

## **Continuous learning challenges the working adult – how to provide organisational support?**

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*The aim of the continuous learning reform is to enable working adults to update their competence over the course of their careers. At the level of the system, the necessary reforms have been undertaken with determination in Finland. In the context of continuous learning, however, the interests of society and companies do not always meet the everyday realities of individuals. Do we have sufficient understanding of an adult learner's motives for studying? Why do not all working people develop their competence? How could organisations support working adults in continuous learning? This article discusses continuous learning from the perspective of a working adult.*

*Keywords: continuous learning, working adult, competence development, supervisory work*

### **Continuous learning is on the agenda of society, but the individual's perspective is overlooked**

Working life and its competence requirements are changing rapidly in Finland. The main factors of change include globalisation, technological change and age structure. New work emerges in sectors marked by high competence requirements, and the importance of meta-skills and digital skills increases. (Finnish Government 2020.) Finns are in a good position. Finland has a well-developed adult education system that offers diverse opportunities at all levels (OECD 2020).

Continuous learning is considered an important factor of national competitiveness. The availability of skilled labour is ensured by updating competence. The reforms needed at the level of the system have been undertaken resolutely with the aim of enabling working-age people to update their competence during their careers. Attention is paid to the correspondence of education with the requirements of employment, and the participation of educationally under-represented groups is promoted through changes to benefit systems. Nevertheless, the subjects of the measures, that is, working-age people, are rarely mentioned when describing the reforms and requirements. The interests of society and companies in continuous learning do not necessarily meet the everyday realities of individuals.

Working adults are subject to a great deal of expectations. Facing the demand for continuous learning, they are posed with a challenge. Erkkilä and Kortessalmi (2020b) argue that the views of the continuous learner, who develops their competence, are easily forgotten when discussing continuous learning. Even less voice is given to people who do not actively develop their competence. Thus, this article examines continuous learning from the viewpoint of the working adult by presenting the interview material and preliminary findings of the Urban Growth – GSIP Vantaa project.

### **Working learners have plenty of options for continuous learning**

The working learner's operating environment and opportunities differ from those of degree students (Erkkilä & Kortessalmi 2020a). In particular, the limited time available for learning activities poses challenges to working adults (Sitra 2020). Currently, the Finnish system of continuous learning and its benefits encourage participation in free and open education leading to a degree (OECD 2020). For an adult learner, the degree may not be as important as it is for a younger adult entering the world of work. From the perspective of value creation, the utility value of a degree is remarkable for a graduating student (Dollinger,

Lodge & Coates 2018), whereas increased competence and its application at work are more important for adult learners (Erkkilä & Kortessalmi 2020a; 2020b).

The student's autonomy is highlighted as one of the characteristics of adult learning. An increasing number of adults study independently to keep their skills up to date in the changing world or because of work-related pressures that necessitate studying (Holopainen 2007). At the same time, however, the responsibility for the progress of studies and personal learning remains with the adult. According to the results of a survey sent to decision-makers of Vantaa-based small and medium-sized enterprises, continuous learning is considered the employee's responsibility that should, as a rule, be taken care of at the employee's expense and time (Urban Growth – GSIP Vantaa project 2019).

Working people have various options for developing their competence. Formal education is structured learning that leads to a degree and is organised by an educational organisation. In general, it is a full-time goal-oriented activity. (Kumpulainen 2008.) In formal education, it is essential that the educational organisation and the learner share the same objectives, that is, the completion of a course or degree. Non-formal education may also be structured, but it does not lead to a degree. Non-formal education includes, for example, training at the workplace and in non-governmental organisations and further education. Informal learning refers to all everyday learning, such as learning at work. In other words, informal learning takes place outside of educational organisations and is often incidental by nature. The majority of on-the-job learning is considered to take place informally. An individual who learns informally may not be aware of their competence development as learning is often strongly associated with formal goal-oriented studies.

The debate on continuous learning is heated. Continuous learning is now seen as an inevitable, continuous, life-long process that results from the individual's conscious and unconscious thinking and activities (Billett 2010). As the reforms of continuous learning progress, voice should be given to the working adult as they are the subject of the reforms and discussion. An understanding of the experiences, needs and wishes of the individual is important with regard to the reach, engaging nature and objectives of continuous learning measures. In addition, understanding the working adult's perspective enables planning effective support and guidance.

### **Exploring working adults' opinions on learning and studies**

The Urban Growth – GSIP Vantaa project seeks solutions for developing the competence of Vantaa's labour force and for supporting the growth and development of Vantaa-based companies. In February 2020, the project collected interview material for the joint development needs of education and guidance services. This involved interviewing the project's partner companies' employees working in various units and positions. The participants were selected randomly to ensure rich data. Groups under-represented in education were also heard in addition to active and independent continuous learners.

