
Learning Organizations, Work Flow, and Information Technology

Roelf Woldring
Workplace Competence International Limited
© WCI, 5905 Third Line of Erin, Hillsburgh,
Ontario, Canada N0B 1Z0
1-519-855-4582
woldring@wcilt.com

Is there a connection?

Yes because 1 of 2

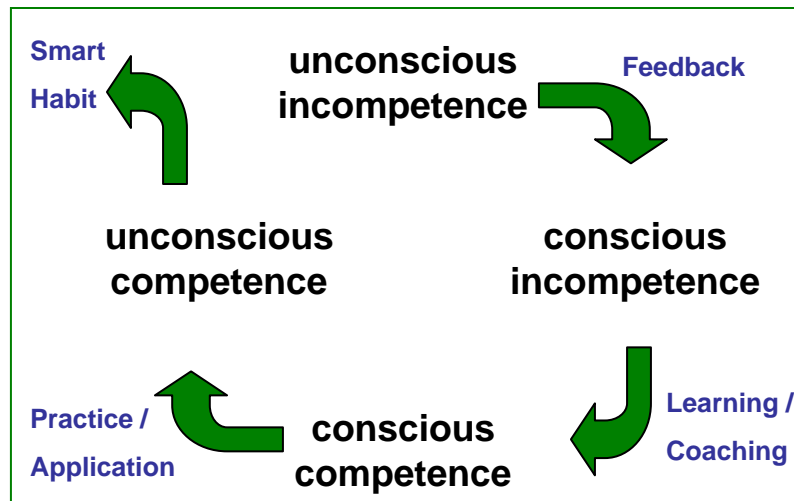
- **An organization that wants to be a “learning organization” must accept that:**
 - Organizations accomplish their goals through **explicitly designed or implicitly developed “interlocked patterns of repetitive work”** that are used by their members to do day-to-day work
 - Software is a **“learning sink”**
 - it captures and activates as “current” a particular generation of work flow
 - Which is nothing more than a “point in time” set of decision shaping business rules and point to point information flow patterns
 - **Continuous change, as opposed to “change releases”** runs against the innate psychological nature of humans beings
 - Individuals develop pre-conscious “smart habits” that allow them to interact with others in the work place without conscious thought
 - Changing these “smart habits” requires energy to move through the smart habit acquisition cycle
 - Smart habits become synchronized with the current generation of work flow embedded in the “software in use” today

Is there a connection? Yes because 2 of 2

- **An organization that wants to be a “learning organization” must accept that (continued):**
 - Being a learning organization means explicitly translating “best practices” and “learning from mistakes” into well designed work flows that are:
 - Implemented in the automated business applications
 - that shape much of the “transactional” and repetitive day-to-day work of its members
 - Require explicit “training and adaption” on the part of its members
 - which move them through the smart habit acquisition cycle
 - Consciously released in generations,
 - so that the organization gains benefits from the use of one generation of the work flow
 - while a small group in the organization works on designing and preparing the next generation for release

Background Idea: What is the Smart Habit Acquisition Cycle?

The Personal Competence Development Cycle



Individuals need to go through this cycle in order to replace old smart habits or acquire new ones.

- Most of the time people do things without having to **think consciously about how to do them**
- “**Smart habits**” allow human beings to integrate a “huge” amount of conscious, pre-conscious (pre-symbolic) and physical learning into “natural” integrated, immediate responses to external events
- Interlocked patterns of repetitive work in organizations take advantage of individual smart habits to create work flows that are **interpersonally effective** (doing the right things in sequence, one person to the next)
- **Explicit design** of such work flows can make them **efficient** (maximizing the value of the output of an activity compared to the effort put into the input)

Background Idea:
What are “Inter-locked patterns of repetitive work”?

- **Interlocked means**

- Person B expects person A to behave in an certain way as part of getting something done
- When Person B sees A behaving in this way, B knows that B will have to do something as the next step in the work flow and past the results or consequences to Person C, usually as an information flow
- This allows people to develop “smart habits” which allow them interact in this way with minimal conscious “how to or process” energy
- As a result, they can direct **their conscious energy on the content** of what they are working on

- **Patterns of Repetitive Work means**

- Patterns develop in a organization in order to do the variety of work that accomplishes the goals or objectives of the organization
- These patterns repeat themselves
 - That is, there are many instances of these patterns, each of which deals with different specific content relevant to this “instance” (or transaction)
- This means that much great deal of the work of the organization is done in “structured” and “anticipated” ways

