

Barriers to organisational development in higher education lifelong learning initiatives

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Abstract

From an economic human capital perspective, higher education lifelong learning initiatives should include the professional development of individuals as well as organisational development. This indicates the dissolving of boundaries between individual and organisational development and that successful professional development occurs at both individual and aggregated levels. Based on the networked mode, higher education institutions could be closely linked to their surrounding society, embracing a two-way relationship with a hybrid character, including multiple connections with branches and/or organisations. In such initiatives, formal education and informal work-related tasks are blurred and both are emphasised as equally important. In focus are collaborative features and the idea to link theoretical reasoning to authentic organisational problems. To offer higher education lifelong learning for organisational development, Mid Sweden University initiated a project called BUFFL in collaboration with eight organisations belonging to an established network of banks and insurance companies. This paper aims at reporting barriers to organisational development in higher education lifelong learning. It answers the following research question: Which barriers could be identified when implementing a hybrid and networked approach to higher education lifelong learning for organisational development? A case-study-inspired approach was conducted. In total, 328 registrations from the collaborating organisations were documented in the BUFFL courses. In addition to open-ended questions and Likert scale questions in the course evaluations, the methods also included conversations with leading representatives of the collaborating organisations. Although several barriers were highlighted in line with the innovation resistance theory, the main barrier seems to be that no organisation applied lifelong learning as a tool for strategic organisational development. The study suggests that a crucial barrier breaker to reduce or eliminate the main barrier is a course on strategically managed competence development for leading representatives of participating organisations. A combined focus on individuals and organisations could also stimulate leading representatives to take a holistic approach to the organisation's competence development. This includes increased responsibility to ensure that investments in the competence area are beneficial for the organisation. Bringing company-relevant data as input to the courses could ensure the establishment of strong links between theoretical perspectives and work-related practices.

Keywords

Barriers, higher education, hybrid, individual development, lifelong learning, organisational development, professional development

Research Context

Supporting individuals' professional development is a crucial feature of lifelong learning in higher education (Peters & Romero, 2019). However, from an economic human capital perspective, lifelong learning initiatives in the workplace context should also include organisational development (Ahlgren & Engel, 2011). This indicates that successful professional development occurs at both individual and aggregated levels. This also means that traditional boundaries between individual and organisational development dissolve (Jaldemark et al., 2019).

Based on the networked mode, higher education institutions should be closely linked to their surrounding society, embracing a two-way relationship (Nørgård et al., 2019). While applying lifelong learning initiatives, higher education institutions could form a hybrid character with multiple connections with branches and/or

organisations. In such initiatives, formal education and informal work-related tasks are blurred and emphasised as equally important. In focus are collaborative features and the idea to link theoretical reasoning to authentic organisational problems.

To offer higher education lifelong learning for organisational development, a Swedish higher education institution, i.e., Mid Sweden University, initiated a project called BUFFL in collaboration with eight organisations belonging to an established network of banks and insurance companies. The Swedish acronym BUFFL can be translated to English as follows: Industry Development at Banks and Insurance Companies through Flexible Lifelong Learning (Jaldemark & Öhman, 2020).

The project, which started at the end of 2018 and lasted until the end of June 2021, emphasised the intersection of formal education and informal work-related tasks, and developed innovative and technology-enhanced learning methods in terms of short flexible courses for professionals. At the intersection of disciplinary competencies and organisational needs, this collaborative approach resulted in a number of main themes for related short, flexible courses. The courses ran in parallel with the participants' regular workload (at 20% of full-time study tempo, for a period of one month between the start and the end of the course).

The organisations were encouraged to register employees as participants, and to bring company-relevant data as input to the courses. Such a bring-your-own-data (BYOD) approach includes the idea that course participants work with challenges related to their working life context (Jaldemark & Öhman, 2020). BYOD enables linking formal education and informal work-related tasks to provide a strong link between theory and practice.

Participants were able to work in small groups with a maximum of four individuals from the same organisation with real challenges situated in their organisations. The group members could investigate and discuss a challenge that affects all or parts of the organisation, and how processes were carried out today in relation to how they could be developed in the future. These practical problems were then analysed in light of the literature as a part of the course assessment. The participating organisations and their employees were free to apply to the courses that fit their needs at individual and organisational levels.

Based on the innovation resistance theory (Ram, 1987), innovations and developments often encounter barriers on the way to being adopted. In line with Kuisma et al. (2007), the BUFFL project acknowledges barriers related to innovation inability to produce economic or performance-based benefits, and potential barriers also need to be considered regarding organisational development in a higher education lifelong learning context. To make the adoption process smoother for the participating organisations, the BUFFL project focused on barrier-breaking activities when developing the short, flexible courses.

First, ease-of-use is described as the degree of effort that an individual perceives when using a service or a technology (Davis et al., 1989). Thus, ease-of-use can also be a barrier breaker regarding organisational development in a higher education lifelong learning context. Second, usefulness is related to convenience, access, and perceived benefits (Davis et al., 1989). For example, for-profit organisations are more likely to adopt services which offer more advantages than do other alternatives. Third, social influence is described as individuals' perceptions in the decision to use a certain service or technology based on the influence of people important to the individual (Davis et al., 1989), and as the effect of the opinions of friends, relatives, and superiors on individuals' intentions (Martins et al., 2014). In the BUFFL case, social influence covers the opinions and actions of leading representatives and employees of the participating organisations, and leading representatives of the other organisations. Accordingly, cultural issues could be important barrier-breakers.

