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RESEARCH PAPER

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Learning when new at work. A thematic analysis of interviews with young adult retail workers in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this study is to analyse young adults' positive experiences of learning when entering the labour market.

Design/methodology/approach: The study is based on 13 individual in-depth interviews with young adults (aged 18–28) working within the retail sector in Sweden. The interviews explored the interviewees' experiences when entering the workforce, focusing on positive experiences of learning.

Findings: The findings highlight the relationship between learning and encounters with others both within and outside work, that is, with colleagues and customers as well as with family and friends. Learning is mostly depicted as informal and as related to work and here, more experienced colleagues, openness, trust and equality as well as self-initiative, responsibility and autonomy are highlighted.

Originality/value: Taking its point of departure in a health promotion perspective, the study reinforces the perspective of workplace learning as an interplay between contextual (work-related) factors and personal factors by highlighting the importance of relationships outside the workplace for understanding the experiences of learning when new at work. Furthermore, the study examines how the learning needs of young adults relate not only to the work itself but to the experience of entering the labour market.

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Learning; workplace learning; health promotion; retail

Introduction

With departure from a health-promoting perspective, opportunities for learning in and 'about' work are in this article discussed as important for young adults when entering the labour market within retail. The need for research broadly based on a health promotion perspective has been promoted by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2012) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (Kines et al. 2013). Health promotion includes policies, supportive environments, strengthening community action, developing personal skills and reorienting health services (World Health Organization 1986). The promotion of personal skills is thus a central aspect of health promotion. In addition, learning in everyday activities (such as through work) is described as fostered by social support and job control (Ellström 1992, 2001; Eraut 2000, 2004), that is, as linked to factors

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highlighted as important resources to prevent work-related ill health and as essential if individual are to cope with job demands (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Karasek and Theorell 1990). According to Ellström (2001), the promotion of so-called workplace learning (including both formal and informal learning) is '. . . instrumental in reducing stress and promoting healthier working conditions' (Ellström 2001, 421) and recent studies report a positive relationship between learning opportunities in daily work and workplace well-being (Eurofound and Cedefop 2020; Lehtonen et al. 2021; Puhakka, Nokelainen, and Pylväs 2021).

In Sweden, about 18% of the total population aged 15–24 are employed in the retail sector (Statistics Sweden 2021), and retail is discussed as a youth-intensive industry (Bornhäll et al. 2021). Consequently, many young adults' first experience of 'work' takes place within this sector. At the same time, young workers (aged 16–29) in Sweden experience more work-related fatigue than older workers, and their limited access to structural and social resources at work suggests that it is more difficult for retail workers to manage stress (Tuckey et al. 2017). According to the Swedish Work Environment Authority (2021) almost every other person in the age group 16–29 years that suffers from work-related problems experience problems in terms of worry and anxiety.

Previous research shows that young adults perceive it as a failure if they get ´caught up' in a job that does not offer opportunities for competence development (Gillberg 2010) and respond to labour market insecurity by seeking opportunities for competence development (De Hauw and De Vos 2010). It is also well known that opportunities for learning at work are not evenly distributed. For example, despite that Swedish companies provide more learning opportunities in comparison with other similar countries (Eurofound and Cedefop 2020), formal and informal learning during paid working hours is more common in managerial positions and in occupations that require university qualifications (Statistics Sweden 2018). Harteis et al. (2015) discuss how highly educated individuals are not only more likely to receive access to work-related development through formal learning (training) but are also more likely, regardless of age or gender, to receive more support for informal learning. When regarding learning within retail, previous research suggests both challenges and opportunities. As regards challenges, Reegard (2015) discusses the dominant depiction of retail work as low-skilled labour characterised by poor learning environments (Simpson, McKechnie, and Hobbs 2018) and Eurofound and Cedefop (2020) show how establishments where 80% or more of their workforce received training were lowest within the commerce sector and hospitality (including other wholesale and retail trade). Bell, Mengüç, and Widing (2010) discuss how the use of traditional incentive systems in retail tends to reward information hoarding and individualistic behaviour which, in turn, hinders, for example, individuals to share their own learning with others. Regarding opportunities, on the other hand, Reegard's (2015) study of retail work shows that tasks are handled with limited instruction and a great deal of individual responsibility, which promotes rather than hinders learning, and how challenges in customer interaction played a key role in prompting learning. Simpson, McKechnie and Hobbs (2018) investigated a population of teenagers (14–18 years) working part-time in the retail and catering sectors, suggesting that opportunities for skills development are common in both sectors. However, research on learning in retail is described as limited, particularly regarding informal learning (Kock 2018), and Roberts (2013) suggests that young retail employees represent a 'missing middle' since research has been overshadowed by a focus on either individuals who receive no training at all, or, on individuals in higher education or apprenticeships. The above illustrates how learning in daily work is not only discussed as important for the promotion of health among young adults entering the labour market but also some specific reasons for studying learning among young adults in the retail sector.

