

Workplace learning in transient workplaces: the tourism and hospitality industry in the Arctic region

Tourism and
hospitality
industry

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to focus on conditions for workplace learning (WPL) in highly transient workplaces, exemplified by the tourism and hospitality sector in the Arctic region. The aim is to analyse and discuss how employees and employers view the conditions for employees' WPL from their respective perspectives.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is based on a qualitative approach. Ten interviews with employers and ten interviews with employees were carried out. This opens for different perspectives, including identifying “learning gaps”. The analysis was thematic, with a focus on opportunities and challenges for WPL in these transient workplace contexts.

Findings – Overall, conditions for WPL seem unsatisfactory. On the one hand, both employees and employers see WPL as essential for staff retention. Employers also see WPL as a strategy for business development and, thus, profit. On the other hand, high staff turnover makes it challenging to strategically invest in and organize for WPL, especially formal learning. Hence, a Catch-22 situation emerges.

Research limitations/implications – As this study is qualitative in its scope, generalizations are analytical rather than statistical.

Originality/value – There is a shortage of studies on conditions for WPL, focusing particularly on transient workplaces. Moreover, by including employer and employee perspectives, the authors contribute to a gap in the literature. The empirical contribution of this paper thus lies in using a theoretical WPL framework on transient workplaces, exemplified by the tourism and hospitality industries in the Arctic region.

Keywords Workplace learning, Staff turnover, Tourism and hospitality, Arctic region, Staff retention, Transient workplaces

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

This study focuses on conditions for workplace learning (WPL) in workplaces characterized by high transience, in this case, the tourism and hospitality industries [1] in the Arctic North. While there is vast research on conditions for WPL in general, there is less on conditions for WPL in the context of transient workplaces, such as those in tourism and hospitality. This is a shortage we aim to address with this paper. In fact, based on a recent systematic literature review, [Kodom-Wiredu et al. \(2022\)](#) claim that there is little research on informal learning in the tourism and hospitality industries, even though informal learning “in hospitality and tourism is a significant contributor to improving individual and organizational performance” (p. 13). There is even less done in the context of the Arctic region, which is characterized by huge skills-supply challenges due to geographical, demographical and labour-market factors. The tourism and hospitality industries are known for high transience generally, but particularly so in the context of the Arctic North. This area exemplifies a context where the transience can be assumed to be higher than average in the industry, as it is a geographically peripheral region with a long, cold and dark winter and low population density. The Norrbotten region has 2.6 inhabitants per km², compared to the Swedish average of 25.8 inhabitants per km² ([Regionfakta, 2023](#)). In addition, the population is decreasing and ageing ([Ekonomifakta, 2023](#)), and there are simply not enough citizens in the region to possibly cover the vacant positions in the industry.

Moreover, the so-called “green deal” is taking place in the north of Sweden, with several industry initiatives, such as large car battery plants and fossil-free steel production, which are attracting and recruiting individuals from other sectors. This is exacerbating the issue of the skills-supply challenge ([Haltorp, 2022](#); [Kejerhag, 2022](#); [Lindberg, 2021](#)), thus contributing to even higher staff transience. At the same time, the hospitality and tourism industries are rapidly growing, and despite the COVID-19 crisis, the number of visitors for 2022 has already exceeded pre-pandemic levels ([Tillväxtverket, 2023](#)). These characteristics altogether make workplaces in the tourism and hospitality industries in the Arctic North region an interesting case in terms of conditions for WPL. Context-specific studies can be argued to be important, as both previous and current research concludes that WPL is a highly contextualized and multifaceted phenomenon (see, for example, [Brandi and Iannone, 2021](#); [Evans et al., 2002](#); [Manuti et al., 2015](#)).

Against this background, this paper aims to analyse and discuss how employees and employers in the tourism and hospitality industries in the Swedish Arctic region view the conditions for employees’ WPL from their respective perspectives. In doing so, we take an exploratory, qualitative approach. Research questions guiding the study are:

- RQ1. How are conditions for workplace learning described by employers and employees in the tourism and hospitality industries?
- RQ2. What challenges and opportunities can be identified?
- RQ3. To what extent do employees and employers share similar views?

