28 shift from authoritarian to transformational leadership style prioritises organizational learning. Crossan
29 et al. (1999) point out that technological advancements, globalisation, market uncertainty, stakeholder
30 pressure, rising employee voices and changing consumer preferences are the main factors stimulating
31 organizational learning. Nevertheless, most research on the organisational learning is conducted in
32 Western economics/ developed countries and privately owned enterprises (Tajeddini, 2016). This could
33 be due to the relatively late adoption of organisational learning in developing economics which have
34 started to place emphasis on organizational learning only in the past decade despite its popularity in the
35 developed markets (Jamali, 2009; Jain and Moreno, 2015). However, our study aims to cover the gap
36 in the literature by providing an ethnographic understanding to how organisational learning is framed
37 and conducted in developing countries' public banks. The study aims at answering the following
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1. *How the current practices of organisational learning are described at public banks?*
 2. *To what extent the formal training plays a role in the current practices of organisational learning in these banks?*
 3. *What are the current barriers of organisational learning through formal training in such banks?*

2. Literature review

2.1 Theories and concepts of formal/informal organizational learning

According to Cohen and Levinthal (1990), the theory of absorptive capacity describes, “a firm’s ability to recognise the value of new, external knowledge, assimilate it and apply it to commercial ends” (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990, P.128). In their extension of the theory of absorptive capacity, Lane and Lubatkin (1990) differentiate between three types of learning: passive, active and interactive. Passive learning reflects the process of acquiring knowledge through traditional means such as journals, seminars and so on. Active learning entails acquiring knowledge through making the best beneficial use of external consultants and experts. And finally, interactive learning entails acquiring knowledge through collaborating with external agents. Jones and Macpherson (2006) highlight that both active and passive learning look like the “student-teacher” mechanism, while interactive learning is a “teacher-teacher” dyad or conversation.

Although some management scholars use the terms organizational learning and learning organization interchangeably, Song et al. (2013) highlight that organizational learning is the systematic capacity or capability of an organization to acquire, store and use new information, while a learning organization is an organization that promotes, secures, and fosters learning among its employees. Therefore, learning organizations are adaptive, innovative, agile and continuously open to change (Islam et al., 2015). According to March (1991) and Benner and Tushman (2015), organizational learning includes feed-forward learning in which individuals explore new knowledge and transfer to both group and organizational levels, while the second type is feedback learning in which the organization selects, examines and refines the accumulated knowledge and then decides either to distribute or transmit it to all of its organizational members or not and to what extent.

According to Fang and Chen (2016), learning is the process of creating and updating meaning within a specific organization. Such creation of meaning assists the organization in achieving its objectives, planned performance levels and targeted production (Dickson, 1996). For Simon (1991) and Kim (1993), organizational learning is a systematic intentional process of acquiring information through which employees effectively accomplish their duties so that stakeholders feel satisfied (Fang & Chen, 2016). Schofield and Wilson (1995) highlight that organizational learning is a social phenomenon through which individuals interact to assimilate new information and subsequently enhance their skills and accordingly their organization’s collective performance.

Milia and Birdi (2010) indicate that organizational learning occurs at individual, group and organizational level. However, both group and organizational knowledge come as a result of individual

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3 experience, knowledge, norms and culture (Garcia et al., 2003). Crossan et al. (1999) and Crossan et al.
4 (2011) have identified the following four stages in acquiring knowledge: intuition which reflects an
5 individual's attempts to obtain information and acquire knowledge, interpretation in which the
6 individual transfers his acquired knowledge to his group of surrounding colleagues, integration in which
7 the outcomes of group knowledge are transferred to the organizational level and finally
8 institutionalisation in which some or part of the group knowledge is embedded in the organisation's
9 culture, routine, assumptions and procedures.

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11 According to Walshe et al. (2009) and Edmonstone (2018), the main learning strategies an organization
12 adopts to acquire knowledge are: action learning, in which a small group of colleagues/employees
13 regularly meet and use their experiences, brain storming to tackle specific issues (Edmonstone, 2011);
14 large group events, in which participants are working in the same organization meet and engage in a
15 conversation in order to use their experience, knowledge, beliefs to constitute a joint mutual mindset
16 towards an issue; and conversational conferences, in which participants work in a specific organization
17 invite and interact with external experts to find mutual answers/solutions/support for a challenge or
18 problem. Fenwick and McMillan (2005) highlight the role of partners and networks in the organisational
19 learning. Alas et al. (2009) indicate that organizational learning can be maintained through securing
20 both structural elements, which reflect the institutional procedures an organization follows to acquire,
21 store, analyse and use information; and cultural elements, which reflect the shared values of the
22 individuals who interact and exchange knowledge and skills. Both the structural and cultural elements
23 are critical for the effective functioning of organizational learning.

2.2 *Practices of organisational learning through training in public sector*

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25 Some previous studies explored the phenomenon of organisational learning in publicly managed banks
26 in different countries. For examples, Mohammad (2019) found a significant mediating effect of
27 organizational learning on the relationship between strategic change and banks performance in Nigeria.
28 Siddiqui et al (2019) found that organizational learning plays a significant role between knowledge
29 sharing and innovation capabilities in the banking sector in Pakistan. Vaijayanthi et al., (2017) found
30 that strategic leadership in public banking sector is the primary foundation for learning in organizations.
31 Similarly, Thakur et al (2017) studied the presence of learning dimensions in public and private banks
32 in India and found that managerial level does not affect the perception of employees regarding the bank
33 as a learning organization, and that connection with external environment and strategic leadership are
34 considered as the most important dimensions in banking sector in India. Al-Hawary et al (2020) found
35 that electronic human resources management practices have an impact on organisational learning
36 capabilities in banking sector in Jordan.

