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How successful employees at Corporate Market in Síminn develop their competence at work

An interview study of some
of the employees' own experiences

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ABSTRACT

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- Title:** How successful employees at Corporate Market in Síminn develop their competence at work: an interview study of some of the employees' own experiences.
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- Summary:** In today's ever changing business world, the competitiveness of organizations relies on employees' competencies, which entails the fact that employees' contributions become more valuable than ever before. The main purpose of the study was to identify which strategies are used by successful employees at Corporate Market in Síminn (an Icelandic company which handles telecommunications) in order to learn on the job, develop their competence and obtain success at work. Further, I explored and discussed possible relations between the strategies. The study was implemented through six qualitative, semi structured interviews with an inductive approach. In the thesis I also review earlier research on on-the-job learning and competence development, which I then intertwine with my empirical findings in the chapters of analysis and discussion.
- I identified twenty six different strategies which successful employees at Corporate Market, Síminn, use to learn on their jobs, develop their competence and obtain success at work. My results suggest that continuous learning is the key to competence development and thereby the key to success. My results further suggest that if employees are aware of their best ways of learning, they can use that knowledge in order to constantly improve their learning and thereby constantly improve their performance. There seems to be strong relations between the different strategies, and interpersonal strategies appear to be ones that cover all three areas of learning, competence development and obtaining success. The result might help employees and managers to choose and use the most effective strategies in order to obtain success at work, and thereby contribute to increased effectiveness of organizations.
- Keywords:** On-the-job learning, human competence development, successful employees, obtaining success.

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Preface

Throughout my studies here at Lund University, I have become more and more fascinated by the fact that individual contributions really matter for the successfulness of organizations. Based on that, I developed the idea of interviewing employees who are considered to be successful in their jobs, and find out how they learn and develop their competence. By now I have implemented an empirical study on the different strategies that employees use in order to learn on the job, develop the competence and obtain success at work. My results are presented in this master thesis.

I thank my family for their endless love and support. Hjörtur, Inga María, Silla og Mirra: þið eruð frábær! Takk fyrir að vera til.

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At last I thank the employees and the vice president of Corporate Market for their participation.

Enjoy the reading!

1 Introduction

In the complex and unpredictable business world of today, globalization, constant change and increased competition are factors which can affect organizations' continued existence. In order to survive, organizations must therefore continuously concentrate on being effective and successful. Organizations' competitiveness in this changeable world relies upon the competencies the workforce possesses, which entails the fact that employees' contribution becomes more valuable than ever before.

As a result, the emphasis on continuous workplace learning and individual competence development in order to build a smarter workforce is rapidly increasing (Drejer, 2000; Sandberg, 2000a; Berings, Poell & Simons, 2005; Ellström, 2001, 2005; Sessa & London, 2006). At the same time, the nature of work has been changing and knowledge has progressively become acknowledged as the basic resource in organizations (Boud & Garrick, 1999). Consequently, employees enlarge their educational capabilities by learning and developing their competence through their work (Boud & Garrick, 1999; Ellström, 1992, 2001; Sessa & London, 2006).

Research has shown that workplace learning and competence development can contribute to increased productivity, innovation and competitiveness (Ellström, 2001; Sandberg, 2000a) and thereby raise organizations' potential to perform better and succeed (Sessa & London, 2006). Additionally, the ideas about learning in working life have transformed away from viewing educational institutions as the primary places for learning, towards the recognition of the workplace as a substantial learning environment (Ellström, 2005; Boyd & Garrick, 1999; Sessa & London, 2006).

If organizations are to be able to adapt to constant change and continue to be effective and successful, it is crucial to put an emphasis on creating more proficient staff by facilitating on-the-job learning and competence development (Sandberg, 2000a; Ellström 2005). For the best results, it is important that employees are aware of the need to learn new things and develop themselves from the beginning of their employment. According to Berings et al. (2005), knowing how to learn and how to develop competence can be decisive for failure or success.

Successful employees are the ones who somehow are outstanding in their jobs, do something extraordinary compared to other employees in similar jobs and constantly endeavor to improve their performance. Berings et al. (2005) argues that gaining insight into learning behavior offers better opportunities for improvement of individual on-the-job learning and competence development. In order to be successful in ones job it can, therefore, be imperative for employees to be aware of which strategy suits them best for learning and developing their competence (Berings et al., 2005).

In the next section I will review some of the previous research in the areas of on-the-job learning and human competence development, in order to build up a theoretical background for the study.

1.1 Theoretical background

I will begin this section by reviewing my search strategy and selection of literature. Then, I will review studies which deal with on-the-job learning, different types of learning and learning styles. After that I will take a look at studies which cover human competence development and successful strategies for competence development. Then I will account for studies which emphasize the importance of being aware of strategies to learn and develop the competence, and at last I will present the main purpose of the study.

1.1.1 Search strategy and selection of literature

When searching for literature, I followed Mertens (1998) strategy by first identifying preliminarily sources, then identifying primary research journals and at last by using personal networks. In my search for preliminarily sources, I used relevant key words like *on-the-job learning*, *workplace learning* and *human competence development*. I also used different combination or added words like *employee* or *individual* in order to narrow down the search. I found a lot of interesting titles and abstracts by searching through the databases ELIN, ERIC and Emerald Insight. I also found a few interesting book titles by using the library databases LOVISA and LIBRIS. I downloaded the articles and borrowed the books that I found relevant and interesting. Then I took a closer look at the abstracts and indexes and checked the reference lists. My intentions were to assess the relevance of the source, as well as to identify primary research journals. I also used personal networks, since I got a little help from my classmates and instructor, who pointed out a few books that might be relevant for my work.

When I was selecting the literature I set up three main criteria in order to increase the quality of my work. The first criterion was relevance in relation to the purpose of my study. In order to fulfill this first criterion, I read abstracts and indexes to assess the relevance for my study. My second criterion was scientific relevance. To measure up to this criterion I took a closer look at the researchers and evaluated the scientific relevance by examining the authors' background when possible, and checked if the source was published in a scientific publishing house or journal. I also examined the research methods used in the sources. In addition I carefully read through the reference lists and identified researchers who were often quoted by others and found even more relevant sources by doing that. According to Bell (2000), researchers who are often quoted by other researchers can be seen as *authorities* within their research fields, and can for that reason be considered as reliable sources.

I found this method to be an important part of my search and selection of literature, and it also contributed to increased reliability of my study. The last criterion on quality was aimed at finding primary resources. In my case, the primary resources usually involved the most often quoted researchers. Then I downloaded or borrowed their work and read it myself to make my own understanding, after reading these studies I based my writings on my interpretations of their material. If I was not able to fulfill my demand with primary sources, I tried, instead, to critically judge the importance and scientific relevance of the secondary sources. After I had identified the most important articles and books, I chose the relevant parts and then used an Excel file to help me categorize and analyze the literature sources. I used a similar approach while writing my bachelor

thesis and felt comfortable mapping the literature this way (Indriðadóttir & Kimmehed, 2006). While reading through the articles and books I made notes and memos, and listed names of articles, researchers and relevant page numbers in the Excel file and then I arranged all of the categories into mutual topics. This helped me to develop the structure of my work and to identify which information was relevant in relation to my purpose. Additionally, doing my research in this manner also helped me to fulfill the first quality criterion.

Regarding the quality aspects of my work with the literature data, I have assured that it can all be traced back to its original sources, both because I have used primary sources and also because I have used literature which has been used and quoted by other researchers. Throughout my work, I tried to the best of my ability to give a fair and comprehensible picture of everything I read in the literature.

I will now leave the discussion about my search and selection of literature and turn to earlier research on on-the-job learning.

1.1.2 On-the-job learning

Individual on-the-job learning refers to the activities and processes where employees continuously obtain new knowledge and skills which can be used in new combinations in different situations. This leads to permanent changes in employees' behavior because they have increased and expanded their knowledge, skills and attitudes (Berings et al., 2006; Sessa & London, 2006). In this context, factors such as level of development, personality, interest in learning and willingness to change can determine if employees actually will and are capable of learning on their jobs (Sessa & London, 2006). On-the-job learning often focuses on practice and learning *how* to do things at work, while academic learning focuses on learning *about* things (Sessa & London, 2006). In on-the-job learning contexts, people at the same time work, think, learn, make decisions and innovate (Berings et al., 2005), which entails the fact that learning processes intertwine with the everyday work (Høyrup and Elkjaer, 2006). Ellström (2006) points out that on-the-job learning often takes place without awareness or intention of the individual, but can also involve some conscious efforts to learn.

Argyris and Schön (1978) studied the integration of learning and work in their approach called Theory of action. They studied learning in situations of interpersonal interaction, and distinguish between espoused theory and theory-in-use. Espoused theory refers to what an individual thinks he or she does, while theory-in-use refers to the actual behavior of an individual. Argyris and Schön (1978) argue that all people need to become capable of taking action, and at the same time they must reflect on the action so that they can learn from it. The theory that actually controls the individual's actions is theory-in-use, and may or may not, be in harmony with the individual's espoused theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Ellström (2001) argues that integrating learning and work can increase productivity, innovation and competitiveness and can therefore have profitable consequences for both individuals and organizations. He also points out that encouraging learning at work may lead to healthier working conditions and reduce stress among the employees. Ellström (2001) maintains that the learning potential of a specific job relies on the individual learning styles and willingness to learn, along with other work related factors like opportunities to reflect on the tasks or the degree to

which organizations organize employees' participation in developmental activities and problem managing (Ellström, 2001).

Since research has shown that on-the-job learning can increase employees' potential to succeed in their jobs (Ellström, 2001; Sessa & London, 2006), I will now review the different types of individual on-the-job learning and account for how learning can contribute to obtaining success at work.

1.1.3 Different types of individual on-the-job learning

Throughout the years, researchers have identified different processes of individual learning at the workplace. These learning processes can be categorized in three main types or levels: adaptive learning; reconstructive, generative or developmental learning and transformative, creative or process learning (Probst & Büchel, 1997; Ellström, 2001; Sessa & London, 2006).

1.1.3.1 The first level of learning

Adaptive learning is the simplest level of learning and refers to minor, unconscious behavior changes when individuals act in response to their environment and adjust effectively to given goals (Probst & Büchel, 1997; Sessa & London, 2006). According to Probst and Büchel (1997), adaptive learning occurs because the organization adapts to its environment, which means that employees identify problems in their working environment and develop some strategies to deal with the problems. Similarly, Sessa and London (2006) describe the adaptive learning process as employees take in information from their environment regarding how to act and change their behavior in accordance. Moreover, employees are not necessarily aware of this process, and therefore this kind of learning is automatic and unconscious (Sessa & London, 2006).

Argyris and Schön (1978) developed learning theories called single-loop and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning is a form of adaptive learning and refers to limited learning, that is learning which does not change the individual's assumptions or actions. This form of learning occurs when the individual creates matches between his or hers actions and consequences, or when the individual corrects mismatches by changing the actions. According to the authors, no learning takes place unless a match or mismatch has been produced (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

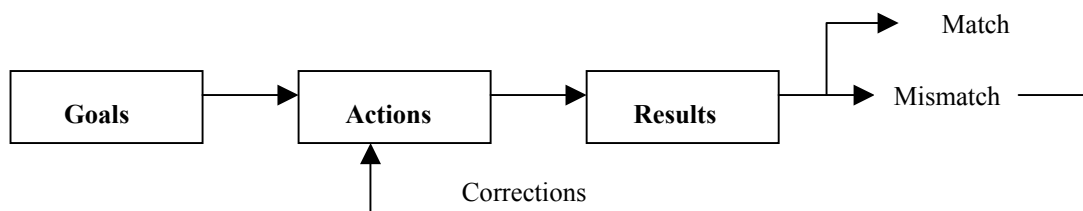


Figure 1. Adaptive or single-loop learning. Based on Argyris and Schön, 1978 and Probst and Büchel, 1997.

Ellström (2001) distinguishes between adaptive and developmental (or innovative) learning. Ellström bases his distinction on the character of the work-learning situation, like methods and procedures to be used, tasks to be performed and the results to be achieved. Ellström's starting point when making this distinction is the character of the situation where workplace learning takes place. In particular, he means the character of

the tasks to be performed, the procedures and methods to be used, and the results to be obtained (Ellström, 2001). Ellström (2001) also distinguishes among at least four different levels of learning. Two of these levels may be seen as examples of adaptive learning. The lowest level of learning is called reproductive learning, and refers to the every day routine actions at work, which employees perform without giving much conscious attention to the task or having much control over it. This kind of learning can be necessary in many situations at work, and the main role is to develop competence to handle frequent routine problems. The next level is called productive learning, type I, where the learner has to evaluate the outcomes of the work, and make ancillary corrections on the methods used to solve the problem. In reproductive learning, the tasks, methods and results are all given, but in productive learning type I only the tasks and methods are given, while the results remain unknown (Ellström, 2001).

Adaptive learning or single-loop learning can be necessary in many situations at work and plays an important role in getting the everyday job done since this type of learning involves developing competence to handle frequent routine problems and repetitive tasks (Argyris, 1999; Ellström, 2001).