Indeed, on a general level, the tourism and hospitality industries worldwide face great challenges when it comes to attracting, recruiting and retaining staff ([Ashton, 2018](#)). There are many different reasons for the staff shortage in tourism and hospitality. Research has pointed to factors such as low levels of pay, unattractive working hours and a negative industry image ([Anyalem et al., 2016](#); [Lin et al., 2018](#)), but also poor conditions for learning and development ([Ashton, 2018](#); [Anyalem et al., 2016](#)). There is ample research showing why and how good conditions for WPL are essential for any business. Firstly, good conditions for WPL can bring higher employee satisfaction, which, in turn, lowers intentions

to leave and thus increases intentions to stay. For instance, [Lehtonen et al. \(2021, p. 109\)](#) found that when there is:

[. . .] higher access to resources that support learning, more opportunities for professional growth and satisfactory career decisions made by employees were connected to lower turnover intention. The processes of well-being and learning are strongly intertwined and mutually reinforce each other, reducing the willingness to change a job in the near future.

Others in the field of WPL, such as [Cerasoli et al. \(2018\)](#), [Kyndt et al. \(2011\)](#), [Lyons and Bandura \(2022\)](#) and [Puhakka et al. \(2021\)](#) confirm this thesis and emphasize that if employers want to retain employees, they need to offer good conditions for learning. Moreover, [Karasek and Theorell \(1990\)](#), based on their now seminal work environment study, argued that good conditions for learning can buffer against a bad work environment.

Secondly, if the employees' learning goes hand in hand with the development of the business itself, it gives extra momentum to the business development and as such can bring higher profitability. For instance, [Lancaster and Di Milia \(2015, p. 442\)](#) found that "organisations that develop their learning capability increased [. . .] customer satisfaction and profitability". On the same note, [Hasson et al. \(2016, p. 115\)](#), referring to a vast list of literature, claim that "organizational learning is a well-documented determinant of desirable organizational outcomes such as financial performance, innovation capacity and customer value". Furthermore, [Lancaster and Di Milia \(2015\)](#) argue that employees who are given good WPL opportunities perform better. This has a direct positive impact on businesses. Similarly, [Fraj et al. \(2015\)](#) point to WPL as a strategy that supports organizational competitiveness and financial profitability. In other words, it is well established that WPL is a fruitful strategy on an individual level, as well as on a business development level.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we present the theoretical underpinnings, providing insights into conditions for WPL. Secondly, we describe the methodological considerations, including study design and analysis of the empirical data. Thereafter, we present our findings, followed by a discussion and conclusions, including identifying avenues for further research.

Theoretical underpinnings

In the introduction, we pinpointed why good conditions for WPL are essential for any business to develop their staff and deliver prosperous services, but also as a way of being an attractive employer who invests in their staff. In this section, we discuss what is meant by WPL and the role of employers in making successful WPL take place. In other words, how can work be organized to support WPL? Firstly, we describe what WPL is, and secondly, we turn the attention to what actor(s) drive WPL and implications of that. We then move on and discuss how work can be organized to enhance conditions for WPL, and finally, we give some examples of factors that can inhibit WPL.

In their literature review on WPL, [Manuti et al. \(2015\)](#) state that there is not one definition of the concept, as WPL is examined in different disciplines from different perspectives. In a broad sense, however, WPL involves learning that takes place in daily work. We would like to argue that WPL can be viewed as learning that takes place in, at, and for work, formally and informally. Formal learning is, for example, courses taking place outside of the workplace, whereas informal learning is "predominantly unstructured, experiential, noninstitutional, and occurs during daily work activities" ([Kodom-Wiredu et al., 2022, p. 14](#)). However, [Manuti et al. \(2015\)](#) discuss the informal and formal aspects of learning and suggest moving away from seeing them as binary. Instead, these aspects should be seen as

parallel, “as they are co-present in any learning situation both in and out of the workplace” (p. 12).

Moreover, WPL can be “driven by” both individuals and organizations (Evans and Rainbird, 2004). Indeed, the driver for learning is central in any circumstance. A circumstance of importance in our specific study is that we examine conditions for WPL in the tourism and hospitality industries which by and large employ individuals with low formal qualifications. While findings seem inconclusive (Kyndt *et al.*, 2009, 2012), there are indications that low-qualified employees are more negatively geared towards learning than others, as they often connotate learning with formal learning and often have negative experiences of their own schooling (Kyndt *et al.*, 2012). This line of argument resonates with Evans and Rainbird (2004), claiming that employees may see learning as positive, a status marker and a sign of employer investment; however, it can also be seen as negative, as a threat and as a sign of distrust. This means there may be an extra challenge for the employing organizations in terms of organizing and engaging their employees in learning activities.