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38 Fang and Chen (2016) found that successful organization learning is contingent upon managerial
39 strategic intent and the organizational environment in which the organization operates. Gerards et al.
40 (2020) found that informal learning is driven by new ways of working including more access to
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3 organizational knowledge. In studying how managers in the banking sector regulate their learning,
4 Littlejohn (2016) found that a key characteristic of good self-regulation is viewing learning as a form
5 of long-term, personalised self-improvement. Khan and Khan (2019) found that transformational
6 leadership has a positive impact on organisational learning and knowledge sharing, and that
7 organisational learning and knowledge sharing have a significant impact on employee innovation in
8 public sector organizations. Fang and Chen (2016) suggest that proactive strategic intent will cultivate
9 a group-oriented learning system, whereas reactive strategic intent emphasizes the effectiveness of
10 personal learning.

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12 Guan and Frenkel (2019) found that work engagement mediates the relationship between training and
13 task performance, and that HRM power plays a role in the relationships between work engagement and
14 both task performance and organizational citizenship behavior. Lopez-Cabrales and Valle (2011) found
15 that those firms developing a mutual investment employment relationship outperform other firms in
16 terms of functional flexibility and organisational learning (both exploitative and exploratory learning).
17 Dermol and Cater (2013) found a strong relationship between supervisor support and the volume and
18 quality of training as well as between supervisor support and organisational incentives for training
19 transfer.

20 21 22 *2.3 Egyptian cultural context and characteristics of its public sector*

23 Unlike some Middle Eastern countries, the 2019 Global Competitiveness Report, which is prepared
24 annually by the World Economic Forum, shows that Egypt is one of the worst countries in promoting
25 active labour market policies and in securing cooperation in labour relations. This country has never
26 been considered one of those securing smooth employee-employer interactions under the umbrella of
27 the law and judicial policies. Instead, Egypt has a negative record overall in terms of violations against
28 human rights, political freedom, labour rights, social justice and judicial independence
29 (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf).

30 In contrast, like many public sectors in most developing countries, the Egyptian public sector is
31 characterised by limited institutional capacity (Kandil, 2008), high levels of corruption (Barsoum, 2018)
32 and informality (Assaad, 2002) and low involvement of stakeholders and marked by a strong level of
33 centralization (Tansel et al., 2018; Barsoum, 2018) and a lack of performance monitoring and evaluation
34 (Barsoum, 2017). In order to develop the public sector, the Egyptian Government introduced a number
35 of reform initiatives, some of which were supported by donor funded projects (Barsoum, 2018; Adhikari
36 et al., 2019) to address many elements of reform including those identified by the OECD as essential
37 elements for reforming human resource management such as establishing new and more effective
38 training programs (Barsoum, 2018). However, despite the reform efforts paid by the Egyptian agencies
39 and bodies to reform this sector (Barsoum, 2018), the implementation of some reform initiatives was
40 unsuccessful due to reasons such as the absence of change agents and the limited inter-organisational
41 communication flows and networks (Adhikari et al., 2019). Furthermore, Adhikari et al. (2019) claimed
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3 that “the adoption of reforms has resulted in instigating bad practices” such as “the fabrication of reform
4 results” and their study results suggest a number of problems with the reform associated training
5 programmes.
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8 Given the importance of the education, training and awareness to the reform of public sector, the fact
9 that organizational learning is still underdeveloped in a range of Egyptian organizational settings and
10 that previous studies on organizational learning are rare in emerging economies’ public sectors -
11 particularly the vital sectors, such as the banking sector (Mousa et al., 2019), the authors choose to study
12 public banks to highlight organisational learning in a new under-researched context. The Egyptian
13 banking sector dominates the financial sector as in most developing countries. It is marked with high
14 competition with a staged financial reform and ever-changing regulations (Poshakwale and Qian, 2011;
15 Khedr and Kok, 2006). Within this industry environment, the public banks seem less competitive
16 compared to private and foreign banks due to the fact that there are just four public sector banks and all
17 of them enjoy monopolistic positions (Poshakwale and Qian, 2011). Needless to say that Egyptian low
18 and middle-income citizens primarily open accounts in public sector banks, especially after the latest
19 Egyptian government orientation of forcing every Egyptian to have a bank account and minimising all
20 cash transactions that had dominated the Egyptian economic scene for decades.
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22 The authors of this paper address bankers (learners) and learning specialists in two Egyptian public
23 banks in an attempt to explore how organizational learning is framed, how it occurs, if at all, and the
24 perspectives of learners and learning specialists on organisational learning and problems. The authors
25 seek to find out whether bankers and their managers are ready to adopt organizational learning in their
26 organizational setting. The impetus for this study lies in addressing organizational learning in a new
27 organizational setting, which remains unknown for both Egyptian and Western researchers. The
28 remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the authors start first by presenting the study design,
29 this is followed by the results of the study, and the discussion, implications and conclusions, and finally,
30 the limitations and potential for future research.
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33 **3. Research methodology**