With departure in the above, the present study proceeds from a health promotion approach (World Health Organization 1986) and assumes that all activities that enable and facilitate health within the community are health promoting activities (Eriksson & Lindström, 2008) and focus on situations in which young adults encounter opportunities for learning. Besides this, the choice to focus on positive learning experiences is related to the above discussed, that is that learning in itself is described as a kind of prerequisite for sustainable working conditions. This also means that we do

not intend to study the implications for health in a direct way. Drawing on data from interviews with young adults in the retail sector, this study has the potential to contribute to the improved health and wellbeing of young people as they enter the labour market by increasing our understanding of how learning occurs in this specific context. The aim of the study is to analyse young adults' positive experiences of learning when entering the labour market.

Method

Study design

The overall aim of the study design was to capture the views of young adults working in the retail sector to gain a greater understanding of their individual experiences when entering the workforce. The study adopts the health promotion perspective, which emphasises social context (World Health Organization 1986), with a study design focused on capturing not only the individual within the social context of a certain workplace but also the individual in relation to their life situation upon entering the labour market in the retail sector. To achieve this aim, the study relied on in-depth interviews. In line with the perspectives of salutogenesis, which are emphasised within health promotion research (Eriksson & Lindström, 2008), the study was designed to capture experiences of learning rather than the opposite. Thus, the questions asked in the interviews focused on positive experiences of learning.

Furthermore, the study design followed the analytical process presented by Nowell et al. (2017), as well as Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. For example, the design was chosen to ensure confirmability. Unedited quotations are therefore presented in the results section to provide an opportunity to evaluate the analysis. In order to achieve dependability and confirmability, the data collection and analysis process are described here and in greater detail within a specific research protocol (Wall, Berg Jansson and Svensson (2021). All data collection and processing is performed in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's guidelines on research ethics (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

Data collection, participants and material

Participants in the individual in-depth interviews were recruited primarily via social media, more specifically through a link to an information page at the university website, which provided information for informed consent and the opportunity to register interest in participation. If registration was confirmed, participants also received information about the project (informed consent) and about the university's processing of personal data (GDPR). Information required for informed consent was also repeated orally before the start of each interview, and all interviewees were asked whether they consented to the audio recording of the interview and were given the opportunity to ask any questions regarding the study. All interviewees consented to audio recording.

In total, 13 individual in-depth interviews (mean 53 minutes) with young adults aged 18–28 (mean age 22) working in the retail sector were conducted between January – June 2020. Eleven women and two men were interviewed, mirroring the uneven gender distribution within the retail sector in Sweden.[1] The population included individuals who worked in a retail setting (store) at some point during the past three months in a Swedish city with between 60,000 and 150,000 inhabitants. The majority of the participants had temporary contracts and worked part time, whereas a minority had permanent contracts and held full time or near full time, permanent positions. This reflects how the retail sector in Sweden is dominated by part-time and fixed-term employment. In a report from The Commercial Employees' Union (Handelsanställdas förbund) Holmlund and Carlén (2020) discuss how the percentage of fixed-term employees within Swedish retail during 1990 to 2020 increased from 12% to 27%. Furthermore, how the percentage of employees who work less than 35 hours per week increased from 53% to 64% during the same period.