1.1.3.2 The second level of learning

This level of learning involves adding and using new behavior, skills and knowledge and entails changes in the interests and values of the individual (Probst & Büchel, 1997; Sessa & London, 2006). In reconstructive learning, the individual critically questions the organizational norms and values, which results in behavioral changes that may be set against the original goal. This means that the individual confronts the organizational frame of reference, which may lead to new adjustment of its goals (Probst & Büchel, 1997). Argyris and Schön (1978) refer to this type of learning as double-loop learning, and argue that the individual uses his experience to change his or her basic assumptions and actions. In double-loop learning, individuals correct their mismatches by first examining the goals and then examining the actions. By his or her actions, the individual is aiming at achieving the goals, and in double-loop learning the individual critically analyzes his or her theories-of-action, which results in questioning the primary goals and then changing them (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Argyris, 1999). Figure 2 illustrates the function of reconstructive or double-loop learning.

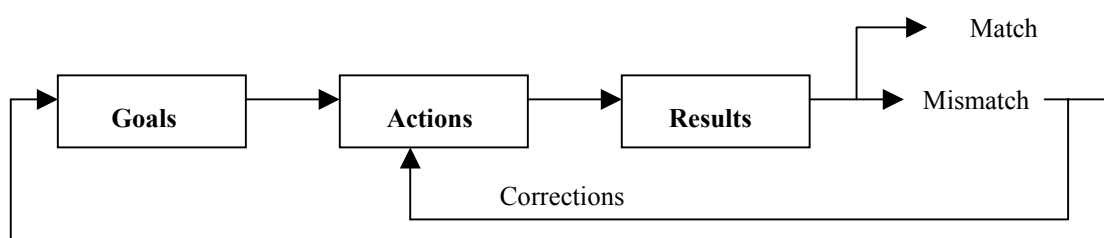


Figure 2. Reconstructive or double-loop learning. Based on Argyris and Schön, 1978 and Probst and Büchel, 1997.

Sessa and London (2006) argue that an important factor of what they call generative learning is that employees recognize the need to learn. In addition, environmental or organizational factors like global expansion, technological change, restructuring or downsizing or new empowering management strategies can motivate employees to change their behavior and set new goals. They further point out that one manifestation of generative learning is when employees seek feedback on their actions, by having

constructive discussions with co-workers about their performance and then ask for advice about how they can perform more effectively. Then they set new learning goals in order to improve some specific skills (Sessa & London, 2006).

Earlier, I mentioned that Ellström (2001) has identified four different levels of learning. His third level can be seen as an example of reconstructive learning, even though Ellström himself calls it developmental learning. This particular level is called productive learning, type II. Here, the employee engages in a more active process of knowledge-based problem solving, by experimenting or inventing and testing new solutions. The employee knows his or her task, but neither the method nor the results are given. Therefore, the learner must formulate and test new solutions to the task, and base these solutions on previous knowledge about the task and other possible solutions (Ellström, 2001). This type of learning can be needed in situations which are new or unfamiliar and no knowledge regarding how to complete the task is available (Ellström, 2001). Therefore this level is relevant for more complex and non-programmable work tasks as well as for the long-range effectiveness of the organization (Argyris, 1999).

1.1.3.3 The third level of learning

This level of learning is seen to be the highest level of learning, and is called process learning by Probst and Büchel (1997). Process learning involves improvement of the individual ability to learn, and the learning itself is actually learning to understand the two former levels of adaptive and reconstructive learning. In process learning, reflection, analysis and creation of new framework of meaning are of much importance and require that the individual gain insight into the learning process and thereby study his or her own role as a part of the environment (Probst & Büchel, 1997). Sessa and London (2006) describe this kind of learning as transformational learning. Individuals go through a dramatic, fundamental change, under which they use their experience to reconstruct reality and meaning (Sessa & London, 2006).

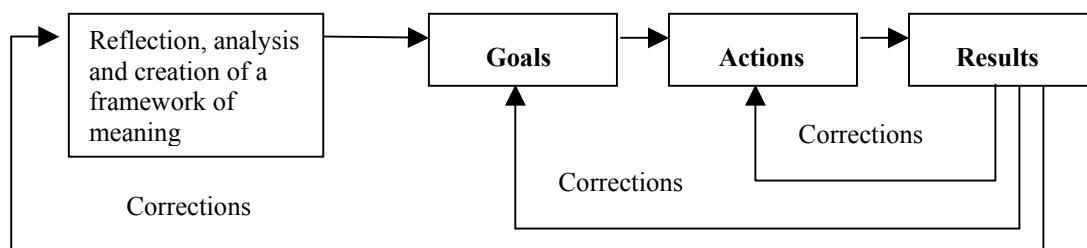


Figure 3. Transformative or process learning. Based on Probst and Büchel, 1997.

David Kolb's (1976) Experimental Learning Theory can be seen as one form of transformational learning. Kolb maintains that knowledge is created through transformation of experience, and that being successful in an ever changing world demands that individuals have the ability to explore new possibilities and learn from their experience, mistakes and/or success (Kolb, 1976). Based on his theory, Kolb developed the so called learning cycle, in order to explain the learning of an individual, where he emphasizes the relevance of experience. The learning cycle involves four elements; concrete experience, observations and reflections, formations of abstract concepts and generalizations, and, finally, testing implications of concepts in new situations. In order to learn, each individual must go through a full cycle, all the way from concrete experience to testing in new situations (Kolb, 1976). Drejer (2000)

explains Kolb's learning cycle as an individual turns his or her actions (and the results of the actions) into experiences and then reflects on these experiences, that is, takes into consideration what can be learned. After that, the individual develops and plans for new actions and decides on a course of action. At last, and if feasible at all, the individual changes his actions in consistence to the solutions he or she has already have decided on (Drejer, 2000).

Mainemelis, Boyatzis & Kolb's research from year 2002, indicates that individuals whose learning styles are based on experience, show high level of skills in interpersonal relations (Mainemelis et al., 2002). According to Sessa & London (2006), individual's experiences along with interactions with other people are essential for this highest level of learning to take place. Individuals can undergo transformative learning by learning through others, which involves reflecting on their own behavior and getting feedback through discussions with other people (Sessa & London, 2006).

Ellström (2001) calls this kind of learning creative learning, which he sees as an advanced form of developmental learning. In creative learning, the learner has to use his or her own influence to choose new methods or evaluate outcomes, as well as simultaneously identify and diagnose the nature of the task or the problem and the situation. Moreover, the learner has to define and diagnose the task and perhaps an unclear and puzzling situation. The fundamental element in creative learning is making the implicit assumptions of our actions explicit, which demands that the individual becomes aware of his or her actions and their consequences. Thus, he or she must be able to skillfully judge and analyze underlying assumptions and consider other alternatives to solve the task. This means that creative learning takes place when individuals begin to question the traditional goals or definitions of problems, and take some action in order to make changes in the established structures, practices or ideologies of the organization (Ellström, 2001).

1.1.3.4 Learning from others

According to McAdam, Mason and McCrory (2007), research indicates that tacit knowledge is the most strategically important resource in organizations. Tacit knowledge refers to hidden knowledge about how to perform work, i.e. knowledge that employees possess but do not articulate. Tacit knowledge can be defined as knowledge for which we have no words, which can be linked to terms like skills, working knowledge, know-how and expertise (McAdam et al., 2007). Tacit knowledge is mainly obtained and developed by experience (Ellström, 2001), but also by perceptions, insights and assumptions (McAdam et al., 2007). Tacit knowledge is often regarded as the main source of all knowledge and can play an important role in informal learning at the workplace. The ability to generate knowledge and continuously learn from it can be seen as a competitive advantage for organizations. Knowledge which is developed today may become the most important knowledge of tomorrow, and thereby be the base for an organization's actions and competitiveness (McAdam et al., 2007).

Argyris (1999) argues that work based routines are put into operation through skillful actions, and that these skillful actions are mainly based on tacit knowledge (Argyris, 1999). Thus, making tacit knowledge explicit can be of great importance for individual learning in organizations (Argyris, 1999; McAdam et al., 2007). Therefore, it is important to be aware of the importance and emphasize the development of tacit

knowledge. Tacit knowledge cannot be captured, but it can be made more obvious through our actions and expressible knowledge (McAdam et al., 2007).

Conversation between people is the most effective way to transfer tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and thereby make it useful to others (McAdam et al., 2007). This involves people learning with and from one another by reflecting on what they are or have been doing (Boud & Middleton, 2003 Bjerlöv & Docherty, 2006). Sessa and London (2006) point out that learning through others is one form of transformative learning. Through conversations, people develop a new understanding which can be applied to new learning situations (Sessa & London, 2006). Learning through conversations can be extremely valuable when employees are dealing with new situations where the procedure of performing the task is not known and new strategies must be developed (Boud & Middleton, 2003).

Bjerlöv and Docherty (2006) describe this process as a communicative learning process, where collective reflection in a group of co-workers is the main key. The authors mean that if employees are to be able to understand the nature of their work and work tasks, along with understanding the organization and its activities, they need to get opportunities to compare their own experiences and perceptions with those of their co-workers. Bjerlöv and Docherty (2006) regard two processes as most important in the communication process: differentiation which is a process whereby people differentiate between their own subjective experience and other people's experience in order to be able to see things in a new or different way, and decentration by which people critically validate their own assumptions to be better able to reformulate the perception of a previous point of view. This process involves the ability to distinguish between one's own way of looking at things and other people's points of view. The iterations between differentiation and decentration lead to additional attempts to find new solutions or resolve the issues (Bjerlöv & Docherty, 2006).

1.1.4 The importance of learning for obtaining success

Ellström (2001) points out that the different levels of learning are not to be seen as mutually exclusive but are assumed to complete one other. Employees need to be able to use all levels of learning, depending on the situation and the task at each time. Ellström further argues that individuals (and organizations) tend to cling to adaptive mode of learning. What seems, however, to be the preference for improving performance and obtaining success is a productive balance; some kind of pendulum movement between adaptive and developmental modes of learning (Ellström, 2001).

Sessa and London (2006) also maintain that individuals can and do use all three different forms of learning in their jobs. They further point out that in order to improve the performance it is important for employees to take control of their own learning by defining goals and constantly aiming at achieving those goals. Sessa and London (2006) see transformative learning through experience as the most effective way for employees to learn on the job. According to the authors, earlier studies have shown that transformative learning is the most effective way to obtain success. Successful and high-potential leaders and executives have used this kind of learning as a key element in their career building. Learning from experience like failure and mistakes, learning from co-workers and superiors as well as coping with unfamiliar and challenging tasks seem to be important for obtaining success (Sessa & London, 2006).

However, experience on its own is not enough for transformative learning to take place. In order to make the most of the experience, certain conditions must be fulfilled and the employee needs time to learn from the experience and make it useful. The employee also needs to be self-critical and acknowledge weaknesses and failures. At last, it is important for the employee to reflect on his or her own actions and experiences in a group of co-workers, aiming at learning from the experience and improving the performance (Sessa & London, 2006).

1.1.5 On-the-job learning styles

Berings et al. (2005) and Sessa & London (2006) have studied employees' learning activities at work and found that the different strategies employees use to learn on their job are the results of the relationship between diverse personal learning styles and diverse situational factors. Berings et al. (2005) define learning style as "the tendency to use a particular combination of implicit and explicit learning activities that a person can, and likes to, perform." (Berings et al., 2005, p 377) According to Sessa and London (2006), learning styles involve the combination of individual tendencies of taking in and transforming information. Berings et al. (2005) divide on-the-job learning styles into two dimensions; intrapersonal activities and interpersonal activities. Moreover, they distinguish between mental activities and overt activities, demonstrated in table 1.

Table 1. (Berings et al.,2005. P. 387).

	Intrapersonal activities	Interpersonal activities
Mental activities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assimilate • Explore • View learning and work situations holistically • Reflect on their actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depend on other people • Are inclined to work with other people • Strive for competition • Reflect on others actions
Overt activities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek information on the Internet or from other sources • Practice new skills • Keep up with specialist journals • Create action plans • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek feedback • Collaborate • Ask others for information • Exchange knowledge and experience • Observe others

By situational factors, Berings et al. (2005) mean on-the-job learning situations like the nature of the tasks, the learning climate, the information environment, the social work environment and coincidental factors. According to the authors, the individual uses different combination of learning activities to enter every learning situation. The particular combination is called the actualized learning strategy (Berings et al., 2005). The authors mean that learning strategies can be seen as state which changes with every learning situation, and learning styles can be seen as a relatively stable personality characteristics. The perceived learning situation and the learning style influence each other, and can therefore be seen as changeable over a longer period. Thus, the stage of changeability depends on the individual's flexibility (Berings et al, 2005).

The authors further argue for four ways of dealing with the awareness of on-the-job learning styles. First is to encourage particular learning strategies. Second is to reflect about employee's strengths and weaknesses. Third is to develop a varied list of learning strategies to use in different learning situation. And fourth, people can adapt different learning strategies to different learning situations (Berings et al., 2005).

