JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY
School of Education and Communication

Where does Workplace Learning Fit in Your Average Swedish Start-up Firm?

A multi-case study on the perceptions and experiences of workplace learning and its implications for power imbalances in Swedish Start-Ups.

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ABSTRACT

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Background Start-ups have become increasingly central to European innovation and employment policy, yet they fall outside the institutional structures through which lifelong learning is typically supported. As workplaces are the central arena for adult learning, how learning is perceived and experienced within these resource-constrained environments remains poorly understood.

Problem: Existing research has rarely examined workplace learning in start-ups across organisational levels, leaving open both how workers and management perceive and experience learning, and how power differences between them influence it. This study addresses both questions in the context of Swedish start-ups.

Methodology: A qualitative, comparative case study of four Swedish start-ups, with an abductive design. Data was collected through eight semi-structured interviews with participants at management and worker level, analysed first through thematic analysis following the Gioia methodology, and subsequently re-examined through Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Results The thematic analysis produced four aggregate dimensions which represent the different how workplace learning is perceived and experienced. Both groups valued learning, but experience workplace learning in different ways. The discourse analysis identified four mechanisms sustaining this divide: learning as a condition or a benefit, non-symmetrical subject positions towards learning, technologically oriented organisational pressure, and self-directed learning as implicit governance. A notable finding was an AI–learning trade-off, where AI adoption improved delivery while undermining workers' opportunities to learn. The findings are synthesised into a proposed framework connecting both levels of analysis.

Conclusion: Perceptions of workplace learning in start-ups differ not because management and workers hold different values, but because learning opportunities are unevenly distributed and sustained by power relations that remain largely invisible to both parties. This carries implications for lifelong learning policy and for the social sustainability of start-up work.

Key Words: workplace learning, lifelong learning; start-ups, Foucauldian discourse analysis, power relations, sustainable careers

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

In 2025, The European Union released a report highlighting the need for increased focus on startups in the European industry. The report established the benefits of start-ups, referring to increased competitiveness, lessened dependence on external countries and is able to thrive in the EU (European Union) with a highly skilled workforce (European Commission, 2025). Start-ups are defined as companies that are small or medium sized, in the embryonic phase of their lifecycle, engaged in the process of discovering, developing, or implementing a business model, and have not yet reached an economic-financial condition that can guarantee their autonomy (Giglio et al., 2025). Beyond these criteria, start-ups are further characterised by transitory organisational forms, undefined products and services, and high entrepreneurial and innovation capacity (Giglio et al., 2025). The contrast of start-ups against established firms, noting that start-ups typically possess promising ideas, organisational agility, a willingness to take risk, and aspirations of rapid growth, while lacking resources, scale, power, and established routines. (Malik et al., 2025).

The European Union's claim of the ability for the start-up industry to provide jobs and eventually grow to other markets are valuable yet highlights the issues with scaling the business and making innovations into products or services that are marketable (European Commission, 2025, 2). Simultaneously, American start-ups have seen significant challenges over the past century, citing that in 1955, companies were on average 63 years old, compared to an average of 100 years old by 2020 (Funk, 2024). To be more precise, the increased average age of companies shows that start-ups are not out-competing existing businesses, but rather oftentimes facing challenges in achieving breakthrough technologies that are adapted by markets and clients (Funk, 2024). The recent large innovations in AI exist as a potential disrupting factor, but their scalability has seen inherent issues, citing more unreliable products the larger a generative AI model becomes (Zhou et al., 2024). These technologies bring an apparent challenge to workers, and requires continuous competence development, forcing companies to constantly consider workforce development, internally or externally, as we are facing the modern issues of megatrends (RISE Writing Team, n.d.). It has been argued that recent start-ups post 2000 suffer from a lack of strong

leadership, manufactured excitement in return for funding, and poor self-reflection of business decisions and overall strategy (Funk, 2024).

Sweden as a country has seen different trends in start-up activity in the previous decades, with increasing amounts of start-ups, and between 1990 to 2013, over half of all Swedish firms were 5 years or younger, a notable difference to the United States economic landscape (Heyman et al., 2019). However, job destruction for young firms in Sweden has increased in recent years, leading to a shrinking workforce among young Swedish firms, where the most notable amount of job creation by young firms was focused in the service sector. This suggests that while Sweden does have reduced barriers to entrepreneurship, especially compared to the United States, there are still apparent challenges in sustaining growth when considering the job destruction young firms often cause (Heyman et al., 2019).

While the EU has taken some steps in supporting increased start-up activity and development within its borders, these do not address the leadership and cultural challenges that are considered to hurt the quality of modern-day start-ups. One way Europe is trying to address funding is the Scaleup Europe fund, which assists in connecting private investors into start-up companies, with the facilitation of governing bodies (Bostrom, 2025). To address finding talent and competence in start-ups, the EU's Lab to Unicorn Initiative and Blue Carpet Initiative also create safe social nets for workers in start-up's and help bridge the gap between universities and entrepreneurial ventures in order to create a steady transition for students wishing to pursue the creation or co-creation of their own organisation (Bostrom, 2025). However, these initiatives primarily target funding and talent pipelines, and do not address the leadership and cultural challenges that are considered diminishing to the quality of modern-day start-ups. On the other hand, workplace learning as a concept for enhancing leadership and competence development has seen a growth in interest since the early 1990s, driven by technology changes, shifting occupational structures and new perspectives on careers (Tynjälä, 2008). Research here supports a gap between the formal learning institutions and what workers need on the job, with it becoming increasingly commonplace that workers report learning key skills at their place of employment rather than from their education (Tynjälä, 2008). When considering the unique nature of working in start-ups, the lack of certain practices such as formal training and increased financial and time pressure often

require workers to adapt beyond the scope of their respective fields, making the question of how workplace learning is perceived and practised in such environments particularly relevant.

The EU has recognised the importance of Lifelong Learning for general workforce development over the last two decades. Lifelong learning, a core concept incorporated into the United Nations sustainable development goals is also relevant to this paper. In that regard, this definition by Tryhub (2023) covers the term of lifelong learning in a broad yet clear scope: "Lifelong learning is defined as encompassing all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within personal, civic, social or employment-related perspectives (Tryhub, 2023)."

Whereas in Sweden, lifelong learning policies have existed dating back to the 1990s, incorporating accessible education from youth all the way through to adult-focused education (Boström, 2017). Popular education and study circles have been a significant feature of Swedish adult learning for over a century, contributing to a strong national tradition of accessible, non-formal learning (Boström, 2017). However, Sweden's system has historically focused on formal educational institutions and established organisations. Start-up organisations and firms in general lack the institutional support needed to engage in these lifelong learning frameworks.

Therefore, on a broader scale, the European Union addresses the need for lifelong learning, with pushes in policy creation and funding, yet there are still noticeable gaps at the level of implementation. Accordingly, the European dimension of lifelong learning has been shaped by a series of policy frameworks, including the European Qualifications Framework and the Council Recommendation on Key Competences, which collectively emphasise that skills and knowledge must be constantly updated to ensure competitiveness in the labour market (Tryhub, 2023). Thus, these gaps are seen in areas such as start-ups, where there is little institutional support on addressing learning challenges and competence development in the labour force within the start-up industry. With the issues start-ups seem to face today, understanding how workplace learning occurs with the lack of support could create useful insights into reaching EU goals.

1.2 Problematisation

With human resource management argued to be a critical component of start-ups, in an environment facing a lack of resources, lack of established routines and challenging time plans, previous literature suggests that founders still prioritise other parts of the business regardless, such as finances and marketing over human resource management (Aldrich & Langton, 1997, p.349). Workplace learning, or overall competence development, awareness and maintenance in start-ups is therefore challenging to address, yet its importance is still considered paramount when developing a successful business idea. In this regard, understanding how workplace learning is perceived and prioritised as a component of the business is relevant yet poorly understood regarding current literature.

Lifelong learning, particularly in Sweden, is present with extensive frameworks at the national level (CEDEFOP, 2025), yet many of these frameworks and actions are more integrated into educational systems and established organisations (Boström, 2017). As start-ups fall out of the scope of these actions, it leaves open the question of how lifelong learning principles can be translated into practice within start-up firms, which often lack the resources to be able to implement targeted workplace learning without having to sacrifice another component of the business. This disconnect reveals the duality of implementing lifelong learning practices within a start-up, it is often not prioritized by the management and has received limited attention by the state yet still holds importance when considering social and organisational development.

Lifelong learning is not only an educational goal but is further embedded in the UN's sustainable development agenda under goal 4 (Elfert, 2019). Questions about who has access to learning are therefore a further focus of sustainability. Sustainable further extends purely from learning, but concerns the social dimension of sustainable working lives, where continuous learning can be argued as a condition for working overtime (Heslin et al., 2020). Therefore if workplaces are the central arena for where workplace learning occurs, understanding how start-ups support or erode the conditions for workplace learning connects to the question of how socially sustainable start-ups are in the context of workplace learning.

On that note, while lifelong learning has been established as an important concept in recent years, workplace learning exists within lifelong learning as a more focused concept on the workplace itself. Beier (2022) argues workplaces as the central environment for most adult

learning, even over that of formal education. Therefore, since workplaces are the central place for learning, it is there where lifelong learning can be realised in practice to research.

While some existing research has analysed workplace learning and competence development (Tai et al., 2025; Narang et al., 2025), there lacks research which has approached the perception of workplace learning specifically in start-ups when incorporating multiple levels of management. Having a holistic understanding of a start-up firm's perceptions of learning can be beneficial when considering possible gaps or similarities between intentions and implementation, as well as needs and wants between workers and management.

Moreover, understanding the power dynamics between workers and management in start-ups can generate better insights on how workplace learning is framed at varying levels. Given these gaps, this study explores the perceptions of workplace learning amongst varying levels of management in Swedish start-ups, using a comparative case-study design informed by Foucauldian discourse analysis as an analytical lens.

2. Aim and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how workplace learning is perceived and experienced between both workers and those with management positions in Swedish start-ups. By examining the perceptions of both managers and workers, this study seeks to understand how learning is framed, prioritised and practised in organisational environments, being start-ups, which are characterised by resource constraints and rapid change. Not only understanding how these perceptions and experiences differ between workers and management positions, but also further understand how these differences in power may create or affect tensions in the environments of which learning is conducted. Thus, in doing so, it aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how workplace learning operates in contexts that fall outside the scope of established lifelong learning frameworks.

The following research questions are therefore proposed:

What are the perceptions and experiences of workplace learning amongst workers[1] and management[2] in Swedish start-ups?[3]

How do power differences between workers and management influence workplace learning?

2.1 Delimitations

This study is bounded in several ways. The study is focused on Swedish start-ups, excluding start-ups operating in other national contexts, where the study focuses on small start-ups, under 15 employees. Larger, more established businesses fall outside of the scope of this study, as their organisational structures and resource conditions differ from the embryonic start-up environments under interest. The data collection will be confined to semi-structured interviews with participants at two levels, a management representative and basic employees without direct responsibility over management or large decisions within the company. Stakeholders such as investors, board members and external stakeholders are not included, as this study's focus is on the perceptual gap between those who direct the organisation and those working within it. The study is bounded by a perceptual and exploratory approach, seeking to understand how workplace learning is experienced and framed rather than to measure learning outcomes or organisational performance. Quantitative effectiveness is therefore outside the scope of this research.

3. Background

The background is composed of five main areas. Given the unique nature of this study and limited literature on Start-ups in this field, most literature was found without the use of a systematic method. Instead, literature was searched for using certain keywords, including *Workplace learning, Competence Development, Start-ups, Entrepreneurship, Lifelong Learning.* The following literature was then organized in a manner to be digestible for the reader to understand the topic and relevant aspects.

[1] The term "workers" refers to an employee or worker within a start-up who holds a role but little to no responsibility over people or larger organisational decisions alone.
[2] The term "management" refers to workers within a start-up who hold a larger responsibility over other workers, the organisation as a whole or both.
[3] Neither workers or management must or must not have ownership, as giving ownership is commonly used as a form of compensation within start-ups instead of paying a full or competitive salary. Therefore, the self-described role holds the greatest impact to which area a participant within the study was assigned to.

3.1 Workplace Learning and Competence Development

Workplace learning, a core focus in this thesis, has seen an increased level of research in the recent decade, however with a limited focus on small organisations and start-ups (Kanfer, 2017). It is argued by Kanfer that the recent changes in technology has accelerated the need for proactive competence development given the high likelihood for future job changes in terms of roles and skills required (Kanfer, 2017). Workers in modern day start-ups can be especially susceptible to this dynamic given the limited resources and lack of secure long-term work. Tynjälä (2008) has also explored the nature of workplace learning in-depth. Relevant to this research, she had established that workplace practices are primarily pedagogical (Tynjälä, 2008). Informal and formal learning were discussed in the paper, establishing the existence of a dual nature of learning. Informal learning is also critiqued to be important to workplaces, as this provides the space and ability for workers to be able to reflect and consider decisions taken whereas formal learning can help establish new cultures, and develop specific skills (Tynjälä, 2008).

