

Beyond Individual Capabilities: Organizational Learning and Agility as Drivers of Learning Organizations

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Abstract. *Learning organizations are extensively regarded as a key source of adaptability in increasingly complex and dynamic environments. Although prior research has emphasized both individual capabilities and organizational practices as potential antecedents, empirical evidence on their relative importance remains mixed. This study examines whether perceptions of an organization as a learning organization are primarily driven by individual-level characteristics or by organizational-level learning and agility practices. Using cross-sectional survey data from 213 employees across organizations of different sizes, sectors, and ownership structures, the analysis employs descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression models. The results show that organizational learning and organizational agility are strong and robust predictors of perceptions of a learning organization, jointly explaining more than half of the observed variance. In contrast, individual learning orientation and individual agility exhibit weak or non-significant effects once organizational practices are considered. Additional analyses reveal no systematic differences between top management and non-managerial respondents, suggesting that perceptions of learning organizations are not driven by hierarchical position. Overall, the findings provide empirical support for the predominance of organizational practices over individual capabilities in shaping learning organizations and contribute to ongoing debates on the micro- and macro-foundations of organizational learning.*

Keywords: learning organization; organizational learning; organizational agility; individual learning orientation; survey research.

Introduction

Organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by uncertainty, rapid technological change, and intensified competitive pressure. Under such conditions, the ability to learn, adapt, and continuously improve has become a central concern for both scholars and practitioners. The concept of the learning organization has emerged as a prominent response to these challenges, emphasizing systematic learning, knowledge sharing, and adaptive capability as foundations for long-term organizational effectiveness.

Despite extensive conceptual development, empirical research on learning organizations remains fragmented. A central unresolved issue concerns the relative importance of individual-level capabilities versus organizational-level practices in shaping learning organizations. On the one hand, prior research has highlighted the role of individual learning orientation, adaptability, and agility as micro-foundations of organizational learning. From this perspective, learning organizations are understood as the aggregation of learning-oriented individuals whose skills and attitudes enable collective learning processes. On the other hand, a growing body of literature

argues that learning organizations cannot be reduced to individual attributes alone and instead depend on organizational structures, routines, leadership practices, and cultural norms that enable learning and adaptation at scale.

Empirical evidence addressing this tension remains limited and inconclusive. Many studies focus on either individual or organizational antecedents in isolation, making it difficult to assess their relative explanatory power. Moreover, survey-based studies of learning organizations often face concerns regarding potential managerial bias, as perceptions of organizational learning may differ systematically between top management and non-managerial employees. These limitations highlight the need for empirical analyses that simultaneously examine individual and organizational factors while explicitly testing whether hierarchical position influences perceptions of learning organizations.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating the determinants of learning organizations using survey data from 213 employees (among them also – entrepreneurs) across organizations of different sizes, sectors, and ownership structures in Bulgaria. Bulgaria is an informative employee-level laboratory to explore the diffusion of the practice of learning organizations. As an EU member characterized by strong external convergence pressures but uneven organizational capabilities, Bulgarian workplaces display substantial variation in learning-supportive practices. There is a strong multinational presence, achieved by acquiring (acquiring the company because of the team and not assets), normal acquisition or de-novo establishment, which have different expected impact on how teams learn. There are foreign firms established by migrants and various locally controlled firms. This heterogeneity allows for the examination of how learning-organization principles are experienced by employees rather than merely adopted symbolically. Demographic pressures, skill shortages, and ongoing organizational transformation further increase the practical relevance of employee learning and adaptability.

Specifically, the study compares the explanatory power of individual-level characteristics - individual learning orientation and individual agility - with organizational-level practices related to organizational learning and organizational agility. In addition, it examines whether respondents occupying top managerial positions differ systematically from other employees in their assessment of their organization as a learning one.

By jointly analyzing individual and organizational antecedents within a unified empirical framework, this study contributes to the learning organization literature in three ways. First, it provides empirical evidence on the relative importance of organizational learning and agility practices compared to individual capabilities. Second, it addresses concerns about managerial bias by explicitly testing the role of hierarchical position in shaping perceptions of learning organizations. Third, it offers practical insights for organizations seeking to foster learning organizations, suggesting that investments in organizational practices may be more effective than approaches focusing exclusively on individual capabilities.

Literature review

Learning Organizations and Organizational Learning

The concept of the learning organization (Senge, 1990) has its foundations in organizational learning theory and in particular double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996) and has been extensively discussed as a means through which organizations enhance adaptability and long-term performance. Early contributions emphasize collective learning processes, shared vision, systems thinking, and continuous improvement as defining characteristics of learning organizations (Garvin, 1993; March, 1991). From this perspective, learning organizations are not merely

collections of knowledgeable individuals, but rather systems in which learning is embedded in routines, structures, and decision-making processes.