The aim of the interviews was to find out what views working adults have on competence development and how could working adults be encouraged to develop their competence. In the interviews (n=12), working adults were presented with questions about learning, studying and on-the-job learning. The interviews were carried out as semi-structured thematic interviews.

At the interview analysis stage, the research data was closely studied by examining how competence development and (continuous) learning is characterised by working adults (Figure 1). Two recurring key themes were identified through careful examination of the data: perceptions of oneself as a learner or student and perceptions of the benefits and costs of developing one's competence. The interviewees' perceptions of themselves as learners were interpreted as self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), and perceptions of

the benefits of competence development were interpreted as the utility value of competence development (Eccles et al. 1983). We will now delve deeper into these two concepts.

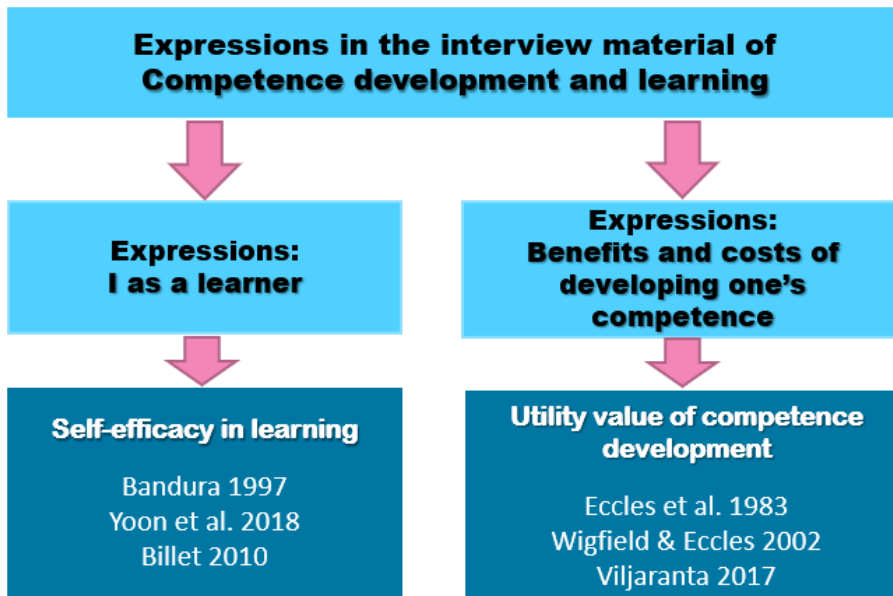


Figure 1. Data analysis strategy (Kortesalmi, Erkkilä & Lamberg 2020).

### Self-efficacy affects learning and study-related choices

When talking about competence development, the interviewees often pondered on their capacities for learning and studying. We interpreted this as talk about *self-efficacy*. The concept of self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that they are able to perform a task or activity and achieve the desired result (Bandura 1997). Thus, self-efficacy has an important role in all learning as it fosters performance. When faced with a challenge, people lack the will to continue studying and trying if they do not feel confident of their abilities to study and learn.

According to Bandura (1997), individuals gather information of their self-efficacy beliefs in four ways. Firstly, individuals assess their previous performance accomplishments and mastery experience. Experiences of success reinforce the individual's self-efficacy while repeated failures weaken it. (Bandura 1997.) The interviewees often brought up their childhood and youth experiences of school. They thus reflected on their previous experiences of academic success to form an idea of their self-efficacy to learn new things.

Secondly, vicarious experience, that is, observing the actions of peers, such as colleagues, provide the individual with information on their skills and abilities (Bandura 1997). Seeing others succeed in a task can generate expectations in observers that they, too, will succeed if they persist in their efforts. Thirdly, the individual's perception of their skills is influenced by verbal persuasion (Bandura 1997). Positive feedback and encouragement are empowering, while negative feedback may weaken the individual's faith in their abilities.

The fourth method to assess one's abilities is to analyse physiological states and emotional reactions to different situations. If an individual can manage a situation calmly, they conclude that they are capable.

Correspondingly, strong negative emotional reactions, such as anxiety, nervousness or stress, can weaken the feeling of self-efficacy. (Bandura 1997.) The interviewees also talked about their emotional responses to various learning situations and on-the-job learning.

### **Working adults reflect on the benefits and costs of education**

Expressions of the benefits of education and studying were a recurring theme in the interviews. In addition, the interviewees considered the adequacy of their resources to study and learn alongside work. We interpreted the interviewees' expressions of the benefits of studying and learning as talk about the utility value and costs of competence development (see Eccles et al. 1983).