Conceptual foundations in workplace learning lies within foundations of the philosophy of education, with a lineage running from Dewey through Lewin and Follett eventually to Knowles (Conlon, 2004). Dewey's core idea was that genuine learning is derived from experience, and reflection is a problem-solving process embedded in everyday activities (Iredale, 2012). In Dewey's perspective, the aim of learning was adaptability, being that learning is changing one's own ability to conduct different actions in new situations, rather than just mastery of routines (Iredale, 2012). Conlon (2004) also found that formal learning is structured and institutionally sponsored, whereas informal learning arises from everyday work under the control of the learner, and incidental learning occurred as the product of other activities. As it is argued by Conlon (2004) that the majority of workplace learning is estimated to occur informally, with only a fifth coming from genuine formal training, informal learning is a rather significant form of learning for most workers in workplaces. However, this has also been criticized, as describing workplace learning as informal defines conceals the notion that workplace activities are still highly structured, intentional and regulated actions with pedagogical properties (Billett, 2004).

Learning through work is also argued to be dependent on two interdependent processes, the activities, interactions and guidance the workplace can afford, and how the individual elects to engage with those affordances (Billett, 2004). How the individuals further elect and decides to participate with these engagements is regulated by interests within the workplace, such as

seniority, affiliation or employment status. These can be affected by new workers, management and even older more established workers (Billett, 2004). Workplaces can then be accordingly placed on a continuum between expansive to restrictive learning environments (Fuller & Unwin, 2003). Expansive environments include cross-boundary experiences, planned reflection time and see workforce development as career progression. On the other hand, restrictive workplaces limit learning to on-the-job tasks, without planned reflection time and view development specific to the job (Fuller & Unwin, 2003). Learning at workplaces also occurs at multiple levels, from the individual, team, organisational and even networking levels (Tynjälä, 2008).

It is argued that one's position within an organisation and the greater community affects how learning occurs (Tynjälä, 2008). The establishment of learning mode in workplaces is also considered to be a factor in enabling a sustainable career. Sustainable careers are argued to be better for long-term workplace development, when considering the employee itself. Learning mode is a three-step process that encourages action, reflection and lastly consideration of cause and effect between an event in question to develop better leadership qualities for self-regulated learning. This can happen in two ways and recognizes that actual acknowledgement of this process and seeking to pursue development is key in pursuing workplace learning (Heslin et al., 2020).

Reflection within workplaces is also considered to be a critical factor in competence development for organisations. Double loop learning, a concept that involves a process of deeper reflection, and questioning the underlying assumptions behind ideas, reasons and skills allows for a more nuanced understanding of systems at the workplace and allows for greater skill retention and application for further uses. However, this must be systematically integrated, as it requires planned and initiative to integrate it into an organisation's practices (Tynjälä, 2008). This is further reinforced by Bergmo-Prvulovic (2017), who argued that professional learning moves from non-articulated theory into explicit reflection, which triggers organisational learning. However, reflection must be supported by the organisation and will not happen automatically unless organisations schedule time for it. Assumptions and initiatives about learning also face challenges, where organisations face growing pains through phases of growth. New colleagues, leadership and management enter organisations with pre-existing values, which can influence how learning is perceived and applied to current systems, which can create unclear expectations and structures, showing the flexibility and constant evolvement of workplace learning as organisations

restructure, grow and adjust to current market, ownership and management needs (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2025).

Recent research has moved from describing the different learning environments that exist to more closely examining how learning opportunities are actualized, especially in a working context (Brandi, 2026). This suggests that learning opportunities are not only characteristics of a job but emerge in concrete situations where routine work and conditions meet uncertainty and inquiry (Brandi, 2026). Highly routinised work can also be harmful for consistent learning, as it closes opportunities to learning, even in organisations that achieve to incorporate learning into their broader workforce, creating a gap between the organisational culture and working reality (Brandi, 2026). This effect that routinisation can have can also be seen within regulations and standardisation, which narrows the variety of experiences workers can access and reflect on (Iredale, 2012). Yet, research has shown that organisations have been increasingly delegating responsibility for learning to the individual employee, making self-directed learning both an opportunity and a burden that requires initiative from the worker, with little support from formal structures (Brandi, 2026).

Therefore, current research has established that workplace learning is not only beneficial to reaching organisational goals, but also enables sustainable careers, prepares employees for changes and adaptations for working roles and lastly that workplace learning happens outside of formal and intentional contexts in the workspace, and supersedes the individual, with a particular emphasis on reflection, and that organisations much make time to trigger reflections, as it is not something that happens automatically. These learning opportunities to conduct workplace learning however are regulated by workplace interests, and are increasingly delegated to individual responsibility (Billett, 2004; Brandi, 2026).

3.2 Lifelong Learning

The OECD definition (Boström, 2003) describes lifelong learning as a process of individual learning and development across the lifespan, encompassing formal, non-formal and informal settings. This shift matters because the economic framing dominates how lifelong learning is understood by workplaces today. Lifelong learning is incorporated into the United Nations sustainable development goals, under goal 4, acknowledged as a developmental objective, however, is still mainly focused on formal education such as school and vocational training (United

Nations, nd). Elfert (2019) argued that despite goal 4's general arguments, there continues to be weak monitoring and little funding proportionate to other educational institutions towards adult learning.

However, Europe's policies have taken a stronger emphasis on integrating lifelong learning into programs and efforts that help establish increased competitiveness in the entrepreneurial activities of Europe simultaneously to competence development among workforces. Closer research into actual lifelong learning and competencies however largely focus on actions, needs and principles with a larger perspective of the individual rather than one's career capabilities. On behalf of the political landscape, the Lisbon Memorandum (2000) was one of the primary acknowledgements of lifelong learning in EU policy making today. It established the necessity of lifelong learning for creating a knowledge-based economy and became a guiding principle for provision across all of the learning contexts. This created a primary shift of incorporating lifelong learning into actual priority for structural policy within education (Tryhub, 2023). The EU also recognised the need for lifelong learning and quality competence development more as a human right rather than just a goal, with agreed statements across multiple documents arguing that all individuals within a society need a wide set of skills and competences to achieve their full potential. The 2021-2030 strategic framework by the EU also reaffirmed lifelong learning as the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, establishing the right to quality, inclusive education and training for all as a foundational social commitment (Tryhub, 2023).

Van den Broeck (2024) created a system of six core competency categories: self-regulation and self-direction, learning beliefs and strategies, autonomous motivation, information literacy, initiative and perseverance, and adaptability and resilience. These competencies also reflect the individual nature of lifelong learning, and these competencies exist within an individual's life, rather than the perspective of only their experience of the workplace. In his research, he discovered that the most effective competency was self-regulation, which covers within it self-reflection. Learners must take initiative to diagnose their own needs, in order to become a competent lifelong learner.

Given that lifelong learning is also not purely a spontaneous occurrence, it must be supported in different manners from an institutional perspective (Boström, 2017). Simultaneously, inherent motivation is a critical need from the individual perspective, suggesting that the lack of a proper environment to adopt a perspective of learning may obstruct individuals from developing a

personal motivation and need for themselves (Van den Broeck et al. 2024). It is also important to understand that this is not only referring to what occurs in a workplace, but takes on a larger holistic perspective at an individual's life as well. While workplaces have little to no impact on dictating how an employee manages their free-time, strong working conditions which allow a balanced and healthy lifestyle seem to be good indicators to a lifestyle which has the means to achieve a sustainable career fulfilled of lifelong learning (Heslin et al. 2020).

Effective lifelong learning does not only require self-direction but also requires to some extent a balance of learning strategies, motivations and self-belief. Drawing on analyses of Pisa 2022 data a policy report from OECD (2024), claims that the interplay between these items creates the necessary environmental conditions to achieve lifelong learning. The variances between the amount of support needed per any given individual requires different approaches, such as more proactive learning strategies. Yet this report argues that education and learning systems must strengthen all three of these conditions (OECD 2024). Without any form of support for encouraging a system, culture and strategy that promotes workers to continue learning at all angles of their life, any other efforts will likely face issues succeeding (OECD, 2024).

3.3 Learning in Start-ups

The study by Hahn et al. (2025) researched whether students with entrepreneurial experience and knowledge can translate their skills into personal initiative when they are employed at a startup through quantitative analysis. Data obtained through a large-scale survey showcased the relationship between entrepreneurial learning experiences and personal initiative which as a result leads to more proactive and initiative-taking employees. This was argued to be fundamental in a startup as it can increase efficiency while operating under uncertainty and pressure (Hahn et al., 2025). A related study investigated how having a gamified workplace by implementing progress systems, competition, and interactive tasks can affect employee performance and development in startups (Bhawna et al., 2025). The study suggests that having this environment fulfils the startup employees' intrinsic needs and increases individual motivation and organisational values. It reflects the management's belief on how to push motivation for startup employees and how that incentive became a strategic investment (Bhawna et al., 2025).

Employees in start-ups have also been noted to value learning, challenging tasks and opportunities for skill development much more than purely material rewards (Narang et al., 2025).

A study composed of qualitative interviews looking to explore what drives happiness in technology-based new ventures found that daily interactions, brainstorming and collaboration were all forms of learning and activities which employees in start-ups underwent to which they enjoyed and felt as if they had learnt. Informal learning was also highlighted as key daily experiences within the type of work a start-up brings. Personal coaching from leadership was also a large motivator for happiness. The proximity to the leadership in these smaller flat start-up organisations also has been argued to create a unique learning dynamic that is typically not found in established organisations and companies. This suggests that this preference of learning over rewards supports the argument that learning is intrinsically tied to fulfilment in the type of work a start-up has. This stands in contrast to Paoprasert et al. (2025), who found that employees in start-ups learned primarily due to external pressure rather than genuine motivation, suggesting that the conditions leadership creates may be the determining factor. Lastly, the CEO's attitude toward learning and coaching can change how employees perceive learning, whether it be something meaningful or obligatory (Narang et al., 2025). In addition to this, another study found learning as a key attraction factor in start-ups, where a study found that across start-ups, the positive attributes such as high quality workers, entrepreneurial culture and development opportunities were labelled by workers as learning opportunities (Seo et al., 2024). This study therefore showed that symbolic attributes tended to be favoured over material ones, such as pay or worker benefits and employees perceived the cultural attributes, such as co-worker quality greater than the economic benefits reaped.

Learning in start-ups was also covered regarding the behaviours exhibited within learning. Start-ups offer unique challenges, given their resource constraints, and supervisors and mentors are not always available for workers in start-ups (Malik et al., 2025). Competence development was also seen to be hindered, as collaborative learning is sometimes avoided due to trust issues between sharing ideas, especially of that within technological start-ups. This highlights that learning can be greatly hindered by time, trust, money and the workforce in question, and managers must consider these factors if they wish to invest or implement competence development, self-reflection or continuous learning (Malik et al., 2025). A study exploring startup learning in a two-year-old company in Thailand states that employee learning is a critical part of a start-up company. The study intended to understand what factors can influence the employees' motive to learn by conducting 100 employee surveys (Paoprasert et al., 2025). The study finds that employees do not

learn because they necessarily wanted to learn, rather because of pressure and other people's influence, and only when they believed themselves capable of doing so (Paoprasert et al., 2025). This gives insight to the nature of workplace learning and recognizes that contextual factors and workplace cultures can be a strong influence, even during a strong disregard for intrinsic motivation. This contradiction to Narang et al. (2025)'s findings could be a result of different contexts of research. The research conducted by Paoprasert et al. (2025) was based in Thailand, whereas Narang et al. (2025) was based in a western context.

3.4 Contemporary Research on Start-Ups

In light of a greater perspective of this paper, discussing the contemporary landscape of start-ups in the EU and from a global standpoint can be considered relevant to this study. While workplace learning is not specifically researched amongst start-ups, understanding how current literature has explored the cultural, structural and strategic dimensions can be considered a necessary context for interpreting how workplace learning operates within these dimensions.

Start-ups are considered to be unique in different ways, one way being the decision making amongst founders. Pollack (2023) explored the tensions between rational and intuitive decision making amongst founders in start-ups. This is because he argued that start-ups and its founders often act in conditions that lack the ability to achieve rational decisions, such as lack of time or resources, and therefore must rely on intuition and emotion to fill the gap in making a decision. Heightened levels of uncertainty and resource constraints within start-ups also shape entrepreneurial behaviour. As contextual factors often become moderators of rational behaviour, founders and workers within start-ups are more likely to rely on biased or affect-driven judgements. Decisions that may be seen as inappropriate to an established company may seem like a normal response for a start-up operating in a volatile environment. Therefore, it can be understood that priorities in a start-up may be especially different to that of a normal company, where more urgent, resource intensive concerns are chosen over general human resource practices (Pollack, 2023). This aligns with Aldrich and Langton's (1997) claims that founders tend to put forward concerns and work towards fulfilling commercial and financial needs rather than the needs of its labour force.