Now I will leave the theories of on-the-job learning and begin reviewing some literature regarding human competence development at work.

1.1.6 Human competence development

Human competence involves a combination of employee's knowledge, skills, experience and abilities, used in order to successfully carry out particular work tasks (Ellström, 1992; Sandberg, 2000; Sundberg 2001). In this context, knowledge involves what an employee learns in educational situations and experience involves what an individual gathers in the job, at the workplace and in social life. Abilities refer to how an employee uses his or her knowledge and experience (Sundberg, 2001). Work tasks refer to construction of tasks or problems which an individual intends to solve with the purpose of attaining certain results (Ellström, 1992).

According to Ellström (1992), competence is task related and includes employee's capacity to identify, make use of and if possible expand his or her scope of actions, interpretations and valuation in the work. Therefore, competence refers to the relations between an individual's abilities on one hand and a certain task on the other hand (Ellström, 1992). According to Sandberg (2000a), competence development involves the development of particular skills and knowledge, which always occurs within a certain understanding of work. Competence develops when an individual (or groups) changes the existing understanding of the job and transfers it to an alternative understanding. Sandberg distinguishes between two basic forms of competence development. The former involves individual changes in his or her present understanding of the job while the latter involves individual development and deepening of the present way of understanding the job (Sandberg, 2000a).

1.1.7 Successful strategies for individual competence development

According to Ellström (2005), competence development can be seen as a summarized designation for the different measures which can be used in order to influence the range of competence among individuals or groups in organizations. These different measures can involve formal or informal education or retraining, on-the-job learning and planned changes of work tasks or organization (Ellström, 2005).

Ellström (2005) argues that individual's prerequisites to successfully develop his or her competence at work depend on several factors like self-confidence, motivation, capability and educational experience. Organizational factors like culture, conditions in the workplace and management structure can also play a central role when it comes to human competence development (Ellström, 2005). Sundberg (2001) points out, however, that only each individual can create and develop his or her competence. An

organization can provide the right tools or circumstances, but it is up to each employee whether or not he or she is willing to develop his or her competence (Sundberg, 2001).

1.1.7.1 The importance of reflection

Sandberg (2000a), Drejer (2000), Høyrup and Elkjaer (2006), Ellström (1992, 2006) and Sessa and London (2006) all argue that reflection on what has worked and what needs to be improved is an important element in competence development. Further, reflection in a group facilitates transformative or developmental learning (Ellström, 1992; Sessa & London, 2006), which under favorable conditions can be a driving force for organizational innovation and change (Ellström 2006).

Drejer (2000) describes how the Johari window, originally developed by Luft and Ingram, can be used as a metaphor to explain individual learning and competence development at work. According to Drejer, the basic idea of the Johari window is that individuals learn by being open to others. Individuals learn through public reflection and feedback from other people, and this process might help the individual to shape and affirm his or her self-understanding and thereby contribute to increased learning (Drejer, 2000).

The Johari window has four quadrants which illuminate the different parts of the individual self as seen in figure 4. The first quadrant represents the open area which the individual is aware about and shares openly with others. The next quadrant stands for the blind area, which the individual is unaware of but others might know. The third quadrant covers the unconscious area, the part of the individual that neither he nor others are aware of. The last one represents the hidden area, or the part of the individual that he or she likes to keeps to him or herself, including secrets and dreams. Drejer's version of the Johari window is illustrated in figure 4.

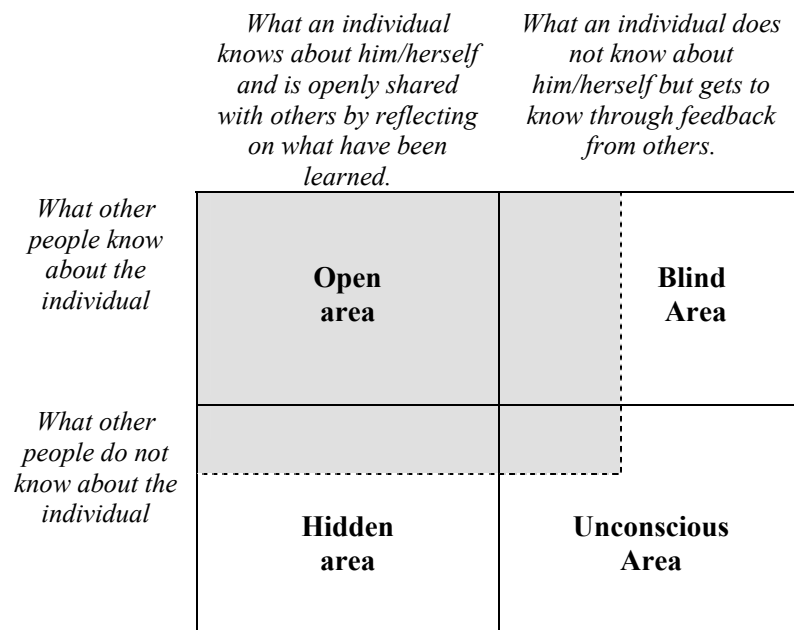


Figure 4. The Johari window as a model for understanding individual learning. Based on Drejer, 2000.

Learning about oneself and listening to feedback from others can in this context be seen as a process, where an individual gets an opportunity to reflect on what has been learned, and a chance to make changes based on feedback and self-disclosure. The main idea is to constantly expand the grey area (Drejer, 2000).

Høyrup and Elkjaer (2006) argue that reflection in a group of co-workers is a key element in competence development, and actually an important part of the everyday learning process in organizations. By reflection, Høyrup and Elkjaer mean:

A complex activity aimed at investigating one's own action in a certain situation and involving a review of the experience, an analysis of causes and effects, and the drawing of conclusions concerning future action, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective. (Høyrup and Elkjaer, 2006, page 29)

According to the authors, both individuals and organizations can benefit by reflection. At the individual level, reflection gives the employee opportunity to learn from mistakes, share knowledge and ask for feedback. At the organizational level, reflection can create space for vision and knowledge sharing among employees, and thereby yield some new ideas and even challenge groupthink. Thus, reflection can lead to experimentation and innovation when employees find it important to put new ideas into practice (Høyrup and Elkjaer, 2006). Ellström (2006) points that reflecting activities in organizations which focus on the content, processes and outcome of employees' actions, require time to observe, think, discuss and exchange ideas with other people. Therefore, Ellström suggests that organizations use the time well by putting reflection on the agenda, with the purpose of creating a space for learning and competence development in and through the work (Ellström, 2006).

1.1.7.2 Goal setting, feedback and performance evaluation

Goal setting and feedback are often regarded as important parts in improving learning and task performance in organizations. Feedback can give individuals a chance to learn from the consequences of their actions and can be used to reward performance and motivate for future achievements (Høyrup and Elkjaer, 2006; McCarthy & Garavan, 2006; Sessa & London, 2006). Sessa and London (2006) argue that feedback is the final step of the learning process because without some kind of feedback, individuals are unable to learn (Sessa & London, 2006).

Goal setting triggers individuals to take actions, which sequentially determine performance improvement (Smither et al., 2005). Sessa and London (2006) point out that goal setting and feedback can be linked to generative learning. On their way to reach their goals, employees seek feedback on their actions by having constructive discussions with co-workers about their performance and then ask for advice about how they can perform more effectively. Then they set new goals in order to improve some specific skills. According to some authors, environmental or organizational factors like global expansion, technological change, restructuring, downsizing or new empowering management strategies can motivate employees to change their behavior and set new goals (Sessa & London, 2006).

Through feedback, individuals get information about their performance, behaviors and their outcomes. Feedback helps individuals to keep their actions on the track and directs them towards the goal. When individuals reflect on their performance and how well they are doing compared to the goals, feedback can help them to clarify the goals, and

understand and plan the behaviors needed to reach them (McCarthy & Garavan, 2006; Sessa & London, 2006). In this context, multisource feedback has become more and more popular in organizations (Smither, London & Reilly, 2005; McCarthy & Garavan, 2006; Sessa & London, 2006).

Multisource feedback involves self-rating as well as ratings from peers, subordinates, superiors and even customers, and has several characteristics which are likely to influence reactions and subsequent behavior. In this context, the most visible characteristic is whether the feedback is negative or positive. Feedback might be interpreted as negative if ratings from other people are lower than self-ratings (Smither et al., 2005). People who receive this kind of negative feedback intend to deny or misattribute the feedback and therefore do not make it useful (Smither et al., 2005; Sessa & London, 2006).

Smither et al. (2005) findings indicate that it is unrealistic to expect that receiving feedback directly yields huge improvements in performance (Smither et al., 2005). This is based on the fact that individuals differ when it comes to accepting feedback and making it useful. Some people are very comfortable with feedback and tend to seek it to guide their behavior towards the goal. Other people are more skeptical and simply try to avoid getting feedback on their actions and behavior (Smither et al., 2005; Sessa & London, 2006). Therefore, it is important for managers in organizations to have in mind that some feedback recipients might be more likely to use the feedback to improve their performance than other (Smither et al., 2005).

1.1.8 Effects of competence development

According to Ellström (2005), there has not been much focus on researching the effects on competence development in organizations. By effects Ellström (2005) means changes in employee's knowledge, skills, attitude or behavior as a result of participation in some kind of formal or informal education. Effects of competence development can either appear immediately or after a long time. The effects can be task related or generalized, predictable or unpredictable, desirable or undesirable. There is the possibility to define and measure the effects of competence development by distinguishing between four levels of effects or results. The first level is the participator's attitudes towards and valuation of educational effort and its results. The second level involves individual effects in the form of acquiring knowledge, skills or attitudes, like attitudes towards new technology. The third level entails effects which include job performance, i.e. the individual becomes more skilled to carry out certain tasks. The fourth level involves effects in form of better performance on a higher level, like on group or organizational level (Ellström, 2005).

The relations between the four levels are complex. It is easier to obtain positive effects on the first two levels than on the last ones. However, a positive attitude towards an educative effort on the first level does not necessarily predict on effects on the higher levels. For best results, positive effects on all levels are required. The individual effects of participation in competence development can appear in increased motivation and interest for on-the-job learning, opportunities for career development and increased self-confidence and self-fulfillment (Ellström, 2005).

1.1.9 The importance of being aware of one's strategies

According to Ellström (2001) and Sessa and London (2006), employees need to be able to use and combine all the different levels of adaptive, generative and transformative learning in their jobs. If they are able to do that, they can continually broaden and deepen the understanding of their work. Ellström (2005) and Sandberg (2000a) see the individual learning process and understanding of the work as the basis for competence development. According to Ellström (2005), competence development can have multiple effects for the employee and result in increased and better performance, more responsibility and more enjoyment of the work, which can result in more effectiveness and better performance of the organization as a whole.

Berings et al. (2005) point out that in order to improve their way of learning and increase their competence, it is essential for employees to be aware of their own learning styles and strategies. Reflecting on these styles and strategies may lead to awareness of the learning process, in relation to what was learned. This knowledge can help employees to find new and better ways to learn at work, make the most of their opportunities and to be more aware of the true reasons for failure or success. As a result, employees may become more effective and successful than they were before. Awareness of one's learning strategies can also be of great help for respective employee in his or her career building and help to maintain interest and engagement in the work (Berings et al., 2005; Sessa & London, 2006).

These last words in the section of theoretical background lead me directly towards the next section, namely the main purpose of my study.

1.2 Main purpose

The main purpose of the study is to identify which strategies successful employees at Corporate Market use in order to learn on the job, develop their competence and obtain success at work. Further, I will explore and discuss possible relations between the strategies.

1.2.1 Delimitations

In my study I concentrate on strategies for individual learning at the workplace and therefore I do not examine workplace learning in a wider context, like group learning or organizational learning. I also focus on how individuals learn in their present jobs, but do not take a close look at how individuals learn when they are new in their jobs. I use the term *on-the-job learning* when I am referring to individual learning at the workplace. Since I am going to deal with human competence at work, I concentrate on the individual competence but do not discuss concepts like collective competence, organizational competence or organizational strategies for competence development. At last, it is not my intention to take gender aspects, nor the difference between the interview subjects' positions within the company, into consideration. Therefore I chose not to introduce each and every interview subject in the chapter of methodology.

2 Method

Qualitative researchers self-consciously draw upon their own experiences as a resource in their inquiries. They always think reflectively, historically and biographically. They seek strategies of empirical inquiry that will allow them to make connections among lived experience, larger social and cultural structures, and the here and now. These connections are forged out of the empirical materials that are gathered in any given investigation. (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, page xi)

Those are words I had in mind during my research work in this master thesis. In the following chapter I will review and motivate my choice of approach and design. After that I will describe my choice of organization and interview subjects and then I will reflect on the actual research process that lies behind the thesis.