This brings us to the issue of how WPL can be organized and what the employing organization can and needs to do to facilitate learning. There is ample research emphasizing the dual relationship between the individual and organization when it comes to learning and outcomes of learning in the workplace. For instance, Lancaster and Di Milia (2014) discuss how individual and organizational aspects interact and state that what learning occurs is not only up to the individual but also only to the organization. Therefore, the organization needs to plan strategically and intentionally, carry out and follow-up any learning activities to create engagement and support, but also to ensure that new learnings are implemented and used in daily work practices. Lancaster and Di Milia (2014) also find, via their study of employees, that development programmes need to be perceived as relevant for the job. As such, the content in courses needs to align with the daily work and with the overall organizational strategy. Finally, the authors conclude that the management’s engagement in learning and development is essential for employees (Lancaster and Di Milia, 2014).

Via a quantitative study, Lohman (2006) finds that factors that inhibit participation in informal learning activities are: lack of time, lack of proximity to colleagues and insufficient funding. Based on this, Lohman (2006) argues that “work areas need to be strategically designed so that employees, especially those in their early stages of development, are located near colleagues in the same technical or professional area” as to “promote collegial interaction and sharing” (p. 153). Moreover, “unencumbered time” is essential, that is, to have time and thus “room” for informal learning in daily work. Kodom-Wiredu *et al.* (2022), in discussing the hospitality and tourism industries specifically, claim that informal learning “is a significant contributor to improving individual and organizational performance” (p. 13). Cerasoli *et al.* (2018) state that 70%–90% of all learning takes place in the form of informal learning. This line of argument is supported by others. For instance, Wallo *et al.* (2021, p. 59) state that “employee learning does not necessarily arise on its own. It needs to be supported, made visible and disseminated within an organization”. When it comes to low-qualified employees specifically, Kyndt *et al.* (2012, p. 180) state that “just increasing the number of opportunities will not suffice when the goal is raising the participation in learning activities of low-qualified employees; attitudes towards participation should also change”. This indicates that special attention needs to be given regarding conditions for WPL in terms of how work is organized to support WPL in the tourism and hospitality industries, where many of the employees have low formal qualifications.

To sum up, indeed, we have discussed what WPL is, and what actor(s) drive WPL, and it has been found that employers need to organize strategically and practically for both informal and formal learning activities to be possible and encouraged. However, in the tourism and hospitality industries in the Arctic North, some context-specific circumstances need to be considered. The study context is further described in the next section.

Methodological considerations

Study context

The focus of this study responds to the lack of research on learning in the tourism and hospitality industries (Kodom-Wiredu *et al.*, 2022), which are characterized by high transience. As described initially, contextual factors of relevance in our study stem from the location where there is a severe staff shortage due to geographical and demographical issues (i.e. a peripheral, cold place with a decreasing and ageing population). The shortage is intensified by the so-called Green Deal and the establishment of new industries requiring high numbers of employees in the Arctic North. Moreover, organizing for WPL in the tourism and hospitality industries specifically can be seen as complex for some key reasons. Firstly, workplaces in these industries are characterized by high turnover, where many employees “come and go”, lessening the possibilities for continuity. Secondly, many businesses in these industries, such as hotels, are open 24/7, meaning that it is difficult to organize joint times to meet as not all employees can be gathered at the same time. Thirdly, many of the employees in these industries have low formal qualifications, which, according to previous research, is connected to having a negative view of learning (Kyndt *et al.*, 2012). Taken together, these aspects influence the conditions for WPL and are, therefore, central to understanding the findings.

Data collection and analysis

We aimed to examine individuals’ perceived views of conditions for WPL in transient workplaces and the opportunities and challenges associated with this. Hence, the study assists in addressing a scarcely studied area (Kodom-Wiredu *et al.*, 2022). Considering the exploratory purpose of the study, a qualitative approach was taken to capture rich and holistic data. As Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, qualitative data are nested in a real context, meaning that the influence of the local context is taken into account in the analysis.