Modern-day technological innovations further contribute to the challenges of volatility within start-up environments. A study by Olan et al. (2023) explored digital entrepreneurship, and

identified key themes of digitalisation within start-ups. The study's findings showed that digitalisation has fundamentally altered how ventures are created, launched and scaled, within platform-based models growing in popularity. The developments in technology in recent decades have allowed start-ups to have access to greater national and global markets, increasing both opportunity as well as complexity for founders (Olan et al., 2023). This study argued that the lack of robust theoretical foundations around leadership in digitally-driven ventures, managing distributed knowledge workers and fostering an innovation culture places significant demands on founders, especially in resource constrained environments. This is further compounded in start-ups, where there is likely no internal institutional infrastructure to support these developments as well. Olan et al. (2023) argues that the rapid pace of technological change as a key driver in skill obsolescence across the digital landscape, specifically so for technology based start-ups, where the useful life of technological knowledge is short. This essentially means that workers are required to constantly update their knowledge and competences to stay relevant and effective. This creates a tension, where a digital workplace that requires intensive ongoing learning is the least equipped for supporting it when referring to the time, resources and infrastructure usually at hand (Olan et al., 2023). While this study was focused on digital start-ups, another study found consistencies across multiple sectors and geographies in regard to operating under constrained resources (Luhas and Mikkilä, 2024).

Jennings et al. (2012) developed a framework which bridges entrepreneurship, institutions and communities together in a sociological framing to gain insights to how communities understand start-ups in their broad concept. From here, the study introduced the concept of the liability of newness, which was that start-ups often face institutional disadvantages compared to established firms, lacking legitimacy in the perspective of other actors, such as investors, customers and regulators. The paper also argued that start-ups also often lack internal routines and social structures which often allow established firms to function efficiently (Jennings et al., 2012). Therefore in start-ups, learning is more challenging to achieve than established firms from a structural perspective. This study further argued that the community and societal context a start-up is working within shapes its opportunities, and research on start-ups should not be isolated to the industry but understood as actors within a greater system.

Shahid et al. (2023) argue that sustainable entrepreneurship is driven by frugal innovation, and that doing more with less (resources) generates meaningful social outcomes. Its findings

argued that social entrepreneurship and responsibility are becoming increasingly prominent as a business feature. Another study found that large societal challenges are increasingly being framed as entrepreneurial opportunities (Fernhaber and Zou, 2022), where start-ups are positioning themselves as agents of change rather than purely marketing a product or service for its function. In this regard, organisations such as start-ups are considering themselves greater than just a product or business model, but as a societal actor with a greater impact than its financial boundaries. Fernhaber and Zou (2022) argue these societal challenges that start-ups attempt to address require solutions that transcend institutional and geographical boundaries, and the nation's political and regulatory context also shape what is possible for a start-up venture to pursue. In light of Sweden, it has consistent and strong support systems for entrepreneurial activities but lacks integrated systems for achieving lifelong learning into start-up practice.

Regarding diversity and inclusion in start-up research, previous literature has found an uneven distribution of entrepreneurial opportunity across gender and geography. Kogut and Mejri's (2021) study found that despite persistent male norms within the start-up industry, female entrepreneurs simply described themselves as successful entrepreneurs. This highlights the masking and internalisation of resilience as a coping mechanism, where females were found at a disadvantage to men, with limited access to networks, finance and even institutional legitimacy at some points, highlighting the uneven conditions for pursuing a start-up (Kogut and Mejri, 2021). This study also found that homogeneity in founding teams can also limit organisational learning and adaptability. The range of problems a team can identify, and solutions it can provide, are often constrained by the homogeneity of its cognitive capabilities (Kogut and Mejri, 2021). However, this study was conducted as a cross-qualitative study on entrepreneurial females in Brazil and Tunisia, in comparison of the literature reviewed, which is primarily focused on Western English language contexts. This study shows that the findings from this study may not be universally applicable, especially in societies with different cultures and regulations, especially in terms of gender equality and access to formal support functions.

Lastly, in regard to Europe as a landscape for start-ups, Pisoni and Onetti (2017) argue that Europe lags behind in acquisitions for start-up activities. Exits for founders, such as initial public offerings, for example, can be classified as a failure, can also be mischaracterised and be seen rather as a change of control and a liquidity event. The structural ecosystem conditions for start-ups in the United States makes it more likely for exits, especially in the form of acquisitions (Pisoni

and Onetti, 2017). These forms of exits are less developed in most European markets, and shapes how start-ups in the European context may plan for and experience their growth trajectories (Pisoni and Onetti, 2017). By framing an early exit for a start-up in Sweden less as a failure and more as a learning opportunity shift how founders and employees process and frame transitions. This connects to the greater area of understanding how learning is experienced in a start-up context, as forced transitions do not need to be processed as a failure, rather a transition. Isenberg (2008) further identified challenges that might create these transitions for founders working in global contexts. These challenges included competing with larger companies while under resource constraints, managing the challenges of national regulations, and lastly the logistical and psychological barriers (Isenberg, 2008). While Sweden is considered to have a high digital literacy and open regulatory environment, the increase in job destruction among young Swedish firms and gap between institutional support for learning are still apparent.

3.5 Research Gaps

Despite the substantial amount of relevant literature to this study covered in this chapter, significant gaps remain in the area of workplace learning amongst start-ups. Therefore, this paper argues that the following five gaps have been overlooked by current literature. *First,* workplace learning has limited focus on start-ups. While the literature has grown significantly (Kanfer, 2017), it has predominantly been focused on larger organisations. The distinct conditions of start-ups, such as resource scarcity, flat structures and liability of newness (Jennings et al., 2012) means that research on established companies cannot be directly applied to start-ups. *Second,* no multi-level management perspective on learning perceptions seems to currently exist regarding start-ups. There is a tendency for research to occur mostly on the founders of start-ups, and occasionally employees within these types of organisations. *Third,* the frameworks and policies targeted towards lifelong learning have not been adapted to reach start-ups, leaving a gap in understanding how lifelong learning principles exist within a start-up when applied. *Fourth,* there is a lack of research of the power dynamics between the founders, management and employees within start-ups for learning. *Fifth,* the Swedish and Nordic context is underexplored. Most literature discussed in this paper has been focused on Asian, US or western European contexts. Therefore, this study aims to explore how workplace learning is perceived between varying levels of management

within Swedish start-ups and analysed through discourse analysis to gain insights to the power dynamics and how that might affect workplace learning.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study took on an abductive logic, which Dubois and Gadde (2002) describe as a systematic combination, which is a continuous movement between the empirical world and the model world, empirical research and case analysis evolve simultaneously.

Workplace learning research understands learning ontologically as something relational, being that it exists between social interactions and practices in work. As it is not a fixed property or object that exists inside or around individuals, but rather a constantly changing concept. Billett (2004), places workplace learning as the constant negotiation between what the workplace can afford and how the individual engages themselves. Tynjälä (2008), on the other hand places workplace learning as something that occurs on different organisation levels, such as individual, team or organisationally. Therefore, is learning is socially situated, then the perceptions and experiences of it are socially constructed. Thus, the philosophy applied in this research is an interpretivist and constructivist research paradigm, acknowledging that reality is socially constructed, and emphasizing that subjective human opinions, including the researcher, are taken into consideration during the processing of data (Kouam Arthur William, 2024). This paradigm is well suited to the research questions, which seeks to understand how workplace learning is perceived and experienced rather than to measure it objectively or from a behavioural. Interpretivism further reinforces this for answering the second research question regarding power dynamics, by allowing for the researcher to interpret the differences and similarities between the different levels of authority among the participants.

Case studies are an appropriate method of data collection here as they can produce context dependent in-depth knowledge. This allows for examining phenomena in real life settings, such as start-ups, with increased detail, and allows for the consideration of context-specific research considerations. This is relevant when considering that this research is focused on human affairs, where case studies are considered well suited to account for human emotion and details that other forms of data collection might miss (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Constructivism, which accounts for human

subjectivity reinforces this, as human opinions are taken into consideration in this research, especially given the exploratory nature of research human perception. Comparative case studies further allow the researcher to be able to compare the analysed data to generate a deeper insight and reduce the risk of generalization by having a singular organisation in question (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Recurring themes across different cases that emerge therefore strengthen the findings and allow for a more in-depth understanding, especially with varying types of start-up organisations.

Therefore, when exploring perceptions and experiences of workplace learning amongst workers and managers, a comparative case design helps identify both shared and divergent patterns in collecting data to explore the research question. In addition, in order to explore how power differences may influence workplace learning, a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis approach is applied between the workers and management. A comparative case study design acts as an appropriate and effective choice for the research that was conducted.

4.2 Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

4.2.1 Workplace Learning as Affordance and Engagement

Billett's (2004) claim of the duality of workplaces argues that workplace learning is affected by two major interdependent factors; how workplace learning is afforded and how much the individual engages themselves. This refers to the workplace affordances, the activities, interactions and guidance the workplace can invite people into, which are intentionally regulated, distributed unevenly by interests, seniority, affiliations and the workplace's need for continuity. On the other hand, individual engagement refers to how workers are exercising agency, which is shaped by their own experiences and goals, as they participate by electing to take on, negotiate or resist what is afforded for learning in the workplace. This perspective will be revisited during the analysis to explore how both the workplace environment and individual engage in workplace learning from both the perspective of management and workers. This is primarily intended to help with answering the first research question: *What are the perceptions and experiences of workplace learning amongst workers and management in Swedish start-ups?* Billett (2004) further argues that individual participation is regulated by power, which is explored by the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, mentioned in the next section.

4.2.2 A Foucauldian Perspective on Power

To address the second research question concerning power relations in workplace learning, this study adopts a Foucauldian perspective (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). For Foucault, power is relational and productive rather than merely repressive. Thus, power is not possessed at the top but dispersed through everyday practices, which suggests that power operates through discourse. Ways of speaking, knowing that defines what counts as true, normal or desirable, for example being, what counts as a learning experience, who is positioned as a learner and whose account of the workplace prevails (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017).

Four specific concepts from Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine (2017) were used to guide the analytical re-examination. The first is power, which explores who holds authority to define and impact culture within their respective organisation. The second concept is the subject positions, which investigates how participants at different levels position themselves within their organisation and the research in question, for example a participant does not see themself as a learner. Thirdly, there are technologies of power and self, which explore the structures, systems and norms that govern learning behaviour from a distance and the techniques that individuals use to regulate themselves in their own way. Lastly, the fourth concept is problematization, which accounts for the circumstances and by whom aspects of the culture, learning or organisation in general are rendered problematic (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017).

In order to answer the second research question, it is important to explore how management perceptions of workplace learning and employee perceptions differ or align, which provides further depth to this research, as Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine (2017) argue that FDA resists rigid formalisation.

The adoption of a Foucauldian analytic perspective is compatible with the interpretivist and constructivist paradigm established in section 4.1, as both reject the notion of a single objective reality and treat knowledge as socially constructed (Kouam Arthur William, 2024). However, FDA extends beyond interpretivism by not only seeking to understand perceptions but also examining how those perceptions are produced and constrained by relations of power (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). Reflexivity, as outlined in section 4.5.1, serves as a bridge between the two, and is further reinforced by the FDA perspective, which requires the researcher to question the embedded assumptions within the data that are taken for granted.

4.2.3 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted at a Swedish-based e-commerce start-up which explored the perceptions of workplace learning through a single interview with the company's CEO, and the findings informed the design and direction of this thesis. The analytical process that was tested during the pilot study is the framework described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) for identifying meaning units, condensing them, and then converting them into codes, as well as Bengtsson's (2016) stages of categorisation and compilation. This process yielded 22 codes, five manifest categories, and three latent themes, and helped inform the decisions made when designing the methodology section. Firstly, the interview guide was refined given it was able to be used in practice. The pilot study also found that thematic analysis was effective for this type of research. Lastly, the findings acted as a guide when conducting more extensive background research.

4.3 Data Collection

The choices made in the methodology and data collection are based primarily on what the research question is intending to capture. For the first research question, the key words are experience and perceptions. As this is not behaviour, but instead one's own description of events from their perceptions, an interview provides the necessary space for the participants to express and contribute the qualitative data this research question requires (Saunders et al., 2019).

For the second research question, as this instead is focused on the power differences between workers and management, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis informed the choices made in the following section in two ways. Firstly, one interview guide was used across all interviews, with only probing questions varying slightly. This helps in understanding genuine differences across the same phenomena. Secondly, this Foucauldian discourse analysis requires verbal communication in order for the research to explore silences, framing and tone when the participants are discussing similar phenomena (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017), therefore qualitative interviews are therefore highly applicable to this case.