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35 Ethnography is the art and science used to describe a group or culture (Fetterman, 1998) and
36 ethnographers search for predictable patterns in the lived human experiences by carefully participating
37 in the lives of those under study by observing the process, interviewing the participants, and
38 undertaking the relevant archival research (Angrosino, 2007). Using their personal contacts, the authors
39 implemented an ethnographic study in which they used direct observations, focus group discussions
40 and interviews to explore organisational learning in the Egyptian public banking sector. Moreover, the
41 authors examined and reviewed documents such as posters, brochures and WhatsApp groups. One of
42 the authors spent two months (full-time) in two Egyptian public banks, in which he identified that the
43 concept of organizational learning has not been addressed in fulfilling the mission and core values of
44 the banks in the study and that it is not addressed within the mission, values and organisational strategy.
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3 One of the authors of this paper plays the role of observer as participant, where he was known and
4 recognized by the participants of this study who are fully aware and recognize the research goals of the
5 observer. The author interacted with the participants, but the interaction was limited as the aim is to
6 play a neutral role as much as possible. The interaction was used to understand how the two banks are
7 practicing organisational learning in their daily work by looking at the people's behaviour and actions
8 and how the overall interaction occurs amongst them and with the externals.
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11 It is worth highlighting that of the four Egyptian public banks remaining after the privatisation processes
12 that began in 1998, only two agreed to respond to the author and consequently participated in this
13 research. After getting the initial agreements from the relevant senior management (from two deputy
14 directors of the two banks) to conduct the research, a detailed letter explaining the steps of conducting
15 the data collection was directed to both banks explaining the methods of data collection including the
16 aim of spending one month at each bank, and the intended size of focus groups, and key interviewees
17 to meet.
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20 The authors focused on the respondents' perception of organisational learning practices, training
21 programmes, coaching activities and educational programmes provided by the banks. Thirty-six focus
22 group discussions with bankers (learners) and four semi-structured interviews with learning specialists
23 were conducted in both banks (see Table 1). In order to guarantee that all internal units of the banks
24 were represented in the study, the authors employed purposive sampling, each interview with each focus
25 group was 40 minutes and many of them were recorded using either electronic recorders or manual
26 hand-writing paper notes after addressing the privacy and confidentiality issues by the authors. Upon
27 the request of participants, some of the focus groups have not been recorded. The author responsible
28 conducted the interviews in Arabic in order to match the desire of his respondents and all authors were
29 responsible for translating them into English when conducting the thematic analysis. Furthermore, the
30 main questions raised in the focus group discussions were: Do you perceive organizational learning
31 practices as important in your bank? What are the main components of the organizational learning
32 programmes and practices in your bank? Who gives you the learning and/or training sessions? How are
33 you evaluated in those learning programmes? What is the main content and titles of the organized
34 learning programmes? What is the main learning strategy implemented in these organizational learning
35 programmes? What is the role of organizational learning in your bank and how is it maintained? How
36 regularly does your bank implement organizational learning? Are you happy with the organizational
37 learning practices organized by your bank? What suggestions do you have for your managers in order
38 to have more effective organizational learning in this bank setting?
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41 In the first bank, the administration selected four branches for the author to conduct his ethnographic
42 study, one week for each branch and all branches were in Cairo, the capital of Egypt. Moreover, the
43 administration gently asked the four managers of those branches to facilitate the author's field study.
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45 16 focus group discussions were conducted in this bank and two learning and development specialists
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who work under the direct supervision of the HR manager agreed to be interviewed. The following table shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents in both banks.

Table 1. Demographic information about the respondents in the two banks

Demographic Variables	Items	Bank 1	Bank 2
a) Gender	Male	70	90
	Female	12	12
b) Age	below 30 years	24	30
	31–40 years	50	55
	More than 40 years	8	17
c) Level of Education	Bachelor	65	82
	Bachelor + Master	17	20
d) Religion	Muslim	74	92
	Christian	8	10
e) Hierarchy	Bankers	80 (16 focus group)	100 (20 focus group)
	Learning specialists	2 (2 interviews)	2 (2 interviews)

In the second bank, the administration selected five branches for the author to conduct his ethnographic study, five days for each branch and all branches were also in Cairo. Twenty focus groups were conducted and two learning and development specialists working under the direct supervision of the HR manager also agreed to be interviewed.

In the analysis of the transcribed data, the authors paid attention to the respondents' perceptions of organizational learning in their organizational contexts in addition to the research themes. This is in line with Weick (1989) and Alvesson and Kärreman (2011), who suggest greater focus on respondents' sense-making through considering their discourse as a social tie linking researcher, respondents and the addressed phenomenon. Kvale (1983) clarifies that an interview subject continuously yields and/or contains meaning in regard to real-world phenomena. This is why the authors devoted time and interest in extracting the maximum benefit from the interviews conducted. Sequential stages were followed for analysis the transcribed data. At the first stage, the authors analysed the data collected from each bank separately in order to develop a general picture of activities related to learning and training within each bank. At this stage the data was analysed by listing participants' responses based on the frequency and contents of expressed views, perspectives, concerns and assessment of the organisational learning experience. At the second stage of analysis, the authors combined the data from the two banks and started to identify and form themes in relation to the main questions raised during data collection (see above). The authors used thematic analysis, which mostly determines the main patterns/ideas from the transcripts, by identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In applying this method, we compare each transcript with the other transcripts collected in order to narrow down the data sets and come up with the main patterns (Namey et al., 2008). Subsequently, the patterns were coded into constituent themes, and the main themes were extracted to reflect the respondent's main answers/experiences/viewpoints. All authors participated in

the coding and analysis after peer checking for three transcripts in order to agreeing in general principals of completing coding and analysing the remaining transcripts. For details describing the thematic analysis map please see Figure 1.