The interview guide focused on the participants' experiences of labour market participation in relation to the following aspects: work experience, form of employment, meaning of work, entry into the labour market, relationships, learning, risks, safety, leadership and health. However, as the overall aim was to capture how the interviewees contextualised their narratives on being novice at their entry into the labour market, the questions were not formulated identically for each participant, nor were they asked in the exact same order. Instead, the interview guide was used as a tool to ensure that all the above main themes (and questions) were taken up in each interview. As the interviews were conducted during the height of the coronavirus pandemic (during spring 2020) when the Swedish Public Health Agency's recommendations to avoid domestic travel and physical proximity were in effect, ten interviews were conducted by telephone and three by video. Eleven of the interviews were transcribed verbatim after data collection and two were transcribed during the interviews.

Data analysis

The data analysis can be described as a thematic analysis and followed the procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Accordingly, the process started with a careful and repeated reading of the transcribed interviews to create an understanding of each interview as a whole. In the next step, the researchers sought to identify significant passages in relation to the aim of this paper. Hence, in line with the health promotion perspective, self-reported narratives of learning (having learned) when new at work were identified and analysed more thoroughly, whereas material relating to obstacles to learning and learning needs was not included in the analysis. The process was guided by the aim of this paper, that is, all parts of the interviews related to learning when new at work were coded and interpreted and from this, themes were identified. To determine whether each of the identified themes represented a 'patterned response or meaning within the data set' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82), these were assessed through a process of re-reading the transcripts and in critical discussions within the research group. Finally, the analysis process resulted in the identification of three themes and two sub-themes, which will be presented in the results section below.

Results

The analysis of the interviewees' experiences of learning resulted in the following two themes and five sub-themes: *Learning as related to work* followed by the sub-themes 'The importance of colleagues and customers', 'The importance of openness, trust and equality', 'The importance of self-initiative, responsibility and independence' and 'The importance of planned activities and information systems', and *Learning as related to private sphere* followed by the sub-theme 'The importance of family and friends'.

Learning as related to work

This theme illustrates how positive experiences of learning were related to daily work and work tasks. In relation to such learning, the importance of 'colleagues and customers', 'openness, trust and equality', 'self-initiative, responsibility and independence' and 'planned activities and information systems' also emerged (representing sub-themes and are presented below).

The importance of colleagues and customers

Based on the analysis, learning at work appears to be clearly linked to encounters with colleagues and customers. The first sub-theme illuminated the connection between learning and interaction with colleagues and customers in the workplace. The interviewees' narratives included repeated references to colleagues, particularly how colleagues help each other understand and perform

certain work tasks and how learning occurs by listening to colleagues. One interviewee says she has learned 'everything there is to know' this way (IP1). When comparing her current work situation (working alone) with previous experiences of working together with others, another interviewee emphasises the importance of colleagues:

> Yes, well, all the colleagues around you are important for your learning. I don't really know how to describe it, but right now, I do not work with anyone besides myself, so … But if I look back to when I worked in other departments, it is always the people who have worked there longer than you that share their experience and learning. So, it is a constant stream of teaching and learning, or you might say, that you learn and then you teach others.(IP3)

As illustrated above, more experienced colleagues are seen as especially important:

> I learn from all my colleagues. But of course, I learn more from the team leaders and who have been working for a long time than, for example, a colleague who is as old as me who I went to school with as well. Because we are on the same level in terms of learning; we started about the same time. So, in terms of work, we do not learn as much from each other, but often, if I learn something new, I share it with him as well.(IP11)

Although the former team leader is mentioned in the quote above, it is not the role of manager that is the most important aspect here. Instead, it is the fact that he/she has more experience and knowledge, which appears to be essential in relation to learning.