Overall, as this explores how people frame and express their own lived experiences regardless of authority, interpretivism and constructivist approach fits well, as it realizes that each person individual constructs their own reality (Kouam Arthur William, 2024).

4.3.1 Participants and Organisations

The participants gathered for this study were found through purposive sampling (Saunders et al., 2019). Purposive sampling allows the researcher, for the purpose of the study, to select participants based on their context, are the most appropriate to help in answering the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). While the participants were picked, none shared a former relationship with the researcher regardless, and were found through public channels.

The following table represents the companies that participated in this study. The names are anonymous and are represented with a corresponding letter.

Table 1. List of Organisations and Participants

Start-up Company	**Type of Product/Service**	**Age of Firm**	**Number of Employees**	**Externally funded and/or supported?**	**Participants Involved**
A	Software Platform for Producers	1.5 years	6 Employees	no	2 Workers, 1 Manager
B	Software-Hardware Manufacturing Solutions	3 years	6 employees	yes	2 Workers
C	Furniture service	6 months	2 employees	no	2 Managers
D	Event company	1 year	2 employees	yes	1 Manager

4.3.2 Interviews

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary data collection. Semi-structured interviews mean a common interview guide is used; while probing and follow-up questions are used selectively by the researcher to allow individual experiences to surface (Saunders et al., 2019). All the primary data was collected and recorded digitally via Microsoft Teams, where the

transcript function was used. A single set of interview questions was made, consisting of both closed questions to establish a basic understanding of the current organisation, and open-ended questions to gather more in-depth data useful for processing. The interviews were between 30-40 minutes long, and all were conducted in English.

The data from the interviews was then stored on Jönköping University's platforms afterwards in a secure folder, with access only allowed from the researcher and supervisor if requested.

4.3.3 Interview Guide

The interview guide was developed and refined through a pilot study conducted prior to this study taking place. Key methodological lessons from the pilot included the importance of varied probing questions, stronger boundaries during interviews, and awareness of researcher proximity to participants. See Appendix A for the interview guide.

4.4 Data Analysis

4.4.1 Thematic Analysis

The method proposed by Gioia et al. (2012) was used for this study, which allows for freedom with the data to build complex frameworks following the analysis. Given the pilot study had only thematic analysis, in contrast with the use of both thematic analysis and FDA in this study, Gioia et al.'s (2012) methodology grants the researcher more freedom for creating an effective framework.

Thematic analysis was used following a method created by Gioia et al. (2012), which is effective in bringing qualitative data from raw data to emergent themes and concepts. This approach treats participants as knowledgeable agents whose own language is preserved in the early stages of analysis, before the research eventually identifies theoretical patterns in the higher orders.

Prior to the analysis of data, the transcripts were organised into two combined documents. The first being a collection of all interviews with basic employees, and the second document being a collection of all management-level participants.

The analysis occurred primarily in three stages. Firstly, the transcripts were be read closely and the 1st order codes were assigned, using terms and phrases drawn directly from the participants

own language. These codes capture what informants said without the filter of theoretical categories yet. At the second stage, 1st-order codes were then examined for underlying patterns and grouped into 2nd order themes, representing the researcher's theoretical interpretation of the data. These 2nd order themes were then finally sorted into aggregate dimensions that capture overarching findings which were then compared across both documents.

After this process, the 1st order codes, 2nd order themes and aggregate dimensions were assembled into a data structure figure which will is designed to best represent the complex relationships discovered during the analysis of the data in this study. This design exists as a framework which connects both the aggregate dimensions discovered together with the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.

4.4.2 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

FDA was applied to answer the second research question. The FDA was applied to both the themes present in from the thematic analysis, and to the raw data itself to undergo a re-examination. These themes were re-examined critically to understand how the power dynamics shaped the perceptions and experiences in the data. This re-examination was guided by the 4 concepts presented in section 4.2.3, *power, subject positions, technologies of power and self* and *problematisation* (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). C were examined between management and workers during accounts of similar phenomena. While this is primarily intended for subject positioning, it also held true in other areas as well. Language that normalises practices, and the implication behind such language is interpreted, such as shown in the problematisation. The results of this second analytical layer are presented in the next chapter, section 5.2.

4.5 Method Discussion

4.5.1 Reflexivity in Analysis

Reflexivity, a subset of constructivism theory acknowledges that the researcher utilizes prior knowledge and experiences in one's research (Kouam Arthur William, 2024). This was applied in this process given the researcher undergone a formal higher education specifically under the area of lifelong learning. This can assist in determining relevant data and grouping the data effectively.

4.5.2 Ethical Considerations

An information sheet was provided as the initial step. The information sheet provided the interviewees with appropriate information about the study, the length of the interview, the aim of the research, type of research, as well as contact information to the researchers as well as the supervisor. After this, the researcher provided the consent form (See appendix B) to be signed when made aware that the parties in questions are willing and able to do the interviews. The research was only conducted after consent forms were signed by the following parties of each organisation: the management (or authorizing signatory who will allow for research) and all interview participants in question. Each interview participant was given a consent form aligned with GDPR privacy standards. All parties held the right to conduct the interview anonymously, as well as withdraw their data at any given point. During the interview process, the researcher asked for consent to record the interview both prior to the beginning of the recording, and after the recording started. The researcher also aimed to make the interview experiences as comfortable for the participants as possible, positioning themselves as a person to listen and ask simple questions, and not to challenge any current beliefs, or opinions. The researcher was made available to questions throughout the entire process. The participants remained anonymous throughout the entire process as well.

The participants were **not** named, as to who said what, when discussing the results. This is because ensuring what was said remains anonymous is imperative to the ethical obligations the researcher has to the participants. Participant codes were also actively chosen to be excluded from the text. This was purposely done given the limited number of companies and participants involved, in the purpose of minimizing the risk that a participant's identity and quotes could be determined from what is discussed in the findings. While this does contradict APA's guidelines, the author found this necessary in this case. However, it is important to note that the respondents are equally represented in the data.

4.5.3 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed in multiple ways. Firstly, covering multiple organisations in this study restricts research from overgeneralization of a single case. Secondly, the analysis of the data through Gioia et al.'s (2012) method allows for reduced bias at different points. Gioia et al.

(2012) argues that qualitative rigor in research is achieved through systematic, transparent and analytical procedures rather than external checklists.

4.5.3.1 Credibility

Credibility concerns whether the research findings are an accurate representation of a credible interpretation of the data. This is primarily achieved through trustworthiness, as this research takes on a more nuanced understanding by including multiple organisations, with multiple workers in most organisations.

The selection of participants at varying management levels also ensures that multiple perspectives are captured in regard to the same phenomena, *workplace learning*. Gioia et al.'s (2012) systematic analytical process further reinforces credibility, with the reduction of meaning units, to codes, and then finally categories and themes. This shows a logical and systematic analysis of the data. Simultaneously, reflexivity is practiced throughout the entire research process, transparently acknowledging the researchers own position in relation to the research being conducted. Lastly, Foucauldian discourse analysis strengthens this credibility by adding a clear and established theoretical lens on the study, which helped justify decisions made during the process of creating themes and categories.

4.5.3.2 Dependability

Dependability concerns the stability of data over time and the transparency of the research process. The scientific method this research adopts ensures that a transparent and logical trail is followed over time, from the collection and raw data throughout the analytical process. The pilot study reinforces this as a methodological pre-test, ensuring that the proposed model produced consistent and intended results with respect to the nature of an exploratory study. Refinements from the pilot, including the interview guide and positionality awareness have been carried into the main study to ensure the best possible method with respect to limitations. The abductive approach of systematic combining also requires continuous documentation of how the interaction between theory and data shapes the evolving framework, further supporting the transparency of this process.

4.5.3.3 Transferability

Transferability concerns the extent to which findings can be applied to other settings or groups. This will be achieved by providing basic descriptions of the four companies, with respect to the

anonymity that is provided to the participants in the study. Matters such as their organisation funding contexts, number of employees and industry which the data was collected enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar environments. The comparative case study design across the different case studies increases transferability, as the findings hold greater weight than that of a single case, reducing generalisability, and offers context dependent knowledge which can act as a guide for future studies within this area of literature.

4.5.4 Limitations

Several limitations of this study are acknowledged. First, the sample size was small by design, consisting of only 4 start-up organisations, consisting of 8 interviews with an equal number of participants being either management and workers. While this is appropriate for an exploratory comparative multi-case study, it means that the findings cannot be generalised beyond the specific contexts studied in this research. The aim was to achieve transferability, so that readers must assess how applicable this research is to their own contexts in the descriptions provided.

Second, the study relied entirely on self-reported perceptions gathered through single interviews. Participants may present idealised or socially desirable accounts of how learning occurs in their start-up organisations, especially considering the professional context of the interviews. Repeated interviews over periods of time could provide a possibly more nuanced and truthful understanding yet given the time and resource constraints of this study, it could not be achieved.

Third, the researcher's exposure to the subjects and material present within this paper prior to conducting this research creates a risk of bias. While reflexivity is practiced throughout this paper and was managed through the use of an interview guide, it cannot be entirely avoided and could have potential impacts on the data.

Fourth, the data collection is conducted at a single point in time. Start-ups are dynamic and volatile organisations where leadership, priorities and conditions can shift quickly (Paoprasert et al., 2025). The perceptions captured in these interviews may only reflect a specific moment within a start-up’s development rather than represent how learning is experienced and perceived over time.

Lastly, the study is limited to start-ups based in Sweden. While this context is good for the different cases to be compared against each other, it means the transferability of the findings may be affected and hindered.

4.5.5 AI Declaration

During creation of this study, the researcher utilized two different forms of artificial intelligence. Firstly, the transcription function in Microsoft Teams to transcribe the audio recorded interview (Microsoft, 2026). The transcription function utilizes an artificial intelligence algorithm to transcribe audio immediately into text. Secondly, Claude by Anthropic was used during the coding process to assist with brainstorming larger themes and 2nd order labels (Anthropic, 2026). It is important to note the Claude by Anthropic did not have access to the statements made, rather than 1st order codes that came from them. After using these tools, the researcher revised the content accordingly and takes full responsibility for the content of the paper submitted.

5. Results

This chapter is organised in two main sections. Firstly, the thematic analysis following Gioia et al.'s (2012) methodology, followed by the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.

After the 8 interviews were conducted, the data was then formatted and organised between two main categories: Management and workers. From here, a coding process was conducted following Gioia et al.'s methodology resulting in four aggregate themes, supported by fourteen second-order themes. The following themes and aggregate dimensions will be discussed in this chapter, following the application of the Foucauldian discourse analysis. As the purpose of this study is to gain better insights into how learning is perceived and experienced in start-ups, the findings present the identified themes which were apparent within the data between workers and management participants. This research was intended to answer the following research questions:

What are the perceptions and experiences of workplace learning amongst workers and management in Swedish start-ups?

How do power differences between workers and management influence workplace learning?

Following the thematic analysis method created by Gioia et al. (2012), the following figure shows the four aggregate dimensions, their 2nd-Order themes, and, in the first column, the number of codes at each level between worker (W) and management (M). The sheer number of codes makes it impossible to show the content of each code in the figure. How the conceptions differ between managers and workers will be expanded on in the following text.

5.1 Aggregate dimensions and 2nd order themes

Table 2. Coding Process

No. of codes	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimension
M 26 W 31	Self-directed autonomous learning (57 Codes)	Individual Learning Agency
M 37 W 13	Learn-by-doing (50 codes)	
M 31 W 7	Learning From Failure (38 codes)	
M 11 W 10	Reflective Practice (21 codes)	
M 28 W 24	Role Breadth and knowledge gaps (52 codes)	Organisational Learning Environment
M 17 W 18	Start-up Context Enabling Learning (35 codes)	
M 19 W 14	Formal Education and Structured Programs (33 codes)	
M 17 W 7	Reactive-Task Driven Learning (24 codes)	
M 50 W 19	Team Learning Culture and Interpersonal Dynamics (69 codes)	Social and Technological Learning Resources
M 9 W 11	Social and Networked Learning (20 codes)	
M 7 W 5	AI-Mediated Learning (12 codes)	
M 52 W 17	Work-Life Integration and Wellbeing (69 codes)	Identity, Tension and Wellbeing
M 46 W 10	Entrepreneurial Identity and Values (56 codes)	
M 1 W 21	Learning-Delivery and Tension (22 codes)	
M 0 W 2	Prioritization of Learning (2 codes)	

5.1.1 Individual Learning Agency

Individual learning agency as an aggregate dimension is defined by the sub-themes self-directed autonomous learning, learning by doing, reflective practice and learning from failure. Within the coding process, the participants from the management side had significantly more codes within *learning by doing*, *learning from failure*, whereas workers had an increased number of *self-*

directed autonomous learning, and both had a similar quantity for *reflective practice*. Given the unique nature of start-up's, individual learning is an important part of working in a start-up, where roles are more loosely defined and tasks are more broadly distributed.