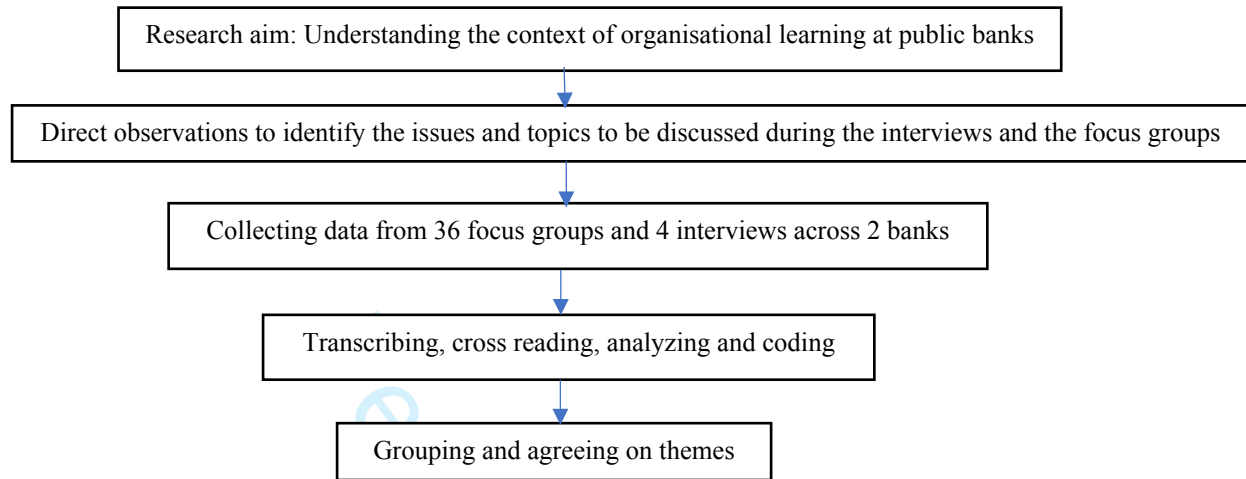


Figure 1: Steps of thematic analysis

4. Findings

4.1 Direct observations and interviews with learning specialists

4.1.1 Organisational learning is not a value or principle of work

The authors observed that organizational learning is not listed as a factor of the values, mission or business plans of the banks in the study. Moreover, the banks do not retain any metrics about how the bankers manage performance at all. However, they keep some forms of performance appraisal conducted by bank branch managers to evaluate the productive capability of each banker. Moreover, when asked about the criteria and standards with which bank branch managers evaluate the performance of their bankers, one of the HR staff highlighted that such appraisals are based on the personal opinions and viewpoints of the managers. Furthermore, another HR employee elaborated that all bankers were evaluated as excellent every year, and those forms of appraisal reflect nothing more than a bureaucratic procedure bank managers are obliged to follow.

4.1.2 Organisational learning for both banks means training and personal development

Through direct observation and interviews with learning specialists, the authors noted that the current practices of organisational learning are all centred around aspects of formal training and personal development. When it comes to formal training and personal development, although there were two employees responsible for learning and development, and they represent a division of the HR department in each of the banks in the study, the authors could not access any written documents concerning the organizational learning practices in either of the banks. Even when asking those who are responsible, they stated that they only keep the information that directly relates to the budget and

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3 the financial resources involved in learning and development, but keeping any information about the
4 content, scope, topics and programmes of organizational learning they develop, provide and maintain
5 is not a priority for them at all. Moreover, they indicated that they keep the attendance lists of those
6 bankers who participated and attended all forms of organizational learning or training their banks
7 provide.
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11 These initial observations highlighted that the concepts and practices of organisational learning in the
12 two banks are centred around organisational development and training programs. This initial outcome
13 helped understanding the overall learning culture in the two banks and help the authors in designing the
14 next phases of collecting data on organisational training programmes using focus groups and interviews.
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19 *4.2 Focus group discussions with bankers*

20 4.2.1 Lack of feedback on previous training programmes

21 Before starting with the respondents, the author got the feeling that the respondents were eager to talk.
22 One of the respondents voiced, *“it is our first time to talk, address and assess the learning programmes*
23 *organized by our bank. We have a lot to say or maybe criticise the learning opportunities and training*
24 *sessions our bank initiated and maintained.”*
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30 4.2.2 No perceived added value for organisational training

31 When the authors clearly asked about the novelty and suitability of the current organizational training
32 and learning practices they perceived, one of the respondents said, *“officially we perceive training*
33 *sessions and learning opportunities but it is better to ask about their added value and/or contribution*
34 *to our career, professional development and personal development”*. And when the author asked about
35 their added value, a second respondent mentioned, *“we have and perceive periodic on-site training,*
36 *workshop sessions and sometimes off-site training. However, such learning opportunities secure little*
37 *added value for us”*. Another respondent added, *“when watching any YouTube video or any talk shows*
38 *about modern management practices ... I immediately feel that a session and/or class about are*
39 *irrelevant for the era we are living in...simply because such topics are not new and we have had many*
40 *sessions about them before”*.
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49 4.2.3 Inappropriate training to banking needs