Data were collected through interviews with both employers and employees who were asked to describe their workplaces and work in general, and conditions for employee WPL in particular. This dual perspective is motivated by a “lack of research designs that incorporate rigour such as multi-source data, mixed-methods” (Kodom-Wiredu *et al.*, 2022, p. 13) and that “most of the studies used single source data” (Kodom-Wiredu *et al.*, 2022, p. 13). The researchers relied on a purposeful sampling strategy to identify relevant interviewees in companies and organizations of various sizes and sectors within tourism and hospitality. This included hotels, restaurants, tourism activities companies and destination management organizations from different parts of the region. Between the employer and employee categories, interviewees from five different cities/municipal areas are represented. In addition, the interviewees from destination management organizations represent the tourism and hospitality sector at different levels ranging from the whole region to the municipality level. Some of the hotels in the sample belong to larger chains, but most of the workplaces are small or micro-sized companies [2], just as in the tourism and hospitality sector in general. For the employee category, we also aimed to get a sample of people with a variety of experiences and positions, all of whom work in customer-facing roles. Hence, in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985), we strived for maximum variation in the sample with respect to achieving a broad range of information.

Potential participants were found through researchers' previous knowledge and networks, combined with online searches and were initially contacted via email. The purposeful sampling was, to some extent, combined with snowballing, as we got in contact with a few new interviewees through referrals from those already interviewed. In total, the research team conducted ten interviews with managers and entrepreneurs representing the employer perspective and ten interviews with employees. At this point, we could see signs of thematic saturation in the responses.

All interviews took place via teleconferencing tools such as Zoom; first due to the pandemic, but also for convenience, as some interviewees were situated in rural areas a fair distance from us as researchers. A semi-structured interview guide was used to cover the same overarching topics in all interviews while remaining flexible and open for probing. The duration of the interviews varied between about 30 min to 1 h, with an average of around 45 min. All interviews were recorded and thereafter transcribed verbatim. As the interviews were conducted in Swedish, we completed the analysis in the original language to maintain content validity and translated the final results during the write-up of the paper.

To ensure rigour in the analysis process, two researchers analysed the interview material, first individually and then together. Following the six-step procedure described by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), a thematic analysis of the collected data was conducted. We searched for patterns in terms of conditions for WPL, focusing on opportunities and challenges. Given that the theory of WPL was used as an underlying framework, the analysis was not purely inductive. The following overriding themes emerged from the interview data: general conditions in the specific context, conditions for formal learning and conditions for informal learning. For clarity, we mark quotes with M/E, as in managers/entrepreneurs or E as in employee.

Considering the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers maintained important standards such as investigator triangulation, variation in the times of the interviews, checking for discrepant data and archiving all recordings and notes ([Lewis, 2009](#); [Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)). A limitation of qualitative studies is the possibility to generalize. However, the aim has not been to arrive at statistically generalizable conclusions but rather to shed light on patterns in terms of experiences of opportunities and challenges as they relate to conditions for WPL. Thus, generalizations are analytical and relate to the contextual factors presented above.

Findings

Firstly, we will present general circumstances for WPL in the studied context. Secondly, we will discuss conditions – opportunities and challenges – for formal learning, such as courses outside of everyday work, as well as informal learning, such as asking another staff member for advice.

General circumstances – too transient for learning

The circumstances for working strategically as well as practically with WPL are described as challenging by employers. The challenges largely relate to that the industry, and thus also the workplaces, is characterized by “high transience”, even “too transient to have routines for learning and development” (M/E). This transience is described as employees coming and going, changing employers often, and therefore, the industry has many stepping-stone roles. It also has to do with that the businesses often operate 24/7, which creates a challenge for employers in terms of being able to gather staff for any joint learning activities.

A picture of WPL being entangled with the issue of skills supply in the Arctic North emerges clearly. It even seems difficult for employers to distinguish between conditions for learning and development and the skills-supply issue. There is a general staff shortage in the Arctic North, and this includes the hospitality and tourism industries. Some expressions of this are:

There are not enough people (M/E).

In this kind of business you have a huge turnover of staff, it is about keeping your head above the water all the time (M/E).

It is a huge problem. As I said, we lose incredibly many employees (M/E).

The staff-shortage issue is mainly due to an aging and decreasing population in the area, and new Green Deal industry investments which involve hiring extensive numbers of employees in a region where there is already a shortage of employable individuals. However, it also relates to perceptions of the hospitality and tourism industries as characterized by less favourable working conditions and being mainly stepping-stone industries where many young individuals work for a shorter period before moving on to studies or other jobs. “The pay is low, the working hours are a bit challenging” (M/E), one employer says, a picture which is widely shared by other interviewees.