2.1 Approach and design

Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right and the term is surrounded by a complex family of concepts, including various research traditions, perspectives and methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative research methods are commonly used when the research is designed to provide a thorough description of a specific subject (Mertens, 1998) and can be defined as a research strategy that emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative research has become increasingly common in organizational studies, is often mainly based on interviews (Alvesson, 1999) and usually emphasizes an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research. It means that theories are generated on the basis of the researcher's analysis of data collection (Mertens, 1998).

The main purpose with qualitative research is to understand the world and its meaning as the research object sees and understands it (Alvesson, 1999). Mertens (1998) distinguishes between three possible reasons for choosing a qualitative research method: research paradigms or the researcher's view of the world, the nature of the research question and practical reasons (Mertens, 1998). In my case it is my view of the world along with the purpose of my study which leads me towards using a qualitative research method by interviewing six employees.

I have chosen to place myself within the paradigm of interpretivism, because my work relies upon my own understanding and interpretations of both empirical and theoretical data. Bryman (2004) points out that within this paradigm there is an interactive link between the researcher and the subject which makes it easier to seize the meaning of a social action. The ontological position is constructionism, involving that the researcher presents a particular version of social reality, instead of presenting a version which can be regarded as definitive (Bryman, 2004). I find this to suit my work, since I collect and present empirical data which is based on the interview subjects own understanding and meaning of things.

The nature of my research question also supports my choice of a qualitative method. In my study I will identify and explore the relations between the strategies successful employees at Corporate Market use to learn on the job, develop their competence and obtain success at work. Exploring the relations between the different strategies requires that my own interpretations play a central role in the data analysis. Mertens (1998) points out that since different perspectives lie behind every description of reality, it is important that the researcher actually describes his or her own understanding of the situation. While interviewing the employees, I tried to grasp their own understanding of reality and then transform their assumptions into the text presented in the chapter of empirical findings.

It is important for qualitative research to outline some criteria for quality. According to Mertens (1998), credibility is the criterion on the internal validity of the research, where peer debriefing and member checks are important factors. Mertens (1998) also mentions dependability and confirmability as significant criteria of quality. Here, dependability refers to the idea that changes are expected during the research process, but these changes should be tracked and inspected publicly. Confirmability requires that the researcher try to remain detached and minimize the influence of the own judgment. At last, Mertens (1998) mentions authenticity as a crucial criterion of quality. Authenticity involves that the researcher presents a fair view of interview persons' perspectives, values and beliefs (Mertens, 1998). I kept all those criteria in mind during the whole research process, and endeavored to fulfill them to the greatest extent. I will explain how I did that in the next section which deals with the research procedures.

2.2 Procedures

In this chapter I am going to review the procedures of the study. I will begin by accounting for my choice of organization and interview persons and then present the construction of the interview guide. Next, I will lead the reader through the data collection and the transcriptions of the interviews. Finally, I will revise the process of the data analysis.

2.2.1 Choice of organization and interview persons

Since I am Icelandic and intend to move back to Iceland after my studies here at Lund University, I wanted to do my empirical research in cooperation with an Icelandic company. I also found it to be more valuable for me and my work to be able to use my own language in the interviews, since interviewing in the mother tongue is quite different from interviewing in a foreign language. I have a few acquaintances who are employed at an Icelandic company named Síminn, which can be seen as comparable to the Swedish company Telia. Síminn is formerly known in English speaking countries as Iceland Telecom Ltd. Síminn is a relatively old company which was established in 1906 and used to be owned by the Icelandic government. In 2005, the company was privatized and has now a leading position in providing telecommunications, mobile and internet services to private and corporate clients in Iceland. Síminn is one of the largest companies in Iceland with 1050 employees. According to the company's personal policy, Síminn emphasizes continuous training and education so that the employees can

continuously increase their skills and develop themselves within the company. I found it therefore interesting to be able to do my research at Síminn.

I contacted a friend who is a vice president at Corporate Market, a department within Síminn which handles sales and consulting of products and service to companies in Iceland. I explained that I intended to do an empirical research on how successful employees learn and develop their competence at work, and asked if it would be possible for me to do my research within his department by interviewing six people. The vice president showed much interest in my research and welcomed me to visit Corporate Market and interview a few of the employees.

My intentions were to interview employees who, according to their managers, can be considered as successful in their work. Therefore I knew it could be complicated to choose interview persons, partly because the fact that people can have different ideas of what “successful” actually means. I discussed this thoroughly with the vice president, and I told him that by successful I meant employees who were somehow outstanding in their jobs, had done something extraordinary compared to other employees in similar jobs and constantly endeavored to improve their performance. I also said that in order to get as broad range of interview persons as possible, I preferred that the people were employed at different divisions as well as holding different positions. Here I must mention that I know the vice president well and completely trust his judgment to make an objective choice. I did not have the opportunity myself to walk around and find out which employees could be considered the most successful, so this was the only way for me to make a selection of interview persons.

The vice president carefully chose six people employed at different divisions and levels within Corporate Market. I asked him to contact respective employees and ask if they would possible volunteer to be interviewed for my master thesis. He did that and informed the employees that the interviews would involve some aspects of on-the-job learning and competence development. All six employees were more than willing to participate, and then I got their e-mails and sent them an introductory letter to explain my intentions and the purpose of the interview (see appendix 1).

In the letter I introduced myself and the purpose of my master thesis, where I would be aiming at identifying the different strategies which successful employees at Corporate Market use in order to learn and develop their competence at work. I also said that they had been chosen because they were considered successful in their jobs. I revealed the main topics we would discuss, and emphasized that I would centre on their own strategies, not strategies in general. I also mentioned ethical aspects like confidentiality and that I intended to record the interviews. After this I booked in the interviews with respective employees, and then I booked a flight to Iceland.

2.2.2 Construction of the interview guide

A professionally implemented interview yields data which can be considered authentic and the results can be seen both valid and useful to others (Lantz, 1993). Asking questions and getting answers is a more difficult task than it may seem in the beginning (Fontana & Frey, 1998). In this context, preparing and framing the interview carefully is an important component in the research process (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Kvale, 1996; Lantz, 1993). I wanted to get as much and useful information from my interviews as

possible, and therefore I constructed an interview guide to prepare questions which would cover the themes I wanted to discuss under the interviews (see appendix 2). In my interview guide, I first prepared questions about the interviewee's background and education, and then I formulated questions which involved three themes: learning, competence at work and successfulness. I deliberately formulated the questions by first asking, for instance, *how* people learned and then I asked *what* they did to make the learning happen. I chose to do this in order to give the interview persons a chance to reflect on *how* they learn, by telling me *what* they do to learn on their job. My intention was to elicit the different strategies each and every interview subject uses to learn on the job. After the discussions about learning strategies, I asked about the meaning of *learning on the job*. I chose to ask this question last because at that point, the interlocutors could have clearer ideas of what learning on the job really meant to them. Then I asked in similar ways about competence development and success at work.

2.2.3 Data collection

Conversation is a foundation for human interactions and is an ancient instrument in obtaining knowledge (Kvale, 1996). In qualitative research, interviewing is one of the most common methods of data collection (Alvesson, 1999; Fontana & Frey, 1998). If the data collected from an interview is to be useful in any way, it is necessary that the researcher possesses theoretical understanding. If not, any use of the interview data risk being primitive, and all interpretations build on an unstable ground (Alvesson, 1999). According to Kvale (1996), the semi structured interview has the purpose of obtaining qualitative descriptions of the interviewee's real world, and places emphasis on respect to interpreting the meaning of the interviewee's descriptions. Therefore, I found it appropriate to use semi structured interviews in my research, since they give the interview persons space to talk openly without restraint and express their thoughts and meanings in their own way.

I interviewed six people and each interview took approximately 40 – 70 minutes. The interviews took place in a private meeting room at Corporate Market. I began each interview with some informal discussions which then lead to presentation of my self and my study. I also thanked my interview subjects for volunteering and placed emphasis on the ethical aspects such as anonymity and freedom to back out at any time. I also asked for permission to record the interview using a digital recorder, and informed the subjects that all interview material would be destroyed after I would finish writing the thesis. The atmosphere was very relaxed and the interview subjects seemed to feel comfortable during the interviews. After the presentation I asked a few questions about the interviewee's background, which seemed to help the persons to start talking and reflecting.

I was aware of the fact that it is important for the researcher to adjust herself to the interview situation, listen actively and ask appropriate follow-up questions in order to get all the information needed (Kvale, 1996). I used my interview guide as a main source for questions, and focused on listening to the answers. In qualitative interviews there is a certain risk of distortion, in light of the fact that people affect each other (Bell, 2000). In order to prevent any kind of distortion, I endeavored to summarize the answers I got to make sure that I had understood and interpreted everything right. I also asked follow up questions to deepen the answers and get more information. It can be

difficult to keep away from being objective, but in order to increase the confirmability I tried as far as I could to remain detached. At the end of the interview, I also gave the interview subjects a chance to tell me if there was something more they wanted to share or if they wanted to complete their earlier answers and thoughts. The basic subject in interviewing is the meaningful, interpreting relations between the researcher and the interviewed (Kvale, 1996; Lantz, 1993), and I felt that I achieved this kind of relation in my interviews and succeeded to objectively understand and interpret the interviewees' stories and meaning.

The interpretive/constructivist researcher constantly endeavors to confirm that the collected data and his or her interpretation are not a creation of his or her own imagination (Mertens, 1998). I am fully aware that my previous understanding of the matter, my own knowledge and earlier experience, along with the fact that I have studied pedagogy, are all factors which can affect my interpretations. Being aware of this, I have throughout my work constantly endeavored to increase the quality of my study by critically reflecting on my own interpretations and analysis. For instance, when the interview subjects talked about "hidden knowledge", I interpreted it as they were talking about "tacit knowledge", so I asked some follow up questions in order to find out if we understood "hidden knowledge" in the same way.

2.2.4 Transcriptions

After I had finished each interview I transcribed it thoroughly using my digital recordings. This process was the most time demanding part of the whole research. I chose to transcribe the whole interview word by word, instead of choosing the parts I found to be most interesting. By doing that I did not risk losing any relevant information. I used the interviewees' exact words, and did not in any case put words in their mouth. I made, however, a few footnotes in certain cases, which I thought could be relevant when I would begin to analyze the material. While doing that I had indeed already begun the analyzing process. I was aware of the fact that I had to conceal the interview persons' identity (compare appendix 1). Kvale (1997) points out that researcher must handle the interview material in a confidential way and therefore it is important to hide the interviewees' identity during the transcription process. Therefore, all names or places they told me about became "X" in my transcripts. These transcripts were then the basis for my work and analysis of my empirical material.

2.2.5 Data analysis

Most researchers using interviews present the results of the interviews as valid statements that provide a reliable basis for exploring the subject's social reality, perceptions or meanings. The interview material does not, however, speak for itself (Alvesson, 1999). The researcher has to assess, analyze and interpret the empirical materials that have been collected. This process involves a set of analytic procedures that produces interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

There are three different stages (compare Kvale, 1996) in my interpretations of the empirical data. The first one involves presenting the way the interview persons understand their own reality, i.e. describing how they see and interpret their world. The second stage involves presenting how I, as an interviewer and researcher, understand

and interpret what the interview subjects tell me. These two stages are partly twined together and presented in my chapter on empirical results. The third stage is to be found in my chapter on analysis, where I analyze how my empirical data and my interpretations agree with earlier research on related matters.

I based my analysis mainly on Mertens (1998) ideas. First I read carefully through all the interviews for several times and endeavored to understand the frame of meaning within each interview. While reading, I noted my own reflections and other comments. During this process I had in mind that Bell (2000) argues that working on the sources and making notes are important elements in the research procedure, and points out that categorizing becomes easier if the researcher has some ideas and makes some suggestions of headings to work with on the way. I sifted through the material, looking out for patterns and themes, aiming at discerning similarities and differences and relationships between different variables in the interviewees' understandings and aspects. Data analysis is an ongoing process during the whole procedure of the research (Kvale, 1996; Mertens, 1998). Therefore, my interpretations and the first steps of my analysis began when I was going through the material and sorting out what I found to be interesting and relevant for my study and identifying the main themes.

At this point, I was able to begin to classify the remaining descriptions into sub categories, where each person's specific answer was separated from its origin and put in relation with other peoples' answers. I used a Word document, and to secure that I would not miss who said what, how many interview subjects had same opinion on certain matter, each person had his or her own font color. Then I wrote down all the headlines in accordance to the main themes and sub categories and by doing that I had created the structure of the thesis.

2.2.5.1 Translating from Icelandic

Since I interviewed the employees in our own language, Icelandic, I had to translate the relevant parts of my transcriptions into English. I was aware of that this could be risky and eventually result in some kind of distortion, but I endeavored to literally translate everything the interview persons said, word by word. This might have resulted in the quotations having some affects from the Icelandic language and perhaps do not sound like normal "English spoken language", but at least the quotations thoroughly describe what actually was said in the interview. I got this confirmed by the interview persons themselves, since they got the opportunity to read my text and recognized their own words and meanings. After my translations I also asked an English speaking friend to read through the chapter.