50 When the authors asked why? Four respondents elaborated that the external training companies
51 responsible for directing and managing our learning opportunities lack relevant banking industry
52 expertise. Those training companies include professional trainers who are elite in strategic management,
53 HR management, corporate governance, financial management, auditing and more, but unfortunately
54 the content of the sessions they initiated are not timely and are so broad that those trainers use the same
55 material and content for training obligations in banks, hospitals, profit companies and so on. Therefore,
56 one of the respondents said, *“I perceive the same knowledge perceived by physicians, nurses, public*
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3 *employees despite the differences in our job responsibilities, work environments and work experiences*
4 *and even educational background.”.*
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8 4.2.4 Inappropriate training providers

9 The authors asked the respondents about the mechanism through which public banks select their
10 consulting and training providers, and four respondents explained, “...*Those who are guiding and*
11 *leading the HR department.... they either grant such a good financial package to one of their relatives*
12 *who manages a centre for ...”.* Another respondent explained, “*I participated in many learning sessions*
13 *organized by our bank... the same trainers has been delivering this material for the past 12 years.*
14 *Accordingly, they offer us the same material, content and curricula...”.*
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20 4.2.5 Untrusting peer colleagues from HR in conducting training

21 When the authors asked why the bank does not rely on the learning and development division, which is
22 a part of the HR department to undertake such tasks instead of depending on external experts, one
23 respondent said, “*our colleagues...they cannot serve as coaches or trainers or lecturers because they*
24 *have the same level of education and experience we have. So they can't add much more knowledge.”*
25 Moreover, one of his colleagues stated, “*please consider that those who work in the HR department in*
26 *Egyptian public banks are those who are relatives and/or have personal relationships with the bank*
27 *board members, ministers and other leading economic and political figures in Egypt. ...accordingly,*
28 *they do not have any ambition to update, innovate or secure beneficial organizational learning*
29 *opportunities for their colleagues.”* A third colleague from another focus group confirmed that the
30 bank’s HR personnel do care about the traditional clerical work of HR such as maintaining the personnel
31 files, rewards, awards, punishments, educational certificates, retirement pensions, and also managing
32 the judicial conflicts against former employees and so on.
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43 4.2.6 Inappropriate management and organisation of training programmes

44 One of the respondents highlighted that the training sessions for bankers are always on Saturday and
45 are rarely conducted during regular working days. When asked whether conducting the training on
46 Saturdays makes responding to such formal organizational learning practices more difficult, one of the
47 respondents stated, “*we...work five days a week and the normal working time is nine hours per day.*
48 *Consequently...going out to attend some work-related commitments even if they are beneficial,*
49 *negatively impact our family and personal commitments. That's why, the majority of bankers do not*
50 *welcome any work-related training during our days off.”* Another banker added, “*I never touch on any*
51 *need to leave my family on Saturday in order to attend some classes on Egyptian financial accounting*
52 *standards/ criteria ...”.*
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4.2.7 Untrusting university business qualifications as a suitable source for appropriate training

When the authors asked about the MBA and other master programmes that banks in Egypt support, one of the respondents replied, “yes, we get 50% discount from the universities providing MBA programmes because we are bankers. so the banks do not play a role in this regard”. Moreover, one of his colleagues said, “I do not consider the MBA programmes part of organizational learning... Accordingly, those business schools recruit bankers, physicians, public servants, private sector employees in the same group with the same teachers/lecturers and we all study the same courses. Accordingly, the knowledge we get there is simple and matches all those people...”. The same has been asserted by another respondent who voiced, “...unfortunately, the majority of the lecturers in such MBA programmes lack practical experience and know little about research design and methodology....”

5. Discussion

5.1 Summary of results and study questions

Figure 2 presents the main study questions and the corresponding findings as per the direct observations and the focus group discussions.