To think about, and organize for, WPL, when everyday work largely deals with having enough staff at all workstations seems challenging:

To be honest, I have a lump in my stomach all the time. There is not enough time, and we never get there [to think about and organize for learning and development] (M/E).

At the same time, learning and development are seen as key to developing the businesses, as well as retaining staff. “We are positive towards everyone learning and developing. It is a way of retaining staff too, to stimulate them to perform and do a good job” (M/E).

However, a “catch-22” emerges. Even if employers see the need to invest in WPL (formal and informal learning), there are practical obstacles. The issue of WPL is overshadowed by a constant challenge to find staff and have sufficient staff to cover all shifts. This means that conditions for learning and development are closely linked to a larger issue, namely, attracting, recruiting and retaining individuals in and to the region. Thus, high turnover makes it challenging to strategically as well as practically organize for learning and development. As an example, local anchorage is described as essential to retain staff not only with a certain employer but at least within the local community or even in the region. “It is a challenge to find employees that are locally anchored” because if employees are not anchored or do not become anchored soon enough “at the end of the day they never stay” (M/E).

To sum up, regarding the general contextual circumstances, a picture of high transience emerges, which brings severe challenges for employers to organize for WPL mainly, but perhaps also for employees to a certain extent, as shall be developed in the next themes of conditions for formal WPL, and conditions for informal WPL.

Conditions for formal workplace learning. Employers and employer representatives unanimously describe WPL as important. Often, they seem to refer to formal learning activities, such as courses outside of everyday work. “One has to work with development and learning because if they develop, there are better chances they stay on” (M/E). However, a dilemma can be deciphered. Learning and development are described as important, partly to deliver high-quality services to customers and thus make a profit, and partly to be perceived as an attractive employer, making employees more prone to stay. All employers

and employer representatives agree on this. Nonetheless, many interviewees paint a picture of challenges linked to seeing courses as an investment and thus offering courses to employees when the staff turnover is as high as it is.

In the industry, and perhaps even more so in the geographical context of this study, there are many micro (less than ten employees) and small businesses (between 10 and 49 employees), and some a bit bigger (more than 49 employees), who describe managing on the marginal, and not having the economic muscles to pay for courses. “There are no funds for formal training” (M/E) is one expression of this. Another expression is that “many in the industry come and go, it becomes very costly to train staff all the time” (M/E); others yet describe it as “a big risk, that staff hit the road after having gone through a course” (M/E). It is pointed out that this is “not sustainable” (M/E) in the long run. Others share the picture of a dilemma related to offering formal learning:

It is a big cost we have to take [...] partly it is an obstacle, but at the same time, we have to see it as an investment in the future (M/E).

There are some exceptions among businesses with a “high-end” customer base, where margins are less tight. Among these employers, the costs of courses do not seem to make up an issue at all:

Everyone who wants to take a course and learn and develop can do so, and take licenses for vehicles or what it might be [...] As an employer one is stupid if one does not offer that [courses] (M/E).

The employer dilemma related to daring offering and investing in formal learning, such as courses outside of everyday work, shines through via the employees as well. One of the employees describes having been turned down when asking for a course. One employee, in particular, has therefore paid for their own course. “There are very few places that offer development positions and such [...]. I have paid for my own training” (E). Another example is an employee who thinks that employers need to offer courses as to retain staff. “They have to organize courses for the staff” (E). This indicates a match in employer intention and employees’ needs but a mismatch between what employees want and what employers offer. At the same time, a valid question to raise is what can be expected of employees to stay attractive on the labour market, whether offering courses should only be up to employers or if further education via formal courses may, in fact, also be a responsibility of each individual on the labour market.

There are also expressions among the employees of being mobile, of being open to and wanting to change employers, as to learn more and gain experience:

I jump around a fair bit, because as soon as I feel that I know how it’s done, as soon as I feel comfortable, or too comfortable, then I don’t develop, and then I want to upgrade. So, I have changed [employers] very often (E).

Here, we see that it is seen as natural and sought after to change employers often, which further aggravates the situation for employers wanting to offer formal learning possibilities. A dilemma can be identified. On the one hand, it is important to offer formal learning opportunities via courses, as it is an investment in the businesses; on the other hand, it is difficult to see this as an investment due to the high staff transience. The return on investment is very uncertain. One way for employers to lessen the risk is that the employee signs a contract stating that they will stay with the same employer for a pre-determined amount of time:

It’s a big investment. Then they might want me to sign a contract beforehand, and I’m unsure of how willing I am to do so. But that’s kind of my choice and not theirs (E).