5.1.1.1 Self-Directed Autonomous Learning

Participants in this study framed the personal responsibility of learning and development as an employee as a choice and culture, where it was common that they claimed responsibility, regardless of position or authority. The management within the paper also tended to emphasize that taking this responsibility is self-evident and empowering within a start-up. This is commonly derived from two major motivations, one being the passion a co-founder or someone with more responsibility may have within the start-up, and the other motivator being the obligations a person working in the start-up may feel towards the other members in the team.

"We are all responsible for our own learning. The only thing we're responsible for toward each other is putting in our best effort and setting a good example, but when it comes to actual learning, that's something we're each responsible for on our own."

Some of the management took on tasks that were new and required a significant amount of problem solving in a very isolated manner as well. "I just told my co-founder, leave me alone for three, five days. Let me sit in front of my laptop and try it. I'll come back once I have some answer."

On the other hand, for the participants in the workers section, the perceived individual responsibility towards learning was more commonly defined as a necessity, something that needs to happen while working in a start-up. One participant described their experience as more of a requirement, especially when needed. "I am the company's cloud resource, if you will. So it is a lot on me to figure it out in one way or another. The company doesn't pay me to go somewhere and learn officially." Another employee also noted that learning within a start-up requires more than just responsibility, but intrinsic motivation to make sense of the information one is taking on as a worker.

"I can get the information and pass the exam, deliver the thing (skill), but I won't have learned anything. Or I could take extra time to actually understand what I'm doing. There are a lot of people who can do jobs, but don't really understand what it is they're doing." Therefore, while both management and workers deemed that self-directed learning is important and that one is

responsible for their own development and learning, the motivation behind why it occurs and the intrinsic motivators differ. Management feels a strong obligation towards their team and the passion to succeed through improvement, whereas the workers instead feel that it is just necessary in order to complete their jobs.

5.1.1.2 Learning-by-Doing

Learning by doing represents a common practice in start-ups where they tend to take on challenges and new ideas by trial and error, even when holding little to no experience or knowledge within the decision they had just taken.

Instead, choosing to learn on the fly or just before attempting a task was common, but more prevalent through the interviews with participants holding a management position. “I’m not proud of it, but I’d just throw myself into it.” Within discussions, it was found that management positions discussed learning by doing more commonly as they took on more undefined roles and tasks within the company. Simultaneously, these consequences act more as learning experiences rather than controversial moments. “We’ve published new updates of the app without trying them, and just said ‘Oh no, we accidentally published something that breaks the entire app.’” While in a more established company who values things such as reputation, both internally and externally, a moment like this may be different to the mild reaction described by the participant in their case. Another participant in the management section also established this trait as desirable, even when they could not fully adopt it themselves. “I wish I was just a bit more like, yeah screw it, lets try it and see what happens rather than: wait, before we do this, let's look into all of this” Therefore, trial and error is not only established as a normal practice, but seen as a desirable mentality to have when it comes to learning and trying things with the business.

On the other hand, workers had a tendency for first-hand learning to occur more by accident rather than intentionally. Many participants eventually contributed to the company in places they felt out of place from the beginning, with their roles changing greatly over time. “I couldn’t really program, I was just familiar with the basics. But with the start-up over these last three years, I’ve become a very competent front-end developer.” The same applied for another participant, whose understanding of his role and what he would be required and asked to do changed greatly. “You don’t really know what's needed before you try a bunch of stuff. We thought it was needed for us

to be more businessy and do pitch decks, which we now in hindsight shouldn't have spent time on."

It was quite evident through the analysis that management was able to discuss and establish trial and error not only as an established method of learning, but as a desirable trait and method. On the other hand, workers rather described the learning by doing as gradual, which occurs overtime through working and correcting prior assumptions in regard to their current situations and understanding of what working in a start-up would be like for them.

5.1.1.3 Learning from Failure

This section represents how individual learning occurs following the mistakes, and how participants perceive mistakes within their company. Management discussed this section more thoroughly than the workers, yet both had similarities and differences across their statements.

From the management perspective, failure seemed to be normalised and generally accepted within the companies. Especially so that the participants generally agreed that many mistakes go unnoticed and all applied a no-blame culture. "I can't think of any cases of blame game within the company, not at the top of my mind at least." When considering the responsibility management has in such volatile conditions as well, one did admit that frustration amongst the teams occurs. "I won't lie, we do judge each other a little bit when mess ups happen - because it's your baby (the company)." However, when some more serious mistakes occur, management did seem to reflect on it quite seriously. "I'm going to be vastly more rigorous in the future, no matter how smooth the sales pitch is."

Management does seem to be quite accepting of failure, and showed that the consequences of mistakes were learning opportunities more than they were moments to dwell on. Even when frustration occurs, all the participants circled back on the fact that focusing on fixing errors and understanding what happens trumps pointing fingers. The worker participants focused more on the stakes involved, yet also experienced failure as normal and also took upon a solution focused approach. "We fail all the time, so it's just something you don't even think about anymore." However, workers still found that they did not appreciate mistakes the way management did, and found that mistakes were preferably affordable. "The planned space for errors is usually small, almost always too small."

Thus, both management and workers were able to accept failure and deal with the consequences in a productive manner, yet workers had a tendency to be much more cautious and would actively avoid it compared to those in responsibility for the company.

5.1.1.4 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice supports the idea that individual learning does not only occur from trying new things, but processing and understanding the actual events that occur. Reflection was not only noted to be important amongst the participants, but varied heavily in how they perceived what reflection is for them and how to do it. One participant noted it was challenging to consider reflection and conduct it given the nature of their work they do.

"It's really hard to, in the middle of everything on a day to day basis, have that sort of reflective mindset. We all agreed it would be good to have monthly check-ins, a bit longer, more focused on the long term and bigger picture."

Therefore, while not adopting reflection into the daily routines as an individual worker, this participant managed to initiate reflections as an organisational activity. Participants working in management also commonly referred to breaking free from their physical workplaces, as those often kept them within a hands-on working mindset rather than considering the bigger picture. "Those weekends where you don't focus at all on day-to-day tasks, but try to see: where do we want to be in five months? It doesn't need to be that long, just lift us above where we are." The same went for another participant, who referred to a company trip when explaining a moment of dedicated reflection. "We had one workshop at (a colleague's) summer house in the archipelago."

However, workers framed reflection more personally and self-initiated. Oftentimes, it was tied to career milestones or uncertainty rather than scheduled team structures. "Working in start-ups can be quite a risk, but I can confidently say, after having reflected many times - I've learned an immense amount and grown immensely from this." Another participant mentioned their personal career development. "I've reflected on my knowledge writing my CV and realized I've come a long way since three years ago when we (company) started."

Ultimately, both management and workers shared the same feeling of reflecting when away from work rather than during. "My way of reflecting is finding time where I completely disconnect from work." This also speaks to the unique nature of start-up work, where work is much more constant and uncertain to that of established companies, many participants found it challenging to

completely disconnect from work, and realized that "getting away" worked the best for putting themselves in a mindset that they can be critical of how themselves or their career is doing. Realizing this for conducting individual learning is important when it comes to achieving a working routine for developing, not just within the company but within the role itself.

5.1.2 Organisational Learning Environment

Organisational learning environment as an aggregate dimension represents the structural conditions that shape how and when learning occurs. The themes that built up this dimension are: *role breadth and knowledge gaps, start-up context as a learning enabler, reactive task driven learning* and *formal education and structured programs.*

5.1.2.1 Role breadth and knowledge gaps

Throughout the interviews, it was apparent that start-ups include many forms of new tasks and responsibilities. These tasks that must be done are not always anticipated or expected by the management or workers until they must address something. Therefore, it was common that all of the participants took on unexpected tasks, regardless of their experience working with such items prior. It was common however that management took on the most broad assortment of tasks. "I'm a really horizontal learner, I try to learn a little about a lot, but if I see the need to dig into different verticals, I enjoy that too." The participants in the management section also seemed to claim a sense of leadership when it comes to being "first responders" to new situations as well. "Throughout the company, I've tried to fill in different knowledge gaps in where we have capacity, while still leading the overall direction." Furthermore, as start-ups can be very small, creating a defined role is not necessarily easy or possible, according to a participant. "My role is very hard to specify, because we're only two people in the company."

On the other hand, for the workers being employees hired by start-ups, their roles were more established when onboarded into the company, yet have changed significantly overtime as their knowledge and skills grew.

"When I started, it was getting specifications and just developing that. Now I am more the one planning and creating the specifications as well, much more a part of deciding which direction we go in." Another participant had a similar experience as well. "I've had a larger role than I really could manage at the start, but I've grown into it."

And this is not only because the employee changes as a worker, but the start-up company changes and develops overtime as well. One of the participants had mentioned the flexibility of their role. “I assembled probably 200 plus devices. I was basically a one-person assembly line. Now I’m developing firmware from bare metal, when I came in, the firmware already existed.” While this is a bit of an extreme case, it was not uncommon across most participants to admit they do almost anything in their work, and are not limited by the roles they are initially established in, regardless between management or workers. However, it does seem to be the case that the roles of the worker changes overtime as a result of developing as an employee, while management instead rather fills the gaps in areas that the company may be missing.

5.1.2.2 Start-up context as a learning enabler

As discussed in the literature review and introduction, the unique nature of start-ups in contrast to established companies create conditions that affect how learning occur. While this research represents the broader understanding of how learning is perceived by workers within start-ups, this section considers the established differences noticed between working in older companies and their current situation in a start-up.

The participants in management tended to reference informality as a feature that grants greater access to opportunities for learning and development. This informality would not necessarily exist within an older company as rules, policies, departments and role descriptions all may hinder what an employee can try and is capable of. “Within larger organisations, there are so many structures in place and a lot of red tape. In a start-up, we just need to get things done, there are no rules so to say.” This freedom not only affected how management is able to try different things, but how they approach it too. One participant commented on the spontaneous nature of learning in their role. “We just went all over the internet and found some guy on Reddit saying it works. We did that and we figured it out along the way. There are not restrictions to what we can do.” A participant in management compared their role in the start-up to their previous experience in a larger company. “In bigger companies, you make one decision and it only affects one thing. Here, you make one decision, and it affects something else over there. It’s like spiderman, with great freedom comes great responsibility.” Thus, the participants in management found that the freedom working with start-ups allowed for much more creative approaches to solving issues, however, can also create issues if not careful.

The workers also saw this form of freedom in start-ups in a positive light yet required more self-motivation to take advantage of taking on learning opportunities.

"At a large business, I would be more afraid to push code that might ruin their system. Here I realised it can't really go that bad, we didn't even have a product on the market. So, it's been a great place for me to learn."

One participant admitted that overtime they were able to improve their personal situation in the company when discussing how to address tasks and demands being put on them. "Start-ups impose a lot of stuff on you, but you also need to get comfortable imposing back on them your requirements. If you can balance that, you're in a really symbiotic relationship." This aligned with another participant's perspective, who had discussed how they viewed their role when it came to developing and learning new skills relevant to their job and requirements. "Most of the time I spend learning is paid time. I see that as part of my job and my work progress""

Overall, both management and workers see the start-up context as enabling when considering learning, yet while management tends to revolve around the fact that lessened bureaucracy helps in creating opportunities, workers advocate for the fact that capitalising on opportunities while in a start-up context is required in order to genuinely learn and develop professionally.

5.1.2.3 Reactive task driven learning

Reactive task driven learning refers to learning on what is required at the current moment rather than planning or anticipating future needs within the workforce. All participants agreed around the notion that in the nature of start-ups, most task-driven learning is reactive, however, management and workers differ between their perceived realities of the tasks.

Management considered a more holistic picture, and referred to the tasks usually outpacing the capacity of the company itself. "There are more tasks available than we can manage as a team, so yeah, more reactive definitely." Especially when adapting to the industry itself, participants in management found that adapting to the industry is a challenge for the start-ups they were working in. "Whenever you go into a startup, you have to learn a whole new industry from scratch. Learning the furniture industry and the sustainability aspect of it was definitely huge."

While management focuses on adapting to the industry they are competing in and establishing the company as a competitor, the workers rather found that the reactive task driven

learning occurred more in the different projects they took on. “Every new project usually involves some new thing, a new type of data or a piece of cloud infrastructure I haven’t worked with before.” In comparison, workers describe the pattern of task-driven learning more within the projects and specifics of the work itself, whereas management tends to refer to the greater picture when it comes to developing organisation-wide.

5.1.2.4 Formal education and structured programs

When discussing formal education opportunities and experiences during the interviews, it represented an angle of learning which is often overlooked across the start-up companies. The management identified formal education more in their degrees from higher educations, which influenced the type of work and directions they took that led them to what they are doing currently. “The reason I went into computer science courses was that my part-time job was technical and there were things I didn’t have the competences to do.” Another participant also referenced how university influenced his ability to learn. “I haven’t used more than 2% of it (my education) in my daily work. But academics gave us the tools to learn, it trains your brain to learn things more efficiently and teaches you things about yourself.”