A related stream of research focuses on organizational learning as a set of processes through which organizations acquire, interpret, and apply knowledge. Organizational learning is often conceptualized as an ongoing cycle of knowledge creation, sharing, and institutionalization that enables organizations to respond effectively to internal and external change (Crossman et al, 1999). Empirical studies consistently highlight the importance of leadership support, knowledge-sharing systems, and open communication in sustaining organizational learning over time.

Recent research has further emphasized the close relationship between learning organizations and organizational flexibility. In particular, Velitchkov and Yaneva (2025) conceptualize learning organizations as dynamic systems in which learning and flexibility are mutually reinforcing. The authors argue that organizational learning enables flexibility by supporting adaptive decision-making, while flexibility, in turn, creates conditions that facilitate experimentation and continuous learning. This perspective underscores the importance of organizational-level practices and structures in shaping learning organizations, rather than attributing learning capacity solely to individual characteristics.

Organizational Agility as a Complementary Capability

Closely related to organizational learning is the concept of organizational agility, which refers to an organization's ability to sense changes in its environment and respond to them rapidly and effectively. Organizational agility has been discussed extensively in the literature on dynamic capabilities (Teece et al, 1997 and Teece, 2007), where it is viewed as a higher-order capability that enables organizations to reconfigure resources and processes in response to uncertainty.

Organizational agility complements organizational learning by translating learning outcomes into timely action. While organizational learning focuses on knowledge acquisition and interpretation, agility emphasizes responsiveness, flexibility, and speed of adaptation. Empirical studies suggest that organizations exhibiting high levels of agility are better positioned to capitalize on learning processes, particularly in volatile and complex environments. Together, organizational learning and agility form a coherent capability set that underpins the functioning of learning organizations. There is a growing number of studies looking on how agile are organizations in their learning patterns forming a new field of research as learning agility (Reyes et al, 2024).

Individual Capabilities: Learning Orientation, Agility, and Agency

Together with organizational-level explanations, a substantial body of research has focused on individual-level capabilities as micro-foundations of learning organizations. Individual learning orientation reflects an individual's motivation to acquire new knowledge and develop skills, while individual learning agility captures the ability to learn from experience and apply learning in novel situations. These individual characteristics are often assumed to aggregate into organizational learning outcomes.

Research on entrepreneurship and early-stage venture development has been particularly influential in highlighting the role of individual learning agility and personal agency. For example, Yaneva and Yalamova (2025) using GUESS data for Bulgaria demonstrate that learning agility and agency play a critical role in shaping how nascent entrepreneurs navigate uncertainty and acquire competencies. This line of research provides strong evidence that individual capabilities matter for learning and adaptation, especially in contexts characterized by ambiguity and limited structure.

Abbas (2025), using data from banking sector, empirically confirms that organizations which deliberately develop employee agility use it to mediate the thriving at work and organizational performance.

The extent to which such individual capabilities translate into learning organizations remains an open empirical question. While individuals may possess high levels of learning agility and motivation, organizational constraints, rigid structures, or unsupportive cultures may limit the extent to which individual learning contributes to collective learning outcomes. This suggests that individual capabilities alone may be insufficient to explain learning organizations without considering the organizational context in which they are embedded.

Gaps in the Literature and Research Focus

Despite extensive conceptual development, empirical research has rarely examined individual and organizational antecedents of learning organizations within a single analytical framework. Many studies focus either on micro-level learning capabilities or on macro-level organizational practices, making it difficult to assess their relative importance. Moreover, concerns persist regarding potential managerial bias in survey-based assessments of learning organizations, as perceptions may differ systematically across hierarchical levels.

Building on prior work on organizational learning, flexibility, agility, and individual learning capabilities, the present study addresses these gaps by jointly examining individual learning orientation and individual agility alongside organizational learning and organizational agility. In addition, it explicitly tests whether hierarchical position influences perceptions of learning organizations. By doing so, the study contributes to a more integrated understanding of the drivers of learning organizations and clarifies the respective roles of individual capabilities and organizational practices.

Bulgarian learning organizations context

Probably the first Bulgarian organization (founded by Bulgarian entrepreneurs and still owned by them), which identified itself (in mid to late 1990s) as a learning organization was Technologica, later followed by Sirma Group, LuxPac and Bulgarian Online Research (known under the brand of BorSolutions). Others (former state-owned) have been privatized by foreign groups, which introduced the narrative of “learning organization”, as the case of Zlatna Panega Cement (Titan Group from Greece), but in an interview with the general manager of the plant, which career has been entirely in the plant or the group, suggested that the culture of organizational learning has always been there. Foreign-owned firms with headquarters in different countries like Nobel Pharma (Turkey), British American Tobacco (UK), KBC Group (Belgium), UniCredit (Italy) also publicly self-identify themselves as learning organizations or that they promote the culture of learning organization.