Customers, on the other hand, are associated with daily challenges, such as answering questions, which, in turn, implies learning. As one interviewee describes, every single customer encounter provides opportunities for learning new things (I7). As regards customers and learning, another interviewee says the following:

> It can be, for example, if you talk to a customer who is looking for something in the store, then you might, if I don't know where it is, then I always find out for the customer. And then next time, I know where it is. […] It can be something I never heard of before, and then I learned what it is.(IP2)

Experiences of learning are also related to situations of 'handling customers', which illustrates how customers are linked to learning in daily work. As one interviewee says:

> It's mostly that I learn about how … Well, dealing with people and things like that. […] And I think I've learned a lot, that you kind of, that you can do it. Yes, it's possible to have a positive interaction with most people.(IP9)

Thus, it was evident from the analysis that daily encounters and interactions with colleagues and customers are linked to learning in daily work. Here, more experienced colleagues emerged as especially important.

The importance of openness, trust and equality

This sub-theme, which is closely related to the theme discussed above, illuminates the importance of norms and the values of openness, trust and equality. In terms of openness, situations where one is allowed to try new things and learn in different ways – when advice and tips are appreciated – emerged as a kind of prerequisite for learning. One interviewee says she has learned a lot during her first years as an employee:

> I usually feel like I can still ask, basically anyone, straight away, if it is not something more specific, so that I feel like everyone gets help and helps each other out as well(IP2)

We interpret this as illustrating the importance of openness in relation to learning. Similarly, trust from colleagues and managers emerges as an important factor for learning in daily work. Being 'allowed' to make mistakes and feeling that you are allowed to (to dare) ask questions are described as crucial factors for being able to learn in your daily work. As one interviewee describes:

> Yes, so feeling like you earn confidence and that someone trusts you has been very valuable for me to learn. And also, that my boss is as nice as she is, so I feel brave enough to ask questions. And that they always say that everyone makes mistakes and that it is o.k. if you make a mistake and so on, which is also a nice mindset(IP8)

The importance of perceived equality, regardless of one's formal role, was also highlighted as an important condition. As one interviewee described, the fact that everyone (including managers) helps each other out and her manager performs the same work tasks as she is asked to do promotes learning in daily work. We interpret this as an expression of how equality, in terms of the absence of rigid lines between work tasks and no strict hierarchy, is regarded as important for being able to learn in daily work.

> The fact that there is a very high ceiling for everyone. Whereas before, I felt like 'this is your job', and so colleagues were not able to help each other and ask about things you have no idea about.(IP4)

Another interviewee says she 'learns more every day', and thus becomes more independent in her daily work. She describes equality in relation to this:

> I don't need to ask anyone. I don't have to ask my boss, because I am an equal just like everyone else, who can make my own conscious decisions(IP8)

The importance of self-initiative, responsibility, and independence

This sub-theme, which is closely related to the theme discussed above, illuminates how learning appears to be related to self-initiative and independence, that is, how learning is promoted by a desire to learn new things and to be inquisitive. One interviewee pinpoints the importance of curiosity by explaining how her learning has been promoted by her desire to learn new things:

> Because I, myself, am quite curious, so I think if I hadn't been, it would have taken longer for me to learn things, since not everyone may have immediately showed you how things are done. Instead some, maybe let you try it out yourself and then if I don't ask 'what's the best way to do this?' so … If I don't ask, then maybe they, well, then it takes longer I would think.(IP11)

Likewise, another interviewee says she learns 'better by herself' than when someone tries to explain it to her or show her how to do things (I8).

Being given responsibility is also related to learning. For example, one interviewee discusses what she learned by being entrusted with responsibility:

> For example, well, on Tuesday I worked, but a colleague who … we have worked for about the same length of time. We are both pretty new to the workplace. We were alone in the store because our boss who was supposed to be there was sick. And then I really felt that it would be a learning experience because we did not have much choice. We got to help each other and relied on our own knowledge, and we took responsibility for the whole store as well, and it helped a lot. I grew a lot.(IP4)

As illustrated, this theme is based on expressions related to the importance of taking self-initiative, being independent and being given opportunities to take responsibility when new at work. That is, how curiosity and inquisitiveness, based on a desire to learn new things at work, as well as opportunities to take responsibility and to work independently, promote learning in daily work.