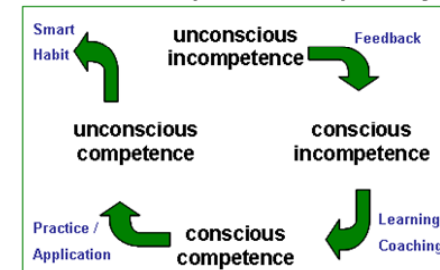
Organizations accomplish their goals through **explicitly designed or implicitly developed “interlocked patterns of repetitive work”** that are used by their members to do day-to-day work

- **Human psychology is fundamentally both individual and tribal (social)**
 - We come with **innate cognitive and information processing capabilities** that allows us to develop “interlocked patterns of repetitive work”
 - Our **psycho-social development** in the family, during schooling, and in pre-work social environments develop and expand these abilities
 - As a result, we will **implicitly develop “interlocked patterns of repetitive work”** when we work with others
 - New organizational members **acquire the existing stock of such patterns** in an organization during their initial socialization, training and coaching / mentoring
- **Learning organizations take explicit control of these patterns**
 - They **catalogue the implicitly developed stock** of these patterns, making them explicit
 - They **explicitly develop new ones** to “upgrade” and to “extend” the current stock of such patterns – they design work flows
 - They **translate these work flows** into the **business requirement and information storage / movement specifications** needed to acquire or to build automated business application support to such work flows

Continuous change, as opposed to “change releases” runs against the innate psychological nature of humans beings

- Because human beings are “smart habit” users,
 - they need periods of relative stability in which their “smart habits” pay off
- Continuous change does not allow this
 - it places people in a continuous state of “conscious incompetence”
 - which is de-moralizing to individuals
 - and unproductive for organizations
- Learning organizations recognize this
 - and create periods of “stability” in which people get to use their smart habits to do work – to be “unconsciously competent”
 - This increases personal confidence and “pride in work accomplished”, both of which are deep motivators for individuals
- Learning organizations explicitly schedule new releases of work flow
 - and implement them in ways that allow people to develop “new smart habits” (training and familiarization)
 - and then use them for a period of time

The Personal Competence Development Cycle



A learning organization explicitly manages the part of IT that implements new functionality as part of a “released change” organizational improvement program.

- In a learning organization, the rest of IT is a service organization providing operational support to the current generation of automated business applications.
- In “non-learning” organizations, IT is either:
 - A **service organization responsive to clients** because its budget is controlled by its ability to get clients to pay for its services through **direct revenue or internal chargeback**
 - This means that the accountability for organizational learning rests with the clients. They may or may not be explicit learning organizations.
 - Or
 - A **control organization** that imposes the “inner circle” leadership’s CLEAR sense of what the organization needs in the way of automation on its clients.
 - This means that the accountability for organizational learning rests with the Inner Circle of Leaders. They may or may not have explicit learning organization goals.
 - **In the absence of either of these organizational dynamics,**
 - Senior IT staff implicitly formulate a sense of what work flow the organization needs and implement it.
 - This means that IT staffers take on the role of LEARNING ORGANIZATION unit staffers, often without realizing it.

Consequence (continued):

In a learning organization, IT application development and maintenance is responsive to strategic and tactical direction set by an Learning Organization unit that explicitly designs work flow for the organization.

- In some organizations, this is the IT Architecture unit
 - which has a direct relationship to a organizational learning visionary CIO who is a member of the organizational learning visionary inner circle of organizational LEADERSHIP,
 - or
 - whose leader, the Chief Architect, has a direct relationship to an organizational learning visionary CEO and the inner circle or organizational leaders

- In other organizations, there is a separate organizational unit outside of IT charged with responsibility for learning organizational objectives.
 - This unit must have a DIRECT relationship in the inner circle of organizational LEADERS in order to be effective.

 - The unit's leader must be able to set strategic direction for work flow across the organization, and thus needs a final sign off on all IT functional related business requirements.
 - The leaders of the business units affected by these business requirements must also have such a sign-off
 - The (and their staffs) need to dialog with the organizational learning unit during the development of these business requirements (decision rules, information flow / presentation and information storage).
 - This means that the leader of the organizational learning unit must have high "internal influencing" capabilities.

 - Persuasion, work flow vision and one-on-one and one-on-group communication are key individual competencies for this unit's leaders.

 - This leader needs to be supported by relationship power / positioning.
 - That is, the leader of the unit must be seen to have a close and effective working relationship with the CEO and the inner circle of organizational leaders.

Note: this is an example of an explicitly designed high level work flow.

The Dynamics of Released Change in A Learning Organization