Dreamix is an informative case of a Bulgarian start-up, established in 2006 by a group of friends and fellow students at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. The company is a “learning organization by design” from the early years with its own learning jargon as “learning animal” as a description of the perfect employee, having an internal book-club, continuous partnership with Sofia University where many of the partners and employees teach. The company grew to almost 200 employees in early 2024 when it was acquired by the global consultant Synecrhon and continued to grow to 250 at the end of 2025.

Most of the learning organizations we are aware of in Bulgaria employ university professors/lecturers or PhD students, have multi-layer partnerships with academia and are definitely among the most innovative in the country aligning with the findings of Yalamov (2021).

Learning multinational organizations such as KBC Bank export knowledge and innovations through their networks – internally through group-level competence centers (in the case of KBC – on financial instruments), on a bilateral level through “smart-copy initiatives” and externally – through industry level associations and initiatives.

A major contextual caveat is the early introduction (as early as 1995) of a compulsory course entitled Learning organization (taught by Anastasia Bankova and Todor Yalamov at the beginning and since 2022 the first author joined the team) for the HR master programs in the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” based on Senge (1990), March (1991), Garvin (1993) and others. In particular cases (including regarding learning organization concept) universities serve as a major diffusion channel of institutionalizing managerial practices, as happened lately with ESG (Vutsova et al, 2023).

Methodology

Research Design and Sample

The study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design based on survey data collected from employees working in organizations operating in different sectors and organizational contexts in Bulgaria. The sampling strategy was non-probability, convenience and purposive aiming to reach out different type of organizations, partners of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and HRs in graduate education. The distribution channel included LinkedIn, Facebook and emails. The estimated total reach was about 950 respondents. The final sample consists of 213 respondents (roughly 22% response rate), representing organizations of varying size (19% micro, 17% small, 14% medium and 50% large – measured by number of employees), ownership structure (concentrated and dispersed, local and foreign), sectoral affiliation and geographical location (particularly followed up by telephone calls to companies in smaller places). Respondents occupy different hierarchical positions, including non-managerial roles and top management positions, allowing for the examination of potential differences in perceptions across organizational levels.

The sample includes respondents from private, public, non-profit, and hybrid organizational settings, as well as from both multinational and domestically controlled organizations. This diversity enhances the external validity of the findings and allows for the inclusion of organizational controls in the empirical analysis.

In addition, procedural remedies were applied, including ensuring respondent anonymity and separating conceptually distinct constructs in the survey design.

Measures

The study employed established multi-item measures taken from commonly used and validated scales in organizational learning and agility literature. All items were assessed using a common seven-point Likert scale, where higher values indicated stronger agreement. For each construct, a composite index was computed as the arithmetic mean of the corresponding items.

Learning organization

Perceptions of the organization as a learning organization were measured using a single-item scale capturing respondents’ overall agreement if a statement could be attributed to their organization: “A learning organization is one that continuously improves by encouraging people at all levels to

share knowledge, reflect on experiences, and adapt to change. In such organizations, mistakes are treated as opportunities to learn, new ideas are welcomed, and employees are supported in developing their skills and understanding.” The statement explicitly refers to the tolerance towards failure as a proxy of Edmondson’s (1999) psychological safety characteristics of learning organizations. This variable serves as the dependent variable in the regression analyses. While multi-item measures are often preferred, single-item measures are considered appropriate when the construct is concrete, clearly defined, and reflects a holistic evaluation (e.g., global organizational assessments). In this study, the item explicitly describes key characteristics of a learning organization, thereby reducing ambiguity and enhancing face validity.

Individual agility

Individual agility reflects respondents’ perceived ability to adapt to change, learn from experience, and perform effectively in novel or uncertain situations. The scale combines I-ADAPT (Ployhart and Bliese, 2006) and personal agency (Bandura, 1990) measures. It demonstrates high internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$).

Individual learning orientation

Individual learning orientation captures respondents’ preferences and motivation for learning, including experiential learning, reflection, and experimentation (Kolb, 2007). The reliability of this scale is acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.78$).

Organizational learning.

Organizational learning was measured using multi-item scale based on dimension of learning organization questionnaire (Watkins and Marsick, 1997) assessing the extent to which the organization encourages knowledge sharing, open dialogue, reflection, and continuous improvement. The scale exhibits strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$).