Despite the various attempts to support organisational development, innovation resistance theory suggests that barriers will still exist (Ram & Sheth, 1989). For example, security, access, and cultural issues have been highlighted in the banking context (Dimitrova et al., 2022). Security can be seen as a barrier because of the potential risk that an organisation's data could be misused when being revealed to employees of competing organisations. This will likely affect the intention to highlight challenges within the course frame. Access to relevant BYOD is related to the security aspect. However, there is also a possibility that the organisation is unable to deliver the information needed for the employees to contribute to organisational development within the frame of formal education. Another obstacle is that leading representatives are unable to support and assist the employees related to the BYOD practice. Moreover, Kuisma et al. (2007) argued that a barrier could be linked to individuals' habits and routines. In other words, cultural issues could not only be barrier-breakers, but they could also be crucial barriers in terms of resistance to change within an organisation.

To sum up, barriers may affect all kinds of organisational development. This means that hybrid and networked approaches to higher education lifelong learning initiatives as tools to support such development need to consider these barriers to enable the intended positive organisational outcomes.

Aim and Research Question

Based on the BUFFL project, this paper aims at reporting barriers to organisational development in higher education lifelong learning. It answers the following research question:

Which barriers could be identified when implementing a hybrid and networked approach to higher education lifelong learning for organisational development?

Methods

To answer the research question, a case-study-inspired approach (Yin, 2009) was conducted, and every course within the BUFFL project was evaluated. In total, there were 328 course registrations by participating employees. After each course, the participants received an email and a course evaluation form including four open-ended questions and 26 questions with a five-point Likert scale, from 1 = very poor to 5 = very good. The information in the course evaluations were the main data source. In addition, the study used information saved on the course platforms (including digital discussion fora, study guides, video lectures and information from the teachers), and conversations with leading representatives of the collaborating organisations. The data were analysed using an approach that included content analysis. Collaborating organisations were informed that research on the course development process was part of the BUFFL-project.

Preliminary Findings

The main barrier seems to be that no organisation used the courses as a tool for strategic organisational development. Several reasons could be found.

First, course participants were sent to the courses ad hoc, mostly based on the participants' own interest in reading the courses in their free time. There was a lack of well-reasoned selection processes for enrolment in the courses. In most cases, the organisations did not allow for time in their employees' work schedules for participation in the courses and for fulfilment of course assignments.

Second, there were challenges for the participating organisations in the application of the BYOD practice. One challenge was to find assignments clearly linked to organisational development. Another challenge was to find suitable data and to manage it properly according to organisational security policies, along with the fact that employees of competing organisations were included among the course participants.

Third, although recommended, no organisation encouraged their employees to continue working with the organisation's own data after the end of a specific course. Moreover, none of the organisations took the opportunity to continue working with the identified organisational challenges when the course was given the second time. The recommendation was that new participants should continue to work with the challenges that had been identified and initiated by their colleagues (i.e., employees from the same organisations that had participated when the course was given the first time).

For the higher education institution, there was a challenge to align the examination to the organisations-specific data. Participants were asked to rate how well this was done in the course evaluation form. The aggregated answers indicate that most teachers tried to align taught theories with the organisation-specific data. When answering one of the open-ended questions, a course participant explicitly mentioned that "it was valuable to compare my own workplace experience with the theories in the course". Another participant, however, stated that "there was too much focus on academic theories". Another challenge for the higher education institution was the insufficient administrative and technological support. This aggravated the enrolment process, the communication between participants on the course platforms, and the throughput in some of the courses.

Another barrier was that the course participants did not deploy the course platform to communicate. A possible explanation was the short length of the courses and the exclusion of physical meetings. The participants from various organisations had difficulties finding times and places to get to know each other. This also highlights the importance of participants from the same organisation coming together to collaborate in solving authentic organisational challenges. A main finding, therefore, is that the importance of local study groups cannot be underestimated. One participant also emphasised the positive outcome and that the "good collaboration with my course colleague resulted in the ability to bring this knowledge with us to our common, everyday work".

A strong recommendation in the same vein of supporting collaboration and group work was that the participating organisations should enrol at least two participants on a course. This recommendation is reinforced by the course evaluations, where several participants praised the importance of organisational support. However, there were also opposing opinions. In the open-ended questions, participants who were not enrolled with colleagues from their organisation claimed that they "felt lonely" and experienced "poor support from the organisation". In fact, sole participants from an organisation have a particularly high dropout rate.

Finally, the evaluation question “How did you perceive that your group work contributed to the organisation’s development?” yielded varying results. This illustrates that transferring course participants’ formal education and informal work-related tasks to organisational benefit is a complex task.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although there is still a belief within the BUFFL research group that higher education lifelong learning initiatives in the workplace context should include organisational development, several barriers were highlighted during the project in line with the innovation resistance theory (Ram, 1987). These barriers can be related to the participating organisations (i.e., the leading representatives of the organisations), the participating employees, and the higher education institution.

To reduce or eliminate the main barrier, i.e., the organisations’ inability to use the courses as tools for organisational development, the suggested barrier-breaker is an initial short flexible course on strategically managed competence development for leading representatives of participating organisations. This was tested late in the project as a seminar series for four of the collaborating organisations. The positive outcome suggests that this course could also facilitate long-term relationships between an organisation and the higher education institution, and meet organisational needs in a sustainable, strategic way. Included in this course is charting the need for the competence development of employees in light of the benefit to the organisation. Thereafter, each employee could focus on the most relevant courses to receive personal development and at the same time contribute to the organisation’s development.

A combined focus on individual and organisational levels could stimulate leading representatives to take a holistic approach to the organisation’s competence supply and competence development. This includes increased responsibility for ensuring that investments in the competence area are beneficial for the organisation. Based on the networked mode, developed and maintained long-term relationships could be the basis for recurring dialogues about content and forms for investments in professional development as a tool for organisational development. The BYOD principle could further ensure the establishment of strong links between theoretical perspectives and work-related practices.

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