2.2.5.2 Presenting the results

When I was writing my presentation of the empirical results I decided not to present each and every interview, since it is not the aim of my study to compare them in any way. I did not want to reveal the interviewees' identity, and therefore I chose not to present each person's strategies. Instead, I aimed at finding as many strategies as possible and present them as mutual strategies for the whole group. Therefore, I presented similar answers within a certain category as a whole, for instance: "four of the employees I interviewed emphasized the importance of experimenting". In other cases I found interesting what one interview person had said and then I let the answer stand as a

direct quotation. In this context, I found it to be of great importance for the confirmability to use different colors for different interview persons. By doing that I could secure that it was this particular person but not some other person who actually said this or that, and make sure that every word could be traced back to its origin.

2.2.5.3 Identifying the different strategies

In order to fulfill the main purpose of my thesis, I had to identify the strategies employees at Corporate Market use to learn on their jobs, develop their competence and obtain success at work. Therefore, I used the chapter of empirical findings to find these different strategies. First, I carefully read through the section which handles on-the-job learning and marked each strategy mentioned by the employees. I also wrote down notes regarding how this particular strategy was used in order to learn on the job. Then I read thoroughly through the section which handles competence development and did the same thing. I wrote down each and every strategy the employees mentioned and noted that they used this strategy to develop their competence. Finally, I did the same thing with the section on obtaining success.

After this I had identified twenty six different strategies used by employees at Corporate Market to learn, develop the competence and obtain success. I noticed that some of the strategies were used both in order to learn and develop the competence, and that some of them were used in order to develop the competence or to obtain success and so on. To better be able to keep an eye on all these strategies and their relations I chose to categorize them. First, I divided them into two main categories: intrapersonal and interpersonal. After that, I used my notes and constructed a table (see table 2) to illustrate all the strategies and their purpose. By doing that it became easier to see which strategy is used in order to learn and which strategy is used in order to develop the competence or obtain success. I find the method I used for analyzing and presenting the data to perfectly fit my main purpose, since I was going to examine and analyze the relations between peoples' different strategies to learn on their jobs and develop their competence.

2.2.5.4 Aspects of quality

In order to increase the quality of my research, I endeavored to fulfill the quality criteria mentioned in section 2.1. My meetings with my instructor, where we discussed the next steps in the research process and critically reflected on the procedure and the findings, helped me to fulfill the criterion on peer debriefing. I also endeavored to fulfill the criterion on member checks, dependability and authenticity by sending the final version of the chapter of empirical findings to all my interview subjects and asked them to carefully read it. I asked for their comments, like whether or not I seemed to have understood and interpreted what they told me, or if there was something they were not satisfied with. The interview subjects all wrote back (individually, of course) and all told me that they were quite happy with the chapter. All of them said that they had no comments at all, but a few mentioned that they had enjoyed the reading and actually it was quite fun to see their own words on print. Receiving these comments can be seen as a certain conformation of the dependability and authenticity of my work.

Now I will leave the chapter of methodology and turn to the main thing, namely the empirical findings.

3 Empirical findings

I interviewed six people, employed at different divisions and levels at Corporate Market, Síminn. Corporate Market was established in February 2006, which means that the employees have been working in their present jobs since then or later. Some employees have been doing similar jobs within the company before, while others can be seen as beginners in theirs. Five of the interviewees have some kind of academic education. One of these five has two bachelor degrees in different subjects. One has a master degree and two have been or are being studying at universities without having received a degree. One person has technical education and is now studying in order to get an academic degree. These five persons all find their education to be relevant and useful in their jobs today. The sixth interview subject has another kind of education which is totally different from the present work, and therefore this person does not find the education to be useful in the current job. Self-education has been the key to this person's success instead.

3.1 Strategies to learn on the job

The first theme in my interview guide deals with the questions *how* people learn on their job and *what* they do to make the learning happen (see appendix X). I begin my presentation by reviewing the interviewees' ideas on on-the-job learning so that the readers will get some ideas on what the subject is all about. After that I will review all the different strategies the interview subjects use to learn on the job.

3.1.1 Learning on the job is the everyday work

Five of the interview persons told me that one of the most important sources of learning on the job was indeed the every day work. One person emphasized that people were always taking in new knowledge through everything they were doing. By this he meant that people were always learning, and finished his argument by saying:

There is no final graduation!

Another person said that every day work often dealt with new situations and new problems, and therefore it was essential to constantly learn something new, and then combine the new knowledge with old experience in order to solve the tasks and make the customer happy. One person saw learning on the job as learning new things which appeared at work, learning something that could be useful for both the employee and the company, as well as taking notice and being aware of the company's environment. The person further added that learning on the job involved intensifying oneself, both as a person and as an employee. Another person had the same view and said that learning on the job meant that employees learned by simply doing their jobs, and that entailed opportunities to evolve, both personally as within the company. One person expressed that learning on the job meant learning from co-workers. She continued by saying that

continuous learning on the job was essential for employees in order to reinforce their performance.

3.1.2 Learning by practical problem solving

Four of the employees I interviewed emphasized the importance of experimenting in their jobs in order to solve a challenging task. One person said that she totally learned the most by doing that. Another person stressed this by saying that experimenting her way forward worked better for her than anything. All four interviewees mentioned that they learned the most just by throwing themselves into the deep end of the pool. I got a bit curious to find out what they meant by that, and I asked for further declaration. One person expressed this by saying:

You learn most by experimenting. Just do it. And... you must throw your self into the deep end of the pool. It can of course be difficult, and you foresee that you are going to drown, but there are water wings all over the place and you just reach out for it... the water wings... are just your co-workers and the people around you.

Another person expressed how she, at the beginning of her last job, was thrown into the pool because the person who had the job before her left the company very suddenly:

Actually there was no safety net to hold on to. Therefore I had to seek everything myself or learn from co-workers, and then I just had to experiment my way forward.

All four agreed on that they often found it best to throw themselves into new things, even without knowing how to do them. They pointed out that it was of great importance for their learning within the company to welcome new and unknown tasks and then experiment a little bit towards a successful solution.

3.1.2.1 Read first and then test by yourself

Four interview subjects said that they read in order to learn new things at work. They pointed out, however, that it was of no use just to read. The ultimate compound was to read first, and then try by your self:

I can read forever, but I do not obtain any proper knowledge until I have also experienced the thing myself. (...) And if I experience an error, then I go back. Look for other solutions. Maybe I read some more. Then I try again.

A few interviewees mentioned that in today's ever changing and turbulent world, reading could be crucial for organizations in order to obtain new information about other companies or rivals. Therefore, reading the newspapers, articles and even advertisements could help organizations to be one step a head, just by taking in the information, and trying to develop or create something new and better in order to ensure the future of the company. One person phrased this by saying:

If we would not read the papers, use the media and get acquainted with the company's surroundings, Síminn would not be in a competitive position today.

3.1.3 Courses and lectures

All the persons I interviewed had attended some courses or lectures during their employment at Síminn. All six also told me that the company was more than willing to

send its employees to courses. They drew attention to the fact that if employees found they were in need of a course, they could contact Human Resources and they would construct a course formatted to respective needs. And if they needed to attend so called outside courses, it was no problem either.

One interview subject said that the company's education centre always had something going on but some of it was not that useful for just him. It could, however, be useful for some others in the company. He continued by saying that a course only would be practical if the employee would sit down afterwards and begin to do things related to the course, in order to preserve the new knowledge and make it stay in the head. One person in a managerial position pointed out that lately she had not had much time for going courses. It was on the schedule, though, because she found it essential in order to maintain being successful at her job.

Now I am a superior, and no one is born with the skills needed for that. You need to seek some help. I have also attended courses in expression and appearance, and that has helped me a great deal. Anyway, my motto is: you are never too good at anything. You never loose by learning, or going a course, or seeking a help from a co-worker.

A few person mentioned interior presentations, a forum where the different departments of the company presented something they were doing, had developed, or was important for all to know.

These are called lunch lectures, and every employee can attend and listen. This gives an insight into what all the other departments are actually doing. (...) I think it's brilliant!

Three persons told me that they often had attended work related courses that did not come in use in any way. Therefore, two of them emphasized the importance of being selective when choosing a course. Doing that would both minimize the time spent on courses, as well as increase the efficiency developed from the course:

I think the company must realize the importance of being selective when it comes to courses. Uh... each and every company does it's... let's say business plan... in its own way. Siminn handles a certain sector and some things must be taken into consideration. Then there is another company which manufactures body lotion or something... and therefore needs some different business plan than we do...

3.1.4 Learning from co-workers

Throughout all six interviews, the interview subjects emphasized the relevance of co-workers when it came to learning at the workplace. When I asked one person how he learned on his job, he simply answered:

By talking to people.

When I asked the same question in the other interviews I also got answers like:

By learning from others; By asking my co-workers; I ask for help and assistance from my colleagues.

One person said that she always tried to seek help from colleagues because there are so many people at the workplace who have been working there for years, and all the knowledge is just in their head. Another person told me the same thing, and then added

that it was rather a question from *which* person you should seek help, assistance or information, rather than *if* you should seek some help. The same person also pointed out that to be sure whom to ask from time to time, it is very important to have a contact net within the company and know the company's infrastructure. All the interview subjects said that they could easily obtain help and information from colleagues. One person expressed this by saying:

I just ask. (...) You're not stupid if you don't know all the answers. I do not necessarily ask people who have worked here longer than I have; I just ask the ones who have more knowledge. (...) I also ask those who have worked here for 40-50 years. They know how it once was, and how it is now, and know what matters.

One person drew attention to another aspect of learning from co-workers. She told me that she had learned a lot about how things were done in the company by studying projects which her co-workers had completed before. She said that this strategy had been of great importance when she was a beginner in her present job, and had helped her to generate new ideas and ways to carry out the tasks.

Because all my interviewees seemed so accustomed to seek assistance from their co-workers, I wanted to know what they did exactly. First they had the conversation with the co-worker, and then what?

Three persons said that that if they had to learn something new, then first they would get some common presentation by a colleague or their boss, and they would continue the process by looking for more information by themselves and then use it to solve the tasks. One person described how he would start putting together the puzzle after getting information from co-workers, by combining the new information and his own knowledge. If he would come across some problem or hindrance and need more information, he would go back and talk to respective person. Usually, this enables him to arrive at a solution.

One person said that she asked someone to demonstrate the substance to her and after that she would experiment her way forward until she would get the grip of it. Another person described the same process like this:

I simply ask someone to show me how to do and... then I use that to continue my work. (...) I am completely unafraid of seeking assistance. That's just how it is with co-workers. (...) I get the information and then I go back to my job and try to use what I was taught or told, and then I work with the task until it's finished. And if I need some more help, then I just look for more help.

3.1.4.2 Ways to make co-workers' knowledge more visible

At this point it had become clear to me that all of these successful employees I interviewed used their colleagues as their main source for knowledge seeking. Therefore I wondered if the interview subjects held out on some ways to facilitate the process of making all the hidden knowledge in the company more visible.

One interviewee told me that he could not see any magical way to make the hidden knowledge more visible. Two other persons told me that in order to make hidden knowledge more visible it would be necessary to have some kind of corporate forum with the purpose of being able to share knowledge and information. One person pointed out that in this context it would be possible to use the company's computer system or

intranet to gather information. Sometimes employees used the intranet for this reason, but in fact the resources on the intranet were extremely limited and in some cases of no use.

One interview subject told me that once, two employees had gone abroad to attend a course concerning “how to be a product manager”. A while after they returned, they shared their new knowledge with their co-workers in a seminar. According to the interview person it was a great seminar, especially because the respective employees had adjusted the course to the company. She furthermore continued that this was very informative for all present employees, in particular those who had recently started their career as product managers.

Another person said that it would be easy to make hidden knowledge more visible by using a mentoring system, where younger and less experienced employees could meet with, talk to and get advice from older and more experienced co-workers. A few interview subjects mentioned that a kind of mentoring system had existed within the company some time ago. Two persons said that when training new employees a mentoring system could be crucial. When new employees were hired they would usually not get enough adjustment time with an experienced person, which results in a limitation of the knowledge transferred between persons. One person further continued by saying that mentors could introduce new employees to the company’s infrastructure and other employees in order to build up a contact net which would facilitate communications within the company. Besides, a mentoring system would speed up the adjustment time for new employees; minimize risks of making beginner’s mistakes and result in more confident and satisfied employees.

Those were the last words on the learning strategies. Next I am going to review the different strategies my interview subjects use to develop their competence at their work.

3.2 Strategies to develop human competence at work

The second theme in my interview guide covers questions regarding competence development (see appendix 2). In my upcoming presentation, I begin by reviewing the employees’ ideas on human competence at work, and then I present all of the different strategies the employees use in order to develop their competence.