The importance of planned activities and information systems

This theme describes the link between learning and planned activities and information systems. During the interviews, experiences of learning are related to planned activities, such as short training courses (regarding safety, sale of tobacco products, etc.), that is formal learning, and the initial introductory training. One interviewee says the following regarding the latter:

> During the training, you get to be everywhere. Like in the storage area, with the managers, at meetings, and even the picking teams, front and pick and so on. And when you are side by side with other employees picking, you get to hear a lot. You hear a lot from them(IP7)

These processes are characterised as pre-planned and structured in relation to some type of goal for the activity. Thus, an element of management is illustrated here. Processes are planned to let the interviewee 'see the whole picture', that is, to 'visit' different places in order to get an overview of different tasks. These processes are linked to learning. The tendency to include variation and rotation also highlights the link between planned processes and learning. Below, one of the interviewees describes learning as related to opportunities to rotate between different 'places and positions' (work tasks) in a store:

> The difference is that at my job now, at X, is that we have different roles and when we need to be in different places. It's more organised. And that was not the case at my previous job. (interviewer: ok) Then it was more like you get there and you do whatever. And I also think it's so nice to be able to move around a bit from these different positions, because then you learn so much more.(IP1)

Besides illustrating the importance of variation and rotation, we interpret this as an illustration of how organisational structure adds clarity and predictability in daily work, which enables planned variation and rotation, in contrast to daily ad-hoc variation and rotation. In fact, the above workplace is described as 'more organised'. Thus, we interpret this as an illustration of how clear roles and work tasks/processes are related to learning by providing the prerequisites for 'planned and organised' variation.

Lastly, different kinds of information systems used in daily work are also linked to learning during the interviews. For example, one interviewee connects the use of a database information system to learning:

> Sometimes there are two different varieties, different brands of the same type of product, for example. And then you have had to go in to the system, compare. So then I learn(IP11)

As highlighted above, it was evident from the analysis that planned activities and the opportunity to use information systems were related to experiences of learning in daily work.

Learning as related to the private sphere

This theme illustrates how positive experiences of learning were related to private sphere and 'of working' instead of to work and work tasks (as illustrated above). In relation to this, the importance of 'family and friends' also emerged (representing the sub-theme presented below).

The importance of family and friends

Based on the analysis, learning also appears to be related to social interactions and relationships with family and friends. This theme describes how learning is related to social relationships outside the workplace. Below, one interviewee describes what she learned about the labour market from her grandfather when she entered the workforce:

> And so I know I had a lot of questions about . . . well, employment contracts and leases and things like that. And I have had that with my sister too. She is a year younger than me but has started work rather late. And she asks me a lot about it.(IP5)

Another interviewee emphasises that her parents have been just as important as colleagues for her learning. When asked how and in what way, she elaborates as follows:

> Yes, they were pretty important, because they would help me understand everything about it (working), I guess. I don't quite know how to explain.(IP1)

Another interviewee says she had precarious jobs at the beginning of her professional life, and that she ended up in a carousel where she always agreed to extra shifts, which affected her negatively. She describes how a former colleague, a person who became a close friend,

pointed out how unsustainable this was. We interpret this as an example of how family and friends are linked to learning in terms of the overarching (prevailing) conditions in working life, that is, how learning not only relates to work itself, in terms of specific work tasks and roles, but also to issues regarding how one understands, approaches and acts in relation to working life.

Discussion

The findings of the present study reflect experiences of learning among young adult retail workers. From a health promotion perspective, we argue that the opportunities for learning in daily work presented here should be understood as expressions of what provides conditions for the promotion of health and wellbeing. Put another way, how activities that enable and facilitate learning are interrelated with activities that improve health (cf. Eriksson & Lindström, 2008).