*Utility value* and *cost* are concepts of the expectancy-value theory of Eccles et al. (1983). According to the expectancy-value theory, the individual's persistence, performance and study-related choices can be explained by their beliefs about how well they will do on the activity and the extent to which they value the activity. (Viljaranta 2017; Wigfield & Eccles 2002). The perceived value or appreciation of the result is an important factor of motivation, as it affects the individual's choices. Even if an individual believes that they can perform an activity well, they may not engage in it if they do not consider it valuable. (Viljaranta 2017; Wigfield & Eccles 2002.) In other words, a working adult will not take up education or studies if they do not consider learning valuable. The development of one's competence can be considered valuable or important in various ways.

Eccles et al. (1983) distinguish between four performance values: attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value and cost. Attainment value can be defined as the importance of doing well on a given task. Intrinsic value means that the activity itself is considered meaningful and enjoyable. The concept of intrinsic value is quite similar to that of internal motivation. (Wigfield & Eccles 2002.) The utility value or usefulness, on the other hand, refers to how a task fits into an individual's future plans and goals. For example, an individual may not consider a Microsoft Office training interesting in itself, but they believe that software skills will speed up and facilitate handling practical work tasks. Thus, they consider the training useful as it facilitates performing their duties. Utility value describes the external reasons for an activity: the activity is carried out because of a desired outcome, not so much because of the activity itself. The concept of utility value shares similarities with the concept of external motivation. (Viljaranta 2017; Wigfield & Eccles 2002.)

The concept of utility value is highlighted in, for example, a study carried out earlier as part of the Urban Growth – GSIP Vantaa project by Erkkilä and Kortessalmi (2020b). The study examined which aspects of training are considered important by working learners and what they expect from training. According to the study, an employed adult expects a training to provide them with concrete knowledge and skills that facilitate the performance of their duties. Thus, the training must be useful in terms of their work. (Erkkilä & Kortessalmi 2020b.) The benefits related to studying and competence development were also highlighted in this research material. The benefits of education described by the interviewees included tools and knowledge directly applicable to their work, career development in terms of pay or position, and security for employment or protection against unemployment.

In the expectancy-value theory of Eccles et al. (1983), cost refers to assessments of how much effort will be taken to accomplish the activity and how the decision to engage in one activity (e.g. studying) limits access to other activities (e.g. free time at home). In other words, costs are factors that reduce individual's willingness to commit to an activity. In this study, the interviewees explained, for example, that it is challenging to coordinate studies with their life situation and family and work obligations. The interviewees also often experienced that studying reduced their free time. Competence development was considered to come with costs, and the interviewees reflected a lot on the cost–benefit ratio of studies and competence.

The interviewees emphasised that education and training should be beneficial and that the benefits should exceed the experienced costs.

### **Organisations benefit from supporting self-efficacy and making explicit the benefits of competence development**

Present working life, the importance of continuous learning is strongly emphasised, and continuous learning is expected of us all. Erkkilä and Kortessalmi (2020b) examined the needs and hopes placed on the implementation of formal continuous learning by working learners who have a positive and active approach towards competence development. However, there are many working adults who cannot be described as so-called continuous learners. They do not seek trainings actively or independently nor develop their competence autonomously. This group, in particular, is often neglected in the discussion on continuous learning. It is important that their wishes and needs, too, are taken into account when planning the system and practices of continuous learning.

The working adult is expected to be active in the field of continuous learning (Billett & Pavlova 2005; Harteis & Goller 2014). However, complete independence in setting goals for one's learning is an unrealistic expectation. An employee's activities are guided by the framework determined by the work community and environment. It is essential to consider how learning is enabled and supported in the organisation (Hilden 2019; Lemmetty 2020). Based on our interpretations of the interview data collected in Urban Growth – GSIP Vantaa project, the concepts of self-efficacy and utility value of competence development can be utilised in planning employee support for competence development. These concepts may be useful in, for example, discussions between an employee and their immediate supervisor on education opportunities.

Self-efficacy plays an important role in seeking learning situations and trainings, as an individual will not attempt to develop their competence unless they believe in their capacity to learn and study. Furthermore, the perceived utility value of education is important with regard to seeking trainings, as it affects the individual's choices. However, an individual who believes that they will perform well in a training may not engage in it if they do not consider it useful. In addition, education is considered to have costs. The benefits of education should therefore exceed its perceived costs.

Analysis of self-efficacy and the utility value of education in the context of continuous learning is therefore justified. These concepts can increase understanding of the challenges of continuous learning and the individual's needs from their perspective. The concepts of self-efficacy and utility value can be particularly useful when seeking to understand working adults who do not independently aim to develop their competence. Based on our analysis, we argue that supporting employees' self-efficacy and stating aloud the benefits of education can be beneficial to organisations. As a next step, we continue the analysis of working adult data to develop a deeper understanding of this timely theme.

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