Organizational agility

Organizational agility borrows six items from the classical study of Jaworski and Kohli (1993) which reflects the organization’s ability to respond quickly to environmental changes, adapt strategies, and enable flexible decision-making. It is often achieved through institutionalized agile management (i.e. Scaled Agile Framework). In the case of KBC Group Bulgaria it’s a further example for learning in networks. The scale shows high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$).

Control Variables

Several individual- and organizational-level control variables were included in the regression models. At the individual level, age, gender, and total years of work experience were controlled for. At the organizational level, controls include organizational size, sector, and whether the organization is part of a multinational organization. In additional analyses, a binary indicator identifying respondents occupying top managerial positions or entrepreneurial roles was used to test for potential hierarchical differences in perceptions.

Analytical Strategy

The empirical analysis was conducted using R statistical software. The analytical strategy proceeded in several steps. First, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used to examine the distribution of variables and their bivariate relationships. Second, a series of ordinary

least squares (OLS) regression models were estimated to assess the relative explanatory power of individual-level and organizational-level predictors of learning organization perceptions.

Models were estimated incrementally. Initial models included only individual-level predictors, followed by models incorporating organizational learning and organizational agility, as well as control variables. To assess the robustness of the findings, heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC1) robust standard errors were computed. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicate that variance inflation factors remain within acceptable thresholds, suggesting that multicollinearity does not pose a concern.

As all variables are derived from the same survey instrument and respondents, we assessed the potential presence of common method variance. Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The results show that the first unrotated factor accounts for 27% of the total variance, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 50%, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to substantially affect the results.

Finally, additional models and group comparisons were estimated to test whether respondents in top management positions differ systematically from other employees in their assessment of the organization as a learning one.

Results and discussions

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for the main variables included in the analysis. Overall, respondents report relatively high levels of individual learning orientation and individual agility, suggesting that the sample is characterized by generally strong individual learning-related capabilities. In contrast, organizational learning and organizational agility exhibit greater dispersion, indicating substantial variation in learning-supportive practices across organizations. The mean value of the learning organization construct suggests that respondents, on average, perceive their organizations as moderately to strongly supportive of learning.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of main variables (N = 213)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Learning organization	5.26	1.49	1.00	7.00
Individual agility	5.86	0.88	1.64	7.00
Individual learning orientation	5.84	0.81	2.25	7.00
Organizational learning	5.27	1.38	1.00	7.00
Organizational agility	5.21	1.46	1.00	7.00
Age (years)	38.5	8.97	20	64
Work experience (years)	16.52	8.49	1	40

Source: Authors' calculations.

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for the key constructs. Attributions of the organization as a learning one are strongly and positively correlated with organizational learning and organizational agility. By comparison, correlations with individual learning orientation and individual agility are weaker and, in some cases, only marginally significant. Organizational learning and organizational agility are themselves strongly correlated, reflecting their conceptual proximity, while remaining sufficiently distinct to justify their simultaneous inclusion in the regression models.

Table 2. Correlations among main constructs

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Learning organization	1				
2. Individual agility	0.16*	1			
3. Individual learning orientation	0.13	0.59***	1		
4. Organizational learning	0.64***	0.37***	0.27***	1	
5. Organizational agility	0.61***	0.25***	0.22***	0.68***	1

Source: Authors' calculations.

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Regression Results

Table 3 reports the results of the regression analyses examining the determinants of learning organization perceptions.

Model 1 includes only individual-level predictors and demographic controls. In this specification, individual agility exhibits a weak positive association with perceptions of a learning organization, while individual learning orientation does not reach statistical significance. Overall, Model 1 explains only a small proportion of the variance in the dependent variable, indicating limited explanatory power of individual-level characteristics alone.

Model 2 extends the analysis by incorporating organizational learning and organizational agility, together with organizational control variables. The inclusion of these organizational-level predictors leads to a substantial increase in explanatory power, with the model accounting for more than half of the variance in learning organization perceptions. Both organizational learning and organizational agility appear as strong and highly significant predictors. Once organizational practices are taken into account, the coefficients for individual agility and individual learning orientation become statistically insignificant, suggesting that their effects are largely subsumed by organizational-level factors.

Model 3 further tests whether hierarchical position influences perceptions of learning organizations by introducing an indicator for top management. The results show that hierarchical position does not exert a statistically significant effect on perceptions of the organization as a learning organization. At the same time, the coefficients for organizational learning and organizational agility remain stable in magnitude and significance. Robust standard errors confirm that these findings are not sensitive to heteroskedasticity or influential observations.