The findings show that experiences of learning among the interviewees are dependent on interaction with colleagues and customers. As such, the results thus mirror the description of workplace learning as a 'participatory practice' (Billett 2001, 2004) and reinforce the importance of social relationships for informal learning in daily work since this kind of learning is facilitated by consultation and collaboration, participation in group processes and working alongside others (Eraut, 2004, 2007, 2011: Tynjälä 2008, 2013). Here, the importance of working alongside more experienced colleagues (Tullberg, Walter, and Blomquist 2014) and the link between learning and norms and values of openness, trust and equality are highlighted. This shows how participation is not sufficient in itself, but rather how workplace learning is conditional on the quality of relationships in the workplace (Eraut, 2007) as well as on tolerance for mistakes (uncertainty) and differences (Ellström 1992). Thus, we argue here that the sub-theme *the importance of openness, trust and equality* is in line with the above. The findings of the present study also highlight the importance of customers, as they provide a more context-specific opportunity for workplace learning in retail. Indeed, in addition to demands and expectations from customers, which are generally linked to informal learning at work (Skule, 2004), customer interactions have previously been linked to opportunities for learning within retail (cf. Reegard, 2015).

The importance of planned activities (e.g. through rotation and short training courses) and the use of information systems can instead be discussed as an illustration of how the work organisation either fosters or hinders learning by determining what information the individual will be exposed to (and thus, seek) (Ellström 1992, cf. Eraut, 2004, 2007). According to Ellström (1992), if employees perform tasks under varying conditions and are able to develop a holistic understanding of the task at hand, learning will be promoted. In addition, Martini and Cavenago (2017) discuss how opportunities for workplace learning through, for example, job rotation, can enhance individual employability.

The fact that self-initiative, responsibility, and independence are linked to learning can instead be discussed as a reflection of the importance of an individual's 'learning readiness' (Ellström 2001, 426), that is, how an individual's attitudes, willingness and interest in learning constitute subjective conditions for workplace learning (Ellström 2001). More specifically, how an individual's engagement in learning is mediated not only by ' … access to work activities and interactions that provide opportunities for new learning as well as those for refining and honing what is already known' (Billett 2010, 12) but also by personal factors (Billett 2010). Beyond the context-specific learning opportunities linked to customer interactions discussed above, the findings of this study largely mirror the theoretical description of workplace learning as an interplay between context and personal factors. Indeed, in Tynjälä (2013) so-called '3-P model', recently emphasised as a comprehensive model of work-related learning by Hilkenmeier, Goller, and Schaper (2021), the importance of factors related to both the individual learner (such as commitment and self-confidence) as situational factors (such as collaboration and support) are stressed as important for work-related learning.

However, in addition to the above mentioned, the findings here also illustrate the link between learning and relationships outside work, to family and friends, as well as learning needs that are not only related to daily work but to the actual process of entering the labour market. This can be seen as illustrative of the specific needs of young adults when entering working life. In fact, relationships with family and friends also emerged as central aspects for feelings of security when new at work (Wall, Svensson, and Berg Jansson (2021). Similarly, we regard the fact that many of the interviewees' narratives touch on the importance of openness, trust and equality as a reflection of how subjective learning conditions, in terms of feeling 'allowed to ask questions', 'to make mistakes' etc. are especially important when entering working life. Hence, we suggest that these findings reflect the specific context of being young and new at work. At the same time, work and workplaces within retail in Sweden are discussed as characterised by insecure forms of employment; how young people along with women are overrepresented among part-time employees and approximately 40% of individuals younger than 30 have fixed-term contracts. Inadequate planning of staffing and scheduling is also described as one of the most common work environment problems (Holmlund and Carlén 2020). This raises questions regarding under which conditions young people enter work within retail and then specifically linked to the opportunities for establishing relationships decisive for learning and social support. At the same time, Karasek and Theorell (1990) discuss how competence development may provide strengthened control for individuals with insecure employment. These findings were also made visible by applying a health promotion perspective, that is, by emphasising and focusing on the social context in relation to the individual's whole life situation, rather than exclusively within a certain workplace (World Health Organization 1986). The results therefore indicate that social relationships inside and outside the workplace are important aspects to consider in if we are to promote the health and wellbeing of young adults in their working lives.