The workers found that formal education and opportunities were more within their jobs. One referenced a learning tool offered by one of their distributors, Amazon. “Amazon has a start-up program we’ve been involved with previously… You usually get a contact at Amazon who can help you learn more.” Another participant also referenced an incubator program their company takes part in. “We applied to (university) Innovation Launch… They’ve offered weekly workshops on anything related to a start-up. Funding, business administration, sales, marketing.”

When considering both sides between management and workers, the workers refers and discusses formal education as learning opportunities tied very closely with improving their ability to perform at the company. On the other hand, management instead focuses greatly on improving performance as a worker in general, considering formal education as a chance to step away from the company to learn a new skill in a more general sense. Overall, the organisational learning environment is experienced differently depending on role. Management largely shapes and owns the environment in which it operates in, including the constraints, demands, roles and formalities. Whereas workers have to navigate the environment, finding both genuine opportunities and

working within structural gaps, particularly around formal learning support and the flexibility of their roles.

5.1.3 Social and Technological Learning Resources

Throughout the interviews, the relational and technological channels were one of the most common forms of learning when the participants explored how they approached problems that required insight, new information or skills.

5.1.3.1 Social and Networked Learning

2nd-order theme refers to the networks both personal and professionally used amongst the participants as resources for addressing knowledge gaps. On the management side, networking commonly was used for addressing short and challenging situations. A participant that required help with filing a patent had reached out to a personal friend of his. “When I had questions I just asked him. He pointed me to which ones to use.”

Workers utilized internal networked learning towards larger development paths instead. One participant spent over a year developing a skill learning from a colleague. “For the first year and a half we were pair programming a lot. He has a longer background in programming.” However this access is not always consistent for every worker. Another participant described how in their situation, they had less access to mentorship when they started.

“I would say the access to help. It's there, but they're not going to really baby you. That was one of the big things actually, when I came on, they were like, yeah. we don't really have the time to be like taking you through and like, you know, growing you from grassroots and everything with the company. You're just going to have to figure some things out by yourself, which it didn't help that I was like self-driven, ambitious, young talents with my CV.”

Therefore, when there is the opportunity and time, workers tend to capitalize on access to mentorship and appreciate it, yet it is not always consistent that this type of resource will be available, especially for long term development.

5.1.3.2 Team Learning Culture and Interpersonal Dynamics

Team learning culture and interpersonal dynamics represent how the internal relationships create the conditions for how learning and development from a personal and company perspective occurs.

The participants in management mainly discussed that they share a responsibility to contribute to an environment that is open for learning to make things productive, but also as an obligation to each other. “I feel responsible to ensure we have a shared vision and to get a good example, I think we all want to be our best selves for the company, to inspire each other.” The workers on the other hand addressed team culture as being collectively shaped by ambition rather than influenced purely by management. In this sense, learning became a natural consequence of trying to succeed as a start-up.

“I think it comes as a result of our ambition to bring the business forward. We’re a small team, there will be areas none of us have experience with, but we have the mindset that we can just learn and do it.”

Therefore while management is actively trying to construct a learning environment, the initiative and pressure to learn for workers originates from the ambition a company culture puts forward instead.

5.1.3.3 AI-Mediated Learning

Artificial intelligence (AI) was mentioned often during the interviews, especially when discussing approaching and learning a new skill. Almost every participant referred to AI as a way to learn something new. One participant in management described his process of trying something new. “My entry point is probably to sit down with Claude. For example, setting up Google Ads, first thing I’d do is ask Claude to research the most crucial aspects. From that I know what the next step should be.”

For the workers' side of things, the participants found that AI was able to help them with achieving complex tasks faster, especially for those that worked with programming, but did not assist as much in learning an in-depth process of how some systems work.

“Since the start of this year we’ve started using AI assistance a lot more. It has basically replaced a more senior developer in our team. Instead of asking (a colleague) and taking up his time, I ask the AI agent instead. But I still think it’s a bit boring not to learn as much”

5.1.4 Identity, Tension and Wellbeing

This final dimension of the report involves the more personal and intimate stakes of learning within a start-up. Within the different 2nd-order themes of the text, the managers primarily focused on

topics within the first two themes, being identity, values and wellbeing, whereas workers prioritized learning-delivery tensions. The final theme, prioritization of learning was exclusive to the workers, with only two codes, is not discussed given its lack of depth compared to the rest of the themes. However, prioritization of learning reflects the pressure workers feel compared to management for reaching goals and maintaining productivity.

"So the point, in my opinion, I feel like for a startup, the biggest value is in what you can learn, what you can pick up. Just dig in there and get all the information. And like, as long as you're getting your tasks done as well."

While not consistently present amongst all interviews, it does reflect a hidden tension that workers feel over management, being that learning for them is conditional with fulfilling their tasks. Even when constantly taking on new ideas, projects and initiatives within the company, their most important prioritization is to perform in their role, rather than to develop as a worker.

5.1.4.1 Entrepreneurial Identity and Values

Entrepreneurial identity and values were present amongst both workers and management to explore how both sides take initiative. Those working in management described learning within their positions as mandatory, framing learning as more a natural trait rather than a skill one acquires. One participant went as far as to even describe how it is reflected in the organisational values. "Our idea is that we believe that life needs balance, very much included in gaming as well." Most of the participants in management connected learning very closely to their personal values as well. "I knew I would probably never get really rich because of my moral compass. I grew up with Spiderman." Lastly, a participant in management described the ability to learn as an existential requirement for success as a start-up. "If you have a hard time learning or you're not willing to learn, you're not going to get far, it's basically game over."

Meanwhile, the workers framed learning more as an insurance against their start-ups failing. "Most start-ups don't succeed. But you don't want it to be wasted time, you need to use all the learning to become more valuable for the next project." This style of thinking that workers find on learning in start-ups are transactional. If they are going to work in an organisation with a heightened risk of failing, they see these opportunities of learning as career progression should they find themselves in a situation where they lose their employment. Another worker spoke to their work as a reflection of their identity as well. "I view the work I do at my start-up as an

extension of myself, of my own person." In this sense, management ties their identity to the company's existence, whereas workers tie identity and learning within a start-up as an investment and reflection of their career.

5.1.4.2 Work-Life Integration and Wellbeing

Work-life integration and wellbeing is interesting especially given that all workers are operating in different industries and contexts. Some of the common patterns discovered when discussing well-being and the boundaries created or set between work and private life for the participants.

Management often openly discussed the physical and psychological toll that they took on managing their start-ups. One discussed how he relied on exercise to be able to cope with his situation. "It takes a toll physically. That's why I work out more now, way way more. It's the only time I actually take care of myself." Another participant highlighted how gaming also helps him disconnect from the worries that his start-up creates. "My last hour before bed, I game, all the worries are gone." It was evident that most of the management participants did not explicitly set boundaries between their work and private life, yet instead utilized other hobbies and activities to instead distract them from their worries and stress factors.

Workers rather admitted how they at times felt encroached between their jobs and lives. Given many worked office jobs, they described working at home often, and how they mentally are at work even when technically not at the workplace. "My home is my (second) office. You wake up in the morning and your brain suddenly has a solution to something you were thinking about the night before." One worker even discussed the embarrassment they held working during the stereotypical "off" hours. "Early on I was almost too embarrassed to report it as work time" Overall, when discussing the personal boundaries workers have between the workplace and home, they showed a tendency to discuss the challenges and ambitions they possessed when working in a start-up. Clocking in hours outside of regular time that you *shouldn't* be working to the point you are embarrassed and coming up with ideas or solutions after waking up is not necessarily expected of a regular employee at any job. A participant explained his personal trade-offs of the challenging yet rewarding work-life conditions of their work in a start-up as a sacrifice. "We're sacrificing our careers for this, we would have other opportunities if we chose a full-time position elsewhere." While there are challenging boundaries that are often not properly set for workers, either by management direction or personal initiative, many workers described that the conditions for

working in a start-up are hard, yet at the same time are driven by an ambition that supersedes setting boundaries. By seeing these conditions as a trade-off, or “sacrifice”, workers allow themselves to break rules such as working off hours or getting mentally caught up in ideas and solutions when not at work.

This shows that both management and workers experience some form of pressure when working yet handle their wellbeing in completely different manners. Management relies on hobbies and ways to disconnect from work to relieve stress, whereas workers instead simply erode their boundaries to fulfil tasks and perform well. This contrast shows the tempo management can set on their own terms, resulting in a pace that workers must maintain.

5.1.4.3 Learning-Delivery Tension

Learning delivery tension is one of the largest gaps in the entire coded dataset, with only a single code from management and 21 codes from the workers. This sub-theme primarily revolves around how learning in itself must result in delivery from the workers, and how AI has affected not only learning but also delivery.

As artificial intelligence (AI) has been so prevalent in the coming years with enabling organisations to achieve what was once complex tasks rather easily, a management participant discussed how dependent his organisation had become on using it.

“Its a little scary because we’re trusting so much to AI. It’s telling me: okay, I added this code, and I don't understand what this means, but it works so flawlessly.”

Yet this perception by workers is so vividly different when discussing using AI in their workspaces. While it varied and some appreciated how much it allowed them to achieve, some also discussed how it has degraded their learning opportunities. “I haven’t really learned that much from it. It’s like reading how someone else solved a math problem, you get it, but you wouldn’t understand it the same way.” Another participant also contributed a similar notion. “We took a decision to use more AI to speed up development. But for me individually, it’s not as fun, you don’t really learn that much from it.” However, as workers may feel pressure from management at times to deliver, avoiding AI entirely is quite challenging, given the circumstances of needing to deliver. One participant discussed how he must stay consistently productive, even when hitting obstacles. “Management can get annoyed when things are standing still, it’s always good to have a foundation for why you’re doing things.” Yet as described prior, if workers feel as if they do not

understand the work they are doing to the best extent, it brings to question the effectiveness of both learning and achieving. This pressure is also felt when discussing reaching out to management when not understanding what to do or how to complete certain tasks. “There are basic things I’m afraid to ask my boss, it’s like, why did I hire this person? So I have to figure it out myself.” While the need to learn across the interviews has clearly been established as a requirement, the ability to choose between trade-offs of development by taking on a problem or using shortcuts such as AI cause the worker to choose delivery before learning. Yet, while workers have shown a disdain for artificial intelligence for developing as a worker, the consequences from management for both lacking knowledge or taking on a more in-depth approach pressures workers to utilize methods that undermine their ability to learn.

This highlights how the tension between learning and delivery is not a personal preference or matter of time management, but a structural condition shaped by the tools management acknowledges and the pace they set. While the expectations are explicitly communicated or not, artificial intelligence and other tools set forth by management must be adopted by workers, lessening their ability to tackle challenges and tasks by understanding them first.

5.1.5 Summary of Aggregate Dimension

The four aggregate dimensions presented in this chapter collectively reveal how workplace learning is perceived across management and worker levels. **Individual learning agency** reflects how both groups, management and workers all admit to their own responsibility to learn and develop in their careers, yet while management frames it more as a choice and culture organisation-wide, workers experience it as a structural necessity. **Organisational learning environment** shows that management oversees and shapes the environment, shaping informality and spontaneity as a positive freedom, whereas workers must navigate this environment instead, often facing gaps in formal support. **Social and technological learning resources** explain how management has adopted artificial intelligence and team structures confidently, whereas workers rely heavily on mentorship and express genuine mixed feelings on the impact artificial intelligence has. Lastly, **Identity, tension and wellbeing** show how management ties learning more to their personal identity and manages their wellbeing actively, whereas workers must absorb the pressure put on them through the learning delivery-tensions, simultaneously eroding work-life boundaries to maintain their ambition and effectiveness as a worker. Ultimately, while both groups broadly value

learning and share a positive orientation toward the start-up context, the findings consistently show that the conditions which create and produce workplace learning differ significantly by role and authority, a pattern more critically examined in the following section.

5.2 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

The following chapter applies Foucauldian discourse analysis as a critical perspective to the thematic findings presented in chapter 4, before connecting these findings to existing literature in section 5.2. The FDA (Foucauldian Discourse Analysis) re-examines the findings through the four analytical concepts from Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017).