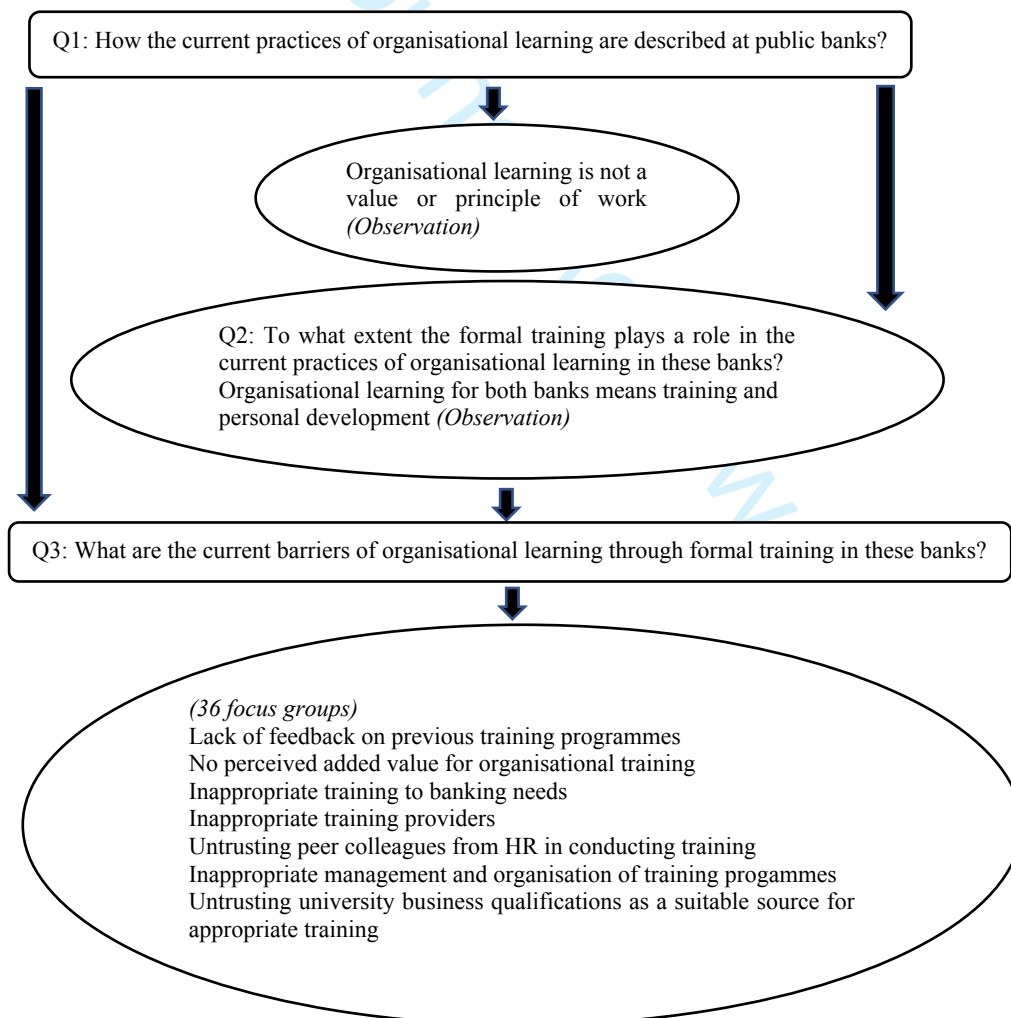


Figure 2: Summary of results and study questions

5.2 Theoretical implications

Our study aimed to discover the experience of organizational learning in Egyptian public banks through addressing bankers and those who are responsible for their training and development. As shown above, our ethnographic study, which included direct observations, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, shows that organizational learning is not currently exercised in an effective and responsible manner in the examined Egyptian public banks. In addition, the study highlights the negative influence of the organisational context on organisational training. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first ethnographic study in the context of developing nations to focus on the exploration of the actual organizational learning practices, and it is subsequently the first to address the public banking sector in Egypt, one of the leading developing African and Middle Eastern nations as previous studies on this topic have been conducted in developed Western countries.

Our study advanced research and theory of organisational learning in the context of public sector. Earlier research highlights difficulties of learning in the public sector contexts due to factors related to their structure, culture, political nature, constraints from governmental regulations and others (Yeo, 2007; Rhodes and Price, 2011; Argote and Miron-Spektor, 2011; Visser and Van der Togt, 2015; Tajeddini, 2016; Jarvie and Stewart, 2015 and 2018; Peronard and Brix, 2019). However, it is worth noticing that such divergence exists between public sectors in developing and developed countries which necessitates paying attention to organisational learning of public sector organisations in the developing countries being characterised by low institutional capacity, limited involvement of stakeholders, and high levels of corruption and informality (Mimba et al., 2007). Furthermore, little research into organisational learning in the public sector in developing countries' context still exists. Some previous studies explored the phenomenon of organisational learning in publicly managed banks in different countries (for example Mohammad, 2019; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Vajjayanthi et al., 2017; Thakur et al., 2017; Al-Hawary et al (2020). Methodologically, most previous research in organisational learning adopted traditional approaches of data collection whether quantitative or qualitative, with little publications on the use of ethnography in organisational learning (Nyame-Asiamah and Patel, 2009). However, our study covered this gap in the literature by providing an ethnographic understanding to how organisational learning is framed and conducted in developing countries' public banks.

Given the analysis of the interviews, discussions and direct observations, the authors had to ask about the banks' organizational learning aims and found that organisational learning is not a value or principle of work and that for both banks it means only training and personal development. Fang and Chen (2016) highlight that the main value of organizational learning is in assisting organizations to achieve their stated objectives, planned performance levels and targeted production. Furthermore, the interviews showed the opinions of the bankers concerning how little value is added by the different forms of learning opportunities, training sessions and seminars they participate in. Therefore, the authors wondered what the banks sought to gain from implementing such forms of organizational learning; in other words, to what extent were the banks serious in their investments in the training form of