Even though this study did not set out to explore what is being learned, the findings illuminate some notable challenges regarding learning. In line with previous studies, which have found that fewer opportunities for formal learning are provided within low-skilled work, such as within retail (cf. Harteis et al. 2015; Kock 2018; Statistics Sweden 2018), our findings reflect mainly informal learning. In addition to the fact that this kind of learning is not visible on a CV, it is often rather specific and thus difficult to 'transfer' to other contexts (Kock 2018) and may result in undesirable outcomes, such as bad habits and dysfunctional practices (Ellström 2004; Manuti et al. 2015; Skule, 2004). Due to these reasons, informal learning is also problematised. Moreover, as new knowledge is produced rapidly in today´s labour market, informal learning alone is not adequate to secure the requisite knowledge and skills needed in the workforce (Slotte, Tynjala and Hytönen 2004). Fuller and Unwin (2004) also stresses that participation in formal learning activities affects the ability to use informal learning in a positive way. Informal learning and formal learning are therefore discussed as equally important elements of learning at work (Slotte, Tynjala and Hytönen 2004). Furthermore, this approach allows us to identify risks associated with a predominantly informal type of learning.

Regarding limitations, the analysis is driven by the exploration of 'learning when new at work', implying that only certain parts of the material, rather than the material as a whole, have been the focus of the study (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84 on 'theoretical' thematic analysis). This also means that if another analytical question had been chosen, for example, accounts of learning challenges and/or obstacles could have been identified. The results can thus only be considered in relation to the specific data that have been analysed and in relation to the specific group of interviewees, that is, in relation to the 13 young adults who were interviewed and who volunteered to participate. This is a choice which can be assumed to reflect a greater motivation to talk to researchers, which may mean that interviewees represent a population of young adults

who are more likely to talk to a leader or manager, compared to those who did not volunteer for the interviews.

Conclusions and practical implications

In applying a health promotion perspective, these findings complement previous perspectives on workplace learning by highlighting how it is not only conditions at the workplace and personal factors that affect learning but also relationships outside work. Furthermore, the study also shows that learning needs among young adults not only relate to work in a direct way, for example, to work tasks, but also to the actual process of entering the labour market. This provides important insights with the potential to contribute to the effort to promote a more sustainable working life for young adults.

In looking at the practical implications of this study, given that the findings touch on aspects that concern both structural and cultural aspects of work, the importance of management and leadership is highlighted. Indeed, the findings pinpoint the importance of organising work in a way that promotes social interaction, social relationships and social support in the workplace in order to facilitate encounters between young, new hires and more experienced colleagues. Indeed, Bell, Mengüç, and Widing (2010) discuss retail and emphasise the importance of creating the conditions for employees to build their own competence and highlight the ways in which managers can promote learning by providing a supportive environment in which individuals share their own learning with others. However, they also point out that this is often counteracted by the use of traditional incentive systems that tend to reward information hoarding and individualistic behaviour (Bell, Mengüç, and Widing 2010).

Put another way, opportunities for engaging with others are important for being able to learn when new at work, as are opportunities for variation and rotation in daily work, and opportunities to participate in planned and organised learning activities, such as introduction trainings and short training courses. Furthermore, the importance of openness, equality and trust (and management that promotes these characteristics), as well as the support of family and friends, also emerge as important from a health-promotion perspective.

Note

1. In 2019, 65% of sales associates within retail in Sweden were women. The corresponding figure for sales associates in specialist stores (specialist trading) was 61% (Statistics Sweden n.d.)

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