3.2.1 Human competence at work involves employee’s potentials

All the interview subjects told me in one way or another that human competence at work involved employee’s capabilities to do their job. When I asked for further explanations, one person said that human competence also involved development and experience. One person told me that human competence at work involved employees’ potentials to carry out their work tasks and perform in their jobs. Further she added that it was essential for employees to constantly increase their potentials, aiming at being better employees. Another person said that competence meant embarking upon new and demanding tasks, completing them and making them useful for the company:

Then I have achieved something and increased my self-confidence and therefore it becomes easier and easier to tackle demanding tasks. (...)You will never grow as an employee or develop your competence unless you attack new and demanding

tasks. (...) This means you must step outside the circle of comfort. And welcome challenging tasks... and succeed. It's such a victory when you manage to expand the circle.

I had never heard of the circle of comfort, so I asked for more information. The person then told me that this was something which had been instilled to her from the first day at Síminn. She continued, however, by saying that it could be crucial to choose the right time to attack difficult tasks:

We're all human and we're differently geared up from day to day. Sometimes you need to arrange your tasks depending on how life is today. In order to succeed it's better to work on a difficult task when you're all geared up and filled with energy. If you're not in the right mood then it's possible you'll not be able to solve the task. (...) But do not give up! Instead, work on less demanding tasks that particular day, and tackle the difficult ones when you're up to it.

The person meant that by doing this employees would constantly expand the circle of comfort, and thereby expand their scope of action which would lead to better performance and more productivity. The same person also pointed out that sometimes she had to look for, or volunteer for, opportunities to get involved in demanding tasks.

Another person told me that the fundamental item in human competence is the extent to which people get to solve tasks in a practical way for the company. Additionally she said that there were direct connections between competence and obtaining success:

If you deliver a job well done, can easily work with other people and use the resources you've got access to, then you have an excellent competence. (...) Constant development of the competence has very constructive effects and makes you definitely more successful as an employee. (...) And therefore, you become a more important resource for Síminn. You see... it all goes hand in hand.

One person said that human competence had everything to do with how people are able to co-operate and communicate with co-workers. Finally, one person told me that, for him, human competence to certain degree meant being able to adapt to change and cope with change with a positive attitude. Change was such a huge factor in today's working environment that it was essential for employees to be able to familiarize with change.

Now, I have reviewed the interview subjects' understandings of human competence, and I shall begin the presentation of the different strategies successful employees at Corporate Market use to develop their competence at work.

3.2.2 Continuous learning and value of co-workers

Five of my interview subjects mentioned continuous learning as a major segment in competence development. Two people described how they developed their competence by learning something new. One of them said that learning was the key to being better at your job, and the other said the most important thing was to learn new things, experiment with the new knowledge and then use that knowledge to make improvements in her work. Another person pointed out that he knew a lot of examples where employees at Síminn had stagnated and were not able to move forward in the ever changing environment. However, he also knew examples of employees who had been working in the company for decades, and had always been on their toes, looking for new knowledge and always doing something new:

And these employees, they are still doing very well today. Competence deals with increasing your knowledge and following the spirit of the times. This technical environment we live in is ever changing. Over these 100 years Síminn has existed... from the telegraph and the Morse code and up to what it is today... It's a very long time... huge advancement. And it's not going to stop. There is always something happening. Hence, we all need to be on our toes and continually seek more knowledge.

Later in the interview, the same person further emphasized his opinions on this:

The key instrument when developing the competence is seeking knowledge. It is important not to stagnate if you will keep being good at doing your job. You must keep up with the turbulent market, and if you are going to be left alone in yesterday's knowledge, then you are not of great value to the company. Continuous learning is simply the key to success. (...) The most important thing, however, is that the company acknowledges the need for continuous education (...) within the working hours. (...) I think that is the key to a developing organization.

All the interview persons mentioned that co-workers played an important role when it came to developing competence at work. One interview subject said that in his division, everybody communicated constantly and shared opinions about things they were handling at work.

We say things like "have you done this? How are you going to do this? How did you do that?" (...) We are all experts in different areas and by doing this we learn from one another. I am sure this makes me more competent as an employee.

Another person told me that her tactic was to sit down with co-workers and reflect upon different work related things. She would ask respective person how he or she had done this or that, or if he or she had some experience in something she was engaged in. These kinds of conversations often would yield relevant information or new ideas, which she could transfer to her own work and use in order to tackle new tasks.

Doing this makes me more competent. I perform better. My co-workers possess huge amount of knowledge, and learning from them is very important for my job.

One person told me that he gained a lot by communicating with people and by taking a look at how co-workers had done things previously. Many of these people had been working at Síminn for a long time and possessed valuable knowledge for his work. By looking into previously performed tasks or reports, he could see how others did this or that, and possibly identify a new ways to perform the tasks even better.

3.2.3 Planning and time management

A few of my interview subjects mentioned that planning and time management were critical when it came to developing their competence at work. One person said that because of the rapid development and constant changes, everyone needed to be on their toes and almost do more than was actually expected. This same person said that it was very practical to use time management in order to prioritize tasks:

I plan the week on Mondays and decide that this day at that time I'll carry out this specific task. Before I was more like "I'll try it on Monday", and if that didn't work then "I'll do it on Tuesday" and then I could have this hanging over my head for a week. Now I put other things aside, engage in the task and then it's just finished. I feel like I perform better... more efficient... and there is, indeed, less workload.

One person told me that she needed to look out for not working on too many tasks at a time. Another person also said it was crucial to use the time well, prioritize the tasks and work while being at work. Otherwise, the tasks would just accumulate and the workload increase. The same person continued by saying that she used her calendar a lot to help her to plan and prioritize tasks. She would put up a task list and mark when she finished the tasks. By doing that, she could see that she had achieved something:

There are always some tasks you neglect because they are too difficult or boring. (...) And if I have a long list, then I aim at taking at least two boring tasks today. And then it is such a victory when I finish something which has been waiting and I just get some extra energy and passion to continue the work.

Two persons told me they tried to simplify things in order to spare time and increase the productivity. When I asked what they meant by this, one person told me that his strategy was to look at an object from A to Z, examine the process and find out where it was possible to simplify. Instead of presupposing that things were complicated, he would begin by looking at the simple sides and then work his way towards the solution. His exact words were:

This usually works faster and has great effects for everyone; especially me. I get a wider perspective over the product. In addition, this increases the productivity. And actually, simplicity is one of Siminn's values!

3.2.4 Feedback, goal setting and performance evaluation

All of the interview subjects mentioned that giving and receiving feedback were extremely important factors when developing one's competence at work. One person, employed at the sales division, said that there was no point in being panegyric, but suitable amount of praise and positive feedback from a manager or co-workers could be encouraging for employees work. In addition, feedback and responses from the customers also were encouragement as such.

Two persons in managerial positions said that they endeavored to give their subordinates reinforcing feedback. One of them told me that she used semi-monthly meetings with each and every employee, where both parties could change opinions, say if something had been done well or if something needed to be done better. Furthermore she said that she was sure that such a forum was one of the most effective ways to help people develop their competence. She also described her experience when she got a certain kind of formal feedback, where the closest co-workers evaluated one another:

This was not a performance evaluation; more like feedback on me as an employee. (...) Then the boss read the comments for me, both positive and negative, and then I worked on that by setting goals. It was extremely valuable. Difficult, but valuable. (...) It's absolutely necessary to do this. I mean, you experience yourself in one way, and your co-workers are experiencing you in another way. And you need to know that, in order to improve yourself as an employee. It's necessary to be able to take criticism (...) and I have tried to welcome it and not take it personally.

She continued by saying that this kind of feedback was not used at Corporate Market, but that she intended to recommend that they would begin using such feedback. Another interview person had also gotten acquainted to a similar kind of formal feedback, so called 360° feedback.

I think it's the most exciting thing. (...) You get feedback from everyone around you at the workplace; subordinates, superiors and equals. Unfortunately, this does not exist here and only time can tell if it ever will. I find it extremely important to be aware of what you have achieved and how you perform.

Five interview persons mentioned performance evaluation as one way to develop their competence. This kind of evaluation was launched shortly after the department was established in February 2006 and is commonly used at Corporate Market today. According to my interview persons, the first step is that the whole department sets mutual goals for the next year. After that, each and every employee, together with the nearest manager, also sets private goals. After three months, the respective employee and manager sit down again and review whether the employee has obtained the goals or not. A few interview persons told me that in one division, employees would get a bonus if they reached their goals. One person in a managerial position said that in this kind of goal-setting it was very important that superiors monitored, supported and reminded their subordinates if necessary. She also said that performance evaluation had certain effects on every employee, but in different ways:

This is very motivating for most employees, but there are others who find the press very uncomfortable. Then I say: "Are you at the right place?" There is no shame of not being at the right place in life, one can always go and try something out if one doesn't know what he wants. (...) But most people welcome the challenge, and it can be very enjoyable to see after a certain period, how performance has changed over the time.

The interview subjects who are not managers did not all have the same opinions on performance evaluation. One person said it worked all right, it was no holy truth, but could give the employee some clues which should be taken into consideration. Another person said that because this was a relatively new instrument and employees were rather inexperienced in goal formulation, a few employees might have set the goal too high to begin with. However, the person continued by saying that this was a developing process at Corporate Market, in which the future could be of great importance:

...Both for the employees and the whole department. It is important that everyone knows where we are headed, and that each and everyone has something particular to aim at.

One person said that in his division, goal monitoring was not highly prioritized. Surely, employees and managers formulated some goals, and according to the goals the employee really needed to speed up in order to obtain those. But a few days later everyone had forgotten about the goals and no one ever followed them up.

I think it also matters how one formulates the goals. They are supposed to be like SMART goals, but I think it depends on respective manager and employee how they formulate and understand the goals. (...) And I think it can be very difficult to do a performance evaluation only based on the goals. I would like to see a performance evaluation where it could be measurable how I am doing at work. Like, I always deliver my tasks on time; does that mean I am performing well?

Now I will leave the strategies to develop competence at work and turn to the last theme in my interview guide, namely strategies to obtain success at work.

3.3 Strategies to obtain success at work

The last theme in the interview guide concerns success at work. When I asked the interview persons if they were successful employees, five of them answered yes directly. One person said straight no, and meant that he or she was not successful above other employees. However, later in the interview, after we had discussed what being successful meant, the same person suddenly smiled and said that indeed, he or she was successful after all; he or she had just not realized it before.

After I had asked my interlocutors if they were successful, I was curious to find out how they were successful and what being successful actually meant to them.

3.3.1 Being successful – what does it mean?

All my interview subjects had some opinions on what it meant to be successful. One said that being successful meant doing well at work and living up to the managers' expectations. When I asked her what it meant to do well at work and live up to expectations, she explained that it meant delivering tasks in time and also to be able to work well and closely with co-workers. Further, she said that being successful involved personal ambition and a will to succeed. Another person had similar opinions, and said that being successful meant delivering a job well done - and beyond that, actually:

You need to set the goal a little higher than you know you can obtain. By doing that, you will get a little further than you thought you would. And it's similar with work tasks; you need to take some extra tasks or more challenging tasks, even if you don't have much extra time to work on them. But you'll succeed anyway, and manage to deliver excellent tasks in time.

One person said that being successful involved being able to familiarize quickly with new things, working on a high tempo, being proficient and at last, being able to react quickly to any changes or new circumstances. This, she meant, required training, and it was important for employees to be aware of that. One person mentioned that being successful meant being able to differentiate between main issues and side issues and at the same time being focused and determined on the work tasks. This, she meant, could be extremely important in today's turbulent world, because it would shorten the time it takes to perform the tasks, and therefore increase the productivity.

3.3.2 In which ways do you find yourself being successful and what did you do to get there?

After the discussions about being successful, I was a bit curious to find out in which ways respective an interview subject found him or her to be successful. And furthermore, what did the person do to get to this point?

3.3.2.1 Personal ambition and stimulating working environment

My first interview subject said that she found herself to be successful because she was ambitious and interested in what she was doing from time to time. She said that she entered the company with passion and enthusiasm, and that ever since she had just felt that she had to perform well. Regarding the question of what led to her success, the

interview subject told me it was a combination of her own personal ambition, the will to perform well, the stimulating and motivating working environment, her superiors and all the co-workers. She told me that she experienced the working environment as extremely positive and that helped a lot:

If your personal ambition goes along with a stimulating working environment, it drives you forward and results in obtaining success.

In addition, her nearest superior was also very zealous and that affected her in a positive way. She further mentioned that an important factor to maintain interest, enthusiasm and ambition is to become aware that one's contribution is worth something.

3.3.2.2 Listen to feedback and use it to improve yourself

One person told me that he found himself to be successful, period. I received no further explanations of that because he immediately continued by saying that of course he could do better, and that the whole time he aimed at improving his performance at work. He told me that the performance evaluation had been very helpful in order to find out which things he should work on in order to improve:

In this evaluation you see certain things you must take into consideration. (...) And you've got to make the feedback useful to you. Not take it in a negative way. Just think "How can I do better?" This is simply an opportunity one has to exploit if he wants to be more successful.

Another person also mentioned that she had used feedback from co-workers and supervisors to learn in order to obtain success, and that this has been of extremely valuable to her. Further she said that the bonus she received if she obtained her goals was very motivating and helped her to be even more successful.