5.2.1 Learning as a Condition or a Benefit

Who holds the authority to define learning culture, and how is that authority exercised? Management defines the meaning of learning through language: such as framing the absence of structure as a freedom rather than disorganisation, normalising the informality between both groups, yet only management benefits from it unconditionally. As management sets the pace within the organisation, such as driving ambition, deadlines and access to resources, the workers must absorb the eventual consequences, which has only been named by management as a tension throughout the interviews. Learning loses its value when not creating a delivery of results: “Management can get annoyed when things are standing still.” Furthermore, not a single management participant raised a level of consideration for the workers having sufficient learning support. That silence and lack of regard could suggest a discourse of self-direction among the workers responsible for a workforce greater than their individual selves. Simultaneously, when management discusses overall ambition within the company, they tend to refer organisation-wide, even for personal opinions. One management participant discussed how they avoid taking days off and prefer to work overtime. “I feel so bad taking days off. It sounds maybe a little unhealthy, but I feel like we enjoy it.” The use of the term “we” emphasises the notion that management is ultimately responsible for the workplace environment among all the staff, and normalizes hard work and harder than average working conditions on the entire organisation. This reflects how workers have to accommodate for this work environment, rather than help shape and control it. A worker discussed how they were able to choose when they wanted to work. “The hours are flexible, as long as I'm able to deliver. What matters more is the job being done” While no workers generally

reflected feeling forced to work overtime, there was very little discussion amongst workers of their freedom for when and how they work specifically. Of the few that discussed their independence, it is not experienced uniformly, and often as a condition rather than a benefit.

5.2.2 Non-symmetrical subject positions towards learning

Subject positions, as discussed in the methodology, explores how subjects position themselves in regards to their role in the company from an authority standpoint. More specifically to this study, this topic refers to how subjects explain their position as a learner within the organisation. Management showed tendencies to embed the concept of learning in frames of identity and vision, referring culturally to the greater organisation rather than establishing themselves as learners explicitly. “If you’re not willing to learn, it’s basically game over”, establishing learning as a trait rather than a personal development need. Another discussed how they feel responsible for the entire company in terms of direction for workforce development. “I feel responsible to ensure we have a shared vision. We all want to be our best selves for the company, to inspire each other." Management often positioned themselves as responsible, vision setters across the interviews.

The workers rather described their position as a learner explicitly, “(My colleague) has been a great mentor, I went from scratch to now being an intermediate level.” This was focused more inward, towards their career and their capability when discussing what they have learnt and their abilities. However, another worker instead felt uncomfortable asking for help. “There are basic things I’m afraid to ask my boss, its like ‘Why did I hire her?’” As relationships between the worker and the company can vary greatly, more junior workers who feel the relationship is more transactional may avoid learning or publicly admitting needing help. Not only are they constrained to consult their superiors for help, they are constrained by the power dynamic of the fact that their employers control their own career, to the extent that they must deliver and meet demands put on them. This transactional feeling was very common, and often resulted in workers reflecting on their positions in the perspective of their entire career rather than within their organisation. “I’ve learned an immense amount and grown immensely from this opportunity that I don’t think I would have had I made other choices.” This reflects how as a worker, the participant focused purely on their individual self and capabilities rather than as an individual who impacts a greater system and culture.

Evidently enough, the subject positioning between workers and management were not symmetrical. Positioning oneself as a visionary who identifies learning more as a trait and identity in contrast to explicitly discussing learning as an experience and a power dynamic that needs to be navigated suggests a gap between both. Management never positioned themselves as a worker that needs support from colleagues, but rather as drivers behind an organisational culture and identity. On the other hand, workers discussed the challenges of learning and hiding their flaws.

5.2.3 Technologically oriented organisational pressure

The use of technology to both control and enable the workforce of start-ups creates tensions in both directions. Technology allows for employees to work from home, where management uses weekly, monthly and annual meetings at different scales to check in and assess development of the product rather than specifically the employee. On this note, the use of these meetings initiated by management shows how management typically controls structure, and its orientation of product direction rather than purely employee management. This type of structure focused more on ensuring that the product and work is being done legitimates certain notions for employees, such as completing tasks and improving the company, yet silences others as well, such as reviews targeted towards well-being and competence development.

One of the workers referred to the awkwardness of working from home, especially conducting work during off-hours. “You feel like you want to be this better developer. But you don’t want to admit you’re spending your whole life on it.” Artificial intelligence was also seen to be something that the management participants described as enabling when tackling unfamiliar areas confidently. Whereas, workers felt as if their learning capabilities were diminished by artificial intelligence. “I would rather actually learn what it is I’m trying to know.” When actually comparing the use of AI between both the management and workers, it fulfills completely opposite functions depending on who is using it. For management, its a tool for entering unknown territory and achieving something they otherwise couldn’t do either easily or at all. For workers, it's a form of adapting to delivery pressure while privately monitoring something they are losing genuine understanding in by taking on an otherwise more thorough approach without AI. One addressed their personal perspective on AI. “We took a decision to use more AI to speed up development. But for me individually, it’s not as fun, you don’t really learn that much from it.” This participant

was adapting to an organisation decision they didn't fully endorse, to meet delivery expectations within the company.

Overall, the broader power argument points back to how the individual choice of how much to work, whether to use AI, is shaped by conditions the management sets. In each case, the regulation for individual development vs worker delivery appears somewhat voluntary, but is organisationally produced.

5.2.4 Self-directed learning as implicit governance

What gets rendered as a problem, by who and what does the silence reveal?

Management problematized the absence of reflection as an attention and organisational issue, with their operational focus often preventing them from taking time to address more long term thinking. "On a day-to-day basis, you don't have the time, or feel like you have the time, to discuss the more long-term things. Everyone builds different thoughts about their vision for the company as you go but you never really discuss them." However, the solution, being check-ins with each other and especially workers, is often in addressing the management's own need in managing the state of the company and development, rather than the co-creation of values and a shared vision. However, some participants did discuss annual meetings with all the employees within a company, which often took on larger more holistic conversations. Yet this was not uniform across all organisations. Thus, the solution remains within control of management rather than collectively.

On the other hand, workers participants described their problems, especially with reflections and learning in a different light. One worker experienced fear and discomfort when wanting to ask certain questions based on previous experiences. "My higher up tells me their feedback on my work in the meeting, in front of everybody. I don't know if I'm just sensitive, but I'm like, you could have told me that separately." This sensitivity was felt among another participant as well. One worker discussed their knowledge gaps as a problem considering their management's awareness of it. "They don't know the knowledge gaps that I have. And that is not very good because I should be more open about my weaknesses." Another participant realized that the AI trade-off doesn't really pay off when it comes to absorbing information with the involvement of AI. "It doesn't really get stuck with you." Lastly, time pressure as a constraint was very common

across different interviews for workers. “It’s not uncommon for us to go over the planned space for errors, and that makes things stressful and short on time.” One worker even went as far to show how they had to learn entirely new concepts to even begin a project he was expected to complete. “I don’t know too much about this, so I’m going to need two weeks to sit down and do a proof of concept.” This worker was essentially actively negotiating their own learning time upfront, implying it isn’t automatically given.

Ultimately, the near absence of learning-delivery tension in the management data is the most analytically significant finding. Not because the participants in management are significantly better than workers, just that they set deadlines and a pace with tools that the workers then must adapt to. Simultaneously, when workers describe taking on short tasks, working within such short time frames makes it increasingly challenging to absorb and reflect effectively on any new information, especially with the adoption of artificial intelligence into the different projects. Yet, neither side deliberately stated this as an issue or something they wished to be changed in their work life. Moreso, they do not find it to be an issue, rather that it is just a present imbalance and the nature of start-up work. That silence suggests that management takes self-directed learning as a given, an unspoken assumption that workers will figure it out.

6. Discussion

This section discusses the connections with the analysed data together with the literature presented in the literature review.

The divide between management and worker in this study connects rather well to the contradicting studies found between Narang et al. (2025) and Paoprasert et al. (2025). Management's learning according to the findings was found to be more intrinsically motivated, opposite to the external pressures felt by the workers. Therefore, both arguments are true simultaneously, just experienced at different levels. While learning between management and workers exists as a choice vs necessity, Van den Broeck's (2024) paper argued that genuine self-regulation existed as one of the most effective lifelong learning competencies. However, that requires the space to diagnose one's own needs, which delivery pressure in start-ups actively removes for workers.

Start-ups often appear expansive on the surface, cross-boundary roles, freedom and new tasks (Narang et al., 2025). Yet according to an important factor in learning, being reflection, workers must have planned reflection time and formal learning support to develop competence within a career (Tynjälä, 2008). As shown in the findings section, there was limited support, whether internally or externally, suggesting that the learning that occurs is limited to the task demands itself. However, the roles between workers did vary, with new opportunities often present to many workers. From the perspective of Fuller & Unwin (2003), the data shows start-ups as unique in the sense that they have expansive properties, such as cross-boundary roles, yet restrictive conditions, such as the lack of time and pressures to use AI.

From the perspective of Billett's (2004) arguments on workplace learning, the duality of workplace affordances and participation explains the central divide between management and workers consistent throughout the entire findings. While both groups did evidently value learning in their work, the difference lies in the affordances that start-up workplaces *can* afford. While management occupies both roles at once, being that they not only work around the affordances (time pressures, stress…) but also create the affordances (AI pressure, pace, culture). As they decide their learning on their own terms, it suggests why they consider it closer to their identity, in contrast to workers who see learning as a necessity to survive and achieve tasks within a start-up. Workers on the other hand can only elect, resist or negotiate what is afforded for them, and the findings consistently showed that the worker's negotiation power was relatively weak. With

instances where workers were hesitant when asking for help but also normalized imbalances in their work with how artificial intelligence had affected their development and opportunities to learning. This reinforces Billett's (2004) argument that participation is regulated by seniority and workplace interests. As Billett (2004) claims that individual participation for workplace learning is regulated by these factors, such as seniority, workplace interests, newcomers vs oldcomers, it does not signify exactly how it is regulated. The FDA study conducted helps shed light on this regulation, as the power dynamics and differences have meaningful impacts on how workplace learning is affected by seniority and authority amongst the two levels of authority

The lack of reflection time, or more so the space to create reflection time within working roles also fell short amongst the worker participants. Heslin et al.'s (2020) three-step learning mode, action, reflection, cause and effect was present for managers to some extent, but can be argued is interrupted for workers given the pressure to ensure their delivery on tasks. Not only could it be argued to incorporate reflection to improve learning, but by understanding who schedules it determines who gets to develop as a worker within their role, regardless of being within management or not.

Management, or more specifically the CEO's attitude, can also have significant impacts on how learning is perceived and carried out within a start-up (Narang et al., 2025). The FDA analysis not only helped strengthen this argument but gives further insight into how management shapes learning culture through not only direct instruction, but through language, pace and tooling decisions. While these decisions and thinking are usually done by management towards development of the organisation, the analysis did touch on the fact that employees and their needs were overlooked. However, given the limited resources of a start-up, it can be common that meeting these demands fall short, as discussed in the literature review. Aldrich and Langton (1997) argued this, being that meeting certain financial and commercial goals is often almost always prioritized over the needs of its labour force.

Olan et al.'s (2023) argument towards the fact that digital start-ups are the least equipped for the learning demands they face the most was also mostly confirmed within this data. As AI adoption creates an appearance of competence for improving the delivery of certain technological services, it contributes to deepening the skill-gap as workers do not feel as if they can learn and interact with the skills needed for their tasks anymore. This was felt almost entirely by workers and barely acknowledged by management. The issue of workers losing critical learning

experiences by using AI instead of learning how to complete some tasks was taken for granted by workers, rather than establishing pushback or negotiating a better system. This can be understood as a mechanism, being that the more use of AI, the better the delivery, yet the less the learning that will occur according to the participants. In the perspective of Billett (2004), artificial intelligence impacted the workplace as creating an affordance in the workplace, being productivity, but undermined learning. As the workers clearly resisted AI for increasing learning regardless that their productivity increased according to management, is an extension of Billett's (2004) claim that workers are forced to engage with an affordance without genuine election behind the idea, which can create a tension between management and workers.

Lastly, workers and management sought out different external programs for support as all the organisations had little to no formal support functions within the company, making Boström's (2017) argument concrete in the sense that there is little support of lifelong learning outside of formal institutional programs. This gap is not only structural but is further produced by internal power dynamics in some instances, where workers in this study felt a risk involved when asking for learning support.

Therefore, regarding the research questions, the perceptions of workplace learning in Swedish start-ups differ not because management and workers have different values, but because the workplace affordances in contrast to individual participation of start-up work produce and sustain these differences invisibly. The FDA helped shed light on this invisibility, by granting a more in-depth understanding on how differences between management and workers affect the individual participation of workplace learning within start-ups. This has implications for how lifelong learning policy, start-up culture and workplace learning research approaches these environments going forward.