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3 organizational learning. It was clear that improving competitiveness was not a driver for organisational
4 learning in the two public banks due to their monopolistic positions. Although Jarvie and Stewart (2018)
5 suggest agency survival, meeting the expectations of ministers and improving efficiency and
6 effectiveness of operations as purposes for public sector organisational learning, these do not seem to
7 strongly apply to the studied banks. Some other incentives were identified highlighting opportunistic
8 behaviour, if not corruption. Despite the role of partners, networks and, for local government in public
9 sector learning in the developing countries (Fenwick and McMillan, 2005), the local government and
10 the other government agencies were not identified as key players in the organisational learning for the
11 two public banks and the main players were external learning and training providers who managed
12 through personal network to provide training to these banks for long periods. This in turn, affects the
13 diversity of the learning provided to bankers. Wahda (2017) demonstrated that the challenge of today's
14 organizations is not only to obtain information but also to keep this information updated. However, the
15 analysis of the interviews showed that the bankers perceive their off-site learning/training material as
16 being irrelevant and outdated. Moreover, the bankers claimed that the trainers use the same materials
17 year after year, and without any considerable changes. This comes in a disagreement with Schofield
18 and Wilson (1995), who consider organizational learning as a social phenomenon that needs interaction
19 between trainer and trainees in order to assimilate knowledge and enhance skills, but seemingly, this
20 was not the case in our study, as the organisational learning was not seen by participants as embedded
21 within the values and principles of workplace in the two banks when the authors observed that
22 organizational learning is not listed as a factor of the values, mission or business plans of the banks in
23 the study. For participants, the organisational learning practices for both banks is seen only from the
24 window and borders of training and personal development. The authors, through direct observation and
25 interviews with learning specialists, noted that the current practices of organisational learning are all
26 centred around aspects of formal training and personal development. Edmonstone (2018) identifies that
27 organizational learning is shaped by external (environmental conditions) and internal factors
28 (organizational culture), which raises doubts concerning the significance of the organizational learning
29 process and its subsequent context and scope of formal training and personal development in the context
30 of the banks in this study.

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47 When it comes to formal training and personal development, our study found that the employees at the
48 two banks were trained on traditional topics and thoughts in sales, management, corporate governance
49 and cost accounting. Moreover, these training programmes do not address recent important topics such
50 as climate change, the empowerment of women, green HRM, and organizational and societal inclusion
51 which are -shaping today's socio-cultural and business contexts. Furthermore, our study found that
52 employees referred to the fact of inappropriate training delivered, and they indicated that the same
53 learning materials/training content offered to all organizational settings such as banks, hospitals and for
54 profit organizations regardless of their business activities, management style, work conditions and
55 organizational culture. The authors raised concerns about how the culture and characteristics of the
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3 Egyptian public sector (the limited institutional capacity, the high levels of corruption and informality
4 and the low involvement of stakeholders) are negatively reflected on organisational training and
5 learning practices.
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8 Despite the fact that off-site learning and the dependence on external experts is one of the main learning
9 strategies organizations undertake (Edmonstone, 2011), our study found that employees referred to the
10 issue of inappropriate external training providers. The authors had to raise questions regarding the
11 absence of some learning tactics that might be initiated and maintained either internally by the staff
12 themselves (e.g. action learning) and learning tactics that might be organized by both internal staff and
13 external experts (e.g. conversational conferences) despite their role in forming a mutual mindset
14 towards challenges and problems (Walshe et al., 2009). In this regard, Fang and Chen (2016) argue that
15 firms in an environment marked by radical change utilize experiential learning mechanisms
16 (participation- and experience-orientation), whereas firms in a stable environment use a specialist-
17 knowledge-oriented approach to learning (benchmarking- and specializing-orientation).
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19 Even though organizations should use their ability to recognise and acquire new information, assimilate
20 knowledge and then apply it to commercial ends (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), the mechanism through
21 which banks in this study recruit sources of training, the timing of the training sessions and the methods
22 of selecting the participants (bankers) for those training opportunities come in disagreement with this
23 theory and with what has been highlighted earlier by Mousa and Ayoubi (2019), who consider nepotism
24 as a determinant factor in giving rewards and awards in the Egyptian public sector. This contradicts
25 recommendations by Alas et al. (2009), who urge transparent institutional procedures in addition to a
26 kind of cultural equality for the effective functioning of organizational learning.
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38 *5.3 Practical implications*