However, as the quote shows, even those who are interested in certain courses might be hesitant to sign such a contract.

Another contextual dilemma is related to the specific type of businesses there are within the industry. The businesses are often relatively small, with few employees and they are open 24/7. This means that often the employees “are stuck in the everyday operations/work” (M/E), as one employer describes it. “The problem is to set aside staff in a small business because they [the employees] have such an important role [...]” (M/E). Another expression of this contextual dilemma is that “They are never here at the same time [...] I can’t gather my employees, it is not possible. They are spread out during the entire day and night” (M/E). Others express it slightly less strongly, still with the same message. “Time is something which makes it a bit of a challenge” (M/E). One employee describes how she has been offered to take a formal course, but in her spare time and not during her paid work time, and she, therefore, had to decline the offer (M/E). This possibly mirrors an employer’s attempt to find a time to send an employee for a course that does not make the business short of staff. At the same time, as the employee was not offered a salary, it was not attractive for the employee, and the “offer” may mirror a problematic employer attitude.

To sum up, two main challenges for formal WPL emerge. The first is the monetary dilemma, how employers can see investing in formal learning as an investment when turnover is high, and the new competence may well walk out the door just after finishing a costly course. Apart from the monetary dilemma, it is practically difficult to offer formal learning opportunities, such as courses outside of everyday work, since work is organized so that it takes place 24/7, sometimes rurally situated and many businesses are small with few employees. When it is already hard to cover all shifts, sending employees away for courses may be very difficult.

Informal workplace learning. Many of the employer representatives refer to formal learning when the issue of WPL comes up, often discussed as problematic, as has been described above. Informal learning, on the other hand, seems natural and common, as if taken for granted. This seems to relate to that many employees do not have any formal education for working in the industry, and thus, learning from more experienced employees is the way to learn how to carry out one’s tasks. “That is what we apply here, learning in the daily business” (M/E), one employer says. Some seem to have strategies linked to informal learning, such as job rotation – letting employees learn to work in different roles, as to offer learning opportunities for the individuals, but also to lessen the vulnerability in the business. “We use [...] we train staff so that they can jump between divisions, it becomes less vulnerable that way. It is fun too, it stimulates staff” (M/E). Various examples of informal learning are described in the interviews, from job rotation to going alongside more experienced colleagues and asking each other continuously. Ideas of *potential* informal learning opportunities are also brought up, like study visits in other but similar businesses, but this is more on an idea stage rather than something which has been realized, according to employers and employees.

The employees describe informal learning as the biggest source of learning. “The informal, that is how I have learned almost my entire life. I have learned from the old foxes” (E). The informal learning opportunities seem appreciated by the employees. A challenge here is for the employees who are stayers and who have long experience, as they repeatedly are subject to training new colleagues. This can be experienced as challenging by this so important group of employees who stand for much of the continuity. “Those who have worked longer, it is hard for them to keep starting all over again [by training new colleagues]”, one employer says (M/E). One employee describes a dilemma related to training new colleagues. “I’ve probably had the same wage for many years, even though I’ve

been given more responsibilities, more of a leading position” (M/E). This interviewee further explains that she has responsibility for training new colleagues, however, with very little involvement or support from the employer and no monetary compensation. This mismatch between increased workload and responsibility and lack of wage development can be assumed to discourage stayers.

Moreover, for a workplace short on staff, it may be difficult to make the informal learning take place while still catering to a good work environment. One employee describes how learning often takes place “there and then” without sufficient time to learn in a conducive way. This employee would like “less panic-learning” and to have time to learn during paid time rather than during her spare time (M/E). To learn *ad hoc*, when there is a long line and not enough staff, is experienced as challenging. As [Lohman \(2006\)](#) stated, unencumbered time is needed to open for sustainable informal learning possibilities.

To sum up, informal learning seems taken for granted. Still, the high transience and the time aspect seem to make up challenges for good conditions for informal learning.