3.3.2.3 Definite goal formulation, deliver tasks in time and opportunity to change jobs within the company

One person told me that one of the things that made her successful was that she sets herself definite goals and continuously works on obtaining them. She continued by saying that it was the same with her work tasks. She always focused on getting things done, worked well and systematically, and aimed at delivering on time. When I asked if there was anything special that had made her successful, she told me that for her it had been crucial that she had opportunities to change jobs within the company:

I began in a job which is the best you can get in the beginning. It was a better school than the university, ever. Then I had the chance to move on to be a project manager and I stayed there for two years. Then I was offered this job. And it must be because of how I've been performing. What I've been doing... that counts.

Two persons said that the opportunity to change jobs within the company had been of great importance in order to obtain success. One added that all of the acknowledgements he had got for his work within Síminn also had played an important role in his success. Four persons agreed on the fact that delivering tasks in time were an essential part of being successful and three of them mentioned that they were successful because they were willing to or even asked for new and challenging tasks to perform. One person put it like this:

I can attend all my tasks, and more than that. (...) If I am supposed to deliver a task at one o'clock, then I have delivered the task at one o'clock. And I just sense that I am successful, both from co-workers and bosses. I also find that I have advanced lately... I have been able to tackle new tasks. And solve them. And therefore I find myself being more successful.

3.3.2.4 Adaptability and positive attitude

One person told me that adaptability was a crucial factor if one wants to obtain success. He said that there have been tremendous changes within the company the last years, and therefore he had gone through significant change processes a few times:

It's important to adapt to changes and be aware of the process. If you do that, then you know where you stand. (...) People who resist change because they are not happy with it, they can't move on. (...) I think... that if you adapt to change, you are more likely to obtain success.

The same person continued by saying that his positive attitude and communicability had done a lot in order to make him successful:

I think, that deep down it is the positive attitude. And positive attitude leads to other positive things. Like... communications. That's easy for me. And that's based on how positive I am. You know, if I wasn't positive, I would not show good ability in communications. All the people around here... you need to be able to communicate with them. Otherwise you just stand still.

3.3.2.5 Stability and being at the right place

One interview subject said that she found herself being successful because she had self control and that she did not experience any stress. The reason for this, she told me, was that she has developed both better planning strategies and had more overview on her work tasks. She continued by saying that she was very happy in her work, and that she was sure that it would lead to returns in her work as well as personal life. These words will be the final words in the presentation of the empirical results:

I sense stability in my life. Yes, stability may be the key word. And I also think that for people to obtain success, it's necessary to be at the right place. If one is not at the right place, it's impossible to get anything out of the work. Work is the half of one's life, or even more, and therefore, everybody must consider if they are situated at the right place in life.

After saying this, I will now turn to the next section of this master thesis, namely the analysis.

4 Analysis

In this last chapter I endeavor to analyze the different strategies to learn on the job, develop the competence and obtain success at work. I aim to find out to what degree my empirical data agrees with my interpretations, and also how my interpretations agree with earlier research in these matters. This can be seen as the second and the third stages of my interpretations (compare paragraph 3.1). Based on my analysis I was able to identify twenty six different strategies, both intrapersonal and interpersonal, which successful employees at Corporate Market use for on-the-job learning, competence development and to obtain success at work.

4.1 Learning on the job, developing the competence and obtaining success

In light of the fact that human competence involves a combination of knowledge, skills, experience and abilities, there seems to be an extremely strong relation between on-the-job learning and human competence. Developing the competence involves increasing the understanding of the work and expanding the scope of actions by intensifying knowledge, skills, experience and abilities. If employees are to be able to enlarge their understanding of work and expand their scope of actions, learning new things on the job seems to be essential. Based on my interviews, it seems that Síminn is a company which encourages and facilitates on-the-job learning and competence development. Indeed, this was actually one of the reasons why I chose to implement my study at Síminn.

During the interviews I got the feeling that both on-the-job learning and competence development is deeply integrated in the organization's culture. The employees I interviewed all expressed the view that learning and competence development are intertwined with the every day work, and therefore extremely important, both for them as employees as for the organization as a whole.

4.1.1 Personal ambition and will to learn and develop

During my interviews, all the interview subjects expressed in some way that human competence involved employees' potential, and that they saw on-the-job learning as an essential way to develop this potential. Therefore it appears that all these persons have some kind of personal ambition for delivering a job well done and to obtain success at work. This requires that they have recognized some need to learn on their jobs and that they are also actually willing to learn on their jobs. According to Sessa and London (2006), recognizing the need to learn is an essential element in the second level of learning. Furthermore, these employees seem to acknowledge the fact that on-the-job learning can be necessary in order to keep up with the newest knowledge so they can better deal with new situations and adapt to change. Seemingly, it is important for organizations' success to conduce towards personal ambition and encourage employees to constantly learn in their jobs to avoid being left in yesterday's knowledge.

4.1.2 Continuous learning for continuous development

The interview subjects all described how they use different levels of learning when they are learning on their jobs. They seem to use adaptive learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Probst & Büchel, 1997; Sessa & London, 2006, Ellström, 2001) in their every day job because they claim they are always taking in new knowledge through everything they are doing. The interview subjects do not seem to sense this simplest form of learning as a form of on-the-job learning. It appears that they relate the term on-the-job learning to more advanced forms of learning. Adaptive learning often takes place without our awareness (Ellström, 2001; Sessa & London, 2006) so in fact this kind of learning might be a larger part of the interview persons' learning than they realize.

Few of the interview persons mentioned the importance of welcoming challenging tasks and throwing themselves into new things. They also emphasized the importance of experimenting their way forward in order to solve unfamiliar and demanding tasks. This kind of behavior involves the second level of learning where individuals recognize the need to learn and use their knowledge to solve the problem. First, they experiment and then they correct their mismatches by changing their goals and actions (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Probst & Büchel, 1997; Ellström, 2001; Sessa & London, 2006).

It appears that the employees at Corporate Market find this kind of learning to be important for competence development and obtaining success. According to Argyris (1999), this second level of learning is extremely important in organizations, since it encourages employees to critically analyze their theories-of-action in order to solve problems and achieve their goals. In addition, this kind of learning is extremely relevant for organizations' long-term effectiveness (Argyris, 1999).

All the interview subjects described how they use the third level of learning in order to develop their competence or to obtain success. This involves learning from experience and making it useful in new situations; they learn from others by reflecting on previously done things; they change jobs within the company, they seek feedback and participate in performance evaluation. All these strategies can certainly be seen as a part of the third level of learning (Probst & Büchel, 1997; Ellström, 2001; Sessa & London, 2006), where individuals get acquainted with their own learning process, reflect on what has been done and use their experience to solve new tasks.

Learning from experience and making it useful in new situations involves experience transforming into knowledge. In organizations today, solving problems and dealing with unfamiliar tasks is a great part of employees' work. Kolb (1976) maintains that in order to obtain success in their jobs, it is important for individuals to be able to explore new ways and learn from their mistakes and success. In order to make experiences useful and learn from mistakes and successes it seems to be very important to use discussions with other people in order to reflect on their own behavior and receive feedback.

The interviewees' understanding of on-the-job learning and competence development appears to be in coherence with earlier research, and all of these subjects seem to see direct connections between the two subjects. Moreover, they seem to consider continuous learning to be the key to competence development and thereby the key to both individual success and success of the organization. Therefore it seems to be extremely important for organizations to emphasize continuous learning at the work

place and provide the right conditions so that the employees can use and undergo all three different levels of learning on their jobs.

4.1.3 Learning from co-workers

During my interviews, all the subjects told me that one of their strategies to learn on the job was to seek assistance and gather information from their co-workers. Therefore, they considered their co-workers being a valuable resource when developing their competence. One interview subject used the metaphor “water wings” for her co-workers, since they were the ones to reach out for after she had just thrown herself into the deep end of the pool. Apparently she meant that when employees get new, unfamiliar and demanding tasks to engage in, they turn to their co-workers and ask for information or assistance to solve the task.

Sessa and London (2006) point out that learning from co-workers is one form of the third level of learning, and in this context, conversations with co-workers appear to be extremely valuable for learning in organizations (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Bjerlöv & Docherty, 2006; McAdam et al., 2007). One person told me that human competence had everything to do with people’s abilities to cooperate and communicate with others. It seems that this person meant that without co-workers, human competence could not be developed so effectively.

Many of my interview subjects pointed out the value of their co-workers’ hidden knowledge, and how important it was to make this knowledge visible so it could pass on within the organization. Group discussion can be an excellent forum to elicit tacit knowledge, which according to McAdam et al. (2007) is an important resource which is essential to activate. The knowledge developed today can be the most important knowledge of tomorrow. Apparently, it is a perfectly normal thing at Corporate Market to seek assistance and get information from co-workers, and actually it seems that the employees see their co-workers as the major source of knowledge. This can be seen as an important segment in learning and therefore it is crucial for Corporate Market to continue to facilitate group discussions in order to constantly generate new knowledge.

One way of making the hidden knowledge at Síminn more visible might be to strategically construct the organization’s intranet, increase access to information, encourage the employees to use the intranet and constantly add and update relevant information. Another way is to establish a formal mentoring system, where an older and more experienced employee mentors a younger and less experienced co-worker. Mentoring can also be seen as a forum for conversations, reflection and development for new ideas. It doesn’t have to be a complicated system nor expensive, since the employees might as well meet over a cup of coffee in the company’s coffee garden.

4.1.3.1 The importance of reflecting in a group of co-workers

Like I have mentioned before, all the interview subjects told me that conversations with co-workers are important for getting information and new ideas. This can be seen as a form of communicative learning (Bjerlöv & Docherty, 2006) where collective reflection in a group of people is the central element. What I find interesting, however, is the fact that just a few of my interlocutors mentioned the importance of conversations with co-workers as an opportunity for reflection on their own behavior or actions.

The interview persons seem to look at their co-workers as important resources for information. They also seem to use conversations with co-workers as forums to reflect on how the co-workers have done things previously, and how that knowledge can be used in new situation. At the same time, they seem to underestimate the significance of reflecting on their own efforts, actions and behavior; reflecting on what they have been doing, how they did it and what they can do in order to solve the task differently or perform even better the next time. Experimenting your way forward and finding the solution by gathering information is one thing, but reflecting on ones actions in a group of co-workers is another thing.

Discussions in a group of co-workers gives valuable opportunities for learning since people get to share their options and meanings, get to hear other peoples points of view and get the opportunity to reflect on their own and other's actions. Therefore, group discussions result in development of new understanding which the employee can use in other learning situations, and it seems for this reason to be an important element in competence development (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Sessa & London, 2006; Bjerlöv & Docherty, 2006).

Based on my interviews, it is more than welcome at Corporate Market to seek assistance from co-workers. Therefore, being aware of the relevance of reflection in a group of co-workers can be of great importance for the employees at Corporate Market. In this context, semi-monthly or monthly seminars could be an option, where employees get a chance to reflect on accomplished tasks or ongoing projects. Such seminars can be seen as opportunities for learning from experience or actions, as well as learning from success or mistakes, and result in continuous learning and better performance.

4.1.4 Adjusting courses to the company's needs

When it comes to courses and lectures, the interview persons pointed out the relevance of adjusting the courses to Síminn's needs. It might be useful to attend extern courses and then bring the new knowledge and the new ideas back into the company. In other cases, it might increase the quality and usage of the course to adjust it to a particular division or group of employees. In this context it can also be useful for learning and competence development if people who go extern courses, later can communicate to their co-workers what was learned.

Doing that can also be seen as one way of making the tacit knowledge (McAdam et al., 2007) gained from the course more explicit, and therefore more useful for other employees in the company. According to my interview subjects this has been done at Síminn. It might be of great relevance for continuous learning and development of Síminn to continue to facilitate this process. Seminars or lunch lectures can be mentioned as fortunate forums for such transfer of knowledge.

The interview subjects seem to believe that learning always leads to something good, and therefore it is important to use all possible opportunities to learn and reflect in order to constantly develop the competence. With the intention of facilitating and encouraging continuous learning, it might be appropriate for Síminn to continue to integrate learning with the organization's culture.

4.1.5 Goal setting and individual feedback

Managers seem to be more positive than other employees towards the usage of goal setting and feedback as a tool for competence development. At Corporate Market, feedback appears to be informally used in relation with performance evaluation. Since goal setting and feedback are considered effective ways to improve learning and performance (Høyrup and Elkjaer, 2006; McCarthy & Garavan, 2006; Sessa & London, 2006), it can be of importance for organizations to strategically use feedback in order to facilitate learning and competence development. Some of the interview subjects mentioned that if they set the goal a little higher than they knew they could obtain, they would get a little further than they thought they would.

Goal setting and individual feedback can be important for improving employees' skills and for best results it is essential that managers follow up their employees' goal setting. Even more important is to help employees understand the reasons which lie behind the feedback process, and that the purpose is to learn from one's experience and improve the performance. Feedback and reflection appear to be excellent ways to find coherence between theories-in-use and espoused-theories (compare Argyris & Schön, 1978).