6.1 Proposed Framework

Figure 1. Power Disparities (center) between workers and management's perception and experiences (top/bottom) of workplace learning

↓ Management ↓			
Individual Learning Agency	Framed learning as a personal choice and a cultural obligation, driven by both passion for the company and a sense of responsibility toward the team		
Organisational Learning Environment	Shapes and defines the environment they operate in, framing the absence of formal structure as a freedom that enables creative and spontaneous approaches to development		
Social and Technological Learning Resources	Adopts AI confidently as a tool for entering unfamiliar areas quickly, while treating team culture and shared vision as the primary vehicle for collective learning.		
Identity, Tension and Wellbeing	Learning is tied to personal identity and entrepreneurial values, with wellbeing managed through deliberate coping strategies rather than formal boundaries between work and life.		
Defines what legitimate learning looks like through the language they use and the pace they set.	Positions themselves as vision-setters who embed learning in identity and organisational culture.	Governs the pace and tools of work through meetings, AI adoption and remote conditions, orienting structure around product development rather than employee learning.	Names absence of reflection as a primary learning problem and designs its own solution through check-ins and retreats, keeping both the problem and its resolution within the control of management
↕ Learning as a Condition or a Benefit	**Non-symmetrical subject positions towards learning**	**Technologically oriented organisational pressure**	**Self-directed learning as implicit governance ↕**
Workers absorbing the consequences of management definitions without being directly consulted	Position themselves as explicit learners navigating a power dynamic that makes admitting gaps both risky and costly.	Obligated to adapt to organisationally produced conditions, negatively experiencing loss of learning and experiencing to meet delivery needs.	Privately name deeper problems that never surface in shared discussions and are simply accepted as the nature of start-up work.
Individual Learning Agency:	Experience learning as a structural necessity rather than a choice, where self-direction is largely imposed by resource constraints and role demands rather than freely adopted as a personal value.		
Organisational Learning Environment:	Navigate an environment they did not design, often encountering gaps in formal learning support and taking on responsibilities that expand well beyond what was originally expected of them.		
Social and Technological Learning Resources:	Rely heavily on mentorship and peer learning where available, yet express genuine mixed feelings toward AI and newer technology, which speeds up delivery but undermines the depth of understanding they are trying to develop.		
Identity, Tension and Wellbeing:	Absorb the learning-delivery tensions that are barely acknowledged by management eroding their work-life boundaries to meet a pace and set of expectations they had little part in shaping.		
↑ Workers ↑			

The two-part structure features perceptions of managers on top, and workers on the bottom, with the middle layer being the results of the Foucauldian Discourse analysis. The aggregate dimensions are explained on each side, between worker and management, highlighting the main areas and differences between workers and management. Data from the management side ultimately suggests that as management perceives learning as a trait, something that they can do constantly, no matter what task they take on, while acknowledging the freedom and AI as benefits to their work. On the other hand, workers must absorb the decisions, tempo and culture set by management, whether positive or negative, where workers constantly must navigate their organisational environment. Thus, while both experience the workplace affordances (use of AI, tempo), the differences come because of different perceptions and experiences expressed by the participants. The tensions described in the centre of the framework showcase how management more actively elects the workplace affordances granted, whereas workers feel as if workplace learning is more necessary, uncertain of the newer technologies and must navigate an unknown environment filled of workplace affordances they did not decide on.

The language used by management and workers when applied with the Foucauldian Discourse analysis perspective reinforces these differences within the aggregate dimensions, as management tended to use the term “we”, discuss the greater culture, and mainly create their own personal solutions to company-wide problems. On the other hand, workers were much more focused in-wards on their personal careers, discussing more often adapting to needs set by those above them and how these structures govern. The deeper issues aren’t explicitly even discussed as a problem by workers and are rather instead just accepted as the nature of start-up work.

This framework is not only showing the different perceptions that arose across the interviews, but how the difference is produced and sustained without either side purposely establishing advantages or disadvantages. Overall, it is intended as a contribution to understanding workplace learning in start-ups, not just what is perceived differently, but why those differences persist, by answering both research questions presented in the beginning of this study.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of workplace learning between management and workers, as well as understand how the power differences between management and workers affect workplace learning.

Following the interviews and Gioia et al.'s (2012) thematic analysis, four aggregate dimensions were discovered, consistent across both management and workers, but understood differently. The four aggregate dimensions primarily revolved around perceptions of learning, the organisational environment, access to learning resources and lastly the personal identity and well-being. The Foucauldian discourse analysis used as a perspective after this further reinforced the understanding of these different dimensions by allowing the use of language and subject positions to be analysed in contrast to each other. This study was then able to propose a framework which gives a strong visual demonstration of the patterns identified by the analysis of the data. Ultimately, the key finding of this paper is that both workers and management value learning, but the conditions that produce learning differ greatly depending on which role. One of the most noticeable points in the data was that management can shape the learning environment, while workers experience a strong learning-delivery tension.

This study contributed to the modern field of literature by filling the gap that no study had achieved a multi-level management study. This study then found an AI-learning trade-off mechanism, which had yet to be identified in previous literature. This study also furthered academia's understanding of start-ups in the Nordic context, also being one of few research papers that focused on lifelong learning within start-ups as well. Lastly, this study helps identify the gap discussed in lifelong learning policy, reinforcing the notion that national lifelong learning policies are mostly evidently in institutional contexts, but are lacking support towards more informal contexts, such as start-up businesses.

The results of this paper contribute particularly to the social dimension of sustainability. The learning-delivery tension and eroded work-life boundaries discussed in this study are precisely the conditions important to consider for achieving sustainable careers according to Heslin et al. (2020). Workers maintaining pace and goals at the expense of proper reflection and development in career terms is unsustainable regardless of if the economic venture is economically performing.

This brings forth the question, if a company is unable to meet internal social sustainable needs while declaring itself economically viable, is it truly economically sustainable?

There are some limitations in this study worth noting. Firstly, this study has had a relatively small sample size. Its focus on a single point in time, with self-reported perceptions means that the data could have been very different if these variables were adjusted to any extent. Secondly, the context that all these interviews were done in a Swedish context limits transferability.

Future research that can be identified would be to firstly increase the number of participants, as well as capturing the perceptions at multiple points in time. This could allow for a greater understanding of how perceptions change as a company develops. Secondly, widening the scope to account for start-ups outside of Sweden, or even Europe could also strengthen the findings presented in this paper. Lastly, a more specific focus on how AI affected learning in start-ups could be beneficial, as AI as a tool and an impacting factor on learning was rather prevalent throughout the interviews.

If sustainable lifelong learning policy and workplace learning research are to eventually reach start-up workers, they should account not only for the resource constraints, but also for the power dynamics within start-ups that shape who gets to learn, on whose terms and at whose costs.

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9. Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Perceptions of Workplace Learning in Swedish Start-ups

George Anderson – Master's Thesis, WorkS, HLK, Jönköping University – 2026

Interview Setup

Format: Semi-structured, 1-on-1 via Microsoft Teams. Audio recorded and transcribed.

Duration: Approximately 30–40 minutes

Purpose: To explore how people at varying levels of management in Swedish start-ups perceive and experience workplace learning and competence development.

Approach: Interpretivist and constructivist. The participant's personal views, experiences and opinions are the data – there are no right or wrong answers.

Participants: Management and employees across 4 start-ups.

Note: A single interview guide is used for all participants. Role-specific probing questions are marked throughout as "For management" or "For employees." Follow-up and probing questions are adjusted based on responses.

Opening (0–7 min)

Start the recording. Introduce yourself and the purpose of the study. Confirm consent to record both before and after pressing record.

Q1. Can you tell me a bit about the company – what it does and how long it has been around?

- *How many people work here?*
- *What stage would you say the company is at right now?*

Q2. What is your role, and what does a typical workday look like for you?

- *How long have you been with the company?*
- *Has your role changed since you started?*
- ***For management:*** *How would you describe the structure of the organisation?*
- ***For employees:*** *Who do you work most closely with day to day?*

Section 1: Learning at Work (7–18 min)

Goal: Understand how the participant experiences and thinks about learning in their daily work, without introducing academic terminology.

Q3. When you think about your time at this company, can you describe a situation where you learned something important?

- *What made that situation a learning experience?*
- *Did someone help you, or did you figure it out on your own?*
- *Was that experience planned or did it happen by chance?*

Q4. How do you typically pick up new skills or knowledge in your work?

- *Is it more through doing things, talking to colleagues, or something more structured?*
- *Are there any routines or habits that help you learn?*
- *Do you ever seek out learning on your own outside of work tasks?*

Q5. What do you think makes it easier – or harder – to learn in a start-up compared to other workplaces?

- *Does the size of the company affect how you learn?*
- *How do things like time pressure or resources come into play?*
- *Are there any barriers to learning that you have experienced here?*

Section 2: Development, Growth and Reflection (18–28 min)

Q6. Are there any skills or areas where you feel you have developed the most since joining this company?

- *Was that development something the company supported, or something you pursued on your own?*
- *Were there any formal opportunities, such as courses or training?*
- ***For management:*** *Have you actively tried to support learning or development for your team? How?*
- ***For employees:*** *Has the company ever offered or encouraged any kind of development for you?*

Q7. Do you ever take time to reflect on what you have learned or how you have handled a situation at work?

- *Can you give an example of a time when reflection led to a change in how you work?*
- *Is reflection something the company encourages, or is it something you do on your own?*
- *Is there dedicated time or space for reflection, or does it happen informally?*

Q8. How important do you think learning and development is for someone working in a start-up?

- *Do you feel it is prioritised here? Why or why not?*
- *If you could change one thing about how learning happens here, what would it be?*
- ***For management:*** *What do you think your employees need most in terms of development?*
- ***For employees:*** *Do you feel your learning needs are understood by the people above you?*
- ***For management co-founders:*** *What do you think your organisation needs to work on the most for competence development?*

Section 3: Decision-Making, Culture and Support (28–35 min)

Goal: Explore how authority, culture and organisational norms shape what is said, expected and practised around learning. These questions are designed to surface data relevant to the Foucauldian analytic perspective without explicitly asking about power.

Q9. If you had a new skill you wanted to develop, or a course you wanted to take, what would that process look like here?

- *Who would you talk to?*
- *Do you feel comfortable raising that kind of thing?*
- *Has anyone ever raised something like that? What happened?*

Q10. How would you describe the culture of this company when it comes to making mistakes or trying new things?

- *Is it safe to fail here?*
- *Can you give me an example?*

Q11. Do you think everyone in the company has the same understanding of what learning and development means here, or do people see it differently?

- ***For management:*** *What do you think your employees would say about learning here if I asked them?*
- ***For employees:*** *What do you think management believes about learning here? Does that match your experience?*

Q12. How do you see your own role in shaping how learning happens in this company?

- *Do you feel responsible for your own development, or is that something the company should provide?*
- ***For management:*** *Do you feel you have the resources or time to support your team's development the way you would like to?*
- ***For employees:*** *Is there anyone here who you consider a mentor or someone you learn from regularly?*

Closing (35–40 min)

Q13. Looking back at what we have talked about – is there anything about learning or development at work that you think is important but we have not covered?

Q14. Is there anything you would like to add or ask me?

Thank the participant for their time. Confirm they will remain anonymous and can withdraw their data at any point. Stop recording.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Information Sheet and Consent Form

Perceptions of Workplace Learning in Swedish Start-ups

George Anderson – Master's Thesis, WorkS Programme, HLK, Jönköping University

About This Study

My name is George Anderson and I am a master's student in the Lifelong Learning (WorkS) programme at the School of Education and Communication (HLK), Jönköping University. I am conducting research for my master's thesis, which explores how workplace learning is perceived and experienced across varying levels of management in Swedish technology-based start-ups.

The study uses a comparative case study design involving multiple start-up organisations. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals at different levels within each organisation. The purpose is to understand how competence development and workplace learning is framed, prioritised, and practised in organisational environments characterised by resource constraints and rapid change.

The interview lasts approximately 30–40 minutes and will be conducted either in person or via Microsoft Teams.

What Happens with the Data

- The interview will be recorded with audio and video. If conducted via Microsoft Teams, the built-in transcription function will also be used.
- The recording will be transcribed and analysed as part of the thesis research.
- Your name, the name of your organisation, and any identifying details will be anonymised in all written work. Pseudonyms will be used throughout.
- The data will be stored securely on the university's platform and handled in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016/679).
- The anonymised data will be used in the master's thesis, which will be published through Jönköping University's open access archive (DiVA).

- Raw data (recordings and transcripts) will be retained only for the duration of the thesis process and will be deleted following the final submission and examination of the thesis.

Your Rights

- Participation is entirely voluntary.
- You may skip any question you do not wish to answer.
- You may stop the interview at any time without providing a reason.
- You may withdraw your data at any point before the thesis is submitted for examination by contacting the researcher at the details provided below.
- Under GDPR, you have the right to request access to, correction of, or deletion of your personal data.

Contact Information

Researcher:

George Anderson

Email: Ange21az@student.ju.se

Phone: (Removed)

Supervisor:

Helene Ahl

Email: helene.ahl@ju.se

Consent

By signing below, I confirm that:

- I have read and understood the information provided above.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers.
- I agree to participate in this interview voluntarily.
- I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed.

- I understand that my data will be anonymised and may be included in the published thesis.
- I understand that I may withdraw my participation and data at any time before or after the thesis is submitted for examination.

Participant name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Note: *For interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, verbal consent confirmed at the start of the recording is acceptable in place of a physical signature. The researcher will confirm consent on the recording before proceeding.*