Discussion

This paper has aimed to analyse and discuss how employees and employers in the tourism and hospitality industry in the Arctic region view the conditions for employees’ WPL from their respective perspectives. The following research questions have guided the study: *How are conditions for workplace learning described by employers and employees in the tourism and hospitality industries? What challenges and opportunities can be identified? To what extent do employees and employers share similar views?*

A main finding in this study is that strategically and practically organizing for WPL comes with certain context-specific challenges in the tourism and hospitality industries. Firstly, as the workplaces in the industries in general, and perhaps in the Arctic North in particular, are characterized by staff shortage, high transience, high employee turnover, even having staff to offer WPL in the first place is often difficult. These challenges of high staff transience are accentuated in the Arctic North, which is geographically peripheral; “in the middle of nowhere”, with a decreasing population but still growing tourism and hospitality industries, paired with new “green industries” surging the labour market of employees. In fact, employers can hardly seem to distinguish between conditions for learning and development and conditions for competence supply. A dilemma emerges where employers see the need for investing in learning, both formal and informal learning opportunities, while, at the same time, the problem with attracting, recruiting and retaining staff brings practical constraints. For instance, investing in formal learning via courses is not only an investment but also a cost, as training employees only to see them leave shortly after is costly. At the same time, employers agree that it is not possible to refrain from investing in formal learning, as this is essential for business development and profit, as well as for staff retention possibilities. Employees share the view of the importance of formal learning. However, this is a need which is not satisfactorily met. A mismatch between what employees seem to want and what employers seem to offer can be identified. These findings can be related to [Lancaster and Di Milia’s \(2014\)](#) thesis that work needs to be strategically organized to allow for good conditions for WPL to improve both staff performance and business profitability. It seems employers, for various reasons, do not always make that happen.

Secondly, as the businesses are often short on staff, and businesses are often operating 24/7, it is practically challenging to gather employees for joint formal learning activities. When it comes to informal learning, the opportunities are perhaps better. However, as there is high staff turnover, repeatedly training new employees becomes burdensome for the

employees who stay but also for the employers – thus a shared view in terms of the problem. However, a mismatch between employers and employees can be seen in terms of remuneration for training new employees, where employees find it dissatisfactory not to be remunerated when shouldering the role of training new employees. Moreover, when short of staff, devoting time to informal learning may be seen as a burden for employees. As described initially, [Lohman \(2006\)](#) argued that time is of the essence for learning to be given space and place. It seems due to contextual constraints, there is not always enough time, thus challenging the conditions for WPL.

To sum up, conditions for WPL in tourism and hospitality industries in the Arctic North are described as challenging due to the extreme staff shortage and staff transience. Challenges are mainly how to organize for WPL when there is not enough staff, and staff come and go to a high extent. Though employees and employers share similar views on the importance of WPL, employees are dissatisfied with the current learning affordances of the employers, indicating room for development among employers. In this study, it becomes apparent both employers and employees identify WPL as essential, and both see dilemmas in WPL practically being realized in the workplace. It seems there is a Catch-22, where WPL is seen as important but is difficult to organize due to contextual constraints, which, in turn, may lead to even higher staff transience.

Conclusions and implications

In our review of the literature, there is ample research indicating that conditions for WPL are insufficient in the hospitality and tourism industries. However, there are hardly any studies focusing on reasons for the conditions for WPL being unsatisfactory in workplaces and industries characterized by high staff transience in general, and hospitality and tourism in particular. In fact, only a couple of studies were found that dealt specifically with WPL and staff transience – but in different sectors and/or different geographical locations. In examining “workplace learning in a contemporary blue-collar work environment characterized by transience, language diversity, and limited opportunities for human-human interaction” (2020: 369), [Hovens](#) found that “the often-temporary work relations between human newcomers and human [...] constituted the largest obstacle for workplace learning” ([Hovens, 2020](#), p. 385). He claims that transience in staff can be demotivating in terms of investing in the learning process of newcomers. That is, knowing that staff come and go, stayers may be less prone to engage in WPL with newcomers. And perhaps vice versa, newcomers, who see themselves as only there for a limited period, might be less prone to invest in joint WPL processes.

These findings indicate that the characteristics of the workforce, in terms of staff transience, help explain the dilemma with unsatisfactory WPL in workplaces in the tourism and hospitality industries. One of the main issues with organizing for learning seems to be the shortage and transience of staff. There is, therefore, good reason to try to decrease the staff transience in workplaces, and ironically, one way of doing so is to offer good conditions for WPL. Moreover, in a study by [Abelsen et al. \(2020\)](#) focusing on the health-care sector in the Arctic North, there are indications that we are witnessing similar trends of staff transience in other sectors than the tourism and hospitality industries, which is claimed problematic both in terms of quality and customer experience. While not a specific focus on WPL, the study helps pinpoint that contextual characteristics – in this case, staff transience – are important to take into consideration when examining working conditions in general and conditions for WPL in particular.