Table 3. Table 3. Regression results (dependent variable: learning organization)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Individual agility	0.224 (0.144)	-0.077 (0.112)	-0.080 (0.112)
Individual learning orientation	0.102 (0.156)	-0.065 (0.116)	-0.052 (0.119)
Organizational learning	—	0.455*** (0.080)	0.459*** (0.080)
Organizational agility	—	0.343*** (0.071)	0.340*** (0.072)
Top management	—	—	0.133 (0.227)
Age	0.035 (0.032)	0.015 (0.025)	0.017 (0.025)
Gender (Male)	0.336 (0.208)	0.113 (0.159)	0.093 (0.163)
Work experience	-0.045 (0.034)	-0.013 (0.026)	-0.017 (0.027)
Organizational controls	No	Yes	Yes
Sector controls	No	Yes	Yes
Multinational	No	Yes	Yes

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
R ²	0.049	0.532	0.533
Adjusted R ²	0.026	0.486	0.484
N	213	213	213

Source: Authors' calculations.

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Standard errors in parentheses.

Model 3 reports heteroskedasticity-robust (HC1) standard errors.

Discussion

The overall results provide strong empirical support for the primacy of organizational learning and organizational agility in shaping perceptions of learning organizations. While individual learning orientation and agility are often conceptualized as important micro-foundations of organizational learning, the findings indicate that these individual capabilities alone do not explain learning organization perceptions once organizational practices are considered. This suggests that learning organizations are better understood as organizational-level capabilities embedded in structures, routines, and decision-making processes rather than as simple aggregations of individual traits. Peer-learning patterns (Clement et al, 2025) have structural implications on conceptual understanding in most of the engineering contexts and thus organization of peer-learning circles could contribute to stronger performance.

The strong effects of organizational learning and organizational agility highlight the complementary nature of these capabilities. Organizational learning provides mechanisms for knowledge acquisition and reflection, while organizational agility enables the timely translation of learning into adaptive action. Together, they form a coherent foundation for the functioning of learning organizations in dynamic environments.

The absence of significant differences between top management and non-managerial respondents has important implications. Methodologically, it alleviates concerns regarding managerial bias in survey-based assessments of learning organizations. Substantively, it suggests that learning-supportive practices are experienced consistently across hierarchical levels, reinforcing the view that learning organizations are characterized by organization-wide processes rather than by elite perspectives. Employees of multinational firms tend to align their organizations stronger with “continuous improvements by encouraging people at all levels to share knowledge, reflect on experiences, and adapt to change” (mean = 5.44, compared with mean = 5.01 for the rest with level of significance $p = 0.04$).

From a practical standpoint, the findings imply that organizations seeking to develop into learning organizations should focus primarily on strengthening organizational learning and agility practices. Initiatives aimed solely at enhancing individual skills (funding certification courses) or learning motivation (dedicated time or bonuses for completion of courses) may have limited impact unless they are embedded within supportive organizational systems and cultures.

Conclusion

This study examined the relative importance of individual capabilities and organizational practices in shaping learning organizations. The analysis demonstrates that organizational learning and organizational agility are the primary drivers of perceptions of a learning organization. In contrast, individual learning orientation, individual agility, and hierarchical position do not exert independent effects once organizational practices are taken into account.

These findings contribute to the literature on learning organizations by providing empirical support for perspectives that conceptualize learning organizations as organizational-level capabilities rather than as simple aggregations of individual traits. By jointly examining individual and organizational antecedents within a single empirical framework, the study clarifies an important tension in prior research and highlights the complementary role of organizational learning and agility in enabling collective learning and adaptation.

Organizations seeking to develop into learning organizations should prioritize investments in learning-supportive structures, processes, and decision-making practices that enhance organizational agility. Efforts focused exclusively on developing individual learning skills or motivation are unlikely to be sufficient unless they are embedded within an organizational context that enables learning to be shared, institutionalized, and translated into action.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and the reliance on self-reported measures may introduce common method bias. As expected, in the sample we observed cases from the same large companies (evident from emails submitted to receive results of the study) and there are differences of up to two Likert-scale points among assessments of learning organization. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs, multi-source data, or objective indicators of learning and adaptability. Further studies may also explore how organizational learning and agility interact over time and across different institutional and cultural contexts. Another limitation of the study is the use of a single-item measure for the dependent variable. Although it captures a global assessment consistent with the conceptual definition of a learning organization, future research could employ multi-item validated scales to enhance measurement reliability and allow for more fine-grained analysis.

Overall, this study reinforces the view that learning organizations are fundamentally shaped by organizational practices and capabilities, underscoring the importance of organizational learning and agility in navigating contemporary organizational challenges.

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