In this context, the Johari window as a metaphor (Drejer, 2001) can be of great importance when employees constantly seek feedback and endeavor to enlarge their open area. It is, however, valuable for managers to have in mind that not all employees are expected to improve their competence after receiving feedback (Smither et al., 2005). In this context, being at the right place and recognizing the will and need to learn and develop the competence might be the crucial factors for making the feedback useful.

Corporate Market is already using goal setting and performance management as a management tool, and certain managers seem to give their subordinates individual feedback in relation to the goal setting. It seems, however, not to be the case in all divisions, in light of the fact that one of my interview persons said that goal setting and performance evaluation was not highly prioritized. It is relevant to have in mind that it can take time to develop management tools, and in this context, continuous reflection on the process in order to improve it can be of great importance for its failure or success.

4.2 The actual strategies

Based on my analysis of the interviews I have identified twenty six different strategies which successful employees at Corporate Market in Síminn use in order to learn on the job, develop their competence and obtain success at work. Those strategies are both intrapersonal, that is strategies which the individual uses on his or her own, and interpersonal, or strategies which the individual uses in relations with other people. I constructed table 2 in order to better reveal the actual strategies.

I chose to present intrapersonal strategies and interpersonal strategies in separate categories. I use "X" to explain the relations between them. For instance, the interview subjects seem to use the strategy to *explore and experiment with new knowledge* both when they are learning and developing their competence, while they seem to use the strategy to *prioritize tasks* in order to develop their competence or obtaining success.

Table 2. *The different strategies the employees use to learn on the job, develop their competence and obtain success.*

Strategies which successful employees at Corporate Market are aware of they use to:	Learn on the job	Develop their competence	Obtain success
Intrapersonal strategies:			
• Read in order to keep up with things	X		
• Attend relevant courses and lectures	X		
• Explore and experiment with new knowledge	X	X	
• Seek information	X	X	
• Simplify things		X	
• Feel stable and are at the right place			X
• Being proficient and deliver tasks in time			X
• Change jobs within the company			X
• Plan their work and manage the time		X	X
• Willing to adapt to change		X	X
• Positive attitude		X	X
• Step outside the circle of comfort		X	X
• Personal ambition		X	X
• Prioritize tasks		X	X
• Intertwine learning and work	X	X	X
• Welcome and embark upon challenging tasks	X	X	X
• Constantly seek new knowledge	X	X	X
• Familiarize with new things	X	X	X
Interpersonal strategies:			
• Experience stimulating working environment		X	X
• Willing to co-operate with others		X	X
• Seek feedback	X	X	X
• Endeavor to elicit co-workers knowledge	X	X	X
• Learn from co-workers	X	X	X
• Reflect on others' actions	X	X	X
• Communications with co-workers	X	X	X
• Goal setting and performance evaluation	X	X	X

4.3 The relations between the strategies

If we take a look at the intrapersonal strategies in table 2, there appear to be certain relations between strategies of learning on the job and developing the competence. Further, there appear to be certain relations between strategies to develop competence and obtain success at work. On four occasions, the employees seem to use the same strategy in the purpose to learn on the job, develop the competence and obtain success.

If we take a look at the interpersonal strategies, there seem to be stronger relations between all different strategies. In six out of eight occasions, the employees seem to use respective strategy in the purpose of learning, developing the competence and obtaining success.

The interview persons seem to look at their learning as their everyday job and see on-the-job learning as a key element in their competence development. They constantly seek information and new knowledge, and practice their skills by exploring and experimenting with new knowledge in order to solve the tasks in a practical way. They

prefer to work with other people and see their co-workers as valuable resources of knowledge. Most of the interviewees had opportunities to change jobs within Siminn, which they considered as positive for obtaining success. All the interviewees have at some point attended courses in order to learn on their jobs, and certain employees mentioned that for courses to be even more effective, it is important to adjust them to the company's own needs.

Being able to quickly familiarize themselves with new things and the ability and will to adapt to change also seems to be factors which facilitate success. Since goal setting and performance evaluation is a management tool currently used at Corporate Market, a few of the interview subjects mentioned goal setting and individual feedback as an important element in on-the-job learning and competence development as well for obtaining success.

In addition, it appears to be crucial in today's unstable world where ad-hoc solutions are often important, to prioritize tasks and be able to differentiate between main issues and side issues in order to reduce the time it takes to work out new solutions. Prioritizing, planning and simplifying seem therefore to be crucial for employees to be able to cover all the work tasks, and can also make it easier to see what has been achieved and help to expand the circle of comfort. According to my interview subjects, making the most of the time can lead to reduced workload and help to achieve goals.

The last thing I will mention in this chapter of analysis is that all the employees I interviewed appear to have positive attitudes towards their tasks, co-workers and surroundings. Furthermore, they appear to possess a personal ambition to deliver a job well done, and a few of them mentioned that they experience their working environment as stimulating and encouraging, which is of great importance for learning and competence development. That being said, I will now turn to the concluding discussion of this master thesis.

5 Concluding discussion

There is much evidence which draws attention to the fact that integrating on-the-job learning and work results in better competence, which leads to increased productivity and innovation, therefore reinforcing organizations' effectiveness and competitiveness. This gives the impression that it is very important for organizations' survival to place emphasis on on-the-job learning and competence development, by motivating and encouraging their employees. In this context, it can be crucial for organizations to provide a stimulating working environment and facilitate the integration of continuous learning and the organizational culture.

The results of my study imply that there are strong relations between the strategies employees use in order to learn, develop their competence at work and obtain success at work. It appears that the six successful employees at Corporate Market see on-the-job learning as the foundation for competence development, which then is the key to obtaining success at work. It depends on the nature and purpose of the task and the situation which strategy is chosen from time to time. It also depends on the individual him or herself, since different strategies might suit different people.

Based on table 2, it seems that certain strategies are more likely to lead to success than others. In this context, interpersonal strategies appear to be the winning strategies, since most of them cover all three areas of on-the-job learning, competence development and obtaining success at work. These strategies involve seeking feedback, attempting to elicit knowledge from co-workers, learning from co-workers, reflecting on others' actions, communications, and participation in performance evaluations.

Collective reflection on employees' own actions, behavior or experiences does not seem to be an every day act at Corporate Market. I find it, however, reasonable to recommend the usage of this particular interpersonal strategy, even though *collective reflection on one's actions* is not one of the strategies in table 2.

According to table 2, only four out of eighteen intrapersonal strategies cover all three areas of learning, competence development and obtaining of success. These strategies involve intertwining learning and work, welcoming challenging tasks, knowledge seeking and familiarizing with new things. Further, the employees at Corporate Market seem to place emphasis on intrapersonal strategies before interpersonal strategies. They mention usage of eighteen intrapersonal strategies, while they only mention usage of eight interpersonal strategies.

A possible explanation for why the employees seem to choose intrapersonal strategies above interpersonal strategies is that they look at their on-the-job learning as something they have to do on their own. Therefore, I find it appropriate to recommend increased usage of interpersonal strategies to complete the usage of intrapersonal strategies, that is, to use the co-workers in order to expand the open area (compare the Johari window) and increase employees' perceptions of themselves and their learning processes. By doing that, employees can more easily undergo all three levels of learning and thereby constantly increase their scope of actions and improve their performance.

My results further suggest that it is extremely important for employees to be aware of which strategies they actually use in order to learn and develop their competence. It is even more important to be aware of which strategy suits respective individuals best. Here it might come in handy to be familiar with all the different strategies revealed in table 2, plus the strategy on collective reflection. If employees know which strategies they can use, and know their best ways of learning, they can use the knowledge in order to constantly improve their learning process and thereby constantly improve their performance.

If employees are made aware of the importance of all this from the beginning of their employment, and enabled to find their best strategies to learn and develop their competence, they might be more likely to gain personal ambition and recognize the need and will to learn on their jobs, develop their competence and obtain success at work.

5.2 Future work with improvement of on-the-job learning and competence development

The results of my study can contribute to future work on improving on-the-job learning and competence development. They can, for instance, help employees become aware of the importance of continuous learning and competence development and help them to find and use their best strategies. Awareness of strategies to learn on the job can support employees' learning at the workplace and actually improve their way of learning.

According to earlier research (compare Sandberg, 2000a; Drejer 2000; Høyrup and Elkjaer, 2006; Ellström, 1992, 2006; Sessa & London, 2006), reflection in a group of people appears to be important for learning, competence development and achievement of success. To constantly reflect on ones actions, strengths and weaknesses, both individually and in a group, as well as seeking constructive feedback and use it to make some improvements and behavioral changes at work, seems to be of great importance for personal development. Being aware of the importance of collective reflection and using that method in work situations can also lead towards improvement of on-the-job learning.

In addition, my study can help organizations become aware of the relevance of continuous learning and competence development for increased effectiveness and improved abilities in order to adapt to the constantly changing business environment. Employees' contribution becomes more and more important, and creating a more proficient workforce can be a huge advantage for the future and competitiveness of organizations. That knowledge should encourage organizations to facilitate continuous learning and competence development.

In this context, table 2 plus the chapter on the concluding discussion can help employees and managers to identify and choose promising strategies, which then can be used in varied combinations and adopted to different situations, in order to learn on the job, develop the competence and achieve success at work.

5.3 Proposal for future research

There has not been much empirical research upon the effects of on-the-job learning and competence development efforts. I find it relevant, both for individuals as well as for organizations, to be aware of the actual effects. It could be possible to implement a case study where two different groups with similar work tasks are studied and compared. One group gets motivation and opportunities for on-the-job learning and competence development while the other group gets no motivation in these matters at all. The results might be interesting.

I also find it interesting to empirically investigate whether or not awareness and usage of these different strategies actually leads to improved learning, and if it is actually that some of the strategies are better than other for competence development and obtaining success at work.

At last, I find it important to further investigate how managers can motivate and inspire employees' will, enthusiasm and personal ambition to learn on the job, develop the competence and achieve success.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – The letter to the interview persons

A translation of the original letter.

Lund, Sweden, October 23rd, 2006.

Hello!

My name is Sigríður Indriðadóttir and I am a master candidate in social science at Lund University, Sweden. My main theme of interest is pedagogy in working life and human resource management. Now I am preparing a research I am going to implement as a part of my master thesis. The research has the working title “Successful employees” and is supposed to deal with the strategies that successful employees use to learn on their jobs and develop their competence at work. Then I will explore potential relations between these strategies and obtaining success at work.

I will use a qualitative method in my work. In order to implement the study, I need to interview employees who by managers or co-workers are considered to be successful in their jobs. I made contact with the vice president of Corporate Market at Síminn, and he welcomed my request regarding interviewing a few people of his staff. I asked him to point out six employees who are considered to be successful in their jobs. You are one of these employees, and that is why I am contacting you now.

I therefore ask if you would like to volunteer to participate in my research by having a conversation with me for 45-60 minutes. The subject will be “your strategies”, i.e. which strategies you use in order to learn on your job and develop your competence. I will individually interview six employees, but by doing that I get a better chance to get broader answers. The vice president has allowed that the interviews will take place at your workplace in the beginning of next week. I intend to record each interview, since doing that can contribute to increased credibility when transcribing and analyzing the interview material.

I will point out that everything we talk about is totally confidential. Your name will never be mentioned and nothing you say can be traced back to you. It's just me who has access to the recordings, which then will be destroyed after I've finished the research. It is of course voluntary to take part in my research, but it would be great if you would like to join in. And if you do, I would like you to send me an e-mail and let me know as soon as possible. Then I will book in an interview with you, either October the 30th or November the 2nd. You may gladly point out which day suits you best. If you have any questions, please contact me through sindra@torg.is.

Kind regards,

Sigríður Indriðadóttir.

Appendix 2 – Interview Guide

A translation of the original interview guide.

Interview Guide – Corporate Market – Oct – Nov 2006

Background:

Worked for how many years at Corporate Market? (Age, occupation).

Education

In which ways fits your education to your work?

Learning:

Can you describe **how** you learn in your job?

(Do you mean that...? Can you say something more about that? Some further details?)

Can you tell me **what** you do to learn in your job?

(Do you mean that...? Can you say something more about that? Some further details?)

Tell me, which learning ways do you find to be most successful for you?

(Why? How?)

Can you tell me what *learning on the job* means to you?

(Do you mean that...)

(Opportunities - Initiative - You as instructor or educator)

Human competence at work:

Can you describe **how** you develop your competence here at Corporate Market?

(Do you mean that...? Can you tell me something more about this?)

Can you tell me **what** you do to develop your competence?

(Do you mean that...? Can you tell me something more...)

- Can you tell me which ways to develop your competence, you find to be most successful for you?

Why? How?

- Can you tell me what *human competence at work* means to you?

(Do you mean that...)

(Opportunities – Motivation - Initiative)

Successfulness:

Do you find yourself to be a successful employee?

Why/Why not? How? (What did you do to be successful?)

Can you tell me what *being successful* means to you?

(Do you mean...? Is there something more you want to say about this?)