Another study that resonates with ours is that of [Berg Jansson and Engström \(2022\)](#). Their study focuses on conditions for learning in relation to temporary agency staffing in the health-care sector in Sweden, describing workplaces where regular and temporary staff

(nurses in that case) work side by side in the very same workplace, although with different employers (and thus different employment and working conditions). These circumstances, the authors claim, make some of the workforce characterized by flexibility and the other part by continuity. Some staff members, i.e. the regular nurses employed by the regions, stand for continuity, whereas another group of employees stands for flexibility, i.e. the staffing agency nurses, who are employed by staffing companies and come and go in workplaces. It is found that these two groups of employees have different conditions for learning, where the regulars have better opportunities for formal learning, whereas the staffing agency nurses have better conditions for informal learning, as they see various workplaces and ways of handling cases. A challenge with the “come and go” staffing is discussed, which resonates with our study, where we see challenges in terms of conditions for learning when there is high staff transience, discontinuity being a negative result.

Results in our study indicate that the “stayers” bear the burden of repeatedly training new colleagues and, thus, in a sense, become the pillars of continuity without necessarily receiving any monetary or other rewards. High staff turnover in the hospitality and tourism industries thus seems to have similarities with the temporary agency phenomena. There is indeed a practical challenge for employers to organize for learning for both stayers and leavers and simultaneously work with regular business development. This means there is a need to devote attention to employers’ and managers’ conditions for organizing WPL in companies and other organizations with these characteristics (see, for example, [Wallo et al., 2021](#)). This is a line of argument supported by Eurofound, which points out the hospitality sector as one of four sectors that has lower than general job security, and employees also receive less training than in other sectors. Eurofound states that “a substantial policy effort is needed to incorporate workers from these sectors into lifelong learning schemes or company training” ([Eurofound, 2020](#), p. 2). A recent report from [Madgavkar et al. \(2023\)](#) supports this line of argument, where it is argued that companies can gain competitiveness via focusing on good conditions for employee learning. Thus, the *empirical contribution* of this paper is that of qualitative insights via a dual perspective based on interviews, with both employers’ and employees’ views on conditions for employee WPL in the context of the Arctic North (Sweden). We have drawn a picture of dilemmas related to WPL in highly transient workplaces in the tourism and hospitality industries.

The *theoretical contribution* of this paper, on the other hand, lies in using a theoretical framework on WPL specifically in the context of transient workplaces in one specific sector. Thus, when discussing conditions for WPL, it is essential to consider geographical- and sector-based contextual factors. While describing conditions for WPL in tourism and hospitality workplaces in itself may not seem novel, we argue that by adopting a dual perspective to examine conditions for WPL in transient workplaces (such as the tourism and hospitality industries in the Arctic North), often with low-skilled employees, we uncover dilemmas and problems related to organizing for WPL in these workplace contexts.

Overall, there is a shortage of studies of WPL in transient workplace contexts, such as tourism and hospitality, which is a gap addressed in this paper. In doing so, we have discussed how WPL is (heavily) impacted by the workplace context, such as the level of transience and access to potential employees in the local/regional area. When an industry is growing, combined with high staff transience in the industry and a shortage of citizens/potential employees, conditions for WPL may need to be organized differently to be conducive for employers and employees.

This study was conducted with an exploratory purpose, and the results discussed here are based on a qualitative study with a small sample. Further research is needed to uncover successful ways of organizing work to allow for WPL in these kinds of workplace contexts,

perhaps by identifying best practices or success factors. Studies could use or combine different methods such as interviews, participant observations of work situations and content analysis of online sources such as company websites or social media where staff learning and training are discussed. Quantitative approaches comparing employers' and employees' perspectives in statistical terms could also help shed more light on the differences and similarities found in this study. Finally, studies in other countries and sectors but with similar contextual factors will be important to further understand the challenges and possibilities of WPL in transient industries.

Notes

1. The tourism and hospitality industries include any actors that sell to customers whose purchases are regarded as tourism consumption (Bohlin *et al.*, 2017).
2. Small: Less than 50 employees and turnover \leq €10m. Micro: Less than ten employees and turnover \leq €2m (European Commission, 2023).

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