39 The authors of this paper find that the addressed banks need to deal with the following three types of
40 barriers: purpose related barriers, implementation and evaluation barriers to guarantee the effective
41 functioning of organizational learning and training. Figure 3 shows the barriers to organizational
42 learning and formal training in the addressed public banks.
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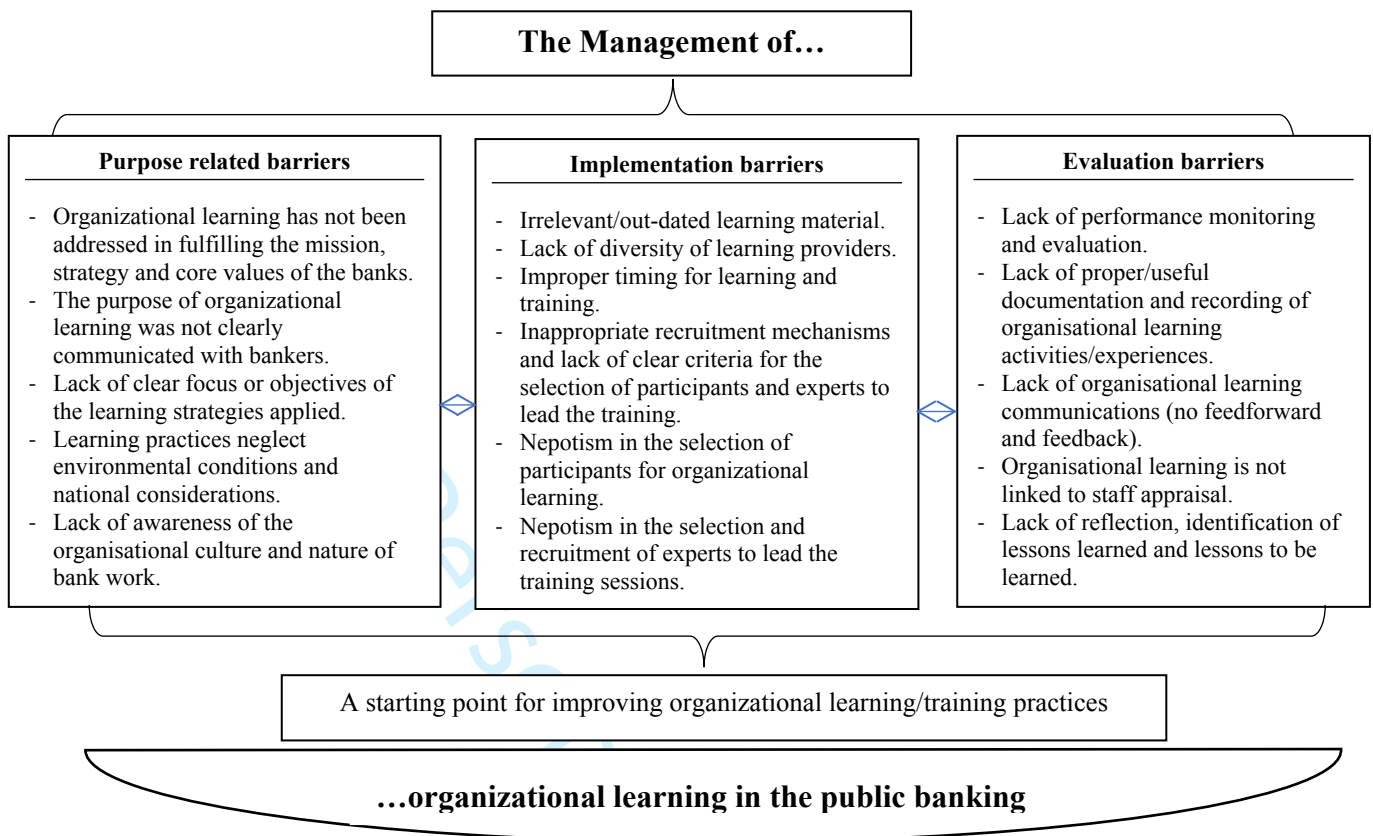


Figure 3. Barriers to organizational learning and training in Egyptian public banks

Since Morphet (2008) has stated that public sector employees currently have to deal with increasing levels of stress, burnout and cynicism, the authors of the present paper highly recommend the public banks in this study to formulate a separate strategy for their organizational learning. This strategy should be added as part of the banks' overall strategy. However, the organizational learning strategy should have planned smart objectives that the employees should be aware of. This may require increasing the number of capable employees in the divisions responsible for learning and development. Moreover, and as a kind of suggestion, the addressed banks could also consider forming separate departments for learning and development instead of these being part of the HR department.

The ongoing policy of relying on external experts to train bankers will only work if the recruited experts design learning curricula that match the needs of the banking sector. This requires the content of the training prepared for bankers to be reviewed and updated in an ongoing manner. Moreover, asking external experts to specify some novel bank-related courses (e.g. green banking practices, responsible leadership in the banking sector, consumer loyalty in public banks, accounting conservatism in banking practices etc.) would also be beneficial. The banks may also consider inviting business schools in Egypt to tailor banking-related MBA programmes. Accordingly, bankers could avail themselves of such an MBA in banking or MBA in accounting and finance or MBA in bank marketing.

5.4 *Limitations and suggestions for future research*

The study offers a good understanding to how organisational learning is framed and conducted in the Egyptian public banking sector. It also provides organisational learning theoretical and practical insights on public sector of a large and leading developing country and why learning remains elusive in this context. However, generalizing the research findings to the other public sectors in other developing countries should be addressed with cautions after considering the similarity of organisational internal and external factors and context. Another limitation is the decision to address only bankers and those who are responsible for learning and development, while neglecting the board members and bank branch managers. This limitation may hinder the authors' ability to further generalise the results of the research. Moreover, focusing only on public banks while neglecting the private sector, which are different in terms of culture, working conditions, development opportunities, and economic incentives, might be perceived as a second challenge in attempting to generalise their research results.

The authors of this paper recommend HR and organization studies researchers to explore both quantitatively and qualitatively the same research questions in private banks for a more in-depth understanding of organizational learning practices. It is also recommended to apply the same research to other public organizational contexts, such as universities, hospitals, SMEs, and non-profit organizations using surveys and interviews. Finally, the authors suggest that HR researchers collaborate with researchers from the disciplines of applied psychology, humanities, public policy, organizational psychology and sociology to produce more interdisciplinary studies about developing organizational learning practices in different public and private organizational settings. This will positively impact the agility, responsiveness and changeability of organizations in a range of industries.

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3 Dear Prof Thomas Garavan,
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5 We would like to thank you for your letter dated 24 December 2020 regarding the decision on our
6 manuscript ID PR-06-2020-0453.R1, entitled "Contexts of organisational learning in developing
7 countries: the role of training programmes in Egyptian public banks", which we submitted to Personnel
8 Review. The authors would like also to thank you for the valuable comments which have truly enriched
9 the value and the quality of our paper.
10

11
12 We have addressed your comments, and highlighted main changes/modifications conducted by us in
13 different colour.
14

15 Once again, we would like to thank you for considering our paper for publication in *Personnel Review*.
16

17
18 Sincerely yours,
19 The authors
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Personnel Review